



Convention on the Rights of the Child

Distr.: General
23 January 2024

Original: English

Committee on the Rights of the Child Ninety-fifth session

Summary record of the 2763rd meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Thursday, 18 January 2024, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Ms. Skelton

Contents

Consideration of reports of States parties (*continued*)

Combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Bulgaria (continued)

This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of the present record to the Documents Management Section (DMS-DCM@un.org).

Any corrected records of the public meetings of the Committee at this session will be reissued for technical reasons after the end of the session.



The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Consideration of reports of States parties *(continued)*

Combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Bulgaria (continued)
([CRC/C/BGR/6-7](#) and [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. She invited the delegation to reply to the questions raised at the Committee's 2762nd meeting.
3. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the main values underpinning the education system included universal access and non-discrimination. Accordingly, there were no segregated schools in the country. However, "secondary segregation" could arise in schools established decades previously in neighbourhoods or areas with a high concentration of vulnerable groups, including Roma. A number of national programmes had been launched and tens of millions of euros invested to provide municipalities with the resources necessary to address such segregation. Measures included providing free transportation to allow students to attend different schools, conducting awareness-raising activities, and working with parents, community leaders and families to address various kinds of vulnerabilities. The Government's policy towards vulnerable groups focused not on ethnicity – no data on ethnic origin were collected – but on factors such as poverty, religion and language. The Government provided sustainable funding for approximately 500 specialized educational mediators, who worked full-time with communities and families to support educational inclusion. At the local level, inter-institutional teams comprising members from the educational and social authorities and the police visited neighbourhoods before the start of each academic year, to ensure that every child was enrolled in school, and provided follow-up to prevent dropout during the year. Tuition fees for nurseries and kindergartens had been eliminated for all children, and schoolbooks had been made available free of charge for children up to the seventh grade, to be extended to all grades starting in 2025. Children who did not have a school in their community were provided with free transportation to attend a "focal school" nearby, where they also received free breakfast and lunch. There were also a number of "protected schools" in more isolated areas that would remain open even with small numbers of children enrolled.
4. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of Roma students graduating from secondary school had doubled, and there had been a sixfold increase in the number obtaining a university degree. The proportion of Roma children enrolled in early childhood education ranged from only 17.5 per cent among those under 3 to 87 per cent among those aged between 3 and 6. An inter-institutional working group had been established under the Council of Ministers with a view to enhancing access to and the quality of early childhood care.
5. Efforts had been under way since 2018 to create a quality standard for education, which would cover the definition of quality and how it was to be measured and monitored. A text was currently being finalized and would be voted on later in the year. In order to adapt to the needs of the digital world and the contemporary labour market, a large-scale curricular reform was under way. Approximately €80 million were being jointly invested by the Government and the European Union to transition towards a competency-based approach, whereby students would develop practical skills and competencies rather than simply acquiring knowledge. Significant investments were also being made in the teacher workforce. The average age of teachers had been reduced by half within the previous year. Over the previous 10 years, teachers' salaries had doubled, and the starting salary was currently set at 125 per cent of the average salary in the country. A mentoring programme had been introduced to provide support to young teachers during their first year in the job, which was when the risk of dropping out of the profession was greatest. A full evaluation of those measures had yet to be carried out, but initial results showed that they had had a positive impact.
6. The Government was committed to improving digital infrastructure. The number of devices per student had increased significantly over the previous five years. The "Digital Backpack" was a national platform created as a one-stop source for interactive content in a

protected environment. A recently established working group on digitization was developing standards on the use of artificial intelligence and guidelines on the use of technology in schools. The working group's goal was to create a vision that would prevent digital exclusion.

7. The Government was investing heavily in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education; a STEM centre would be established in every school in the country, and 40,000 teachers would be trained to use interactive STEM teaching methods.

8. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the Preschool and School Education Act provided for screening and assessment of children's learning capacity at the age of 3, when they started preschool. A manual and guidelines had been drawn up for staff on how to conduct the screening test. In February 2024, 62 people would receive training and would in turn train teachers across the country on how to use the screening test in their daily work. The Ministry of Education and Science was working on a functional assessment of students' needs. An inter-institutional approach was taken to early childhood development, bringing together the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, regional health inspectorates, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Social Assistance Directorate. Special needs schools had been transformed into centres to support early childhood development; they provided coordination, consultation and supervision of inclusive education. In 2023, a total of 24,366 children with learning and special needs had received assistance in kindergartens and schools. Pursuant to legislation adopted in 2021, Bulgarian Sign Language was due to be introduced in schools.

9. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, according to a recent survey by the European Commission, out-of-pocket health-care expenditure in Bulgaria had decreased by approximately 10 per cent. That was positive news, as such payments were one of the major obstacles preventing poorer families from having full access to health care.

10. The establishment of the Maternal and Child Health Department in the Ministry of Health in September 2023 clearly demonstrated the political will to ensure the long-term improvement of maternal and child health in Bulgaria. The first National Strategy for Child and Youth Health and Paediatric Care 2030 and the corresponding action plan had also been launched in September 2023. In that connection, the Ministry of Health was working with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to develop the necessary human resources for children's health care.

11. Various screening programmes for the detection and timely treatment of diseases among newborns were funded from the State budget. The Ages & Stages Questionnaires (ASQ-3) developmental screening tool would be introduced gradually between 2024 and 2025, and the test would be administered to babies at 9 and 18 months by paediatricians, general practitioners and home visiting or so-called patronage nurses. Children who fell below a certain threshold would be referred to the health-care system or social services for early childhood intervention. The Ministry of Health was also introducing screening programmes for spinal muscular atrophy, severe immune deficits and cystic fibrosis.

12. With regard to the prevention of inequalities, 23 mobile offices provided support to vulnerable groups and the Roma population throughout the country to ensure that they had access to health care. Under Ordinance No. 26, the Ministry of Health provided obstetric care to uninsured women. The network of health mediators was growing continuously, and approximately 350 mediators currently provided support throughout the country for the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

13. One of the Ministry's top priorities was the implementation of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination campaign. The vaccine was free of charge for all girls aged between 12 and 14. Vaccination coverage was still very low but was increasing steadily. The preparation of new mothers for breastfeeding was also a priority. Events were carried out to mark World Breastfeeding Week, and information campaigns were conducted to promote and support breastfeeding. The national children's hospital in the town of Burgas, established with Spanish technical assistance, had recently become operational. The tender for the construction of a new national children's hospital in Sofia, which would take 28 months, was open until the end of March 2024.

14. To address the consequences of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on mental health, the National Health Insurance Fund had increased coverage for psychiatric treatment from one visit per month to two. Two clinical pathways in psychiatry were being developed for the first time, one covering affective disorders and the other schizophrenia and psychosis. The National Centre for Public Health and Analysis was drawing up recommendations for employees and employers on how to deal with long COVID, including its mental health consequences.

15. The process for the treatment of intersex children ran smoothly and effectively, and the approach taken did not pose any problems. Intersex children underwent consultations and were operated on before the age of 3, when they began to develop their gender identity.

16. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that Bulgaria carried out border controls in line with the Schengen Borders Code. The border police had signed a tripartite memorandum with the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), under which the latter two institutions, as well as the Bulgarian Red Cross, had access to police detention facilities, where individuals could be held for up to 24 hours as an administrative measure. In 2017, the ordinance on offering police protection to children had been amended to expressly mention unaccompanied children seeking or having been granted international protection. In 2019, brochures and audio files had been produced in French, English, Turkish, Pashto, Urdu and Arabic.

17. To ensure the best interests of migrant children, the border police service organized regular training for its staff on access to the territory and international protection proceedings, vulnerable groups, and cultural and regional specificities. The border police used the fundamental rights training manual developed by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). Bulgaria had experienced a massive influx of migrants in 2014, 2016 and 2023; some 23,000 asylum applications had been registered in 2023. The Ministry of the Interior could not rule out the possibility that cases of violence against migrant children might have occurred; the delegation would therefore appreciate if the Committee could share the sources of the allegations that had been mentioned, so that they could be examined further.

18. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the Ministry of the Interior had procedures in place for dealing with reports of violence by the border police. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, UNHCR and others provided monitoring reports on the situation. The border police service and Frontex also conducted unannounced inspections of border posts and police detention facilities.

19. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography had been incorporated into domestic law through an amendment to the Criminal Code. The Legal Affairs Committee of the Bulgarian Parliament had recently approved amendments to the Code that, if endorsed by Parliament, would integrate Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, into Bulgarian law.

20. Several activities were being implemented to support children of incarcerated parents, including programmes aimed at developing parenting skills among mothers and fathers in prison. Under section 98 of the Prison Act, prisoners had the right to family visitation and home leave, enabling them to maintain direct contact with their children. Child Protection Departments, operating under the auspices of Social Assistance Directorates, arranged foster care for children in difficult situations and helped them to return to family-based care when possible. Support was given to the non-incarcerated parent of children with a parent in prison to help them to obtain childcare benefits. Visits between prisoners and their children were conducted via video link; in cases of hardship and in exceptional circumstances, prisoners were permitted to use the prison telephone network to make external calls free of charge. A number of non-governmental organizations helped underprivileged prisoners to give their children gifts on major holidays, and many prisoners were given the chance to make toys, cards and souvenirs for their children. Mothers who lived with their children in prison were provided with the necessary medical care and counselling, including by external organizations. Some 40 supervisory and security staff working in prisons across Bulgaria had received specialist training in working with children with incarcerated parents.

21. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that four major initiatives had been implemented to support children with disabilities in the enjoyment of their rights. First, the recently adopted Preschool and School Education Act established a new framework for inclusive education, inter alia by adapting facilities, promoting Bulgarian Sign Language, supporting special schools and education centres, and providing specialist training to preschool staff. Second, social protection benefits for children with disabilities had been significantly enhanced. Third, the Government was currently analysing how best to target the services to persons with disabilities, including children, provided under the Personal Assistance Act. Fourth, the Social Services Act, the first piece of legislation to define early interventions for children with disabilities, had led to a significant rise in the number of social services for such children.

22. With regard to article 90 of the Social Assistance Act, the Government had decided that, as a temporary measure, some existing residential care institutions for children with disabilities aged up to three years would remain in operation while the care system shifted towards a family-based model. Such institutions accommodated only children with the most severe conditions requiring round-the-clock or intensive medical care, and only where family-based alternatives were unavailable. The priority was to ensure that children would not have to repeatedly move between placements.

23. Children with disabilities were a key target group in the national action plan for implementation of the European Child Guarantee and in poverty eradication efforts. A national programme of social services for early childhood interventions was being developed, with a view to widening access to such services for all children with developmental disorders. The Government planned to invest in intensive training and capacity-building, support the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education and care, develop national quality standards and promote the social inclusion of children with disabilities, including by addressing public attitudes to disability.

24. There were plans to close all remaining homes for medical and social care for children by December 2024. However, alternatives to institutions and family support services must first be in place. The first priority was to reintegrate children leaving institutions into their birth families; the alternatives were kinship care and, as a last resort, small group homes, some of which provided medical services to children with severe disabilities. Since small group homes were based in communities, children accommodated in such homes engaged with community services, such as mainstream preschools, and maintained contact with their families so that they could be reintegrated into family-based care as soon as possible. A total of 5,585 children were currently in family-based care and 2,765 were in residential care.

25. Early childhood development projects and harm prevention services would receive more investment through European Union funding. The Government would soon launch a new strategy for human resources in the social protection system, including increasing social worker salaries. In addition, there were plans to amend the Child Protection Act following an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses.

26. The Government planned to sustainably integrate foster care services into the State budget. To that end, it was drawing up amendments to legislation and developing unified financial standards to improve administration of foster care. Funding for foster care was used not only to support children entering and remaining in care but also to help those leaving the system to find work and develop vocational and social skills.

27. Child poverty and social exclusion rates had fallen significantly over the previous decade. According to data from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), social assistance programmes had made an impact on child poverty in Bulgaria in recent years, providing an investment case for such programmes. There was considerable political will to ensure that benefit schemes were adequate, well-targeted and timely. The Government's intention was to strike a balance between the provision of benefits and social services, in order to empower vulnerable families to exit their situation and avoid dependency on the social welfare system. The changes made to the family allowance benefit had been adopted with the intention of tackling early pregnancy and school dropout rates. However, those changes had not proven successful as prevention measures; in fact, they had occasionally had a negative impact on the most vulnerable groups, such as Roma children, perpetuating the

cycle of intergenerational poverty. The Government had therefore begun a review of the Family Allowance Act, which would include an assessment of the social impact of all family welfare benefits.

28. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, while surrogacy was strictly prohibited in Bulgaria, there were no express statutory regulations on surrogacy in domestic legislation.

29. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that corporal punishment of children was strictly prohibited. All acts of physical, mental or sexual violence within a family, household or intimate relationship constituted domestic violence under the Protection against Domestic Violence Act and were thus prohibited, and any act of domestic violence committed in the presence of a child constituted mental and emotional abuse of the child. Following the 2023 amendment of the Act, the definition of domestic violence included acts committed through inaction as well as action. The 2019 amendment to the Criminal Code had criminalized all forms of domestic violence. Breaches of domestic violence protection orders were now punishable by up to 3 years' imprisonment or a fine of up to 5,000 lev, and repeat infractions were punishable by 1 to 5 years' imprisonment. Offences involving bodily harm were punished more severely in cases where the victim was a minor.

30. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that the Commission for Protection against Discrimination worked closely with all human rights institutions in the country and, together with the Ombudsman, co-chaired the national Monitoring Council established under the Persons with Disabilities Act. While it was true that children could not lodge complaints with the Commission themselves and must do so through their parents or legal representatives, the Commission had acted on its own initiative on several cases of violations of children's rights. In 2022, the Commission had received 35 complaints concerning the premises of kindergartens and schools and 25 complaints concerning discrimination with regard to children's rights. The Commission inspected and analysed the premises of all kindergartens and schools and issued recommendations on improving their architecture and design. There was also a form on the Ombudsman's website that children could use to file complaints directly. The number of complaints submitted by children had increased in recent years, with 587 complaints received in 2023.

31. The Ombudsman and the Commission had established partnerships with non-governmental organizations, schools, municipal authorities, universities and the business community, and both bodies organized educational workshops for children and young people to raise awareness of their respective activities. The Commission had also provided training on children's rights to over 3,000 education professionals.

32. **Ms. Ayoubi Idrissi** (Coordinator, Country Task Force), said that she would like to know how the State party had translated recently adopted legislation, including legal provisions inspired by the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and by Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, into concrete measures to prevent and combat different forms of child sexual abuse and to provide support to victims.

33. **Ms. Marshall-Harris** (Country Task Force), speaking via video link, said that she wished to know whether the reform of the child justice system would provide for greater use of diversion measures for children in conflict with the law. The delegation might also like to confirm that the necessary steps would be taken to abolish status offences and ensure that children under the minimum age of criminal responsibility were not charged under the notion of "antisocial behaviour". She would welcome confirmation as to whether all children would have access to free legal aid from the moment of arrest. Moreover, it would be helpful to know whether the reform would address the concerns reported in some quarters that parents were not being informed when their children were arrested and that children were not being treated appropriately in custody.

34. The Committee would be interested to know whether schools had access to the services of counsellors to help tackle bullying and harassment among pupils. The delegation might also like to comment on reports that pupils from different communities were being segregated and provide further information on any action the State party intended to take to put an end to segregation in schools.

35. It would be interesting to hear what measures the State party planned to take to improve its detection of unaccompanied migrant children, since the authorities had reportedly deemed certain children to have been in the care of adults who were, in reality, total strangers to them. She would also welcome further information about the proposal for a new age assessment procedure. In particular, she wished to know whether the procedure would be multidisciplinary and child-friendly and whether the principle of the benefit of the doubt would be applied when an individual's age could not be determined with certainty.

36. **Mr. Gudbrandsson** (Country Task Force) said that it was his understanding that a child victim of crime or witness of crime, having been interviewed by a member of the judiciary in a so-called blue room, would then be required to take part in additional interviews and assessments at other locations. It would be useful to know whether the State party had considered coordinating that process to ensure that members of the judiciary, medical professionals, psychologists and any other relevant parties could meet with the child at the same location and without undue delay. He also wished to know whether the State party would consider recording interviews with child victims and witnesses at the pretrial stage and allowing such recordings to be used as evidence during court proceedings.

