



# Foundation “International Social Service – Bulgaria”

Supporting children and families in Bulgaria and across borders

## Activity report 2015



**We 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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## A message from the CEO about 2015:

Distinguished Colleagues and Partners,



For us, 2015 has been a year of hard work, of continuous analysis of the results of the social services we deliver, a year of debate within the service teams as well as between the foundation team and the service managers, on how to listen better to the voice of children and their families, how to include them more effectively in the process of planning our services, how best to engage them in our work.

We have expanded our operation as a provider of social services to children and families, and since September 1<sup>st</sup>, following a competitive procedure, we have been managing two new services in the Pleven Municipality: a Community Support Centre and a Family-type Placement Centre under the name of 'Friends', for children and adolescents without disabilities aged 7 to 18 (20) years.

Throughout the year, our attention has been focused on children and adolescents placed at the 4 residential-type services that we manage in the municipalities of Smolyan, Targovishte and Pleven. We had many questions but got few answers. We had already figured out that we were facing new challenges in our care provision: the group of children and adolescents was becoming increasingly diverse; the average age of children at the time of placement was increasing; more and more adolescents were being taken away from their biological families due to serious grievances (violence, grave crises, parental neglect, involvement in more drastic forms of child labour). All of that made our staff's work increasingly difficult, with positive outcomes being fewer and far between and costing us great effort. These problems have faced us with new tasks: to seek fresh knowledge about how to better organise our work, to identify the kind of pedagogical concept and philosophy that would meet the new demands of young people, and many others. Our quests have led us to the development of a project titled: 'For genuine change in the lives of children raised in alternative care as a result of the process of de-institutionalisation in Bulgaria', that we are about to implement in 2016 with the financial support of the Liechtenstein-based Medicor Foundation.

We see as particularly successful our work on the project "Child-friendly Justice", implemented with the financial support of the OAK Foundation and the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Programme through the Reform Fund linked to Civil Society Participation. As was pointed out in the independent assessment of the project made by Global Metrics OOD, the most sustainable result of the implementation of that project is the change in the attitude of the members of the institutions in charge (mostly courts, Social Assistance directorates, as well as providers of social services to children and families) and the *de facto* placement of the interests and rights of children at the centre of attention and our common effort. This conclusion was also supported by the participants in the Final Conference of the project, one of whom said, *'This project raises a lot of hope of reforming the justice system in the part concerning children, because such a thing is almost non-existent in Bulgaria. This is a first. A good first step in the right direction.'* This provides an incentive and motivation for us to build upon and expand the results already achieved by applying the minimum standards in more populated areas around the country and expanding the scope of the target groups through involving other professional communities and authorities.

An important priority for the organisation continues to be the development of a professional network of experts active in the services sector. The acquisition of new knowledge and skills and the expansion of their competences are of exceptional importance for the provision of high quality and efficient services. This is evidenced by over 85 days of training/participation in professional meetings and seminars that were provided for teams or individual experts, and over 200 external supervisions (63 group and 137 individual) that were conducted. For a second year running, we conducted a general teambuilding exercise for experts from all services we manage, which brought together over 120 participants. This type of meeting has proven very valuable for maintaining our network and promoting the exchange of experience, knowledge and skills for working on a particular case among services.

We continue to actively cooperate with the chapters of the National Network for Children and with those of the Coalition Childhood 2025, of which we are a member, in dealing with emerging problems related to different aspects of children's rights or the development of the de-institutionalisation process. We took part in different inter-institutional meetings and working groups with representatives of government agencies. I believe that we have been efficient and sought-after partners!

Dr. Sabina Sabeva, MD

2015

## Completed projects

### 1. "Child-friendly Justice"

Funded by the OAK Foundation and the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Programme and implemented jointly with the Juvenile Justice Centre Bulgaria. Total project cost: BGN 312,044, of which BGN 49,632 was a grant from Switzerland.

Period of implementation: September 2012 through August 2015.



### 2. "Partnership for Efficient and Accessible Services aiming at Prevention of Children's Institutionalisation"

Funded by the Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Programme. Total project cost: BGN 407,521.36, of which 89.92% or BGN 366,443.21 was a grant from Switzerland.

Period of implementation: September 1, 2013, through August 31, 2015.

### 3. "From better care to successful social inclusion of children and youths in Smolyan region"

Funder by the Medicor Foundation, Liechtenstein, to the amount of BGN 448,500.

Period of implementation: June 1, 2013, through May 31, 2015.

2015

## Services in support of children at risk and their families

Over **2,300 children, parents**, guardians and members of extended families have received support from specialists of the five Community Support Centres (CSCs) managed by us in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo, Targovishte, Sevlievo, Smolyan and Pleven, within their work on **1,003 cases**, given a total capacity of **171 cases**.



Number of cases by type of referral by a Child Protection Department (CPD)	
<i>Family support and counselling in the community</i>	<b>324</b>
<i>Foster care services in the following categories:</i>	<b>221</b>
• Support of approved foster families	103
• Support of children placed under foster care	51
• Training of candidates of foster parents	67
<i>Services in support of child adoption, mostly training of candidates for adoptive parents</i>	<b>39</b>
<i>Prevention of removal of children from their biological families, and reintegration in the biological family</i>	<b>140</b>
<i>Prevention of deviant behaviour. Socio-pedagogical counselling of children with behavioural problems</i>	<b>104</b>
<i>Support of family and loved ones in the provision of quality care to children placed in their custody</i>	<b>30</b>
<i>Other</i>	<b>145</b>



Continuing education of established foster families by the Smolyan CSC

**Zina Alexandrova, the psychologist of the Sevlievo CSC, says:**



One of the most difficult yet successfully closed cases of 2015 was that of a child whom the team at the Sevlievo CSC prepared and supported for relocation with an adoptive family in the US. Earlier in the year, the child showed very strong attachment to the members of her foster family and considerable anxiety at the thought of parting with them. Her personal and family history, the trauma of abandonment and the disruption of her basic trust in people since early childhood had a strong impact on the way she regarded all other persons present in her life; it took time for the child herself to feel safe and emotionally secure.

