



# Foundation “International Social Service – Bulgaria”

Supporting children and families in Bulgaria and across borders

Activity report 2013



**e are a Bulgarian non-governmental organization established in 2002.**

**We believe family is the best environment for a child's development.**

**We support children and families** of all political, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

**ISS-Bulgaria keeps its focus** on the prevention of children's abandonment, violence against children, re-integration in the family, the development of foster care and alternative child care, the effective social inclusion of children with disabilities as well as the support of care leavers.

**ISS-Bulgaria continues to provide** social and legal support, cooperation and consultations to social services, courts and individuals (children, parents, close and distant relatives, lawyers and other professionals), by offering social and other reports in cases of divorce and separation, parental rights and responsibilities application, re-integration, adoption, trafficking, non-accompanied children abroad, etc., and by acting as a branch member in the network of the International Social Service which headquarters are based in Geneva, Switzerland.

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## 2013 Message from the Executive Director



"For us, the last year was very fruitful and interesting, not only in our role as a provider of social services for children and families, but also for our work in an inter-institutional and inter-disciplinary environment with judges, social workers from the system of child protection, experts in municipalities and the state institutions, and colleagues from other NGOs. We were sought as an effective partner in solving international cases of children and families within the network of the International Social Service."

We expanded our capabilities to support children with disabilities and their families as we assumed the management of two new centers – the Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration of children with disabilities in Targovishte for 20 children and the Daycare Centre for children with disabilities “Sunflower” in Sofia with a capacity of 26 children. With them, the number of services managed by our organisation – consultative and residential - reached 13 units across five municipalities - Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo, Smolyan, Sofia and Targovishte that employ 110 professionals.

As an organisation that annually assesses the quality of the social services it provides, in 2013 ISS-Bulgaria aimed at significantly increasing the knowledge of the professionals working on individual cases and improving their skills, in individual planning in particular. This was the main objective in the work of the experts of the organisation during the monthly supervisions and methodological consultations. The year-end results from our casework indicate that there is a significant progress in the planning skills of all teams in our services – they define their objectives on individual cases in a clear and specific way; proposed activities logically bring to the achievement of objectives, and the results can be measured.

In recent years, the increased number of services that we manage and the following through of more than 700 cases of children and families at risk per year, our team began to insistently identify the need for assessment of the effects of the provided services on children and

families. Through the participation in the project “Partnership for effective and affordable services in the prevention of children's institutionalisation, funded by the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program, launched on September 1st, 2013, ISS-Bulgaria, together with our project partners from the association “Samaritans” in Stara Zagora and ISS-Switzerland, will try to find an answer to this question, to manage a pilot try of a framework for the evaluation of three types of services in order to make this type of evaluation an integral part of the management of the quality of all services we provide.

In the past year we continued with a practice that ISS-Bulgaria established in 2005 and provided specialised training to judges and social workers from the child protection system that aims at the implementation of the legislation in the best interest of the child. In the framework of project “Child friendly justice”, funded by the OAK foundation and the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program, we carried out introductory workshops that involved 60 judges and social workers from more than ten regional courts and Directorates “Social Assistance” throughout the country. From the discussions and the feedback received we could infer the many difficulties and barriers that the two professional groups meet with when applying the principle of the best interest of the child to the process of decision making, namely: judges' specialisation; the participation of Child Protection Departments in the court proceedings; the hearing of the child, and the lack of specialized programs for working with parents at the court.

Finally, we were part of the NGOs’ coalition “Childhood 2025”, which unites more than 150 NGOs from across the country and individuals working on the de-institutionalisation and related to its problems. We have participated in meetings, discussions and working groups in order to insist that des-institutionalisation will continue to develop sustainably, independently of the political changes, and that its priority is the development of individual care for each child within the community and the guarantee of respect for his/her rights.

**Sabina Sabeva, MD, Ph.D.**

2013

## Projects' realization

### Project No 1

*Project's name:*

#### **Child friendly Justice**

The project is funded by the foundation OAK and the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program and is implemented jointly with the "Children's Legal Center - Bulgaria" Foundation.

