

INTERNATIONAL DAY
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**ERADICATING POVERTY THROUGH
LOCAL & NATIONAL STRATEGIES**

BULGARIA

**POVERTY WATCH
2025**



EUROPEAN ANTI POVERTY NETWORK

POVERTY WATCH BULGARIA 2025

EAPN Bulgaria

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Bulgaria has been following the process of adopting National Strategies against Poverty since 2003, i.e. since the period of the country's active integration into the EU. After joining the EU in 2007, the country has been following the European regulation and time frame, including through national plans related to the Lisbon Strategy, the National Programme for the Implementation of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010, the National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020, linked to Europe 2020, as well as the current National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2030, linked to Europe 2030.

At local, municipal and/or regional level, strategies were adopted strategies for a 4-year periodon (2011-2015, 2016-2020) and more recently plans on annual basis. These strategies/plans are focused on social services for which municipalities are responsible. They usually address: a) social services for children, b) social services for people with disabilities, c) social services for the elderly, d) social services for other vulnerable groups such as migrants, victims of domestic violence, etc.

Below we discuss the content and processes in relation to the National Strategies for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion, with a focus on the currently implemented one.

1. Mapping and general description of existing National Anti-Poverty Strategies (NAPS):

a. Scope and Priorities

- Working definition of poverty used by the NAPS/LAPS,

The definitions of poverty in the Bulgarian NAPS follow the EU concepts: the Strategy 2030 focuses on people at risk of poverty or social exclusion and respectively its three dimensions: people at risk of poverty; in severe material deprivation and living in households with low work intensity.

While these are used instrumentally and data are based on them, the working definition of poverty in the NAPS is broader: "...the poor are those individuals, families and groups whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from a minimum acceptable way of life in the Member States of the European Union (EU) in which they live." Source: Council of the EU, Decision 85/8/EEC of 1984)

- Main policy areas addressed and priorities, (e.g. income support, employment, housing, health, education, child poverty, homelessness, etc.).

Following 6 specific aims, 8 priorities are formulated and they concern employment; education; healthcare; social services] financial and material support to those in need; transport; housing and working in partnership.

In fact, the priorities in the NAPS 2030¹ are almost similar to the priorities in the NAPS 2020² (in bold when the same and in italic when similar):

Priority N:	NAPS 2030	NAPS 2020
1	Sustainable integration of inactive and unemployed persons, including the long-term unemployed, into the labour market	Providing employment opportunities and increasing income from work through active inclusion in the labor market
2	Equal access to quality pre-school and school education;	Ensuring equal access to quality pre-school and school education
3	Equal and effective access to quality healthcare	Ensuring equal and effective access to quality health care
4	<i>Accessible and quality social and integrated services and integrated support;</i>	<i>Eliminating the institutional model of care and developing intersectoral services for social inclusion</i>
5	Effective and targeted financial and material support to those in need	Ensuring sustainability and adequacy of social payments
6	Ensured accessibility of the environment – physical, architectural, institutional, informational and accessibility of transport and transport services	Improving capacity and interaction in the fields of education, health, employment and social services in implementing common goals for social inclusion
7	Improved housing conditions for vulnerable groups and support for the homeless;	Providing an accessible environment - physical, institutional and informational and accessible transport
8	Working in partnership and implementing innovative approaches in implementing integrated policies for social inclusion and social innovation	Improving housing conditions for vulnerable groups and supporting the homeless
9		Working in partnership to overcome poverty and social exclusion and their consequences

Although priorities of both Strategies are quite similar, the replacement of „adequacy of social payments“ with „effective and targeted financial and material support to those in need“, as well as the replacement of the „increasing income from work“ with „integration ...into the labour market“ is questionable and informative about the direction.

- Links with other national frameworks (i.e. recovery plans)

The Strategy clearly states (page 8) „The leading strategic document in the development of the

¹ Republic Bulgaria: National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2030

² Republic Bulgaria: National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion 2020

National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2030 is the National Development Program Bulgaria 2030 (NDP Bulgaria 2030), which defines the vision and general objectives of development policies in all sectors of public administration“.

Additionally NAPS 2030 is clearly lined to different national frameworks like the National Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030; National Strategy for Long-Term Care; National Strategy for the Child, etc.

The Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) is not specifically mentioned, due to the earlier adoption of the NAPS. However, funds from this Plan are being used and more important are intended to be used in connection with the NAPS. However, it should be noted that Bulgaria is having troubles to receive payments under the RRP after the first one due to the failure to implement promised in it (normative) reforms.