37. **Mr. Van Keirsbilck** said that he would be interested to hear more about the extent to which migrant children were being detained with their families on arrival in the State party. In that regard, it would be useful to know whether the State party would be willing to stop detaining children in the context of migration entirely.

38. The Committee would welcome further information about the key objectives of the reform of the child and juvenile justice system and any time frames that had been set for its adoption and implementation. He wished to know whether the State party would be prepared to take immediate action to make improvements to certain areas of the child justice system that were in need of urgent attention, such as the policy on antisocial behaviour and the high rate of deprivation of liberty of children.

39. With respect to detention conditions, it would be useful to hear whether the Ombudsman had been allocated sufficient resources to discharge its function as the national preventive mechanism under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. He would also like to know whether that institution had received a specific mandate to visit places of deprivation of liberty of children. If so, it would be interesting to know whether any special training had been provided for that purpose, and whether there were any plans to establish a children's ombudsman to assume responsibility for monitoring the detention conditions of children.

40. On a separate matter, he would be interested to know what policy the State party had adopted concerning the arrival of Ukrainian child refugees who had been accommodated in institutions in their home country.

41. **Ms. Kiladze** said that she would like to know whether the State party provided any specific rehabilitation services for children with gambling problems. She would also be interested to hear whether artificial intelligence was being used in schools and whether the Government intended to introduce regulations to govern its use in the field of education.

42. **Ms. Aho** said that she would be interested to know what measures, if any, had been taken to raise awareness of the law concerning children who witnessed violence between their parents. It would be useful to know how many parents had been taken in for questioning in relation to alleged offences under that law, and whether a hotline had been set up to enable children to report violent incidents. She also wished to know what mechanisms had been put in place to inform teenagers about the dangers of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and syphilis.

43. **The Chair** said that, given that corporal punishment was not explicitly prohibited in domestic legislation, she wished to know what steps the State party had taken to inform the public that such acts were illegal and whether, in general, the population believed that corporal punishment was prohibited. With respect to online material of a sexual nature, it would be useful to know whether the law differentiated between cases where adults shared inappropriate images of children and cases where children consensually shared images of themselves. The two categories should be treated separately, not least to avoid drawing

children into the criminal justice system when they might be dealt with using other means such as diversion or social measures. Lastly, the Committee would welcome a more detailed explanation of the State party's policy and practices regarding non-essential surgery on intersex children.

The meeting was suspended at 11.40 a.m. and resumed at noon.

44. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, in accordance with the Preschool and School Education Act, it was prohibited to segregate preschool pupils and students at all levels of education into different groups on the basis of their ethnic background. It was true that, in small towns and villages, a high proportion of the students at certain schools might belong to the same ethnic minority. However, that was simply a reflection of the demographic composition of the local population, since parents usually chose to send their children to the closest possible school.

45. Between 2020 and 2023, 650 experts on bullying and harassment had been trained and 19 psychologists had joined the national mobile psychological assistance team. In August 2023, a working group had been established by the Council of Ministers to examine aggressive behaviour in schools, and a number of measures were being taken to prevent violence, harassment and bullying among students. Local mediation teams composed of education experts, psychologists and other relevant specialists were working to improve communication between parents and schools, particularly in cases of children who were victims of conflicts between parents. At national level, the Ministry of Education and Science, in partnership with UNICEF, had developed the Steps Together towards a School Without Violence programme. The Ministry had also held a meeting with school psychologists to discuss developing their profession, while ongoing training on bullying and harassment was provided for psychologists and teachers.

46. With the aim of strengthening self-governance in schools and fostering civic education, the Ministry of Education and Science encouraged teenagers to become involved in tackling undesirable conduct and violence in schools, including by promoting peer training. During one campaign carried out by the Ministry, the stories and experiences of students, parents and teachers concerning drug addiction had been collected and then disseminated among students, to raise awareness of the dangers of drug use. The Ministry placed a great emphasis on monitoring drug use among teenagers, since substance abuse often went hand in hand with violent behaviour. Schools also focused on developing the social and emotional intelligence of their students, while the Ministry had taken steps to raise awareness about the safe use of online social media and the risks of cyberattacks against education establishments. Elsewhere, the importance of the role played by sports participation in preventing aggression and violence was a core element of a national programme entitled Together in Arts and Sports.

47. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, in the framework of implementation of the National Programme for Prevention of Violence and Child Abuse (2023–2026), new guidelines on the interrogation and examination of children in so-called blue rooms had been adopted. There were currently 70 blue rooms: 33 on premises used for social services, 21 in courts or prosecutor's offices, 6 within the offices of the Ministry of the Interior and 10 on the sites of local authorities.

48. Under the Coordination Mechanism against Violence, a multidisciplinary response team must be formed within 24 hours following receipt of any report that a child might be at risk or a victim of violence or exploitation. Those teams included representatives of the regional police directorate, the regional prosecution office and the local authorities, as well as an inspector specializing in juvenile delinquency. The initial assessment of the report was always led by a social worker.

49. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, pursuant to decision No. 586 of the Council of Ministers in August 2021, the Government had adopted a road map for the implementation of judgments concerning criminal proceedings issued against Bulgaria by the European Court of Human Rights. The road map had been drafted following consultations with the European Commission on transposing the European directives on the right to information in criminal proceedings, on the right of access to a lawyer in the event of custody, and on the right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings. Under the road map, the guidelines on

detention and detention facilities had also been amended. The amended regulations provided for the mandatory notification of a parent, guardian or carer following the arrest of a person under 18 and the mandatory participation of a defence counsel from the moment of arrest, irrespective of the child's opinion on the matter. The Ministry of the Interior Act had also been amended to ensure that the rights of arrested minors were upheld and that the detention of children was reduced to a minimum.

50. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, under the Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, refugee children who were accompanied by their parents could remain in a detention centre for up to three months. However, in practice, if the family applied for asylum, it would be transferred to the facilities of the State Agency for Refugees within six days. Amendments to the above-mentioned Act made in 2018 prohibited the placement of someone who had been identified as an unaccompanied minor in a detention centre, except when that person subsequently revealed that, in fact, he or she was accompanied by a family member, or was over 18. Unaccompanied minors were transferred to safe zones and their case was referred to the relevant regional child protection unit. New instructions on age assessment meant that a medical examination was carried out only as a last resort if there were any remaining doubts after assessment by a multidisciplinary team that included psychologists.

51. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that most Ukrainian refugee children had come with their families and had full access to support services in accordance with the Child Protection Act. If those children had disabilities, they could attend day-care centres. It was not State policy to place Ukrainian children in institutions and, in 2023, only one had been placed in a small residential home.

52. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, in response to a policy brief issued by the World Health Organization, the Bulgarian Parliament had prohibited aggressive advertisement of the national lottery, as it was impoverishing young people by encouraging them to spend their pocket money on lottery tickets. However, online gambling, especially on sports events, was a big problem. For that reason, the Ministry of Health, in cooperation with the Bulgarian Paediatric Association, the National Network for Children and the World Health Organization, had held several workshops to bring the issue to the attention of children and their teachers. A State-run centre near Sofia provided treatment and counselling for addicts who could also consult psychotherapists, albeit at their own cost. The Supervisory Board of the National Health Insurance Fund was considering whether the Fund could provide support for anti-addiction psychotherapy.

53. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that community support centres and social rehabilitation centres were also involved in work to assist juvenile gambling addicts. The staff of those centres included psychologists and social pedagogues. Admittedly, cooperation between experts, social services and the health system could be improved.

54. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that Ordinance No. 6 of 24 August 2015 regulated gender reassignment surgery. Plastic, restorative and aesthetic surgery for that purpose could be performed in hospitals and specialized outpatient clinics. Doctors could not decide whether to change the gender of adult or child patients. The patients themselves had to take an informed decision when they were over 18. If they were under that age, the decision had to be taken by the parent or person acting in a parental capacity. When a child's behaviour jeopardized his or her mental or physical health or education, a district court could take appropriate measures in the child's best interest, by restricting or terminating parental rights, by imposing conditions or by entrusting another person with the exercise of such rights.