*Timeframe:* September 2012 - August 2015

#### *Goals and objectives for 2013*

The project aims to ensure effective protection of children's rights before, during and after judicial proceedings in civil matters through introduction of minimum standards that guarantee child-friendly justice. Such guarantees will be achieved mainly through the development of *training programmes* for magistrates and social workers, provision of general and specialised inter-disciplinary *training* of magistrates and other professionals, *adaptation of court rooms, setting up of family units/panel of judges* within the Courts, tailoring of *integrated services* that support and help children before, during and after the proceedings as well as drafting and dissemination of *information materials* for children who take part in judicial proceedings under the Family Code, the Child Protection Act, the Protection against Domestic Violence Act.

The minimum standards that guarantee child-friendly justice will be piloted in *three Regional model-courts* (Regional Court Burgas, Regional Court Veliko Tarnovo and Regional Court Zlatograd). However, the trainings will include also judges and social workers from the following areas - Razgrad, Kozloduy, Petrich, Blagoevgrad, Dulovo, Byala Slatina, Berkovitza, Haskovo, Razlog, Smolyan, Karlovo and Plovdiv

#### *Results achieved in 2013*

1. Three courts were selected to serve as a model - the regional courts in Burgas, Veliko Tarnovo and Zlatograd, which will apply the minima standards guaranteeing a justice that is a child's friend.

2. Thirty judges from the courts-models and from other courts, who were interested in this topic and thirty social workers from the Child Protection Departments in the same settlements were offered a basic training.

3. There have been inter-institutional meetings between judges serving at the courts-models, social workers from the Child Protection Departments at the same settlements and representatives of the Community Support Centres; at these meetings the services that need to be developed in order to meet the needs of children and families were identified and examined.

## **Project No 2**

### *Project's name:*

**"A partnership for effective and accessible services aiming at prevention of children's institutionalisation"**

The project is funded by the Bulgarian-Swiss cooperation program. It is financed with 407521,36 BGL., 89,92% of them or 366 443,21 BGL are swiss financial contribution.

*Timeframe:* September 2013 - August 2015

### *Goals and objectives for 2013*

**Overall objective:** Support for the child care deinstitutionalization in the regions of Targovishte and Stara Zagora through augmentation of the effectiveness of the services that prevent placement of children in specialized institutions. The project will contribute for the achievement of the main objectives of TF CSP, by increasing the capacity of Bulgarian partners to: provide high quality social services; strengthen their ability to network; communicate with citizens; and mobilize civil support.

### **Specific goals:**

1. Widening the scope, accessibility, and quality improvement of services for children under foster care and at crisis situation;
2. Increasing the social and legal security of children and families in the decision making process by Directorates "Social Assistance" and the court;
3. Increasing the capacity of Bulgarian partners to provide high quality services and to establish and maintain public-private partnerships;
4. Information and dissemination of the project's results

### *Results achieved in 2013 / for this period of implementation*

Expected results by the end of the project:

1. Extended scope and accessibility, increased quality and effectiveness of foster care services in the Complexes for Social Services for children and families (CSSCF) in Targovishte and in Stara Zagora;
2. Extended scope and accessibility, increased quality and effectiveness of crisis intervention services. A new 'Crisis centre' service with own staff and financial resources is set up in the CSSCF in Targovishte. Access and spectrum of services aiming at prevention of domestic violence in the Crisis centre in Stara Zagora is extended;
3. The teams providing services have knowledge and skills for qualitative service provision;
4. Increased capacity of different professionals to apply the principle of the best interest of the child in the decision-making process;
5. Developed and tested package of programs for regular training of judges and social workers in view of child and family participation in judicial proceedings;
6. Developed information materials for children that guarantee effective implementation of the children's rights in judicial proceedings;
7. Increased capacity and improved institutional sustainability of the Bulgarian partners and the other NGOs included in the project;
8. Expanded partnerships and networking between teams of Bulgarian NGOs, between the Bulgarian and Swiss Partners, and improved interaction with the municipalities;
9. Increased participation of the community in solving particular cases of children and families at risk; changed attitudes of the professional groups

### **Project No 3**

*Project's name:*

**"Through better care to a successful social inclusion of children and young at risk in the region of Smolyan"**

Funding from Medicor Foundation, Liechtenstein, with the amount of 448 500 BGL.

