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### WHERE WE WORK



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20 MAY 2009

## Inside Bulgaria

I had last been to Bulgaria in 2008 to develop an overview of the situation, build relationships and develop potential areas for our involvement in the country. This time, I was joined by other members of our team, as a result of a request from the European Commission to undertake a comprehensive situation analysis of Bulgaria.

The visit lasted for four days and during that time we met with a number of officials from the Ministries of Health, Labour and Social Policy, as well as Education and Regional Development. We also met with representatives from NGOs working in Bulgaria, officials from local and regional authorities, and a locally-based consultant for the European Commission.

We were able to visit a number of facilities including a mainstream children's home, a home for children with medium to severe disabilities, a home for children with mild to medium learning disabilities and a rehabilitation centre, called Karin Dom. One of the things that struck me was the high number of Roma children, as well as the high number of Down's Syndrome children in the first facility, which was a home for children with medium to severe disabilities.

Bulgaria faces a number of challenges as it looks to reform its childcare system. First and, perhaps foremost, is the lack of coordination and lack of responsibility at a national level, as well as some apparent confusion about the process itself. Some ministries, for example, referred to numerous deinstitutionalisation projects that, on closer inspection, turned out to merely be a renaming of an existing institution, but with the same children, staff and, we have to presume, policies.

The scale of the problem is also a challenge, and a source of some confusion: children living full time in large residential schools are not included in the official statistics. So while government officials told us that there are around 7,200 children in institutions, other non-governmental sources put the number closer to 13,000 children.

What is evident, though, is the number of babies that are in institutions: over 2,400. And, with 90% of the admissions to institutions for older children come directly from these baby institutions, it's clear that this group should be prioritised in any future deinstitutionalisation process.

There is, as we noted from our visits to facilities, extreme levels of discrimination against Roma people: a recent survey of Roma people across Europe found the highest levels of discrimination in Bulgaria. We were reliably informed that 70% of all the children in institutions are Roma children.

Finally, we noted that the current process of deinstitutionalisation might be causing more harm than good. Some reform programmes, coupled with a negative birth rate, have resulted in an overall reduction of admissions in institutions. As a result, some are closing, but this is done haphazardly, with the children being moved from one institution to another, which is clearly not in their best interests and can, at times, be very traumatic.

There are, though, examples of good practice. Karin Dom, which we visited, is an example of excellence in early intervention and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities. Another good example is the ARK deinstitutionalisation programme in the Stara Zagora Region,

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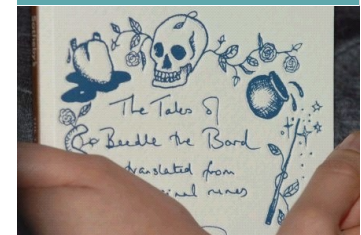
### TWO OF A KIND



Damek is 12 years old. He's lived in the institution for ten years now. The home is situated in a small village in the middle of a forest. He...

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### THE TALES OF BEEDLE THE BARD



'You've never heard of The Tales of Beedle the Bard?' said Ron incredulously. 'You're kidding, right?' (From Harry...

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### EDUCATION IS CENTRAL

Education programmes are at the heart of our deinstitutionalisation programmes in Moldova and the Czech Republic. As part of the programme in Moldova, we...

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which has been implemented according to the best practice principles developed by Georgette Mulheir, our Director of Operations.

We hope that we can become more involved in Bulgaria, whether in building capacity, empowering children to participate or through community-based healthcare programmes. I hope that it won't have been my last visit to the country.

POSTED BY: RICHARD ALDERSLADE

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