



Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Committee on the Rights of the Child Ninety-fifth session

Summary record of the 2762nd meeting*

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Wednesday, 17 January 2024, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Skelton

Contents

Consideration of reports of States parties (*continued*)

Combined sixth and seventh reports of Bulgaria

* No summary records were issued for the 2760th and 2761st meetings.

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports of States parties (*continued*)

Combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Bulgaria (CRC/C/BGR/6-7; CRC/C/BGR/QPR/6-7)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Bulgaria joined the meeting.*
2. **The Chair**, welcoming the delegation of Bulgaria to the meeting, explained that one member of the Committee would be participating via video link.
3. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria), introducing her country's combined sixth and seventh periodic reports (CRC/C/BGR/6-7), said that despite various recent challenges – including recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the impact of wars on Bulgarian society, and the eight changes of government in Bulgaria since 2016, limiting opportunities for serious reforms – Bulgaria had made progress in the implementation of the Convention. The newly elected Government had an ambitious agenda in that regard, and many of the recommendations received during the previous dialogue with the Committee in 2016 had been reflected in the country's policies and programmes.
4. The authorities had been actively working to strengthen the child protection system by implementing comprehensive policies, enhancing legal frameworks and fostering cross-sector collaboration. The country's deinstitutionalization reforms had reduced the number of children accommodated in institutions to fewer than 200 from over 7,500 in 2009 and the number of alternative care institutions to 4 from 137 in 2009. In relation to violence against children, legislative changes had been introduced targeting domestic violence; the Government had adopted a National Programme for Prevention of Violence and Child Abuse (2023–2026); and a new programme for the development of integrated services for victims of violence was being prepared. Changes had been made to the Family Allowance Act and the Labour Code to support families and parental participation in children's lives, and a new legal framework for social services had been instated through the entry into force of the Social Services Act in 2020, aimed at improving service provision, planning and monitoring. Amendments had been made to the Code of Criminal Procedure to fully guarantee the right of minors to a fair trial. More serious and far-reaching reforms were planned for the child justice system by the end of 2024 as part of the National Strategy for the Child 2024–2030, which was in the final stages of development. Children's opinions were taken into account in the creation and implementation of strategies, policies and programmes, for example through the Children's Council, an advisory body consisting of children aged 13 to 18, including children from vulnerable groups.
5. The Government had set a national objective of reducing the number of children under 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion by almost 200,000, representing 25 per cent of the overall national target. It had also adopted an action plan to implement the European Child Guarantee, identifying the most vulnerable children and envisaging that nearly 50,000 children and their families would benefit from its health, home visiting, early childhood development and labour market activities.
6. Bulgaria had been facing migrant pressure as well as several security challenges since 2014, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, some 2.1 million Ukrainians had entered Bulgaria, with 171,571 Ukrainians registering for temporary protection, most of whom were women and children. The authorities had taken measures, including legislative amendments, to provide refugees from Ukraine with temporary protection, full access to the labour market, psychological support, social welfare assistance, social services, accommodation and education.
7. In October 2023, a permanent interministerial working group had been established to develop an annual plan and strategic document for promoting early childhood development by providing access to social, health, educational and integrated services. Ongoing reforms to the system for early childhood education had included the lifting of all crèche and kindergarten fees and the development of a National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care. Furthermore, infant mortality had substantially declined.

8. The Government's children's rights strategy was focused on investing in prevention, building a reliable data system, investing in a competent workforce and achieving a sustainable impact. The Committee's concluding observations would be thoroughly examined by the National Council for Child Protection and the Children's Council, in order to prepare a plan for their implementation setting out specific deadlines.

9. To support children's rights at the global level, Bulgaria had joined the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), co-chaired the Group of Friends for Children and the Sustainable Development Goals, and had been re-elected as a Member State of the Human Rights Council for a second term during 2024–2026. The country actively promoted recognition of the right to free secondary education and at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education.

10. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** (Coordinator, Country Task Force), commending Bulgaria on its actions at the international level, said that she would like to hear what measures were in place to allow Bulgaria to accede to the Optional Protocol on a communications procedure by 2025. It would be helpful to understand whether progress had been made with draft law No. 054-01-111 amending the Child Protection Act and which of its provisions had been withdrawn on account of inconsistencies with national legislation on child protection.