A major goal of our efforts was to rebuild the shattered life of the child and to restore her sense of being in control of her own destiny. Using the methods of narrative therapy, through tales, stories and myths, the minor girl was given an opportunity to share opinions and experiences, epitomised by the characters and personages of the narrative, which had the effect of enabling her to shed the inhibitory burden of her emotional responses and fears. Throughout the entire period, the child was actively involved in the writing and systematic arrangement of her 'Life Journal', which she took with herself upon her departure overseas, together with several albums of photographs. All of that had a deep significance not only with respect to her past and present, but also for the proper understanding by the child of the family relationships she was about to enter into by virtue of the act of her adoption, and which would remain a constant factor for her identity.

Throughout the entire period, we at the CSC have been conducting weekly video calls via Skype between the child and the would-be adoptive mother, which aimed to foster their mutual familiarity and acceptance. The team assisted the parties in overcoming the language barrier and helped the girl gain familiarity, through assorted information and photographic material, with the peculiarities, landmarks and attractions of her future state of residence, including the distance and time of travel to her destination. The whole time the team has been providing complete and objective information about the trip to, respectively her arrival at, the United States of America, about possible joint activities with her would-be mother, visits to sites of interest, her prospective extended family, the way in which they would communicate initially, the school she would go to and many other significant details.

We supported the child in accepting the separation from the foster family by giving her assurances that the ties built with them would remain a major part of her self-identification frame of reference for the rest of her life.

In October, as a way of minimising the traumatic stress for the child during and after her separation from the foster family while giving her timely psychological support, a psychologist with the CSC accompanied the minor girl, together with a representative of the Accredited Organisation for Bulgaria, all the way to her departure at Sofia Airport. The team saw the child off at the airport with a package of gifts, including her 'Life Journal', albums of photographs, original drawings, narrative texts and short stories, as well as a gift set of Bulgarian folk tales and other educational and encouraging materials. Following her departure and subject to the consent of her adoptive mother and everyone involved in her case, the team continued to set up Skype sessions in order to support her in the first weeks, until the CSC would deem it appropriate to finally close the case. The child's adaptation has been quick and successful. To date, she is feeling fine, shares her positive experiences with the team, and has made significant progress with her English.

## Zdravka Nikolova, Manager of the Veliko Tarnovo CSC:



For the team of the Community Support Centre at Veliko Tarnovo, the most difficult cases and yet the most challenging and stimulating in the quest for new approaches, methods and techniques of intervention, have been those involving families in the middle of divorce or custody proceedings where children get sucked into the conflict between the parents, with the emotional and behavioural problems ensuing from that.

Work on such cases during the past year has improved significantly owing to the launch at our CSC of an Awareness Programme for Separated Parental Couples Before, During and After Divorce Proceedings, developed as part of the project "Child-friendly Justice". Undergoing a course of the programme makes parents aware of the impact of separation and conflicts on the children by helping them focus on children's experiences, needs and interests, while indicating the best solutions for them and bringing parents to agree to cooperate on issues of custody and parenting after separation.

The information materials for children and parents published by ISS Bulgaria have proven instrumental in support of professionals working with children and parents. The children's books *My Booklet of Divorce and Separation* and *My Family is Changing* help children express difficult feelings and ask the questions bothering them, as well as obtain easy to understand answers to some of them. The book *Because It Is for the Kids: Building a Secure Basis for Parenting after Separation* and the information brochure *Ten Pieces of Advice for Parents about Children and Divorce* help orient parents in considering how best to protect the children from their conflicts and give them a sense of security after the separation.

In the course of the year, the Veliko Tarnovo CSC has had the far from easy task of 'test-driving' a new service, developed by ISS Bulgaria, called 'Contact Centre for Children and Parents after Separation, in Divorce Proceedings or after Divorce'. The Centre is a place where children of separated parents can see the estranged parent in a comfortable and secure environment, in the presence of experts, thus avoiding the possibility of the child being exposed to scenes of parental conflict and situations that may constitute a safety risk.

In the course of two months, the CSC team has been delivering the service 'Supervised contact' at the Contact Centre in Veliko Tarnovo, on behalf of a child and his father, who lives in the city of Ruse. The case was referred to the Centre by the Regional Court of Veliko Tarnovo. A total of 6 meetings were conducted, and the observations made at these were recorded in a report to the referring court. The meetings thus conducted and the parents' partaking in a course of the Awareness Programme have resulted in changes in the mother's attitude towards the relationship between father and child, to such an extent that she proposed a settlement to the father. After the case was closed, the father received visitation rights, with the child being allowed to see him on pre-scheduled days in Ruse, which had been the purpose of the service.

## **Siyka Sirakova, Director of the Social Services for Children and Families Complex in Smolyan:**



In 2015, thanks to the persistence of the experts at the Smolyan CSC and the teamwork with representatives of different institutions, three children were reintegrated in their family environment after being raised for a long time by foster families or at the Smolyan-based family-type placement centre (FTPC) for children without disabilities.

