

BULGARIA

Key contextual data

Compiled by

**Inge Schreyer, Pamela Oberhuemer,
and Rozalina Engels-Kritidis**

Citation suggestion:

Schreyer, I., P. Oberhuemer, and R. Engels-Kritidis. 2024. "Bulgaria – Key contextual data." In *Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe. 33 country reports with key contextual data*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer. Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy. www.seeepro.eu/English/Country-Reports.htm

Funded by:



Federal Ministry for
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,
Women and Youth



State Institute for Early Childhood
Research and Media Literacy



Contents

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)	3
Historical turning points in ECEC in Bulgaria	3
ECEC system type and auspices	3
General objectives and legislative framework	4
ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance	4
Main types of provision	5
Provider structures	5
Participation rates in regulated provision	6
Financing and costs for parents	7
Staff to child ratios and group size	8
Curricular frameworks	8
Digital education	9
Monitoring – evaluation	9
Inclusion agenda	10
<i>Children with special educational needs and disabilities</i>	10
<i>Children with a migration background – children from Roma communities</i> ...	11
Parental leave arrangements.....	12
Current challenges for the ECEC system in Bulgaria (Rozalina Engels-Kritidis)...	12
Demographic data	13
Total population	13
Total fertility rate	13
Children under 6 years of age.....	14
Single households with children under 6 years of age	14
Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age.....	15
Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	16
References	16



Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms chosen in this report for the main form of centre-based ECEC settings are **nursery** (*detski yasli*, 0–2/3) and **kindergarten** (*detski gradini*, 3–6)¹. Any additional forms of provision are described where appropriate.

Historical milestones in ECEC in Bulgaria

1882	First early childhood institution established
1934	Official integration of kindergartens into the education sector
1935	First day nurseries for under 3 year-olds established
1991	Pre-primary groups for 6 year-olds established during the Socialist era are continued.
1993	Modern programmes for preschool education developed: <i>Educational Programme for Children Aged 2-7 Years</i> and <i>Children's Kindergarten Activities</i>
2000	State Educational Requirements for early childhood education and preparation of children for primary school were established by the content of Decree № 4, issued by the Ministry of Education and Science, with further additions published in 2005.
2002	Pre-primary groups for 6 year-olds are made obligatory.
2010	Obligatory pre-primary education is extended to 5 year-olds.
2014	Standards for development and learning in early childhood: from birth to three years published
2015	Early Education and Schools Act (<i>Zakon za preduchilishtnoto i uchilishtnoto obrazovanie</i>); comes into force 2016 (amendments 2017, 2020)
2016	National standards for early childhood education established through Decree № 5 for Early Education (2016), issued by the Ministry of Education and Science.
2020	Legislative amendment: Pre-primary education in kindergartens is to be made compulsory for 4 to 6 year-olds (three years) by 2023/24.
2021	Parental fees for 4 to 6 year-olds are to be completely abolished

Sources: Atanasova-Trifonova et al. 2014; Engels-Kritidis 2012, 2018; Volen and de Laat 2021.

ECEC system type and auspices²

In Bulgaria, the system of early childhood education and care is organised in two separate sectors, although there have been plans to work towards an integration of the two sectors for some time. At the national level, the Ministry of Education and Science (*Ministerstvo na obrazovaniето i naukata*) is responsible for kindergartens for 2/3 to 6/7 year-olds; it is also responsible for the implementation of curricular frameworks and educational reforms. The Ministry of Health is responsible for nurseries for under 3 year-olds (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 168).

¹ **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds in countries with a primary school entry age of 6 years. In the case of Bulgaria, the relevant format is **0–2/3** years and **3–6/7** years, since children usually start school when they are 7 years old.

² The Eurydice country report on ECEC in Bulgaria provided orientation for data on legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are clearly indicated within the text and in the references section.

At the regional level, 28 supervisory authorities are responsible for administration and management. Regions and municipalities are responsible for buildings, maintenance and equipment, as well as for compliance with health and safety regulations, catering and the transport of children.

General objectives and legislative framework

Basic overall principles of the Bulgarian education system are: (1) quality of education; (2) active partnerships between all stakeholders (staff, parents, employers, unions, NGOs); (3) competitiveness between settings in striving for quality; (4) system transparency and flexibility; (5) equal access for all children, with an emphasis on integrating socially disadvantaged groups.

The overall goal of ECEC is to create the necessary conditions for children to be able to develop their potential, to ease their transition into school and providing the chance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop a positive attitude towards learning. Improving the quality of education is also emphasised as well as achieving equality of access. The concept of lifelong learning is given high priority.

In 2018, the Ministry of Education established an early education strategy, which aims, among other things, to reform the care system for under 3 year-olds. This is to include certain standards regarding health, education, interventions, support and training for professionals working with 0 to 6/7 year-olds, as well as piloting alternative forms of care. This strategy was adopted as part of the new child protection strategy and is currently under discussion by the State Agency for Child Protection (Bogdanov and Zahariev 2018).