*Timeframe:* **June 2013 – May 2015**

### *Goals and objectives for 2013*

**Overall objective:** Strengthen the alternative care for children in Smolyan region

**Specific objectives:**

1. Development and provision of services in Small group home (SGH) for children aged 3-12 with places for emergency placement of small children;
2. Preparation for successful social integration of care leavers placed in the Small group home for youths aged 15-18
3. Raising public awareness about the meaning and the role of alternative care to support children and families at risk
4. Create conditions for development of perseverance in adolescents in carrying out an activity through a hobby

### *Results achieved in 2013 / or for the period of implementation*

Expected results by the end of the project:

1. Completely finished, equipped SGH, corresponding to all standards for provision of social services for children and sanitary requirements and providing conditions for accommodation of children aged 0-12.
2. SGH for children aged 3-12 is opened and provides services. The quality of services in the SGH is high - they are in full compliance with the quality standards for that kind of services in force in Bulgaria
3. Developed and executed programs for staff trainings.
4. Recruited and trained personnel for the SGH for children aged 3-12.
5. The staff of the SGH for children aged 15-18 is trained and know better how to prepare the young people for independent life
6. The staff of the both SGH receives regularly professional support.
7. The youngsters are involved plainly and participated actively in social skills trainings and are ready to practice them.
8. Developed and executed information strategy and plan for its implemented



2013

## Activity and Impact Highlights

Over 1,400 children and families received support in the Community Support Centres in Targovishte, Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo and Smolyan who handled a total of 642 cases.

We have supported **70 families at risk in order to prevent the taking away** of their children; in 62 of these cases we carried out an outreach work, while eight cases were treated in a “Mother and Baby” Unit.

We worked **on 86 cases of reintegration** of children from institutions into their families of origin or in a foster care by supporting children and their families in the periods before, during and after the reintegration.

**110 children with behavioral problems**, delinquency and at risk of dropping out of school **received support** in the form of psychological and social counseling and educational support.

We have supported **24 children victims of various forms of violence**, and some of the parents, so they could overcome the trauma and prevent the re-abuse.

We provided **family consultations and support to 255 families** that due to problems of a different nature were unable to provide adequate care for their children. Support was provided to both children and parents and extended family members, and included psychological and social counseling, training for parental capacities, assistance and accompaniment in their contacts with various institutions – the general practitioner, the Employment Office, children’s daycare, the home for children deprived of parental care, the police, and others.

**We looked after 15 children and young people aged 12-15** years at the Family-type Centre for placement in Smolyan who lived in a small group in a family-type environment; we provided them with good health care and education, and gave them the opportunity to stay in touch with loved ones, to expand their social network and develop skills for independent life.

**The “Mother and Baby” Unit in Targovishte sheltered and supported eight mothers and their 14 children** who have found themselves in a critical situation due to extremely adverse conditions or violence within the family, in order to prevent the placement of the children in specialised institutions. Thanks to the support from the team and our cooperation with the Child Protection Department, all the children admitted in the “Mother and Baby” Unit are now reared in a family environment - 10 of them are in their family of origin and four are in a foster care.

2013

## Foster care and adoption

83 professional foster families and over 140 children placed in them received our support through the Community Support Centres in the municipalities of Targovishte, Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo and Smolyan.

Our support included:

- \* over 1,500 home visits and consultations to the foster families
- \* 40 meetings of the mutual support groups of foster families
- \* 28 advanced trainings
- \* 65 individual and 8 group supervisions of foster families,

as well as their assistance in resolving issues related to the child's care, and accompaniment to the preliminary meetings between children and foster parents, to the meetings between the children and their biological families or prospective adoptive parents.