11. She would appreciate clarification of the main body responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the Convention and its Optional Protocols, the resources and powers available to that body, and its impact on implementation of the Committee's recommendations. She wondered whether the National Strategy for the Child 2024–2030 was a strategy on the protection of children's rights aimed at implementing the Convention and its Optional Protocols, or a strategy for tackling poverty and precarity aligned with the European Child Guarantee. If the former, it would be useful to know what actions were envisaged for its implementation, including in terms of budget and monitoring. As the share of gross domestic product devoted to public spending on health, education and social protection remained lower than the European Union average, she was interested to know what actions were being taken to improve the financing of social sectors and track spending on children's rights, in order to ensure that sufficient resources were set aside. The Committee would also like to hear what action had been taken or was envisaged to set up a mechanism for comprehensive and disaggregated data collection. She would be grateful to hear how training on the Convention and its Optional Protocols was being made systematic and compulsory for those working with or for children, and about efforts to raise awareness of the Convention in wider society. She wished to know what the Government was doing to ensure that civil society was a fully-fledged partner in the implementation of the Convention and its Optional Protocols.

12. While the Ombudsperson appeared to play a positive, active role in advocacy, its Directorate for the Rights of the Child remained understaffed, and she would like to hear the Government's plans to better support it. It would also be helpful to know whether the Commission for Protection against Discrimination remained operational. As children could not file complaints themselves and needed to be represented by adults, information on plans to improve children's access to redress mechanisms would be appreciated. She wondered what impact the Corporate Social Responsibility Strategy 2019–2023 had had on improving children's living conditions. Lastly, while the amendments to the Family Code to prohibit marriage under the age of 18 were welcome, it would be helpful to know what enforcement measures were in place to ensure that underage marriage did not continue despite the prohibition.

13. **Mr. Mezmur** (Country Task Force), commending the authorities' establishment of a permanent working group to address discrimination against children, said that he wished to understand the challenges in making the Commission for Protection against Discrimination as accessible as possible to children, as it had only considered a small number of cases. He also wished to hear whether the State party believed that its legislative frameworks were adequate to prevent discrimination against children on any grounds, as there were concerns that article 90 (2) of the Social Services Act might lead to discrimination against children with disabilities. The Committee would be grateful to receive further examples of legislative efforts to address discrimination. It would be helpful to hear the State party's views on concerns that refugees arriving at the southern border were being pushed back, and whether

it considered such actions to be discriminatory and in violation of article 2 of the Convention. He wondered how effective article 162 (2) of the Criminal Code had been in addressing hate speech. He would also like to know what protocols were in place for dealing with hate speech by public officials and politicians, and what their impact had been.

14. It would be useful to hear how the authorities planned to ensure that the best interests of the child were determined and prioritized. He wondered what impacts had been observed from training and awareness-raising activities on that issue. He was curious to know what efforts had been made to address harmful beliefs and attitudes that discouraged children's participation in society. The Committee would be grateful to receive information on measures taken to implement the "Developing effective policies for the observance of children's rights" project, and on how they had helped fulfil children's rights to have their views considered. Information on efforts to address the under-5 mortality rate, which remained considerable, would be appreciated. It would be helpful if the delegation could shed light on road accident figures and suicide rates among adolescents, with a focus on the right to life.

15. He would be grateful if the delegation could explain whether there were challenges in addressing the obstacles faced by stateless children in Bulgaria, and how the authorities were ensuring that the country's reservations to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons were not affecting the rights of such children. The Committee would also like to know whether there were efforts to adopt regulations to govern the practice of commercial surrogacy, particularly with a focus on children's best interests. Lastly, he would be grateful for an update on efforts to ensure that laws and policies on access to information and the digital environment protected children's rights, privacy and safety.

16. **Mr. Gudbrandsson** (Country Task Force) said that he would be grateful if the delegation could explain why there had been a decline in reports made to the child protection system during a period when offences against children had been on the rise. He was concerned that agencies did not appear to be collecting disaggregated data by protected characteristics.

17. He wondered what measures the State party had taken to strengthen an explicit normative prohibition of corporal punishment and what programmes it had implemented in that respect. He would be interested to know whether the new National Strategy for the Child 2024–2030 would address corporal punishment in as strong a manner as had been envisaged in the withdrawn draft national strategy for the period 2019–2030; what changes had been introduced in the National Programme for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse of Children for the period 2023–2026; and whether assessments had been made of the outcome of programmes that had previously been enacted.