Another national programme called “Successful Together” initiated by the Ministry of Education (2019) aims to ensure the comprehensive development of children and to enable a good transition from family to kindergarten and from kindergarten to school.

In August 2016, the Early Education and Schools Act (*Zakon za preduchilishtnoto i uchilishtnoto obrazovanie*) came into force (amendments in 2017 and 2020), the main objectives of which are to promote inclusive education and to develop standards for the early education sector. In the regulations implementing the Act, kindergartens are defined as pre-primary institutions that provide care and education for children from (2)3 years of age until they start school. Framework conditions for the education, care and upbringing of children under 3 years of age are laid down in the Health Act of 2004, revised in 2016.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

As from 2023/24, attendance at kindergarten is compulsory for three years. This requirement was laid down in an amendment to the Early Education and Schools Act in 2020. Kindergarten will be mandatory for children turning 4 during any one school year and free of charge for parents. State and municipalities have a duty to ensure that the conditions for this are in place by 2023/24 at the latest.

There is no legal entitlement to a place in an ECEC setting for children under 4 years of age.

As a rule, statutory schooling in primary schools starts at 7 years of age.

Main types of provision

Nurseries (*detski yasli*) admit children from 3 months up to 3 years. These may be stand-alone settings, or a unit attached to a full-day kindergarten. The Early Education and Schools Act defines the appropriate age range as 10 months to 3 years. Staff in these settings have a recognised nursing qualification; they are supported by staff with a non-medical qualification (NSI 2022b).

Kindergartens (*detski gradini*) are the core institutions of early childhood education and care for 3 to 6/7 year-olds. According to the Early Education and Schools Act, 2 year-olds can also be admitted to kindergartens since 2015. Kindergartens are compulsory from the age of 4 until primary schooling at 7, i.e. for three years. Although the former term "compulsory pre-primary groups" (*podgotvitelna grupa*) remains in use, these do not exist as separate institutions; some are located in schools. The total weekly number of pedagogical sessions for 5–6 year-olds is at least 15, for 6–7 year-olds 17, with a duration of 20-30 minutes each.

A kindergarten consists of at least four groups; in large cities like Sofia, there may be ten or more. Children are divided into same-age groups: from (2)3 to 4 years, 4 to 5 years, 5 to 6 years, and 6 to 7 years. Occasionally (in smaller towns) there are mixed-age groups.

As a rule, children attend a full-day kindergarten (NSI 2023a), which is open from 7:00 to 19:00. There are also some half-day kindergartens that close at noon (see *Table 1*). Free transportation to the nearest facility is provided for children from remote areas.

There continues to be a considerable insufficiency of kindergarten places in Bulgaria, particularly in the larger cities. It has been calculated that more than 60,000 additional places would be needed to meet the demand (OSI 2020, 15). In 2018, only about 17% of kindergartens and nurseries had available places (*ibid*, 88); long waiting lists are common, particularly in large cities.

Kindergartens with nursery groups are a less common form of provision, catering for children aged 10 months up to 7 years.

Table 1

Bulgaria: Number of children in different kindergarten types (including preparatory groups at schools), 2022/23

Kindergarten type	Number of places	Number of children
Full-day kindergarten	232,813	205,476
Half-day kindergarten	14,634	11,005
– of these, in private kindergartens	8,091	5,977
Total	247,447	216,481

Sources: NSI 2023a

Provider structures

Nursery services are offered by both public and private providers, as well as nursery groups that are provided in some public and private kindergartens. Consolidated statistics for the number of private nurseries and nursery groups are hard to find as official statistics from the Ministry of Health only state the total number of nurseries and nursery groups which at the end of 2022 totalled 835 (NSI 2023b).

Most **kindergartens** are run by local authorities. However, during recent years the proportion of privately-run settings rose slightly from 5.3% in 2017 to 6.5% in 2022/23. Most of these private kindergartens are run on a for-profit basis and are generally too expensive for the greater majority of parents.

Table 2

Bulgaria: Number of kindergartens according to provider, 2017-2022/23

Provider	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2021/22	2022/23
Public/municipal	1,736	1,733	1,734	1,700	1,698
Private (mostly for-profit)	98	101	106	117	119
Total	1,834	1,834	1,840	1,817	1,817
Share of private kindergartens, in %*	5.3	5.5	5.8	6.4	6.5

Source: NSI 2023d, *own calculations

Only 3.3% of all kindergarten places were provided in private facilities in 2022/23 (8,091 of 247,447). In the same year, 2.8% of children attended a private kindergarten, whereas the share was only 0,5% in 2005 (see Table 3).

Table 3

Bulgaria: Number of children in kindergartens according to provider, 2005–2022/23

	2005	2015	2022
Public kindergartens*	205,291	228,692	210,504
Private kindergartens	952	3,333	5,977
Total number of children	206,243	232,025	216,481

Source: NSI 2023a, *own calculations

Private kindergartens are characterised by a significantly lower average number of children than municipal facilities: in 2022/23, there was an average of 50 children in a private kindergarten compared to 124 children in a municipal kindergarten. Also, the private kindergartens have less children in each group (roughly 15) compared with publicly-run kindergartens (approx. 23) (NSI 2023a, own calculations).