One of those reintegrated children, Petya,<sup>1</sup> a 14-year-old girl, had been placed with the FTPC in November 2014. The reason for her being removed from her family setting was the mother's complaint of persistent harassment on the part of the father against her and the children, prompting her to flee the family home. In July 2015, the mother filed an application to the Child Protection Department (CPD) at Smolyan asking for the child to be reintegrated with her family. The mother was referred to the Smolyan CSC for the provision of the service 'Reintegration with the biological family'.

The CSC team started work with both the mother and the child. By conducting one-on-one counselling sessions, role-play games and interviews, the case team worked with the mother to help her communicate properly with her daughter, to understand and meet her emotional needs, to acquire skills for laying down rules and restrictions, to guide and incentivise the child and to develop proper budgeting skills. As a result of the active involvement of the mother in the course of delivery of the service and of her interaction with the team, she managed to find lodgings, has been trying to maintain proper domestic hygiene, and to provide a good level of comfort in her home.

The child has been given an opportunity to share her feelings and emotions about the forthcoming reintegration; she was also briefed on her rights under the Child Protection Act and the responsibilities of adults and the entitlement of each and every child to seek help if and when necessary, without feeling guilt for doing so. The child was assisted in visiting with her mother on bank holidays and weekends.

There have been periodic team meetings between members of the FTPC and the CSC, during which they exchanged information about the mother-and-child sessions, the attitudes and expectations shared by the child with experts of both services.

In early January 2016, the child was reintegrated in her mother's home. Since Petya's return, the mother has been making conscious efforts to satisfy her needs. She tries to help her with her studies while at the same time putting varied and high-quality food on the table. She has even managed to save some money, which she says will go towards the purchase of textbooks and learning aids for the coming school year.

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<sup>1</sup> All names in the text of the report have been changed for privacy reasons.

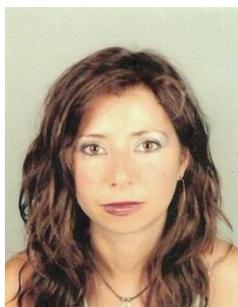
2015

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

**225 children with disabilities** and their families have received support through our services provided at the Social Rehabilitation and Integration Centres in the municipalities of Veliko Tarnovo and Targovishte and the Day Care Centres for Children with Disabilities in the municipalities of Sofia and Sevlievo.

The children have been involved in over **13,000 hours** of rehabilitation, speech therapy, pedagogical and psychological support, as well as **over 1,450 hours of group work** on different subjects geared to develop their skills for self-sufficiency, getting to know life in the community (shopping, going to the library, movies, pastry shop, zoo, visiting natural sites) and participation in cookery, gardening or art therapy workshops.

**Desislava Haralanova, speech therapist and head of the Social Rehabilitation and Integration Centre in the town of Targovishte, on work with children and adolescents with disabilities placed in the family-type placement centre**



In 2015, the Social Rehabilitation and Integration Centre (SRIC), part of the Social Services for Children and Families Complex (SSCFC) of the town of Targovishte, has carried out a great deal of work with children and adolescents with disabilities placed in the family-type placement centre (FTPC) in Targovishte.

In addition to one-on-one sessions with individual experts, the team has put a strong emphasis on group work, since children raised in residential-type services need additional support in the community in order to develop and build upon their extant resources. Such children have difficulties communicating and abiding by rules of group behaviour and public conduct.

In 2015, a total of 61 group activities were conducted within the framework of different workshops, all developed with the children's interests and needs in mind. Of particular interest for children have been the workshops on *Gardening*, *Cooking Skills* and *From Antiquity to the Present*. The emphasis there is placed on developing and sustaining new skills children will need in their daily life. Children's participation in these activities has had a positive impact on their development. They look forward to each session, show engagement and intellectual curiosity and make an honest effort to fulfil the tasks assigned to them; some children even make suggestions about activities to be included in some of the workshops. This increases their feeling of self-worth and their satisfaction with the fact that their input is valued and appreciated, which in turn further increases their commitment to the tasks at hand.





The activities conducted in the workshops differ from those at school or at the family-type placement centre. On a group-work day, children and adolescents are interested to know what the assignment will be, some of them showing more initiative and seeking to be elected leaders by demonstrating leadership skills and qualities and setting the stage for the session; at the same time they strive to draw attention to themselves and gain the approval of adults. The team has observed that children develop more initiative, sociability, and

greater responsibility towards the division of tasks and their fulfilment.

### Iskra Vlahova, Head of *Slanchogled* (Sunflower) Day Care Centre for Children with Disabilities in Sofia



The year 2015 saw the start of a collaborative relationship between the *Slanchogled* Day Care Centre in Sofia, on the one hand, and experts from the New Bulgarian University and members of the ASSIST Foundation, on the other, aimed at familiarising the Centre staff with the capabilities of Tobi Communicator and demonstrating computer interface controlled by eye movement. Eye-movement computer control devices enable tuition of, and communication with, children with physical disabilities who cannot speak or communicate otherwise. The human eye can interact with a computer, thus enabling the creation of learning applications to develop different cognitive skills, from building an understanding of causal relationships, through internalising concepts and categories (shapes, colours, animals, fruits, etc.), to using symbols in generating synthesised speech with a vocabulary of the most commonly used phrases.

The eye-movement computer control method was covered by a Channel 1 team in a detailed TV feature, scheduled to be aired on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, the International Day of People with Disabilities. The feature emphasises the exceptional hospitality and cooperation of the staff at the *Slanchogled* Day Care Centre that has been conducive to the introduction in practice of that innovative method.