**20 candidates for foster families** in the municipalities of Sevlievo, Gorna Oryahovitsa and Antonovo were trained and assessed by the teams of the Community Support Centres in Veliko Tarnovo and Sevlievo.

### Foster parents tell us:

"To me, support means, in the first place, a possibility to talk to someone - sometimes you need to complain, sometimes to boast; the important thing is to have someone who will not just listen to you, but will also hear you"

"It is important for me that whenever I have no clarity on any matter related to the child or to me as a foster parent, the answer is always one phone call away"

"I can only say good things about my relations with the team - I feel supported in everything I needed, I know that I have whom to rely on and there is someone to ask me how I am .... The precise word is "satisfaction".

"Something else happens in the supervision. You ask me questions that make me think about things I would never consider by myself, but they are important. I need someone to direct me to these questions, while the answers to them are on a road that I can travel alone"

42 prospective adoptive parents have received training.  
12 children and their adoptive families are supported after the adoption.

2013

## Services in support of children with disabilities and their families

167 children with disabilities and their families received support through our services in the Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo and Targovishte and through the Daycare Centres for children with disabilities in the municipalities of Sofia and Sevlievo.



They were offered more than 12,000 hours of rehabilitation, speech therapy, and educational and psychological support. Over 700 hours of group work were carried out on various topics as self-service skills, exploring community life - visiting different shops, the library, going to cinema or at a restaurant, and also cooking workshops and art therapy. Birthday celebrations were organized for children, as well as celebrations of Baba Marta (the coming of the spring on March 1<sup>st</sup>), Christmas, New Year, etc.

*“Visiting you not only helps her, but is also fun“.* **Mother of a 12-years-old child with delayed development who visits the Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration at Veliko Tarnovo.**



*“It is for the first time that my child remains so long away from me, without crying and without looking for me. It is for the first time that my child allows another person to feed him. I feel fully relaxed when he is with you. As soon as we get home he begins asking when he will come again“.* **Mother of a 6-year-old child with autism**

*“I like the fact that you respect our opinion and desire and keep closely to what we have agreed about. I think that the level of child care you provide is very, very high. I can hardly imagine E. visiting another centre“.* **Mother of a 16-year-old child with a cerebral palsy**

*“I liked it very much that experts always tell me what have been done and how to continue with our work at home. I can see a genuine concern for M., and people who do not spare their efforts in trying to help the children“.* **Mother of a 4-year-old child with microcephaly**

*“We like that there is an individual approach to each child and each case, as this is what brings about the best results. Besides the good care he gets, A. also learns new things – at present he learns the colors and how to use a spoon by himself when eating, which is very difficult for him“* **Mother of a 17-year-old child with cerebral palsy**

2013

## Services in support of young people and the development of life skills on the path to independence

32 children and young people aged 11 to 18 years, who have been placed in residential care at the Centre for family-type accommodation in Smolyan and the social institutions for children deprived of parental care in Veliko Tarnovo and Popovo, participated in life skills trainings in preparation for leaving these services.



This line of work continues to be one of the most important activities of the Community Support Centres and Protected living spaces that are managed by our organization. Training sessions were held weekly or monthly depending on the age of children and according to the devised plan. They covered a variety of topics and aimed at curbing aggression, controlling emotions and prevention of conflicts, communication, acquisition of daily living skills - nutrition, hygiene, health care, appropriate clothing and care for clothes, teamwork skills and more.



For a fourth consecutive year we organized three camps for the children from the home for children deprived of parental care in Popovo and one camp for the children from the Centre for family-type accommodation in Smolyan, all dedicated to the acquisition of practical skills for independent life in society.

During these camps children worked hard as a team and fully relied on one another. For the first time the camp that was held in September enrolled also youth from the Monitored Housing in Sevlievo. They shared their experiences on the path to independence - career development, social networking in the community, dealing with daily duties and difficulties, successes.