Participation rates in regulated provision

According to national statistics, at the end of 2022 there were 835 nurseries (stand-alone nurseries and nursery groups in kindergartens) in Bulgaria, attended by 30,544 children, which corresponds to an enrolment rate of approximately 17% of the under-threes (Eurostat 2023a). Most of the children were 2 years old. Out of 33,193 places, 44.4% were in stand-alone nurseries (14,743) (NSI 2023b).

Table 4

Bulgaria: Number of nurseries and number of children enrolled by age, end of 2022

	2010	2015	2022
Nurseries (including groups in kindergartens)	731	812	835
Children enrolled	29,507	32,124	30,544
<i>of these:</i>			
1 year-olds	6,059	5,621	5,394
2 year-olds	22,513	22,081	24,884

Source: NSI 2023b

Whereas in both 2010 and 2020/21, the majority of children under 3 years of age were not enrolled in an ECEC setting, the proportion of 3 to 6/7 year-olds in ECEC settings increased from about half of the age group (54%) to 94.6% during this period. Despite the overall low enrolment

rates, the proportion of children under 3 years of age in nurseries also more than doubled, from 7% to 17.4%.

Table 5

Bulgaria: Participation rates according to duration of attendance in centre-based settings by age, 2005-2022

Year	Weekly hours of attendance	Under 3 year olds, in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2010	1 to 29	1	4
	Over 30	6	50
	No enrolment in ECEC	93	46
2015	1 to 29	0.5	3.3
	Over 30	8.4	68.2
	No enrolment in ECEC	91.0	28.5
2022	1 to 29	11.4	19.1
	Over 30	6.0	75.5
	No enrolment in ECEC	82.6	5.4

Source: Eurostat 2023b

In 2022/23, according to national statistics, a total of 216,481 children attended kindergarten, corresponding to an attendance rate of 87.3% of the 3–6/7 year-olds (NSI 2023a).

Table 6

Bulgaria: Children in kindergartens (including preparatory groups in schools) by age, 2022/23

Age	Number of children
Under 3 years	8,438
3 year-olds	46,412
4 year-olds	50,350
5 year-olds	55,941
6 year-olds	54,666
7 year-olds	634
Over 7 years	40
Total	216,481

Source: NSI 2023a

Financing and costs for parents

Almost 87% of the Bulgarian education system is state funded. Public **kindergartens**, which are mostly run by municipalities, are primarily funded through municipal budgets (Eurydice 2023). Private kindergartens are not funded by the state or municipal budgets. However, they can receive state subsidies for educational activities if they are registered as an institution in the education system.

Nurseries that are part of a kindergarten are financed from the budgets of the municipalities and the Ministry of Education; stand-alone nurseries are financed by the municipalities and the Ministry of Health.

A recent change in the Law for Regional Taxes and Fees means that from 1 April 2022 fees have been abolished in all public kindergartens and nurseries while fees for private nurseries and kindergartens can vary from 375 to 850€/month (Ilieva 2023).



Staff to child ratios and group size

Childcare sector

Infant nursery groups comprise between 6 and 8 children aged between 3 and 10 months; the same number applies to groups including children with disabilities. Regular nursery groups for children between 3 months and 3 years comprise between 8 and 16 children.

Nursery groups in kindergartens can include between 8 and 18 children from the age of 10 months up to 3 years. Group size is reduced to between 6/8 and 11 children if children with disabilities attend.

At least one qualified teacher must be employed for up to 60 children, and another teacher for every 20 children. In each nursery group, the children are cared for by at least one qualified member of staff, usually a nurse, and a non-qualified assistant in rotation.

In the study “Bulgaria grows with its children” (For Our Children Foundation 2020, 57), the staff to child ratio was reported to be between 1:5 and 1:8.

Education sector (ISCED 02)

Half-day or full-day **kindergarten** groups are attended by 12 to 23 children. The children are grouped into four age groups: 2/3 to 4 year-olds, 4 to 5 year-olds, 5 to 6 year-olds and 6 to 7 year-olds. For any one kindergarten group, at least two professionals are responsible, who overlap for one hour, and one assistant. The number of children per group can be increased by up to two above the maximum of 23 children if there is a continuous shortage of kindergarten places in the municipality, or may even reach a maximum size of 28 children per group in exceptional circumstances.

The above-mentioned study reports that especially in major cities the maximum number of children in a group is often exceeded and can be more than 30 children. Moreover, there should be no more than three children with special educational needs in a group, for whom a resource teacher must then be present (For Our Children Foundation 2020, 42, 81ff).