From May to July 2015, weekly meetings were held at which the staff of the *Slanchogled* Day Care Centre were trained in the use of eye-movement tracking devices to control computers, with the relevant specialised software.

Three children with serious physical disabilities were selected from the DCC, who would benefit the most from the introduction of such assisting technology. They each underwent several sessions using software that enables a person to interact by eye movement with an environment where simple yet attractive tasks can be performed involving fixing an object with the eyes and interacting with it by holding it in one's stare.

All three children succeeded, albeit to a different extent, in using eye movement to perform tasks assigned to them. Two of the three managed, within a single session, to reach beginner levels four and five, involving fixing an object with their eyes and holding that object for some time in their stare. These skills form the basis of using the method of eye movement tracking as an interface with more complex applications enabling the writing of text and the performance of learning exercises developing the cognitive abilities and communication skills of children. The results of those trial sessions showed that the use of eye movement tracking devices can play a central role in working with children with serious disabilities.

The team was particularly overjoyed by the fact that recently, one of the kids, using eye movement communication (after he began to cry), signalled that he was missing his grandmother, whom he had not seen for a number of days. Also, he has been able on several occasions to signal that he was thirsty, and even whether he preferred juice or water.

## Vanya Dimitrova, social worker in charge of the Social Rehabilitation and Integration Centre in the town of Veliko Tarnovo



Meeting and greeting customers at the Veliko Tarnovo SRIC was one of the highlights of the work done by the SRIC experts in 2015.

In its work over the years, the team of the Veliko Tarnovo SRIC has noticed that the users of our services are not sufficiently familiar with what this Centre is all about, what experts work with it and what they do, when people should seek the help of a particular expert and what kind of support they can expect to receive from him or her. Another observation of ours was that many of the children and adolescents were asking themselves questions for which they had no answer, such as: 'Where am I being taken?', 'What are they going to do to me?' or 'Will it hurt?' I will never forget one of the kids, brought by his parents to be seen by a speech therapist, who was crying in the hallway and yelling at his father at the top of his voice: 'I am not kick! Don't bring me here!' After a brief puzzlement why he was saying that, I figured out the 6-year-old child was trying to say 'I am not SICK!' and that in his imagination the Centre was associated with doctors, pain and fear rather than fun, games and laughter.

That is why in 2014 our team decided that it would be better, in addition to the children's drawings and other decorations put on display in the reception area of the Centre, to have a little fish placed at the office to greet all visitors. The fish, which we named Sergey, turned out to be an excellent 'host' and 'charmer' for the children.

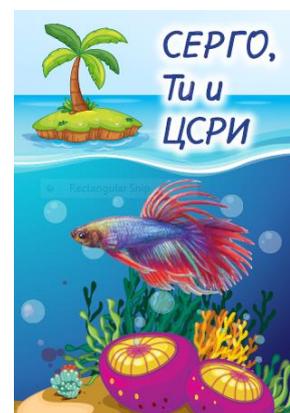
By the end of 2014, we also decided to launch a User Booklet (for customers) of the Centre, which we titled '*Sergo [short for Sergey], you and the SRIC*', through which we try to familiarise the children and their parents with the functioning of the Centre and the work of the experts employed by it.

This idea materialised in 2015, when we developed and published the booklet. The central character is again Sergey, who in an interactive way tells the child or young person who is the customer about the Centre. A special section in the booklet is dedicated to parents; there they can learn about the main signs they should look for to find out if counselling with a specific expert is necessary.

Both children and parents are highly appreciative of the efforts of the team. Our customers enjoyed their copies of the booklet, showed them to others and told them which specialists they were visiting. In cases where a child would have problems with adaptation, the specialist would give the parents a copy of the booklet in advance, so that they could explain to the child, in the privacy of their own home, what they were about to do at the centre, who would be working with the child, and also show them in advance photographs of each of our specialists.

The information contained in the booklets proved useful also for other specialists, pedagogues, as well as parents who wished to know about the conditions of referral to SRIC.

In the course of the year, we also created a Facebook page for our service. This enables our customers to get a fuller idea of the work of the Centre. In it, children and parents can follow interesting events, find or share information or communicate with one another.



2015

## Services in support of children deprived of parental care

We provided care to **52 children and adolescents** aged between 4 months and 18 years at the **Family Type Placement Centres for Children and Adolescents without Disabilities** at the cities of **Smolyan, Pleven and Targovishte**. Combined, the four centres have a capacity of 46 persons.

We have been working with **54 teenagers aged 12 years or over, placed at residential-type services** in **Veliko Tarnovo, Smolyan, Sevlievo and Popovo** (Family Type Placement Centres and Homes for Children Deprived of Parental Care) to assist them in developing different life skills, with an emphasis on social skills, as well as in ridding themselves of behavioural problems and achieving a better understanding and acceptance of their family history.

### Viliana Rizova, Head of the two Family Type Placement Centres, part of the Social Services for Children and Families Complex (SSCFC) in Smolyan



In the course of the year, we have been applying diverse methods of working with children and adolescents, assisting them in the development of practical life skills. The most exciting and impactful proved to be those activities that take place outside the Centres (day trips and excursions, summer camps, hikes), as well as the clubs and workshops organised within the services themselves.

In April 2016, the Centre for children and adolescents aged 13 through 18 (20) years organised a two-day trip to the city of Sofia. The point was to test their skills of finding their bearings in an unfamiliar environment, of using inter-city transportation and obtaining information about getting from one place to another. In parallel with that, the participants learned about the cultural and historical heritage of different regions and obtained information about the historical past and culture.