- Specific attention to an intersectional approach and marginalised communities,

The above-cited priorities of the Strategy 2030 depict that it is precisely the intersectional approach that has fallen out of the priorities of Strategy 2020.

Nevertheless, there are references in the Strategy 2030 to the need for an integrated approach and combining different types of services. What is more, according to the NAPS 2030 (page 6, second paragraph of the Introduction) the importance of the complex, comprehensive and integrated approach to combating poverty is well established as the main approach of national and European policies in this area. Thus it could be said that the intersectional approach is present, although it may be of reduced importance.

However, this is more about wording. In terms of implementation, fragmentation of support and services seem to remain dominant following the responsibilities of different departments and ministries.

The main target groups of the policy in the field of poverty reduction and promotion of social inclusion are identified as (NAPS 2030, p. 36-37): Children; People above working age; Households with children, including families with children; Disadvantaged groups in or outside the labour market; Members of vulnerable ethnic groups; People with disabilities; Homeless and people living in poor housing conditions; The working poor.

This is linked to the statement that): „The data on the leading indicators of poverty and social inclusion, as well as the results on the main social indicators in the context of the EPSR, identify certain groups of the population as particularly vulnerable – the unemployed and economically inactive, children, young people, single parents, the elderly, including those unable to care for themselves, people with disabilities, Roma, people of foreign origin (migrants, refugees). Along with this, there is also an increasingly tangible gender inequality“ (Page 21).

May be important fact to note as well is that the term marginalised is not used. There is clear preference to the term vulnerable. An eventual content analysis of the document could suggest a possible explanation: the term marginalised could provoke a logical question - by whom; the term vulnerable (suggesting due to people themselves) is more politically convenient and safe.

- Alignment with EU and international social rights frameworks (e.g. European Pillar of Social Rights, Sustainable Development Goals).

The elaboration of the NAPS and its updating is considered to be in line with the priorities of the EU in the field of employment and social inclusion.

Different EU and international documents are noted in the NAPS 2030. They include European Pillar of Social Rights; Sustainable Development Goals, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); Principles and Guidelines for a Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies; International Labour Organization Note, COVID-19 and world of work: Impacts and responses. Different EU funds as well as the European Commission Child Guarantee are mentioned. Their principles and rules are considered important. However there is a clear lack of understanding of social rights as real rights. There is a clear implication that support is provided not because people have rights but although this is their fault, well-intentioned and concerned political will is available.

b. Indicators

- Which indicators were used to assess progress of the NAPS/LAPS, and their limits?

National targets for reducing poverty and social exclusion by 2030 are established overall and for children. Assessments of current situation state that by 2024 Bulgaria has achieved 50% of its aim till 2030 when overall share of people in risk of poverty or social exclusion is concerned and by 2023 – 22% of the respective aim for children in risk of poverty or social exclusion

As mentioned above, Bulgarian NAPS follow the EU indicators on different important dimensions like share of people in poverty or social exclusion, at-risk-of-poverty line and rate; severe material deprivation; living in households with low working intensity, working poor; etc.

To assess current situation a Table is presented, following the Social indicators delivered in support of the European Pillar of Social Rights (social protection and social inclusion), 2023

The situation in Bulgaria is assessed as follows:

Critical situation for:

- At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate for children (% of population aged 0-17)
- Employment gap between people without disabilities and people with disabilities (percentage points)

For monitoring:

- Proportion of children under 3 years of age in formal childcare facilities

Unsatisfactory, but with improvement are

- At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (% of total population)
- Impact of social transfers (excluding pensions) on poverty reduction

Above EU average

- Excessive housing costs (% of total population)
- Unmet need for medical care (% of population aged 16+)

- Who/what is missing? Who has been included?

The current Report on the implementation of the action plan for the period 2023-2024 for the the National strategy for poverty reduction and promotion of social inclusion 2030 recognises that: „The review of the implementation of the interim goals set in the Action Plan for the period 2023-2024 on the main indicators of poverty and social inclusion in recent years shows a continuing need to rethink the applied approaches and instruments and implement targeted interventions in the field of sectoral policies directly related to poverty reduction - employment and income policy, education, healthcare, provision of quality and accessible social services, ensuring sustainability and adequacy of social payments, housing policy, etc. In addition, the established regularity of the influence on poverty by economic processes should not be underestimated.“ (page 6)

Additionally as missing could be identified indicators as: adequate definition of poverty based on „minimum acceptable way of life“ as in the working definition above; definition of energy poverty; attention to the different indicators on inequalities, incl. Gini index before social transfers; understanding what is meant by the term „social rights“, etc.