Table 7

Bulgaria: Maximum group size and number of children in kindergartens with nursery groups per staff by age, 2021

Age of children	Maximum number of children per group	Maximum number of children per staff member	Maximum number of children per teacher
3 – 10 months	8	3	4
3 months – 3 years	20	7	20
3–4 years	28	14	23
4–5 years	28	14	23
5–6 years	28	14	23
6–7 years	28	14	23

Source: Eurydice 2023

Curricular frameworks

Childcare sector

The “Standards for development and learning in early childhood: from birth to three years” (Atanasova-Trifonova et al. 2014) act as a guideline for the development of programmes for working with children up to 3 years of age. Additionally, several curricular programmes have been published specifically for working with this age group, including “Impact through interaction:

Programme for educational work with children up to 3 years of age” (Tatyozov 1995), “Little Fairytale Trail” (Peneva and Mitkova 2018), as well as others.

Education sector (ISCED 02)

The first state educational guidelines for early childhood and pre-primary education (3 to 6 years) were issued by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2000. Since then, a number of statutes and regulations have contributed to updating them, most recently Regulation No. 5/03.06.2016 for Early Childhood Education (Official Gazette 2016). The curricular framework is mandatory (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 168).

Seven learning areas are defined: Bulgarian language and literature; mathematics; social environment; art; music; construction and technology; and sport. General aims of early education focus on the children’s intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, moral and physical development as well as age- and needs-appropriate support.

Since 2016, national educational standards set down in the Early Education and Schools Act have applied to all age groups in kindergartens (Decision 5/2016, Official Gazette 46). These define knowledge, skills and attitudes of children to be achieved at a certain age and for different learning areas.

Pedagogical units are defined by the kindergarten teacher and last approx. 15-20 minutes for 3 to 5 year-olds, or approx. 20-30 minutes for 5 to 7 year-olds. There should be at least 11 to 17 such sessions per week. During pedagogical sessions, Kindergarten Teachers follow the educational programme approved by the Ministry of Education. Teachers are free to choose between alternative programmes, e.g. “Hand by Hand”, “Wonder World”, “Little Golden Key” and others (Engels-Kritidis 2020 and personal communication, 14.07.2021). The rest of the day is spent in free play, outdoor activities and learning a foreign language.

Digital education

The educational guidelines in Bulgaria emphasise the pedagogical benefits of digital technologies, especially to support learning processes. However, no specific digital skills are mentioned. The recommended activities include, for example, reading e-books, exploring nature and science with digital devices such as webcams or GPS, also experiencing digital forms of expression or making computer games (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 100). However, digital aspects are not explicitly addressed in the 'construction and technology' section of the early education curriculum, except that the two older groups of children learn to recognise differences between information and communication tools and become familiar with their use (Georgieva 2018).

However, in the context of contemporary Bulgarian pedagogy, digital education is seen as strongly connected to media education, an area where research has notable traditions in a national scope, starting from preschool age (Angelov 2016; Danov 2020, Stoyanova 2022, and others).

Monitoring – evaluation

A National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care has been created (including four key principles, ten statements and 27 indicators) based on the European Quality Framework and adapted to the Bulgarian context through a broad consultative process (Ministry of Education and Science 2022).



It is important to note that since 2014 there have been Bulgarian *Standards for development and learning in early childhood: from birth to three years* (Atanasova-Trifonova et al. 2014). Additionally, at the end of 2023, authors from the same team developed and published guidelines for early screening assessment and developmental stimulation of 3 year-olds (Atanasova-Trifonova, Peneva, and Stoyanova 2023).

Child-related assessment

How children develop in various areas of learning is continually assessed by the kindergarten teachers through observations. Parents are informed regularly about their child's progress. Self-assessment procedures include the children's views and encourages them to take an active part in their own learning. For some learning areas, standardised tests are also carried out (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 104).

Particular value is placed on an assessment at the beginning and end of the child's time in kindergarten. 14 days before the end of the final kindergarten year, the teacher assesses each child's "school readiness" in terms of their physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development. A certificate is prepared which also gives suggestions as to how the child can be best motivated and supported. Parents are obliged to hand over this certificate to the class teacher when their child starts school.

Centre-based internal evaluation

The kindergarten heads are responsible for ensuring that assessments and quality improvement measures approved by the Educational Board are carried out. Internal evaluations should take place at least once every five years. Kindergartens use their own assessment criteria for self-evaluation measures. Parents can also be included in the internal self-assessments (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 131).

External evaluation

External evaluations of kindergarten settings and staff are obligatory and are carried out both at the national and regional levels.

At the national level, the Ministry of Education and Science is responsible, together with the national education inspectorate within the Council of Ministers. At the regional level, 28 education inspection authorities and also the municipalities carry out inspections.

According to the Act on the Inspection of Kindergartens and Schools (2016), an inspection system has been put in place which focuses both on educational processes as well as compliance with regulations (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 122).

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

In 2003, the Education Act was amended to ensure that children and young people with special needs or disabilities are integrated into mainstream institutions as far as possible. In 2017, regulations on inclusive education came into force which define the national education standards for inclusive education. The regulations control the public relations of settings that offer inclusive education and support children in the early education and school system in their personal development. For children with special educational needs or disabilities, appropriate conditions should be created so that they can attend regular institutions (materials, structural access, support staff). A team consisting of the centre head, support staff, psychologists or therapists makes

an initial assessment and follows the child's development. An individual plan, which is closely based on the curricular framework, focuses on the acquisition of skills and abilities so that the child can live as independently and socially integrated as possible.