Upon arrival in Sofia, the children were given a tour of the Central Railway Station and



the Central Bus Station. The aim of the visit was to find out about train and bus schedules, to know how to request and obtain information about arriving and departing trains and buses, where to buy tickets to a particular destination and how, what the purpose of a waiting area is, what different types of rail passenger coaches look like and what they are used for. During their visit they were familiarised with all types of public urban transport: tram, trolley bus and underground railway.



In the course of their two days in Sofia, the youths had an opportunity to visit important public institutions and national landmarks connected with the Bulgarian government: the Office of the President, Parliament, the Council of Ministers, the National Palace of Justice, and were briefed about their functions. The change of the guard ceremony at the entrance to the Presidential Palace was observed with great interest.

For educational purposes, the group visited the National Museum of Natural History and Science. The youngsters learned about rare animal species and minerals. What struck them as particularly interesting was that the most beautiful crystals came from the Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria.

The young visitors took a walk around the city centre, visited the Zoo and one of the biggest shopping malls, Paradise Centre, where they were left aghast at the price tags on most goods.

### **Aneliya Angelova, social worker in charge of the Family Type Centre for Placement (FTCP), part of the Complex for Social Services for Children and Families (CSSCF) in Targovishte**



The FTCP, which is part of CSSCF in the town of Targovishte, was inaugurated on July 1, 2015. By the end of the year, 12 children had already been placed there. In order for them to reach their full potential and acquire life skills, the team has been conducting one-on-one and group sessions on issues of interest for the children, while at the same time organising workshops on popular subjects. It is the kids' willingness and active participation in different activities that give the team confidence that we are moving in the right direction, enabling the children to acquire a sense of belonging to the peer group, while building relations of trust and understanding among themselves and between them and the staff. We are aware that a lot more work and effort will be necessary for such relations to be complete and consolidated.

The main priority of the Centre's team has been to encourage children to maintain an



emotional bond with their biological families. Thanks to our efforts, the year 2015 marked a new start in rebuilding and strengthening the emotional bonds between two of the children placed with us and their families, achieved through a series of home visits. For three of the children, the process of reintegration into their biological families has already begun.

Like any big family, the FTCP under the Targovishte CSSCF has had its ups and



downs, its achievements and challenges. Among its achievements in the daily interaction with children is the placement of three of them in suitable schools, corresponding to their age and abilities, with the team encouraging and supporting them on a daily basis in their preparation for school. To us, even the smallest change for the better in our children is an accomplishment. Within half a year, we succeeded in imparting basic personal hygiene habits upon one

of our youngsters who had long been neglected by his parents, had no personal effects or clothes while at the same time being tasked with caring for his younger siblings. Now this young man has used money earned with honest work under the supervision of his personal mentor at the FTCP to buy his own clothes for the first time, asking before every purchase the approval of the team for the style and fit of the respective garment. At one point, the same boy was at a risk of dropping out of school, but the danger has since been eliminated. He is now enrolled in ninth grade with the vocational major of cookery; thus he will be able to make a living after graduation.

We always work side by side with the children in our care. We strive to be as open and honest with them as possible. Our team, just like the colleagues of the other services with whom the children interact within the Complex, are trying to show them how to dream while making concerted efforts to help them realise their dreams. Together we give them the comfort, peace and safety of a real home where they can grow, and we share with them every emotion and thrill, whether good or bad.

2015

## Services in support of young individuals on their way to self-sufficiency

**13 young persons aged 18 years or over** were placed in Monitored Housing in the towns of Veliko Tarnovo, Sevlievo and Smolyan. Their average age is 20, and the mean duration of their stay in a Monitored Home is 16.5 months.

### *Here is what the service managers have to say about the results and challenges of working with young people*

**Siyka Sirakova, Director of the Social Services for Children and Families Complex in Smolyan**



The team of the SSCFC in Smolyan believes that in order to achieve anything, we should not rely on the individual effort of one single person. The different, mutually complementary services, the joint work of FTPCs and CSCs, the support young people continue to receive after leaving FTPCs and while being placed in Monitored Housing – each of these steps is an achievement in and by itself.

Building trust between young people and the social worker in charge of a given Monitored Home (MH) begins while they are still at the FTPC; the trust thus created remains even after they leave the MH. The young men and women are the ones who initiate contacts at that later stage. The social worker remains their best friend whom they can rely on for advice or just hearing them out.

In 2015, 3 young people in all resided in MH. All three had been admitted into the service in 2014, after leaving the FTPC for children and adolescents aged 13-18 (20) years. By the end of 2015 all three had left the service; two of them have since been reintegrated and have started a life of their own. The third person was re-admitted into the service five months after leaving and is now being supported in his search for steady employment. Five young men and women, former users of the service, have meanwhile sought the support of the social worker in charge of it. Over 25 one-on-one counselling sessions have been conducted with them. They were given assistance in dealing with different institutions, emotional support, help in their search for proper housing; they were provided with food, clothing, bedding and blankets collected from donations. By the end of the year they were all housed and employed on a permanent contract; two of them are continuing their education in college.

## Zdravka Nikolova, Manager of the Monitored Home in Veliko Tarnovo

In 2015, four young persons who had left the respective residential services upon coming of age were taking advantage of the services of the Monitored Home in the town of Veliko Tarnovo. In doing that, they were getting not just shelter but something far more important: support on their way to building a life of their own as responsible adults. In working with them, the team was striving to make them aware of their personal responsibility for the life they were living and the future they were planning for themselves.