It should be noted also that a process of indicatorization is taking place – that is indicators seem to replace aims and goals. In the same report, in the Appendix (a „table for the implementation of the planned measures for the period 2023-2024“) multiple "results" are enlisted - how many people were involved, how many activities have been implemented, etc. Data on how many people were lifted out of poverty by these measures is missing.

c. Governance mechanisms and consistency amongst policy actors

- National vs. regional/local implementation: identification of existing gaps or disparities, are the NAPS/LAPS covering identified gaps? What are the missing gaps?

The regional disparities in Bulgaria are high and increasing. The local/regional aspect is mentioned and some of the measures are specific for some regions, for example with higher levels of unemployed.

Another aspect is that the most important agencies in the field like the Agency for Social Assistance and The Employment Agency are executive agencies under the Minister of Labor and Social Policy for the implementation of the state policy in the fields and their local offices follow the same rules.

On the other hand, there is a risk that the very anti-poverty activities instead to address growing inequalities and integrate society, could additionally fragment it for example by attempts and efforts to regionalize poverty lines, proposals to adopt different minimum salary in different regions, etc..

- Steering committee or other body monitoring the implementation of the NAPS/LAPS (methodology? participation of PEP?)

A National Council for Social Inclusion as a body under the Council of Ministers is established and operates since 2009. Its aim is to coordinate, cooperate and consult in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of state policy in the field of social inclusion. It was established to ensure effective coordination between the various institutions and stakeholders in the social inclusion process. The National Council has a consultative function. It consists currently of 48 members – representatives of different organization.

A draft of the NAPS is prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP). It is presented for a public consultations and also to the National Council and after a period for making and eventually

reflecting recommendations it is adopted by the National Council to be proposed and approved by the Council of Ministers.

- Which ministries oversee adopting, implementing and evaluating the NAPS?

The National Council is chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy

In the National Council for Social Inclusion sixteen Ministries are represented by a vice-minister. The only three Ministries not represented are Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Environment and Water, and Ministry of E-Government.

Members of the National Council are also the chair and the deputy governor of the National Statistical Institute, the chair or executive directors of 5 state agencies and the head of the Department "Social Inclusion Policies, Children and Family" at the MLSP.

- Involvement of diversity of stakeholders: academia, civil society organisation, trade union, representative of diverse policy areas...

Twenty members of the National Council come from different stakeholders like trade unions, employers' organizations, civil society organizations and academia.

- Specific attention to urban, rural, and remote areas, geographical cohesion.

Three other members are representing the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, one of them a Deputy Mayor of Sofia Municipality

Timeframe

- Duration and periodicity of strategies (e.g. short-, medium-, or long-term)

Bulgarian NAPS follow the duration and periodicity of EU strategies. It is for 10 years.

- Monitoring and revision timelines,

On a 2 year basis there is a report for the previous 2 years and a plan for the next 2 years.

- Continuity beyond political cycles: is it synchronised with elections? Why?

There is no link to elections in the sense of timeframe. Different governments could influence some measures and activities. However, there seems to be continuity in the basics: most important are the „market“, meaning profits; anti-poverty measures are not high on the policy agenda; poverty generators, including different public policies, are not questioned and addressed; the „deserving“ poor will have some support as the state is caring.

- Long-term guarantee of continuation of NAPS and LAPS after this policy cycle.

Based on the experience, it seems that if there is something like Europe 2040, including social aspects, there will be a National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promotion of Social Inclusion - Bulgaria 2040.

2. EAPN members' experience and assessment of the NAPS and LAPS

NB: For LAPS, please stick to one or two examples maximum.

a. Involvement of EAPN members

- **Were you involved in the NAPS/LAPS?**

Yes, we are represented in the National Council for Social Inclusion from its establishment. As pointed out above this body adopts the NAPS and proposes it to the Council of Ministers. It also regularly

adopts the report for the previous two years and the plan for the next two years under the same procedure.

Additionally, based on different activities – like meetings with PeP, discussions with different stakeholders, implementing surveys, etc. we make media presentations and publications in the field. This is a way to participate in the evaluation also.