In general, the diagnosing of developmental delays as early as possible is emphasised so that successful inclusion can take place. Psychologists and other support professionals work with regular professionals to adapt educational strategies for children with special needs.

At the end of 2022, there were four facilities for medico-social care for children with chronic illnesses or social problems, attended by 368 children, 341 of them under 1 years of age (NSI 2023c).

Under the responsibility of three Ministries (Education and Science, Labour and Social Affairs, Health), a national plan for children with special needs is revised annually. The ministries work together with the Child Protection Agency, municipalities and non-profit organisations.

From 2019 to 2021, the Ministry of Education and Science (2020) launched the project "Active inclusion in pre-primary education" which aims to facilitate access for children from disadvantaged environments and children living in poverty. The following measures in particular are used for this purpose:

- Children with a home language other than Bulgarian receive additional language training so that they can better integrate into their peer group. A specific method for this is being developed within the framework of the project; furthermore, it is being considered to hire additional staff.
- Fees are to be adjusted to the economic possibilities of the parents.
- Parents will be motivated to actively cooperate with the kindergarten through two national campaigns.
- Kindergarten staff will receive training in how to use screening tests to identify children with learning difficulties at an early stage (European Commission 2020.).

Children with a migration background – children from Roma communities

In 2022, only 2% of the total population and only 0.3% of children under 5 had a non-Bulgarian citizenship; the majority of these were from non-EU27 countries (76.2% of the total population and 90.2% of children under 5 years) (Eurostat 2023d). Nevertheless, the most recent data from the 2011 Census reported just under 5% Roma, who are the second largest ethnic minority in Bulgaria after people from Turkey, and over 12% Roma children under the age of 10 (OSI 2020, 34), though most of these are believed to be of Bulgarian background.

The available data indicate that the share of Roma children in the age group from four to six years who do not attend kindergarten is high (between 25% and 45% in different age cohorts) (Eurochild 2021).

With regard to the integration of ethnic minority children, the *National Strategy for Roma Integration* (2012-2020) emphasises everyone's right to education (NCCEII 2021). The *Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Pupils of Ethnic Minorities* (2015-2020) tries to dissolve Roma-only kindergartens and instead promote the development of integrated early education institutions and schools. Especially in rural areas, there are facilities attended only by ethnic minorities (OSI 2020, 93). Special education in Bulgarian is provided for children with a family language other than Bulgarian. In the Bulgarian report on the inclusion of Roma children in early education (RECI+ report, OSI 2020), measures recommended include family visits or incentives to ensure that services are also used by Roma. In 2020, the Bulgarian Parliament passed amendments to the law which – by abolishing or reducing parental fees in kindergarten – should make it possible for children from ethnic minorities in particular to attend kindergarten (Volen and de Laat 2021).

However, data on the attendance of children from ethnic minorities at pre-school institutions cannot be reported, as such data are not collected nationwide – but it can be assumed that their attendance rate is much lower (OSI 2020, 106f).

Parental leave arrangements³

Maternity leave (*otpusk poradi bremennost i razhdane*) lasts 410 days in Bulgaria, 45 of which must be taken before birth. The first 135 days are compulsory for mothers and are divided into three parts: (1) 45 days before birth, (2) 42 days after birth and (3) 48 days until the 135th day. Mothers who have previously worked at least 24 months with compulsory social insurance receive 90% of their gross salary during the 410 days, up to a maximum of BGN 3,400 (€1,738.42), with a minimum of BGN 710 (€363.02) (as of end of 2022). After the child is 6 months old, the entitlement for the remaining time can also be transferred to the father under the same conditions.

Fathers have 15 obligatory days of **Paternity leave** (*otpusk po bashtinstvo*) which are paid under the same conditions as Maternity leave. Since August 2022, a further two months are available under certain conditions.

After maternity leave, there is a (family) right to **Parental leave** (*otpusk za otglegdane na dete do 2 godishna vazrast*) until the child is 2 years old. This can also be transferred to the father or a grandparent. During Parental leave, a lump sum of 710 BGN (€363.02) is paid. A partial financial compensation of 355 BGN (€181.51) per month is paid after the 135th day if the mother does not take the rest of the parental leave or does not take all of it.

In 2022, 22,039 fathers took paternity leave – this is equivalent from about one third of all children born that year. The new two months paternity leave which was introduced in August 2022 was taken by 1,370 fathers. Of the 85,072 eligible persons who took parental leave in 2022, only 1% were fathers. 17.6% of those entitled returned to work early and received 50% of the compensation.