Teaching the youngsters how to budget their allotted allowance has proven a major challenge. The social worker has been constantly assisting them in planning their monthly budget, supporting them on their shopping trips, talking to them about the risks and problems involved in making expensive purchases or indulging in impulse buying, in borrowing/lending money or buying on credit. Despite all that, the young people did occasionally buy extravagant items on credit while at the same time lending money to friends, ending up in financial dire straits as a result.



The efforts of the team were mostly aimed at helping young people achieve vocational fulfilment. They were receiving counselling about what jobs they could take up depending on their skills and qualifications and the ways of looking for a job; they were supported practically and emotionally in applying for the jobs they wanted. The lack of secondary education has been, for most of them, an impediment to their vocational fulfilment in the labour market. Another serious challenge to their ability to find and hold down a job are their unrealistic expectations. Much too often, they tend to apply for jobs that are way above their qualifications and skill levels; they believe they should be paid a lot more money for a lot less work whereas their employers' requirements with respect to labour discipline and the quality of their performance are seen as a personal affront or discrimination.

Dealing with such issues has been a real test for the team's professionalism. Thanks to our hard work, which included counselling, providing assistance and accompanying job applicants to their job interviews, meetings and discussions with employers, in 2015 two of our young people were already working on a permanent contract, showing good discipline and being able to properly budget their money. With support from the team, they managed to find themselves rental flats and become self-sufficient, and are currently doing very well, holding down their jobs and living in the same flats they rented originally.

2015

## Proud of our achievements!

The year 2015 saw the completion of the Project '**Justice: A Friend of the Child**', whose main goal had been to develop and pilot minimum standards guaranteeing the rights of every child as a potential litigant in the civil justice system (in court proceedings initiated to determine a child's domicile, custody, personal relationships, custodial authorisation for foreign travel, placement outside of the family, domestic violence, etc.). Said **minimum standards**, developed jointly with judges and social workers and grouped in **12 thematic categories**, together with the collected **good practices of the implementation of those standards** were published in the book *Justice: A Friend of the Child. Standards in Juvenile Civil Justice and Good Practices*, accessible on the ISS Bulgaria website ([www.iss-bg.org](http://www.iss-bg.org)). In keeping with the proposed standards:

1. We built **11 adapted premises** (courtrooms, juvenile rooms and reception/waiting areas) in **9 courthouses** in Bulgaria:

- ✓ 4 adapted courtrooms at the Regional Courts of the cities of Burgas, Blagoevgrad and Veliko Tarnovo (2 courtrooms),



- ✓ 6 rooms for juvenile hearings at the Regional Courts of Berkovitz, Burgas, Byala Slatina, Dulovo, Zlatograd and Haskovo,
- ✓ 1 reception/waiting area at the Regional Court of Veliko Tarnovo.

2. We organised **training courses** for a total of 60 judges and social workers from 18 courthouses and Child Protection Departments in Bulgaria working with children litigants in civil cases.

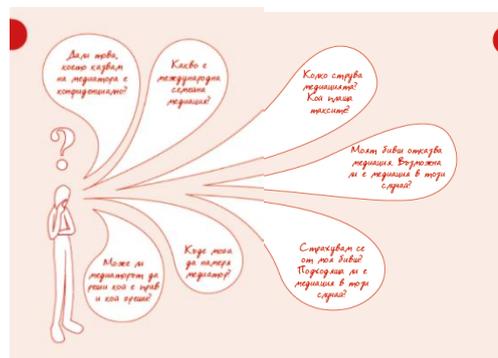
3. We developed and tested for the first time **three new services**, which support both the child and the parents as litigants in court proceedings:

- ✓ **Awareness Programme for Parents in the Process of Separation or Divorce** (the court refers the parents to this programme, which is being delivered by the Community Support Centres in Burgas and Veliko Tarnovo);
  - ✓ **Centre for Post-Separation/Divorce Parent-Children Contacts**, in which, pursuant to a court ruling, parents and children can engage in *supervised contacts*, *supported contacts* or can use the premises to *hand over the child* to each other. Such Contact Centres have been set up in Burgas and Veliko Tarnovo.
  - ✓ **Parenting Plan** – a service that assists parents in reaching an agreement about the children following divorce or separation. The service is provided by the Regional Court of Blagoevgrad. The Parenting Plan is accessible on the website of the Court: (<http://blagoevgradrc.judiciary-bg.org/>).
4. We produced three **information booklets for children** involved in court proceedings under the Family Code, the Child Protection Act and the Domestic Violence Protection Act. Participating in their development were children who had experience and had been involved in court hearings.



5. We prepared a **series of lectures for law students** about the rights of children and their participation in civil litigation. Part of the lectures were made available to third-year students at the department of Law and History with the Neophyt Rilski South-Western University in Blagoevgrad.

6. We translated and published the book **'Resolving Family Conflicts: A Guide to International Family Mediation'**, developed by the General Secretariat of the International Social Service. The book is targeted at families in conflict with an international element, as well as at different professional groups: mediators, lawyers, social workers, etc.





The end of May 2015 saw the successful completion of the project **“From better care to successful social inclusion of children and youths in Smolyan region”**, funded by the Medicor Foundation, Liechtenstein.

Between January and May, 2015, we worked hard to prepare the young people from the FTPC for children aged 15 through 18 years for successful social integration. This included group sessions for developing social skills (teaching them how to write their own CV, how to improve their self-awareness and self-esteem; how to choose a vocation and look for a job; sharing their expectations of the future), as well as weekly workshops and special interest clubs (art, cookery, etc.) with a view to imparting work habits and skills.