- **Was your contribution reflected in the final NAPS/LAPS?**

During If yes, please explain how your contribution was reflected in the final NAPS/LAPS. If no, please explain why – if possible.

It is difficult to answer this question by yes or no. There are some steps forward, some steps backward, and some unclear and unexplained steps. We provide examples:

- There is more attention to inequalities in the current NAPS, which is positive. We have insisted on that for years with other stakeholders and assess this as a positive impact. However, this is not consistently pushed through neither in the Strategy nor in the biennial reports and plans for it. The same applies to the level of social assistance. While the abolition of the so-called guaranteed minimum income is, at last, a distinct achievement, the level of social assistance, although increased, remains unreasonably low.

- Shortly before the development of the current NAPS 2030, there were two important initiatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. They were related to attention to reference budgets and an insistence from the highest level of the Ministry that well-being should be the focus of one of the scientific programs of the Ministry of Education and Science. Accordingly, important steps were undertaken on both initiatives. However, both initiatives were rudely terminated - we have no idea by whom and why.

- **Which other stakeholders were involved in the drafting process of the NAPS/LAPS?**

As mentioned all the stakeholders enlisted above as members of the National Council had the opportunity to be involved in the drafting process.

Additionally, the draft of the document was opened for public consultation.

b. Involvement of persons experiencing poverty (PeP)

- **Were PeP involved in the NAPS/LAPS?**

It could be stated that at the National Council PeP are involved indirectly: through the different organizations and bodies involved in the NAPS and their experience. This is relevant to drafting process, implementation and evaluation.

○ **Was their contribution reflected in the final NAPS/LAPS?**

In principle, these depends on the character of contributions.

There are attempts to reflect contributions linked to different organisational problems, clarifying arising problems, etc.

Contributions linked to needs to provide adequate social payments are not met.

- If possible, **please collect testimonies of PeP** who were involved in the NAPS/LAPS.

As pointed out the involvement is indirect.

Additionally, it is important to note that in so fragmented society as Bulgarian, it is a mistake to consider PeP as one group. They are also very fragmented and even in conflictual relations especially due to the political preference to present anti-poverty actions as a distribution of financial resources.

c. Drafting process of the NAPS/LAPS

- Do you consider the drafting process to have been transparent and inclusive?

Please reflect on the openness of the process, opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution, and whether feedback was considered.

The process is formally transparent. There is public consultation on the Draft Strategy. Small changes could be accepted, but reorientation is not possible. Arguments for not reflecting contributions are either not presented or follow the usual rhetoric of missing money (non-existent for profits, inequalities, rearmament, etc.).

d. Content of the NAPS/LAPS

- To what extent does the content of the NAPS/LAPS address the key challenges faced by PeP

Please assess whether the strategy reflects the real needs and priorities of PeP, and whether it includes concrete, rights-based measures to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion. **If possible, please collect direct feedback/testimonies of PeP.**

If we consider needs as problems that people have, they are to some extent reflected.

If we consider needs as necessary means for an adequate standard of living – no.

The term social rights is not defined and its meaning is not clear. There are many different concrete measures for support in different spheres for the deserving poor. There are rights under plenty of conditions to receive some kind of help.

- Are there other policy frameworks (e.g. economic, fiscal, housing, migration) that conflict with or undermine the goals of the NAPS/LAPS? If yes, please specify which frameworks and describe how these conflicts impact the implementation of the NAPS/LAPS.

The main generators of poverty in Bulgaria can be identified as the economic, fiscal, tax, social security framework, etc. The regulatory rules in them generate poverty and social exclusion, and the residual social policy formed should mitigate some of their effects.

Housing policy may be used as a specific example. Housing is basically individual responsibility following well established rules. The demolition of illegal buildings, especially in Roma ghettos, without providing people and their children with adequate housing is part of this policy.

e. Implementation progress

- Do you consider the implementation of the NAPS/LAPS to be on the right track to deliver on its objectives?

Poverty in Bulgaria is widespread, persistent and deep. Measures in the NAPS only mitigate some of its effects. A much more serious approach to poverty and social exclusion is needed.

Within these strong constraints, implementation follows set parameters. Social workers often try to provide the best possible services and support with care.

