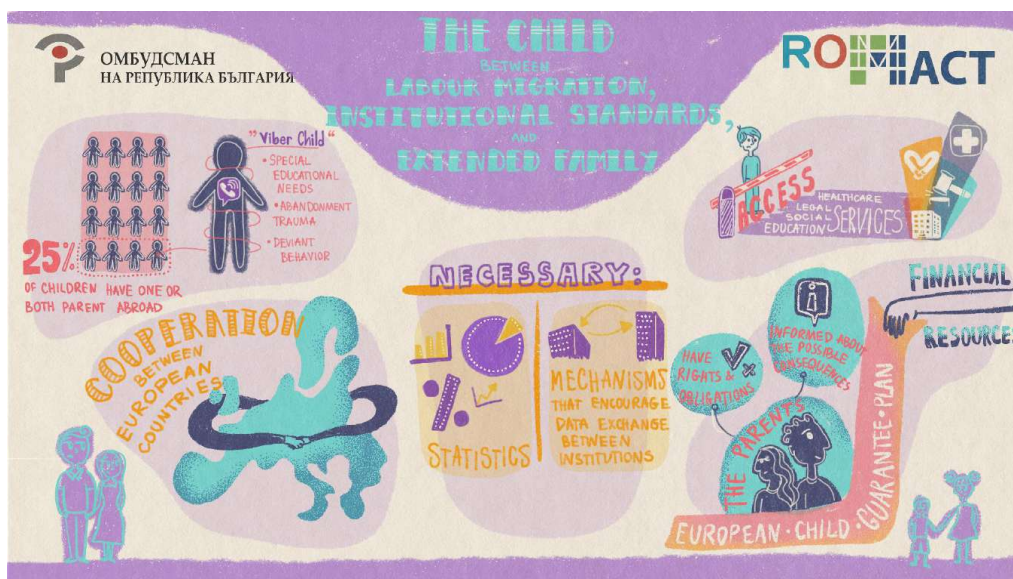


PUBLIC DISCUSSION

"CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND: BETWEEN LABOR MIGRATION, INSTITUTIONAL STANDARDS AND EXTENDED FAMILY"

REPORT



INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Public Discussion "CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND: BETWEEN LABOR MIGRATION, INSTITUTIONAL STANDARDS AND EXTENDED FAMILY" was organised in partnership by the Ombudsperson of the Republic of Bulgaria and ROMACT - a Joint Programme of the European Commission and the Council of Europe, on December 12th 2022, in Sofia, Bulgaria. The event was also streamed via Zoom and Facebook live.

Prior to the official start of the panel discussions, Ana Oprisan - Programme Manager of ROMACT, Council of Europe, presented the photo exhibition "Living without them" by the Bulgarian photographer Lina Krivoshieva. The photographs can be seen [here](#).



KEY MESSAGES, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants in the discussions have outlined the issues and delivered aligned messages and recommendations on the needed steps on policy and implementation level.

The main conclusions and recommendations can be clustered in the following manner:

Clearer definitions and relevant data, and its exchange among institutions

- There is a need for a clearer definition of the group, in order to avoid stigmatization and yet ensure timely recognition of a child at risk and their need to access adequate services. There is a need of regular and up-to-date data and official statistics showcasing the scale of the problem;
- There is a strong need for better exchange of information among the institutions and creation of an information system.



Better collaboration among institutions:

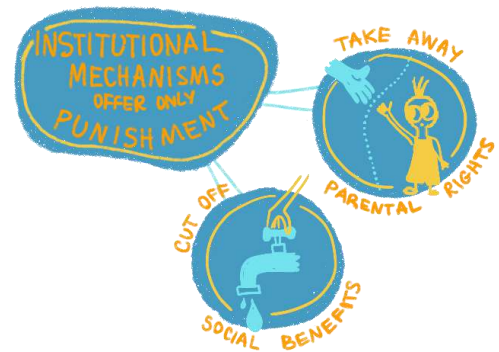
- There is a need for creating integrated services which synchronize the educational, healthcare and social systems;
- There is a need for processes and mechanisms that allow the detection of vulnerability as early as possible, including by teachers, social services, etc., and the activation of access to services.

Legalisation of temporary guardianship arrangements and notifying of institutions prior to departure

- According to the [“Children left behind: between labour migration, institutional standards, and extended family” report](#) elaborated by ROMACT experts, based on a study conducted over the period November 2020 - January 2021 in 9 ROMACT municipalities in Bulgaria, in practice, *“it is not legally possible for parents to request the formalization of temporary care arrangements involving other family members or friends while they are absent due to employment abroad. This means that, in circumstances where the Court is involved in cases of left-behind children (or those whose parents contemplate leaving them behind), the parents are in a position of vulnerability or, indeed, jeopardy.”* There is a strong recommendation that the

complexity of legal procedures for transferring guardianship is reduced, so that it is accessible and understandable by parents and they are not penalised.

- A recommendation to create a process for parents to notify institutions when they are planning to travel has been given, as well.