31 young people over 18 years were admitted to the Monitored Housing in Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo and Smolyan and received support, assistance and accompaniment from the local teams in their search for employment, expansion

of the social network, solving personal problems (developing adequate self-esteem, coping with emotions connected to the biological family, job search's motivation and responsibility), acquiring skills for independent living - dealing with anger, introducing yourself to an employer, budgeting, and more.



By the end of 2013 eleven young people left the service: seven of them had signed work contracts, one was relocated in a Protected Living space, two returned to their families in other municipalities, while one young man was taken away from the service due to the systematic violation of its internal rules

## Bringing joy and creating memories

Over 350 children using different services or coming from high-risk communities in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo, Targovishte, Sevlievo, Smolyan and Sofia took part in various festivities and celebrations.



With lots of music, dancing and competitive games, the teams of the Community Support Centres in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo, Smolyan and Sevlievo organized a celebration on the occasion of June 1<sup>st</sup> - the International Child's Day. In Veliko Tarnovo and Smolyan the children from the Roma neighborhoods were associated to the celebration in order to direct their attention, through various games, to the issues of children's rights. In Sevlievo the 1<sup>st</sup> of June was celebrated with children from the home for children deprived of parental care “Velika and Georgi Chenchevi”.

The children in the Daycare centre for children with disabilities in Sofia enjoyed very much the celebration of Halloween - with masks, music and a clown. Георги Ченчеви“

In all services managed by the organization there were Christmas and New Year festivities. They offered moments of joy and new impressions to the disadvantaged children in the community and created a real opportunity for the realization of the child's right to happiness. Part of the team of the Community Support Centre in Veliko Tarnovo changed themselves into Santa Claus and Snow White who gave gifts to 18 children from three large families the Centre was supporting this year by mobile social work.



Parents expressed their gratitude for this support and commitment. In Targovishte over 100 children who were supported by the Complex for Social Services for Children and Families welcomed the coming holidays with lots of dancing and singing, and many gifts.

Christmas'spirit didn't bypass the children placed in professional foster families - all the Community Support Centres that we manage are working with them. Christmas was particularly interesting for the foster children from Veliko Tarnovo. Santa Claus and Snow White visited the homes of each of the 24 foster children and brought them a gift and a picture to complement their personal story in the Book of life..

2013

## Workforce development: ISS-Bulgaria – A learning organization!

**We believe that the quality of social services we provide depends - to the greatest extent - on the professionalism of our employees!**



Last year the professionals providing consultations in the services managed by ISS Bulgaria – the Community Support centres, Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration, Daycare centres for children with disabilities participated in various training and professional events for 15 to 20 days. Experts from the community-based residential services – the “Mother and Baby” Units, Centre for family-type accommodation and Monitored Housing received training or participated in workshops for 5 up to 10 days. This year we also had a series of in-house training sessions on topics that were identified as important for our work on individual cases.

The teams of all our services had monthly managerial supervision and were consulted methodologically. ISS-Bulgaria also provided external experts who conducted group supervision three to four times during the year and individual supervision (two per professional) for the members of the different teams.



We have initiated and realised three professional meetings – the IV<sup>th</sup> Inter-regional Meeting of the Community Support Centres in Veliko Tarnovo, which was attended by the members of 19 centres from all over the country; the I<sup>st</sup> Regional Meeting of the Community Support centres from the region of Gabrovo, and the I<sup>st</sup> Inter-regional Meeting of the Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration in Veliko Tarnovo, which was attended by the members of the centres in Lovech, Pleven,

Targovishte and Veliko Tarnovo. These meetings proved that professionals employed in different types of services need a forum where they can share the problems they encounter in their work and look together for the good practices in their solution

During the year we developed the “Policy of ISS-Bulgaria on the in-house career development” of the professionals employed in our social services, which will be implemented in practice since the beginning of 2014. It delineates the different levels in the professionals' career and the competencies they need to demonstrate at each level.