We continued to deliver services at the Family Type Placement Centre for children aged 3 through 12 years created within the project framework. Between January and May there were 6 new placements of children, one of whom was successfully adopted after a long preparation period. Towards the end of May, the number of children placed at the FTPC stood at 11. The team has been striving to meet in the best possible way the health, educational and emotional needs of the children, with special focus on the individual character traits of each child, to involve children in the decision making process and to enable them to develop their life skills.

Guided by the understanding that staff qualifications are of paramount importance for the quality of care given to the children, we arranged 5 days of training for the team delivered by an eminent Swiss expert in the field of residential-type services. We also organise monthly methodological consultations; we have arranged 10 group and 15 individual supervisions and one visit to the colleagues at the FTPC in Panagyurishte for exchange of experience in the delivery of a similar type of service.

Thanks to the fact that the FTPC is filled to capacity, the physical conditions there are excellent, the team is highly qualified and motivated and the service provided is of a very high standard, the Smolyan Municipality, in partnership with ISS Bulgaria and with the support of the Regional Social Assistance Directorate in Smolyan, has managed to ensure the sustainability of the service as a state-delegated activity. Following a competitive procedure, its management has been entrusted to ISS Bulgaria as from June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015.



Within the framework of the project **“Partnership for Efficient and Accessible Services aiming at Prevention of Children’s Institutionalisation”**, which we have been implementing in partnership with the International Social Service in Switzerland and the *Samaryani* [Samaritans] Association, we have set ourselves the aim to:

- provide support to foster families residing in municipalities in the Regions of Targovishte and Stara Zagora, where there are no ancillary services to assist them in caring for the children placed with them;
- improve access to, expand the range and raise the quality of the services provided by the Crisis Placement Centre with the Targovishte CSC and the Crisis Centre in Stara Zagora;
- increase our administrative and professional capacity as well as that of other NGOs providing related services, by organising and delivering training courses with the participation of Swiss experts.

And we made it!



By the end of the project, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015, the teams of the Community Support Centres in Targovishte and Stara Zagora, reinforced with additional experts thanks to the project, had provided support to 92 foster families, of which 4 from the Omurtag Municipality, 10 from Antonovo and 4 from Opan. Between the two regions, the teams received, in all, 27 referrals from Child Protection Departments (CPDs) for training applicants from would-be foster families (20 referrals) or for training and evaluation (7 referrals); of those, 24 applicants were approved eventually: 2 from the

municipality of Targovishte, 2 from the municipality of Kotel, 7 from the municipality of Antonovo and 13 from the municipality of Stara Zagora.

In the course of a 16-month period the Crisis Placement Centre in Targovishte has served a total of 38 children (19 boys and 19 girls) aged 4 through 16 years, most of them between 12 and 16. The duration of their stay varied widely, from 5 days to 6 months. Placements were made by CPDs from the entire region, the majority coming from CPD Targovishte (30), followed by CPD Popovo (5) and CPD Omurtag (2). The main reasons for such emergency placements have been the imperative to prevent permanent removal of children from their biological family and their placement in a residential service (22 cases), followed by domestic violence (14), parental neglect (7), physical violence (5) and sexual abuse (2 cases); there was also one child who had attempted suicide. Upon completion of the service, 70% of the children were successfully reintegrated with their biological families, with their extended families or placed in a foster family. Ten children were placed at residential-type services (FTPC).



During the same period, the Crisis Centre at Stara Zagora has provided shelter and support to 42 women with 48 children, and has conducted 72 counselling sessions outside the premises of the Centre on matters related to domestic violence.

Towards the end of the project, experts of the services managed by ourselves and the *Samaryani* Association participated in 13 days of training on subjects like: strategic planning and administrative management, fundraising, foster care, work with children in extra-family care.

## Children and families in cross-border situations (ISS casework)



**Miglena Baldjieva, Attorney-at-Law**  
**Head of the Intercountry Casework Division**

To date, the International Social Service (ISS) network maintains offices in 110 countries around the world. On an annual basis, ISS handles **20,000 cases**, providing assistance and support to over **100,000 persons** globally (the 2015 ISS Annual Report, available on the network's website at [www.iss-ssi.org](http://www.iss-ssi.org)). In 2015, ISS Bulgaria has registered **75 new cases involving 91 children and their families** in conflict cross-border situations, as follows:

1. **Legal dispute between parents** on custody, visitation rights and child support: *a total of 36 motions* for submission of foreign social reports filed by the courts (district and/or regional) at Devin, Vratza, Sofia (the Sofia City Court and the Sofia Regional Court), Montana, Gabrovo, Gorna Oryahovitza, Dryanovo, Smolyan, Varna, Pleven, Sevlievo, Provadia, Yambol, Burgas, Isperih, Kyustendil, Lukovit, Pernik, Plovdiv and Razgrad.

*Galya was born in France in 2008. A little later her parents got married and relocated to Bulgaria. In 2009 all of them settled in Belgium, but relations between the parents became tense. In 2011 the mother moved to Austria to be with her sister; eventually she found a job and decided to settle there. The father did not consent to Galya living with her mother and the child stayed in Belgium. In 2015 the mother filed for divorce in Bulgaria. The court asked ISS Bulgaria to arrange for social reports to be submitted from Belgium about the father and the child, and from Austria, about the mother, in order for the court to rule on the issues of place of residence, custody and visitation rights, personal relations with the child and child support.*

2. **Children whose life, health and development are at risk:** *a total of 19 requests* filed by the ISS network (from the UK, Spain, Germany and Greece) either alerting or seeking information and/or reports from the Social Assistance Directorate about children at risk residing in Bulgaria. Of particular interest has been our work on 4 specific cases involving 5 children in all, characterised by the following: 1) the children reside abroad, as do their parents, yet the children are placed outside the family because of different risks; 2) the social services, respectively the courts of the country of residence of the children, seek information through the ISS network about members of the extended family in Bulgaria who would assume care of the children in order to secure their future in a family environment.