18. He wished to know how the State party intended to integrate the new system of specialized services envisaged under the draft Protection against Domestic Violence Act with those regulated under the Social Services Act of 2019 so as to avoid the creation of two parallel regimes responsible for protecting children at risk. The delegation might comment on how the Government intended to address a reported decline in the quality of institutional cooperation to protect children in recent years, and whether the causes of that lay, for example, in a lack of resources or of professionals in the child protection field.

19. He would be interested to learn whether specially equipped so-called blue rooms were used to elicit disclosure from children regarding abuse only in judicial proceedings, or whether these were also used in cases that had not yet reached that stage, and whether there were trends in Bulgaria towards the practice of collecting audiovisual recordings of disclosures that could then be used in court. Could children whose interviews had been recorded subsequently be called into the courtroom for cross-examination? If so, he wondered whether that might be rendered unnecessary by using recordings of cross-examinations of children conducted at the pretrial stage.

20. He wished to know whether the State party was taking action to address the reported inability of crisis centres and response services in Child Protection Departments to meet demand owing to a lack of capacity and understaffing, and whether steps were being taken to reduce the incidence of violence in alternative care institutions. In the light of recent findings that more than 90 per cent of child sexual abuse images found on the Internet were self-generated, he would be grateful for information on efforts being made in Bulgaria to

confront that issue. It would be useful to learn whether the State party had considered legally prohibiting unnecessary medical or surgical treatment of intersex children.

21. He would welcome information on the availability of services to assist children whose parents were in conflict with regard to custody arrangements, and on how children were heard in court procedures related to such cases. In the light of reports that a quarter of children in Bulgaria whose parents migrated abroad to work were left behind, and that some 40 per cent of such children were Roma, he wished to know what measures the State party had taken to address their vulnerability.

22. It would be useful to learn whether the four remaining children's homes mentioned in the State party's report had been closed as planned. The delegation might comment on reports that the number of children placed in out-of-home settings had not decreased over the reporting period, and on evidence that the cause lay in insufficient support for families with children. He wished to know what measures the State party was taking to provide increased support and training to foster families, numbers of which were reportedly falling, and to respond to reports of negative propaganda campaigns against foster care.

23. In the light of evidence that the child protection system was failing to prevent family separation, he wondered what action the State party was taking to provide timely, quality support to children at risk, and to prevent and react to incidents of violence against them; whether the working practices of the system had been examined; and whether those issues were the result of a lack of human or economic resources. Lastly, he wished to know what efforts had been made in recent years specifically to provide assistance to children with disabilities and Roma children, the two groups most at risk of being separated from their families?

The meeting was suspended at 3.55 p.m. and resumed at 4.20 p.m.

24. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the legal framework in Bulgaria for combating hate crimes, racism, intolerance and xenophobia was up-to-date and solid. Recent amendments to the Criminal Code in that regard included the introduction in 2023 of harsher penalties for a number of offences, if they were committed with racist or xenophobic motives, and the inclusion of the grounds of colour, origin and sexual orientation in the provisions governing hate speech. The Code of Criminal Procedure had been amended in 2023, inter alia to integrate into domestic law European Union Directive 2016/800 on procedural safeguards for children who were suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings. The Family Code had also been amended to prohibit children from marrying under the age of 18 and to ensure that violations were investigated by the authorities.

25. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that management and coordination in the domain of children's rights was the responsibility of the State Agency for Child Protection of the Council of Ministers. The State Agency had been established under the Child Protection Act, which incorporated the principles of the Convention. Its coordinating body was the National Council for Child Protection, the membership of which included heads of ministries involved in the protection of children, such as the Minister of Labour and Social Policy and the Minister of Health; representatives of civil society organizations could also apply to become members. By law, the opinion of the Council had to be asked for and taken into account with regard to any bill to amend legislation related to children's rights. The decisions of the Council were informed by three inter-institutional working groups, on the prevention of violence against and abuse of children; the national strategy for child protection; and implementing the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Another working party had recently been established to look at the amendment of the Child Protection Act. Under that act, the Council managed and monitored the implementation of a wide range of coordination mechanisms.

26. The draft national strategy for the child for the period 2019–2030 had been withdrawn in the face of strong public resistance. Work to develop the new strategy had included a consultation process that had provided for prior discussion with the public and with children as to their expectations for such a document. Together with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the State Agency for Child Protection had launched an initiative to visit children in a variety of care settings, including children from Roma organizations, together with their parents, to gather their opinions, and an opinion poll for parents had been held on the State

Agency's website. The National Strategy for the Child 2024–2030 would be ready for adoption by February 2024.

27. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that there was strong political will in Bulgaria to ensure that the Strategy was adopted with a high level of social consensus. The Strategy, which was based on the principles of the Convention, aimed at strengthening the child protection system in its entirety, ensuring the mainstreaming of all children's rights and the provision of the necessary resources and authority to the State Agency for Child Protection for it to enshrine children's rights in all sectoral and cross-sectoral policies. A plan of action, informed by national research supported by UNICEF, was also being implemented to reduce child poverty; it took into account the targets set by the European Union.

28. While Bulgaria did not currently have an officially regulated child rights budgeting mechanism, such a mechanism had been developed by a non-governmental organization (NGO), the National Network for Children. Investment in policies and measures related to children and the family had increased to 4.7 per cent of gross domestic product in 2021, compared with 4.1 per cent in 2017, and budgetary allocations for social programmes and support services had also increased significantly in 2023. Together with other Member States of the European Union, the Government of Bulgaria was developing a joint system to measure the impact of social investment and to ensure that funding for children was viewed as an investment and not as a cost.

29. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the budget for children's health care had been increased by 4 per cent. The unit for maternal and child health, which had been abolished several years previously, had been re-established. The National Health Insurance Fund had increased the budget available for medical examinations and interventions for children by 25 per cent. Special attention was paid to rural areas, where access to health care had been improved for pregnant women. The infant mortality rate had fallen.

30. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that a new national information system, which was provided for under the Child Protection Act, was being developed and funding had been secured. The system would be in line with the Government's policies and programmes for digital transformation and child protection and the Committee's recommendations. It would bring together data on at-risk children, talented children, children available for adoption, children who had dropped out of education, NGOs that served children and other information relevant to child protection. The data from the system would be used to inform policy development. A memorandum of understanding had been signed between relevant ministries to prepare the sources of information for the system. The implementing regulations of the Child Protection Act had been amended in July 2023 to provide a legal basis for developing the system, to which all institutions would have access. The State Agency for Child Protection also gathered data through monitoring mechanisms.

31. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that the National Statistical Institute had worked with UNICEF with a view to providing more disaggregated data that would also be entered into the new information system.

32. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the national health information system contained a range of data on children, covering their mental and physical health, test results, rare diseases, non-communicable diseases and chronic diseases. An application was available that enabled parents to directly access the data held on their children. The data could be used to inform both individual treatment and regional and national planning and policy development.

33. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that all students, teachers, school administrators and parents had a user account for the education information system, which held information on administrative services and educational outcomes. Information from that system was used for all other education platforms, including the "digital backpack" that provided free access to educational content with a view to preventing digital exclusion and supporting all learners. Plans were in place to integrate the education information system into other information systems, to ensure data protection and consistency.

34. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that in 2018, under a Bulgarian/Swiss project, the Ministry of the Interior had set up an information system registering children under 18 who

had committed criminal offences or other antisocial acts and children who had been granted protection. Through a joint initiative with the child protection system, the Ministry of the Interior would provide disaggregated data on police protection, which would be added to the national information system on child protection.

35. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that the role of civil society was highly valued in Bulgaria. Initiatives were in place for investment in social innovations and the sustainability of civil society organizations, to enable them to support children's rights. Existing mechanisms for civil society participation would continue, and a new national council had been established to receive feedback from civil society. Under the law, NGOs were allocated 1 million Bulgarian leva, and the budget for delegated social services provided by NGOs had been increased. Investment had been made into new social services to better meet the needs of children and families.

36. A working group had been established to evaluate the Corporate Social Responsibility Strategy 2019–2023 and inform the new Strategy. Representatives of academic bodies, NGOs and the corporate world were involved. Good practices had been noted in Bulgaria, with companies investing in initiatives for children's rights. The authorities coordinated work for corporate social responsibility taking into consideration the Sustainable Development Goals.

37. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the Family Code had been amended to give adopted persons and their adoptive parents the right to discover the identity of the biological parents. New rights for minors accused of offences had been enshrined in amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure. Those included the right to be assessed individually, to be examined by a medical professional upon detention and to be accompanied by an adult during court hearings. In addition, detention should be applied only as an exceptional measure, and the private and family lives of children must be protected. Criminal trials of minors were given priority, and the maximum length of pretrial detention for children had been reduced. Blue rooms were used in pretrial, civil and criminal proceedings with a view to ensuring the rights of the child. A further amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure concerned measures to prevent the revictimization of children who had been victims of crime. Their testimony was video or audio recorded to avoid direct contact with the accused.

38. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the State Agency for Child Protection had drawn up a map of all the 70 blue rooms in the country, with the contact details of each room. That document would be made available to the relevant stakeholders, including the courts. The State Agency for Child Protection had developed a methodology to be used by experts working with children in blue rooms.

39. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the Family Code had been amended in 2023 to introduce provisions on children travelling abroad. Regional courts would examine requests from parents or guardians to prohibit a child from being taken outside the country if there was a risk of wrongful removal. The court would immediately inform the border police following the request. During the proceedings, a court order would be needed for the child in question to leave the country.

40. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that when an unaccompanied migrant child was identified, he or she was swiftly taken to a safe zone in the migrant reception centre. There were currently two such safe zones and a third would be opened in 2024. The determination of the child's best interests began with a vulnerability and urgent needs assessment by an expert. The child would then be registered and a legal representative would be appointed. Legal amendments were being discussed that would introduce a guardianship mechanism.

41. The procedure to ensure the best interests of the child included rapidly identifying family members for reunification. If the parents were in a Member State of the European Union, the child would be reunited with them under European Union regulations. Unaccompanied minors did not remain in safe zones but were placed in alternative care whenever possible. Progress had been made in that respect and 49 children had been placed in 2023.

42. Officials involved in the reception of migrant children undertook training on children's rights and how to minimize the risks for children in reception facilities, with an

emphasis on mental health. The State Agency for Refugees was using a tool for vulnerable migrants developed by the European Union Agency for Asylum, which covered working with unaccompanied minors. A definition of unaccompanied minor had been added to the Foreigners Act, along with provisions on parents and traditional caregivers.

43. Isolated cases of pushbacks had been reported by asylum-seekers to the State Agency for Refugees. The Bulgarian authorities maintained good collaboration with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). All asylum applications were considered without discrimination.

44. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that significant efforts had been made to protect the lives of children and adolescents and decrease infant mortality. The training of doctors and social workers in early detection of signs of depression and suicidal ideation had led to a substantial decrease in suicide attempts, with very few recorded deaths. Measures to reduce infant mortality included offering pregnant women who did not have health insurance four medical examinations free of charge. Steps were being taken to increase the number of such examinations.

45. In September 2024, sexual and mental health education for children would be introduced in schools following a compendium of best practices from national experts, UNICEF and the World Health Organization. That education would help adolescents to deal with interpersonal relationships, especially romantic relationships, the breakdown of which led to an increased risk of suicide and depression.

46. Efforts were being made to introduce home visiting or so-called patronage health services. Those efforts included a UNICEF project in vulnerable areas of the country and steps being taken by different ministries to fund such services.

47. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that a four-year national programme for the prevention of violence and child abuse had been adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2023. It set out five strategic goals and 28 strategic objectives and was underpinned by data from the National Statistical Institute, Eurostat and relevant ministries. The programme provided for support for parents, awareness-raising for children, improvements to the legal framework, cooperation between public authorities and civil society, and internal and external monitoring. The programme focused on areas such as protection of the rights of children involved in parental conflicts or whose parents who lived overseas, children with disabilities, children with complex communication needs, and child victims of trafficking and labour exploitation, as well as the prevention of early marriages and early births. Quarterly data were collected under the programme and forwarded to all members of the National Council for Child Protection.

48. Thus far, under the programme, the use made of blue rooms had been analysed; hospital admissions of unaccompanied children had been monitored; a report identifying the number and needs of children with disabilities and children with complex communication needs had been prepared, and a related roundtable discussion had been held; monitoring had been conducted at two correctional facilities housing children serving custodial sentences; and a working group had been set up to identify indicators of violence by and against children. Meetings were held every two to three months in different areas of the country to address early marriages and early births, and the involvement of local authorities had been sought so as to ensure regular reporting on the measures taken.

49. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the Ministry of Health had taken steps to promote the State party's accession to the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Organs.

50. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, to prevent the online exploitation of children, the Cybercrime Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior met regularly with children across the country and, together with the National Centre for Safe Internet, arranged for police officers to speak to children and share age-appropriate information on police cases. Children were informed about different types of cybercrime and how they could protect themselves and prevent unsolicited contact. In November 2023, UNICEF, together with State agencies and other stakeholders, had hosted a conference in Bulgaria entitled "Together for Safer Internet for Children".

51. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that a significant increase in funding under the current budget would enable local authorities and NGOs, on the basis of a demand analysis being conducted, to open new crisis centres for mothers and children who experienced any form of abuse and would allow for community support centres to be expanded. Coordination between the Ministry of the Interior and local authorities was being improved with a view to facilitating early intervention by the social services.

52. **Mr. Gudbrandsson** said that he wished to know whether the State party planned to further its implementation of a human rights-based approach to disability through measures such as awareness-raising and the introduction of a unified, inter-institutional data collection system; whether it planned to develop a national early childhood intervention system, potentially in cooperation with UNICEF; and what measures, if any, had been taken to facilitate the transition of children with disabilities from institutional settings to family ones and to strengthen the non-institutional protection network. He would welcome comments from the delegation on reports that children's developmental difficulties or disabilities were often detected late and that not all areas of child development were systematically monitored; that services for children with disabilities were fragmented, with a lack of coordination among the multiple health and education experts and service providers involved; that those services tended to be expert-driven and were insufficiently family-oriented; and that professionals working directly with children with developmental difficulties and disabilities did not receive regular training or supervision, and that many of them had negative attitudes towards children with disabilities.

53. **Mr. Mezmur** said that he would be interested to find out what steps, if any, the State party was taking to establish a national children's hospital; to ensure the availability of health mediators throughout the country; to address health inequalities, especially those underlying the situation of uninsured pregnant women and children; to effectively implement the National Programme for Improving Maternal and Child Health 2021–2030; to prevent the segregation of Roma women in maternity wards; and to ensure that all adolescents had access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, including contraception, and to counter related societal resistance. He would be grateful for information on the outcomes of the State party's efforts to promote breastfeeding; on the continuing mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the steps being taken to address them, on the methodology used to assess the impact of the National Programme for Improving Maternal and Child Health 2014–2020, and on the role, if any, of mental health in that programme.

54. It would be helpful to know whether the State party planned to increase social benefits in response to the rising cost of living or to review the impact of provisions allowing the suspension of family allowances if a child stopped attending school or became a parent. He wished to find out to what extent climate change mitigation and adaptation plans had been or would be developed taking account of children's views and with children being given an active role in their implementation, and how the State party planned to reduce the high levels of air pollution and the number of children with elevated blood lead levels.

55. **Ms. Marshall-Harris** (Country Task Force), speaking via video link, said that she wished to learn about the causes of, and steps being taken to address, the low rates of enrolment in early childhood education and the high dropout rates among primary and secondary school students, particularly those who were poor or members of ethnic minorities or had disabilities. She would welcome the delegation's comments on reports that the failure to fund certain key policy initiatives under the main Ministry of Education budget caused those initiatives to be sidelined; that students found their school studies to be of little relevance to them because they did not cover life skills or digital literacy skills; and that teachers used outmoded teaching methods. She wished to know how the State party planned to improve its low score under the Programme for International Student Assessment; why Roma and other children in vulnerable situations reportedly had weak literacy and numeracy skills and performed at an academic level three years behind their peers; whether reports that staff contributed to an environment of violence, harassment and bullying in schools were true; and how cases involving the physical, verbal or psychological abuse of children in schools were addressed. She also wished to know how the State party would ensure that, in practice, every student was able to study in his or her mother tongue; whether school curricula

were culturally sensitive; whether human rights education was taught in schools; and what challenges the State party faced in its efforts to move towards inclusive education.

56. She wondered whether the delegation could comment on reports that children at the border were subjected to various forms of assault and that border officials exercised significant discretion in deciding who they would allow to cross the border. She wished to know whether the State party's new child justice legislation would provide for diversion and ensure that children received legal aid and were not detained for lengthy periods. She wondered whether the State party planned to reconsider its practice of placing children in correctional schools as punishment for antisocial behaviour.

57. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** said that she wished to find out about any steps being taken by the State party to develop a comprehensive strategy for the prevention of the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; to align its domestic legislation with the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, including in terms of the definitions contained therein; to amend its criminal laws to incorporate the relevant European Union directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography; and to implement the recommendations made by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences following her visit to Bulgaria in 2019. In connection with the State party's efforts under the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, she wished to know how many potential former participants in or victims of armed conflict had been identified among children seeking international protection, and what assistance those children had been given.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.