Current challenges for the ECEC system in Bulgaria

Country expert assessment by *Rozalina Engels-Kritidis*

Currently, the biggest challenge for the ECEC system in Bulgaria is the process of **prioritising early childhood education for children aged 0 to 3 years**. Significant effort has been put into the goal of nurseries becoming a proper part of the educational system by bringing them under the control of the Ministry of Education and Science rather than the Ministry of Health where they currently placed. Related to this issue is the debate concerning the core professionals working in nurseries. On the one hand, this refers to looking at measures for expanding the opportunities of Kindergarten Teachers to work in nurseries instead of medical Nurses. On the other hand, an interdepartmental working group has been established, including experts from the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. An important aim, as stated by the current Minister of Education, Prof. Galin Tsokov, is to ensure that persons with a medical education have opportunities for acquiring additional

³ The information in this section is based on the country report for Bulgaria by Elitsa Dimitrova and colleagues in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see *References*).

qualifications to become early childhood development specialists. In connection to this, a discussion has started with universities to create Bachelor and Master degree programmes focused on early childhood development, which presents another challenge. According to the Minister, it is very important to ensure strong pedagogical support for children, but also for them to have access to specialists such as Speech Therapists and Psychologists. In parallel, there is work being done on specific regulatory and legislative amendments that can ensure the integration of the early childhood education and care cycle (Ministry of Education and Science 2023a).

Early childhood development is also a matter of priority in the 2021-2030 Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in Bulgaria (Ministry of Education and Science 2023b).

Another system-related challenge is the ongoing **shortage of places** for children in kindergartens, mostly in larger cities; this issue requires measures to be taken by the government in co-operation with the municipalities to ensure adequate coverage.

An upcoming challenge for the university education system, in which future Kindergarten Teachers are prepared, is related to the 2021-2024 Three-Year Plan for the **Implementation of the 2021-2030 Strategy for Development of Higher Education in Bulgaria**, in which there are plans for the introduction of legislation that will include provisions for regular and remote-based education in Bachelor's degrees with a total duration of three academic years instead of the current four years, with opportunity for continuing to a state-sponsored 2-year Master's degree course in the same professional area. Relevant discussions between universities in Bulgaria are currently underway.

Demographic data

Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.

Total population

In 2022, the population in Bulgaria totalled 6,838,937. Over the past 20 years the total population has sunk significantly (2000: 8,198,876; 2010: 7,421,766; 2020: 6,951,482; Eurostat 2023a).

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total fertility rate in the EU27 (from 2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate in the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). With 1.58, Bulgaria is slightly above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023c)⁴.

⁴ Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

Children under 6 years of age

Table 7

Bulgaria: Number of under 6 year-olds by age, 2022

Age	Number of children
Up to 1 year	58,593
1 year-olds	59,518
2 year-olds	62,040
3 year-olds	63,103
4 year-olds	65,120
5 year-olds	66,127
0 to under 6 year-olds	374,501

Source: Eurostat 2023a

The share of children under 3 in the total population in 2022 was 2.6%, that of children under 6 5.5%. These proportions have been below the EU averages for 20 years.

Table 8

Bulgaria: Distribution of under 6 year-olds in population by age compared with EU averages, 2000 to 2022, in %*

Year	Comparison Bulgaria/EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Bulgaria	2.4	2.7	5.2
	∅ EU15 ⁵	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	Bulgaria	2.5	2.5	5.0
	∅ EU25	3.1	3.0	6.2
2015	Bulgaria	2.8	2.9	5.7
	∅ EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Bulgaria	2.6	2.8	5.5
	∅ EU27	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, * own calculations, deviations due to roundings

Single households with children under 6 years of age

In 2022, 41.5% of all households with children under the age of 6 years were couple households. Households with single parents account for only 1.6% and are usually single mother households; the proportion of single fathers is very low at 0.2%.

Table 9

Bulgaria: Households with children under 6 years old, 2022

Household type	Number of households	Households in per cent
Households total	388,900	
Couple households	161,500	41.5
Other types of households	221,000	56.8
Single parent households, total	6,400	1.6

⁵ The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

Household type	Number of households	Households in per cent
Single parent households, women	5,600	1.4
Single parent households, men	800**	0.2

Source: Eurostat 2023k, *own calculation, **data computed

Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In Bulgaria, in 2022, the overall employment rate for men (15-64 years) was 77.3% and for women 69.7% (Eurostat 2023j).

In 2022, 59.6% of women and 81.5% of men (18-64 years) with children under 6 were employed. Among the 27 EU-countries (2020), the shares of employed fathers were among the lowest rates in the EU (EU-average 87.2%); those of mothers were also well below the EU-average (63.6%) (Eurostat 2023g, own calculations).

Table 10a

Bulgaria: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010 und 2022

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Bulgaria:	48.4	76.4
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁶	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7
	2021	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Bulgaria:	59.6	81.5
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries ⁷	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech Rep. 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023g

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 10b*.