*“I learned to formulate specific goals for my work on a case, and my cases are now written in a way that is accessible to our clients” - social worker at a Community Support Centre*

*“My job was more analytical. Each year we face new, higher requirements that prompt our development as professionals” - psychologist at a Community Support Centre*

2013

## **The first year of ISS Bulgaria as a branch member in the network of ISS**

**ISS-Bulgaria worked on 296 cases with an international element during this year. Of them 88 were new cases, and 114 were cases that were open since 2012. During the year 94 cases have been closed.**

Among the new cases, the largest share (28.4%) comes from cases related to the welfare of the child (children at risk). They required that we study the situation of children who live abroad or have moved to Bulgaria and for whom there is evidence that they are at risk because of a risk of abandonment, suspected various forms of violence, health problems, placement outside the biological family, etc.

The second large group of cases (21 cases or 23.8%) were associated with the child's reintegration in its family when his/her parents live and work abroad, including the tracking of the child's adaptation after his reintegration abroad. Follows the group of cases (21.5%) related to requests for assistance received from the ISS which concerns the provision of social reports on protracted lawsuits in Bulgaria or abroad. They deal with situations of divorce, dispute over custody and parental rights between parents who do not live together, and amendment of previously decided upon measures in legal divorce and otherwise contentious proceedings (Article 51, Article 59 and Article 127, Paragraphs 1&2, of the Family Code).

Seven cases were related to child's adoption. The most frequently sought information is about the adoption procedures with an international element or assistance is required for the preparation of social report on prospective adoptive parents who are citizens of countries that do not partake The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. Assistance is very often required by the ISS for the provision of social reports by the competent social services in Bulgaria on women who are Bulgarian citizens who gave birth to a child in Greece and let it be adopted by a particular Greek family. Another important issue in dealing with cases of adoption concerns the tracking of the child's adaptation when he/she was adopted by Bulgarian citizens living abroad. In these cases, the network of ISS colleagues cannot assist the Bulgarian social services since the adoption is not sanctioned under the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption and therefore the decision of the Bulgarian court is not recognized in the respective country.

During the year, ISS-Bulgaria has assisted the Directorate "Social Assistance" in three new cases on the occasions of issuing a birth certificate to a child born abroad or certifying by an apostil of an already issued birth certificate to a child born abroad. In 13 cases we have provided information and consulted individuals or public bodies on the opportunities to take a case to the trial in a third country; the procedures to be followed in a given situation; referral to competent authorities and bodies; getting assistance from the ISS for the establishment of contact between the child and his/her grandparents; providing social assistance; searching for



a biological parent; supplying documents to a foster family of foreigners who wish to care for a child in Bulgaria, etc.

The largest share of requests for assistance that are addressed to us (63 cases or 72%) comes from Bulgaria. Of them 37 requests (or 42%) came from the system of child protection (Regional Directorates “Social Assistance”, Directorate “Social Assistance”, Child Protection Departments). For the first time the ISS-Bulgaria had registered a request for assistance from the Ministry of Interior, in particular from the Sofia Directorate of Internal Affairs. Nineteen requests (or 22%) were requests for social reports from abroad that came from Bulgarian courts (Regional and District Courts); six were the requests coming from individuals - parents, relatives or friends, including lawyers and providers of social services to children and families. Requests coming from Bulgaria were mainly addressed to Germany, Spain, Belgium and Greece.

In 2013 we received 25 new requests for assistance mainly from the UK, Greece and Germany.

## 2013

### Sources of funding and their contribution for 2013

In 2013, for all activities performed by ISS-Bulgaria, we have received funding in the amount of 1,446,552 20 BGL. The major share of this funding comes from state-mandated activities - 1102375, 30 BGL (or 76%), through the management of social services. Next is the funding of projects aimed at achieving specific goals - 317 019 66 BGL (or 22%). The yearly donations plus the proceeds from working on international cases account for 27 157, 24 BGL or 2% of all funding.

**Figure 1. Source of funding in 2013**