55. In order to improve sexual and reproductive health, the Ministry of Health carried out awareness-raising activities targeting students and young people. In 2022, as part of the National Programme for the Prevention and Control of HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections, regional health inspectors and medical specialists had visited schools, where they had distributed condoms and educational materials. Anonymous, free, voluntary counselling and testing for HIV was easily accessible. One aim of the measures taken was to modify the sexual behaviour of target groups and encourage safe sexual behaviour. The measures in question also covered the Roma community. In 2024, sexual health education would be introduced in all Bulgarian schools.

56. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, in order to protect children, under the Criminal Procedure Code a victim of an offence who was under 14 could be questioned only when a psychologist or a pedagogist and a parent was present. Young people between 14 and 18 had the right to request the presence of those persons and it lay with the court to decide whether to allow it. It was common practice for judges to question the victims of crimes, especially of sexual or domestic violence crimes, in blue rooms. When that occurred at the pretrial stage, there was no need for the child to appear in court, as the record of the questioning would be used at the hearing. That record could take the form of video or audio recordings. Blue rooms were equipped to avoid direct contact between the child victim and the perpetrator of the offence. Children who believed that they were the victims of domestic or sexual violence could use hotlines to obtain primary legal assistance or to report ill-treatment. Lawyers were on duty round the clock to provide legal aid to and to attend victims at home, in a police station or in hospital. It was a crime to induce a child to watch pornography, but that did not of course apply when the instigator was himself or herself a minor.

57. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that written replies would be supplied to the questions regarding the underlying reasons for non-accession to the Optional Protocol on a communications procedure, the planned reform of juvenile justice and the Ombudsperson.

58. **Mr. Gudbrandsson** said that he wished to know if it was established practice to question child victims or witnesses in a blue room in the presence of defence counsel, without the child having to see him or her.

59. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that child victims or witnesses could be cross examined not only by prosecutors but also by accused persons and their defence counsel in such a way that the child would not see them.

60. **The Chair** said that Bulgarian legislation seemed ill-equipped to deal situations where children created pornography by taking sexually explicit pictures of themselves. She wished to know whether young people between 14 and 18 who shared pornographic images or who induced others to look at pornography could incur criminal responsibility.

61. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that, in such cases, young people between 14 and 18 could be criminally liable but those under 14 would not be.

62. **Mr. Mezmur** said that he would like to receive written information with updated figures on cases brought before the Commission for Protection against Discrimination and would like to hear more about the work being done to address climate change and monitor air quality.

63. **Ms. Al Barwani** said that she would like to know whether the State party had assessed the impact of busing children to an area with better schools on the quality of education or on pupils' performance in those schools.

64. **A representative of Bulgaria** said that a great deal of work on the consequences of climate change for young people was being done by the National Centre for Public Health and Analysis, non-governmental organizations and Parliament. The National Centre had produced guidelines on heatwaves and air quality. Regional health inspectors visited schools to share the contents of those guidelines with pupils and to tell them how to avoid the risks entailed by heatwaves and air pollution. Workshops on minimizing and dealing with the health risks of particle pollution, especially for children living in large cities, had been organized for health professionals and medical students. Health education on contending with climate change would be introduced in all schools in 2024.

65. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that, in 2024, a new energy efficiency policy would be accompanied by criteria for obtaining energy poverty benefits. The Government was actively consulting young people, because it believed they should be the actors and players in all policies that were going to shape the future in which they were going to live.

66. **Ms. Ayoub Idrissi** said that the Committee had been pleased to hear about all the measures that the State party intended to take to promote the implementation of the Convention and its Optional Protocols and, in particular, about the mechanism for following

up the Committee's recommendations. It trusted that by 2025 Bulgaria would have acceded to the Optional Protocol on a communications procedure.

67. **Ms. Shalapatova** (Bulgaria) said that the delegation had greatly appreciated the interactive dialogue and was grateful for the Committee's suggestions for improvements in the legal basis, institutional infrastructure, policy framework and practices required to protect the rights of the child in Bulgaria. The constructive exchange had made it possible to pinpoint where greater efforts were needed. Bulgaria was committed to ensuring the rights of the child.

The meeting rose at 12.55 p.m.