Table 10b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)

⁶ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

⁷ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
+Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023)	75.6	92.1	++72.3	++79.2
with dependent children	72.4	93.1	++72.1 (2023)	++79.4 (2023)
with children under 2 years	70.7	95.0		
with children 3–4 years				

*Eurostat 2023g, 2023j

**[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

***Rosstat. 2022. *Statistical annex SDG in Russia 2022*. <https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru/sdg/report/document/70355>;
BRICS. 2023. *Joint Statistical Publication 2023*. https://brics2023.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/BRICS-2023-JSP_Final_Web.pdf

+[SSSU] State Statistics Service of Ukraine. 2022. *Employed population in 2021, by age group, sex and place of residence*. <https://ukrstat.gov.ua/operativ/operativ2017/rp/eans/eanse/Archznmve.htm>

++Statista. 2023. *Employment rate in the United Kingdom from June 1971 to January 2023, by gender*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280120/employment-rate-in-the-uk-by-gender/>

+++Office for National Statistics. 2023. *Families and the labour market, UK: 2021*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021>

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁸

In 2022, more than a third (35.7%) of children under 6 year of age were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was significantly above the EU27 average (23.3%) for this age group. The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 32.2% (EU: 21.6%) (Eurostat 2023h). 8.6% of the total population and 16.7% of children under 6 years of age suffered from severe material deprivation in 2020 (EU averages 4.3% and 6.1% respectively) (Eurostat 2023i).

References

- Angelov, B. 2016. *Media and Communication Competences. Fundamentals of Media Pedagogy* [in Bulgarian]. Sofia: “St. Kliment Ohridski” University Press.
- Atanasova-Trifonova, M., L. Peneva, J. Stoyanova, I. Yancheva, L. Yadvkova, M. Mutafchieva, and N. Kolcheva. 2014. *Standards for development and learning in early childhood: from birth to three years* [in Bulgarian] Sofia: Bulvest 2000.
- Atanasova-Trifonova, M., L. Peneva, and J. Stoyanova. 2023. *Early Screening Assessment and Guidelines for Developmental Stimulation of 3-year-old Children* [in Bulgarian]. Sofia: 2023.

⁸ ‘At risk of poverty or social exclusion’ refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation)

- Bogdanov, G., and B. Zahariev. 2018. *Early childhood education and care services for children under the age of 3 in Bulgaria well below the Barcelona target*.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330134073_Early_childhood_education_and_care_services_for_children_under_the_age_of_3_in_Bulgaria_well_below_the_Barcelona_target
- Danov, D. 2020. *Towards a Need of Media Literacy Development in the Kindergarten*. Collected edition in honour of the 80th anniversary of the birth of Prof. Georgi Bizhkov. Sofia: “St. Kliment Ohridski” University Press.
- Dimitrova, E., T. Kotzeva, and K. Ilieva. 2023. “Country Note Bulgaria.” In *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023*, edited by S. Blum, I. Dobrotić, G. Kaufman, A. Koslowski, and P. Moss.
https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2023/Bulgaria2023.pdf
- Engels-Kritidis, R. 2012. “Developments in pre-school education in Bulgaria.” In *Debates on early childhood policies and practices*, edited by T. Papatheodorou, 38-50. London, New York: Routledge.
- Engels-Kritidis, R. 2015. “Individualization and Differentiation for Achieving Educational Progress in Children in Kindergarten”. *Journal of Preschool and Elementary School Education*, 2(8): 13-27. Special issue on “Inclusiveness in Pre-school and Elementary School Education as a Space for Diversity”.
<http://journaledu.ignatianum.edu.pl/12015-8/individualization-and-differentiation-for-achieving-educational-progress-in-children-in.htm>
- Engels-Kritidis, R. 2018. “Bulgaria – ECEC Workforce Profile.” In *Early Childhood Workforce Profiles in 30 Countries with Key Contextual Data*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer, 92-112. Munich.
www.seepro.eu/ISBN-publication.pdf
- Engels-Kritidis, R. 2020. *Contemporary Aspects of Preschool Education in Bulgaria*. Revised second edition with additions and updates. Sofia: Sofia University Publishing House.
- Eurochild. 2021. *Early Childhood Development in Bulgaria Country Profile 2021*.
<https://firstyearsfirstpriority.eu/across-europe/>
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. 2019. *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2019 Edition. Eurydice Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/966808>
- European Commission. 2020. *Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care*.
<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4c526047-6f3c-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>
- Eurostat. 2023a. *Population on 1 January by age and sex*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_pjan/default/table
- Eurostat. 2023b. *Formal Childcare by Age Group and Duration -% over the population of each age group*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_caindformal/default/table
- Eurostat. 2023c. *Fertility rates by age*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_FRATE__custom_1559524/default/table
- Eurostat. 2023d. *Population on 1 January by age group, sex and citizenship*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_pop1ctz/default/table
- Eurostat. 2023e. *Pupils enrolled in early childhood education by sex and age*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDUC_UOE_ENRP02__custom_1910674/default/table
- Eurostat. 2023f. *Pupils enrolled in early childhood education by sex and age- as % of corresponding age population*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDUC_UOE_ENRP07__custom_1562326/default/table?lang=en
- Eurostat. 2023g. *Employment rate of adults by sex, age groups, educational attainment level, number of children and age of youngest child (%)*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFST_HHEREDCH/default/table
- Eurostat. 2023h. *People at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion by Age and Sex*.
[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_PEPS01N\\$DV_1161/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_PEPS01N$DV_1161/default/table)
- Eurostat. 2023i. *Severe housing deprivation rate by age, sex and poverty status*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_mdho06a/default/table
- Eurostat. 2023j. *Employment and activity by sex and age – annual data*
[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSI_EMP_A\\$DV_881/default/table](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSI_EMP_A$DV_881/default/table)
- Eurostat. 2023k. *Number of adults by sex, age groups, number of children, age of youngest child and household composition*.