- **If yes, what key factors/good practices or actions have effectively supported the implementation process?**

- **If no, what are the main obstacles slowing down or hindering the implementation?**

All the enlisted factors - as the political landscape, adequate funding, stakeholder engagement, PeP involvement, coordination mechanisms, or the use of EU funds - could influence including contradictory the processes. However, they are more important at the level of decision taking than on the implementation stage. Once decisions are taken, local offices of state agencies follow the decisions. Mayors and local governments have more impact at their level of competencies, including local social services provided and also, for example, demolition of Roma homes in a neighborhood of Sofia recently.

f. Evaluation

- **Has the implementation of the NAPS and LAPS been regularly monitored and evaluated?** If yes, how frequently has this occurred, and what methods were used? If possible, please include examples of good practices.

As already pointed out every two years, a report is made on the previous ones and a plan for the next ones is made.

- **Which stakeholders were involved in the evaluation process?**

The members of the National Council already enlisted.

- **Were the findings and lessons learned from the evaluation process used to inform and improve subsequent NAPS and LAPS, or to adjust the current strategy?** Please provide examples if available.

The report is important to inform about developments. It also makes some recommendations for policy makers, as we pointed out on page 4-5. These recommendations need to be addressed by political bodies – mainly Government and National Parliament.

- **Was the drafting process of the NAPS and LAPS transparent and inclusive?** Reflect on whether there were meaningful opportunities for participation, how accessible the process was, and whether stakeholders' input was considered in the final outcomes.

We already answer this question.

3. Identification of good/promising practices

- **Please summarise the good or promising practices identified in your assessment in a separate table or section within the chapter.** Please provide at least 5 good/promising practices.

The procedure of identifying good practices seem to us quite problematic. More concretely, there is a problem that specific measures, e.g. at the local level, can be identified as good practices. However, they could easily be immersed in an environment that produces contradictory effects and results.

What we are doing here is to identify small steps, albeit insufficient, in a good direction, paying attention to their more general orientation.

1. Mainstreaming inequalities in the NAPS 2030 – This is an important step forward, although it has not yet been consistently implemented.

2. The abolition of the so-called guaranteed minimum income, which for over 10 years provided extremely low social support.

3. Healthcare for children – adopted by the Parliament improved and universal access to healthcare for the youngest patients and their families by providing two antibiotics for free.

4. Education - Bill amending and supplementing the Preschool and School Education Act for all students to use free textbooks.

5. Elderly care - albeit as a result of crisisification (due to current for profit business abuse of services for elderly), usage of European funds for possibly good social services outside the market rhetoric.

It is important to note that the NAPS is a parallel process. It could eventually influence but Government and National Parliament take decisions. What is more, usually decisions are taken and after that reported in the in the biennial reports.

4. Recommendations to your national decision-makers

- **What are your recommendations to your national decision-makers on how to improve the NAPS and LAPS of your country?** Please provide at least 5 recommendations spelling clearly to which level of decision-making they are addressed to.

Two characteristics of political processes in Bulgaria are important to consider when specifying which level of decision-making recommendations are aimed at:

a/ policies, and in particular social policy in the country, are highly centralized;

b/ with regard to measures against poverty and those to promote social inclusion, Bulgaria follows policies at the EU level.

Thus, the recommendations below are addressed to the national level. However, also to the EU level, due to their important influence on the national ones.

1. High levels of poverty and social exclusion require that the fight against poverty and policies to promote social inclusion be placed **at the centre of the political agenda**. They should be seen as an integral part of a focus on citizens' well-being, rather than as residual measures of weak, low and fragmented support for selected „deserving poor“ as it is currently.

2. Public policies that are **basic poverty generators need to be addressed**. These are - norms and rules for: a) income distribution, especially in the public sector; b) tax system; c) social security system and d) their combinations. Currently, many of these norms and rules in Bulgaria are in clear contrast to the same in the other EU countries. However, they are declared as good practices by the national decision-makers with tacit consent at EU level.

3. A **fair, adequate and serious review of indicators** is needed at both national and EU level. This includes, above all, an adequate definition of poverty, based on adequate basket of basic goods and their prices. The same should be implemented consistently across different types of poverty, e.g. energy poverty; availability and easy access to long-term comparable data on the situation; clarity on how the combination of indicators is aimed at achieving set goals, rather than the current trend to replace set goals by (often meaningless) indicators (the so called indicatorization process).

4. The overall process can benefit from **regular independent assessments** of the situation, based on research **involving social workers and people living in poverty**.

5. The **evaluation** process **should focus on results**, not on enlisting measures undertaken



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