UPR Pre-session statement and draft recommendations

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1) Transcript from video submission

Introduction

My name is Bisser Spirov and I am the Manager of Lumos' Branch in Bulgaria. Lumos has been working in Bulgaria since 2010 to support reform of the child welfare system and to end institutionalization of children, which violates many, if not all, of their fundamental rights. We are greatly encouraged by the fact that **since the adoption of the Vision for DI, the number of children in large, impersonal institutions decreased by more than 90%**. Bulgaria has clearly shown its desire to create a new and modern system for child welfare, to decrease its dependence on residential care and increase services designed to keep children in their families and communities.

Current Situation

However, **a number of changes to legislation are still needed**, to make the achievements till now sustainable, and to strategically outline the future path. Unfortunately, Bulgaria has been **left without a National Strategy for the Child and the implementation of the New Law for Social Services was postponed**, after the government succumbed to pressure, following disinformation campaigns led by anti-child rights groups. These attacks on children's rights are having concrete negative impact on the development and implementation of policies that protect children as rights holders.

And one of the fundamental rights for every child to live in a stimulating and healthy family environment and to stay in touch with their parents is significantly affected by the postponement of these two strategical documents. Because of this, many of the measures that should have been taken to prevent the separation children from their families, were also postponed. Thus, **the number of children that are currently separated from their families and placed into Small Group Homes or the last existing institutions remains high.**

Action Required

It is necessary not only to **finalize the process of closing the existing institutions for children** but to **increase the professionalism and capacity of the CPD and the services that work to support families and to prevent the separation of the children from their parents**. The question of the excessive use of Small Group Homes and insufficient quality of residential care needs to be resolved as well.

My next and final point relates to children's right to education. In past years, the Ministry of education continued to support inclusive education, resulting in a growing number of students with SEN, attending mainstream schools and kindergartens. **Despite this, children with multiple and profound disabilities and especially children with challenging behavior still find it difficult to be integrated in mainstream schools**. Focused efforts for their true integration and inclusion are still needed.

COVID-19

Furthermore, it is important to note that while access to education is important, quality of the education is of equal importance. **The last few months, due to Coronavirus, were a true challenge for children from vulnerable and socially disadvantaged families**. Many were not able to adapt to online learning because they lacked electronic devices and internet. **The pandemic clearly showed that education cannot be separated from social policies and we need to seriously invest in integrating policies and services for the well-being of children**.

Youth Advocates

At the end I would like to quote two of our young self-advocates living in a Small Group Home. "During the pandemic lockdown, the inability to meet your friends, the freedom to go outside, even if it's just to the park, have a negative effect on the emotional state of everyone, especially to children in care. They have special needs and should be supported individually".

2) Draft Recommendations

Lumos Bulgaria would appreciate is Recommending States raise the following recommendations during the UPR of Bulgaria:

1) Finalize the process of safely closing all existing institutions for children, as previously recommended to, and committed to by, Bulgaria.
2) Adopt legislation to end the institutionalisation of all children, especially those under three years old and those with disabilities.
3) End the excessive use of Small Group Homes and ensure that any specialized care provided meets CRC and UN guidelines relating to quality of residential care.

4) Develop and implement an updated National Strategy for the Child, that supports the development and investment in community-based and family-based care for children.
5) Implement the New Law for Social Services, which has been delayed.
6) Establish and implement social housing legislation that ensures effective social and child protection measures to prevent removal of children from their birth families for reasons connected solely to poverty, as well as measures to promote family unification.

7) Improve the integration of Education and Social policies and services to promote and protect the well-being of children.
8) Invest financially to increase the professionalism and capacity of the Child Protection Department and the services that work to support families and prevent the separation of the children from their parents.

9) End all forms of segregation in the education system.
10) Run a nationwide training for educational staff and parents to raise awareness of the benefits and necessity of inclusive education and prevent spreading of negative societal perceptions.
11) Invest in integration and inclusion policies and services in schools so every child is able to realise their right to quality education.

3) Lumos Foundation
Vision and mission
ALL CHILDREN GROW UP IN SAFE AND LOVING FAMILIES
To fight for every child's right to a family by transforming care systems around the world.

What we do
The Problem: Most children in orphanages have families – families who simply need help raising their children.
Our Approach: To change the lives of children, we work strategically with partners at every level to move away from the institutionalisation of children towards a model of community-based care.
Our Impact: Thanks to Lumos, over 31,500 children have left – or been prevented from entering – harmful institutions and orphanages since 2009.

Work in Bulgaria
Bulgaria is one of the poorest members of the European Union. In recent years, it has also proved a politically unstable environment. Sustaining political will has been a challenge, yet progress has been significant.

In 2010, the Bulgarian Government adopted a national strategy for deinstitutionalisation. The aim was to close all its 137 large institutions for children by 2025. We opened our Bulgarian office in 2010 and were asked to provide expertise and technical support to help implement Bulgaria's national strategy and we supported the government to develop its National Action Plan for 2016-2020 to reform children's services. This ensured a commitment to the continuation of reforms undertaken since 2010.

We decided to start with the most vulnerable children – young babies and children with multiple complex disabilities. We created two demonstration regions – Dobrich and Varna, where collaborative working with the authorities began to generate positive results. Progress in Bulgaria has been dramatic and rapid, thanks to a joined-up approach of government, NGOs and the European Commission as a funder.

<p style="text-align:center; color:purple">Achievements since 2010</p>

The number of children in institutions has reduced by more than 90% from 5,695 in 2010 to 510 in 2019,
National admissions to orphanages have reduced by 96%,
In Varna, the numbers of children in institutions have reduced by 81%,
In Dobrich, the numbers of children in institutions have reduced by 92%.

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You can also find out more about Lumos by visiting our website
https://www.wearelumos.org/

Thank you and we wish you all a successful UPR Session.

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