- https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFST_HHACEDAY__custom_4495620/default/table
- Eurydice. 2023. *Bulgaria – Early Childhood Education and Care*.
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/bulgaria/early-childhood-education-and-care>
- For Our Children Foundation. 2020. *Bulgaria Grows with Its Children: Building Professional Competences of the Early Childhood Workforce*.
<https://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/u672/Bulgaria%20Grows%20with%20Its%20Children%20-%20Full%20report%20EN.pdf>
- Georgieva, G. G. 2018. "Teaching preschool children mathematics through constructive activities." In *Specific Issues of Contemporary Preschool Education in Bulgaria and Slovakia*, edited by B. Angelov, R. Engels-Kritidis, D. Kostrub, and R. Osad'an, Sofia: "St. Kliment Ohridski" University Press.
- Ilieva, T. 2023. *20 500 BGN for a year in private kindergarten in Sofia* [in Bulgarian].
<https://businessnovinite.bg/bg-biznes/20-500-lv-za-godina-v-chastna-detska-gradina-v-sofija.html>
- Ministry of Education and Science. 2020. *Project BG05M2OP001-3.005-0004 Active Inclusion in the Pre-school Education System 2019-2021*.
<http://sf.mon.bg/?go=projects&p=detail&projectsId=67&lang=en>
- Ministry of Education and Science. 2022. *Project "Implementation of National Framework for Quality of Education and Care in Early Childhood"* [in Bulgarian]. <https://web.mon.bg/bg/101109>
- Ministry of Education and Science. 2023a. *Minister Galin Tsokov: "Strengthening Support for Early Childhood Development is a Priority"* [in Bulgarian]. <https://www.mon.bg/bg/news/5693>
- Ministry of Education and Science. 2023b. *Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030)* [in Bulgarian].
https://web.mon.bg/upload/25571/Strategicheska-ramka_ObrObuUchene_110321.pdf
- Ministry of Education and Science. 2023c. *Three-Year Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021 – 2030 for the Period 2021 – 2024* [in Bulgarian]. https://web.mon.bg/upload/30552/3-godishen-Plan_Strategy-VO_05052022.pdf – as approved by Order № RD09-2937/21.04.2022 of the Minister of Education and Science (published on 05.05.2022) [in Bulgarian]. https://web.mon.bg/upload/30553/zap2937_Strategy-VO_05052022.pdf
- [NCEII] National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues. 2021. *National Roma Integrations Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020)*.
https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/roma_bulgaria_strategy_en.pdf
- [NSI] National Statistical Institute – Republic of Bulgaria. 2023a. *Kindergartens*.
<https://nsi.bg/en/content/3416/children-enrolled-kindergartens>
- [NSI] National Statistical Institute – Republic of Bulgaria. 2023b. *Creches*.
<https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/3342/creches>
- [NSI] National Statistical Institute – Republic of Bulgaria. 2023c. *Homes for medico-social care for children*. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/3340/homes-medico-social-care-children>
- [NSI] National Statistical Institute – Republic of Bulgaria. 2023d. *Educational institutions by type and kind of ownership in 2020/21 school year*. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/4789/81-educational-institutions-type-and-kind-ownership>
- OECD.Stat. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2023. *Net childcare costs for parents using childcare facilities*. <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=NCC>
- Official Gazette 2016. *Ordinance No. 5 of 3.6.2016 on Early Childhood Education* [in Bulgarian].
<https://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2136850647>
- [OSI] Open Society Institute – Sofia Foundation. 2020. *Roma Early Childhood Inclusion+. Republic of Bulgaria report*. https://reyn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RECI_Republic-of-Bulgaria-Report_ENG.pdf
- Peneva, L., and M. Mitkova. 2018. *Little Fairytale Trail: Teacher's Book* [in Bulgarian]. Sofia: Bulvest 2000.
- Stoyanova, K. 2022. "The Media Education of Children: Challenges for the New Digital Society." In *Pedagogy*, vol. XCIV, issue 1, 122-132,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355669371_THE_MEDIA_EDUCATION_OF_CHILDREN_CHALLENGES_FOR_THE_NEW_DIGITAL_SOCIETY_MEDIJNO_OBRAZOVANIE_ZA_DECA_PREDIZVIKATELS_TVATA_NA_NOVOTO_DIGITALNO_OBSESTVO

Tatyozov, T. 1995. *Impact through interaction: Program for educational work with children up to 3 years of age* [in Bulgarian]. Sofia: Daniela Ubenova.

Volen, E., and J. de Laat. 2021. *Building Evidence for Pre-school Policy Change in Bulgaria*.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8085259/>