*Penka and Angela are 6 and 3 years old respectively, and live with their mother in Spain. Their father used to live with them but subsequently moved to Germany, where he is now settled. The Spanish social service has detected indications of vulnerability of the children (the parents are separated, the mother has no income or permanent address, the educational authorities find it hard to establish contact with either parent; there have been scenes of violence between the parents; the mother had difficulties meeting the most basic needs of the children; there is no supportive environment in Spain). Therefore the children were placed under the guardianship of the Spanish*

*social service and placed in a residential centre. The mother reports that in Bulgaria the children have a grandmother and a great-grandmother who can assume the duties of caregivers. The Spanish social service seeks cooperation from ISS in arranging for social reports to be submitted on the case by the Bulgarian authorities.*

*Problems in our work on cross-border cases involving children in need of protection:* Since 2014, ISS Bulgaria has been encountering substantial difficulties obtaining reports from the Bulgarian social services in response to requests by foreign social services or courts filed through the ISS network. The social report regarding relatives in Bulgaria is prepared by the relevant Social Assistance Directorate, but is usually not forwarded back to ISS Bulgaria under the pretext that ‘the competent government institutions have been notified of the results of the inquest with a view to undertaking appropriate action’. Thus, the information collected in the meantime by the Bulgarian social workers either does not reach at all the services responsible for the child abroad, or does reach them but with a considerable delay (sometimes more than a year). This approach hampers significantly and delays considerably the process of making a decision that would be in the best interest of the child. ISS Bulgaria has alerted more than once the relevant Bulgarian institutions about the issue, and continues to express serious concern about the need to find an adequate solution that would guarantee the rights of every child in need of protection.

**3. *Reintegration of a child in the family*** of parents residing abroad: *a total of 5 motions* filed by Social Assistance Directorates and Bulgarian courts seeking the submission of reports about the status of parents residing abroad.

**4. *Adoption.*** The adoption cases we worked on are of two types: 1) Locating the biological parents of adopted children: *a total of 2 counselling sessions* for adult Bulgarians adopted in the past by foreign nationals; and 2) possibilities for adoption of a child in Greece whose Bulgarian mother has given her consent for that: *a total of 5 requests* filed by ISS Greece for a social report regarding the mother’s situation in Bulgaria. All available information was forwarded to the Social Assistance Agency. Regrettably, ISS Bulgaria receives no feedback as to what is happening with those cases.

*Assya gave birth to her son in Greece and consented to his adoption by a Greek family. The Greek social service requested the ISS assistance in obtaining an up-to-date social report about the mother’s situation in Bulgaria, in order to finalise the procedure by either allowing or banning the adoption.*

**5. *Parental dispute about allowing a child to travel abroad*** (the so-called custodial authorisation): *a total of 2 motions* filed by courts for social reports to be submitted from abroad.

**6. *Searching for persons in Bulgaria:*** parents, relatives and loved ones: *a total of 2 requests* from the ISS network.

**7. *Restoring contacts between parents and children:*** *a total of 2 requests* filed by fathers whose children live abroad with their mothers.

In 2015, ISS Bulgaria worked on two extremely interesting cases:

*Victoria is 4 years old and has tuberculosis, but her parents realised that only when it was too late and the child’s spinal column had been damaged. Victoria was taken instantly to a German hospital where she underwent an operation, but circumstances (no permanent home, no steady income, no social security, etc.) prevented the family from settling there. Ultimately, the parents decided that*

*the whole family would go back to Bulgaria. The social worker of the hospital where Victoria had her operation and the physician in charge got in touch with a fellow doctor in Pleven in order to convey the entire information about the child's treatment, which should continue in Bulgaria. As the parents were not fully aware of the seriousness of their daughter's condition, the ISS was additionally involved to make sure that she would receive all necessary treatment back in Bulgaria. ISS Bulgaria established contact with Dr. Rosmanov of the Medical University in Pleven and informed the Social Assistance Agency, which in turn instructed the relevant territorial Social Assistance Directorate to undertake all action necessary.*

*Maria is 50, a former schoolteacher. Since 2007 she has been residing in Italy, but goes back to Bulgaria for an occasional visit. Her situation is precarious: she has no close relatives or a social circle; her brother doesn't care about her; she lacks security and cannot cope with potential threats. Gradually, she has been developing mental conditions. Instead of resolving themselves over time, her problems have become chronic. Social workers from Italy have requested information through the good offices of ISS from their counterparts in Bulgaria about the possibility for a so-called assisted repatriation of Maria in Bulgaria. The information supplied by the Social Assistance Agency was forwarded to Italy and a decision is pending about Maria's future.*

## SOURCES OF FUNDING AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION FOR 2015

In 2015, for all activities performed by ISS-Bulgaria, we have received funding in the amount of 1 930 106,60 BGL. The major share of this funding comes from state-mandated activities - 1 486 462,45 (77 %), through the management of social services. Next is the funding of projects aimed at achieving specific goals - 404 119,56 лв. (21%). The yearly donations 31 836, 16 лв. (1,6%), the proceeds from working on international cases (6 224,10 BGL) and invoices for trainings and supervision provided by the Foundation (1 464,33 BGL) constitute 0,4% of all funding.

**Figure 1. Source of funding in 2015**