Focus on supporting the social workers

There is an increasing need of a larger number of social workers, as well as:

- Adequate remuneration for their work;
- Capacity building, including training on culture of Roma in order to provide adequate psychological support;
- Continuous development opportunities and ensured supervision.

Mindset changes

- There are different measures in place, but their implementation is formal and this is perceived as part of the norm by the society and institutions;



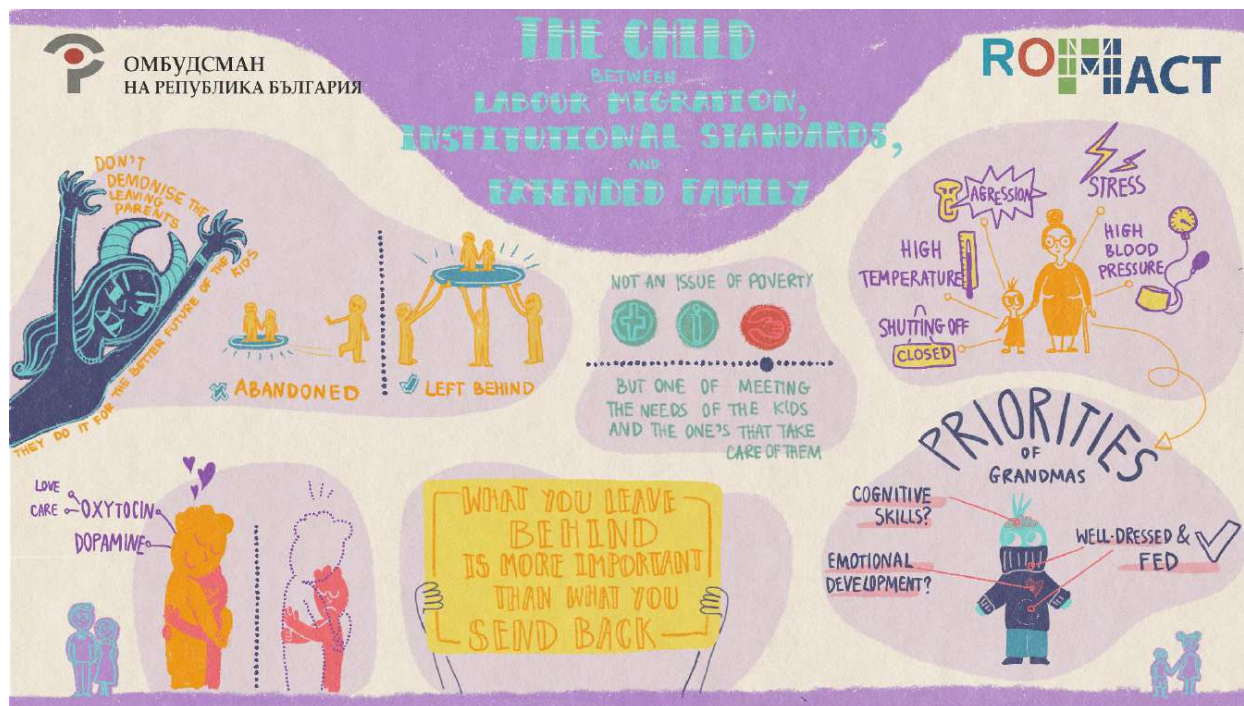
- The phenomenon of children left behind is normalised by many communities and people do not notify the institutions for children at risk;
- The terms need to be used with care in order to avoid stigmatization.

Prevention

- As a preventive measure there have been recommendations for raising awareness among parents on the impact of their absence on the development of their children.

Support to the whole family

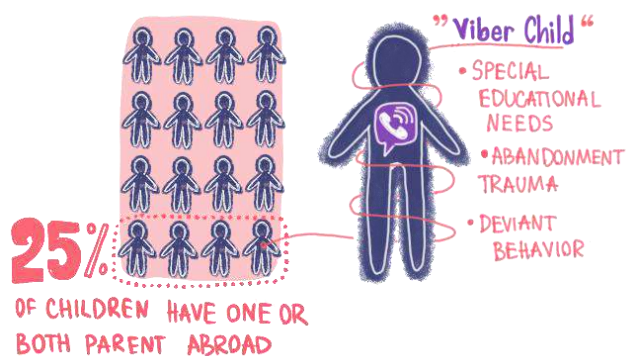
- The issue is complex and there is a need for support for the whole family - the parents and the caregivers, including psychological support, health coverage, etc.



II. DETAILED CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INSTITUTIONAL ACTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

Important messages recognising the extent of the problem with the children left behind in Bulgaria (the so called “Viber children”) as well as calls for urgent actions marked all interventions within the opening panel, moderated by the Ombudsperson of Bulgaria. Comments on the current state and possible solutions were outlined by MPs, relevant institutions and international organizations.



Political Will

Both Bulgarian MPs who took part stated their commitment to introduce any legislative changes that could address the issue of children of labor migrants. It was stated that according to the information system of the Ministry of Education over 39 000 children who dropped out of school have one or both parents working abroad. While it is not clear whether they have joined another school abroad, it is safe to say that a large percentage of them are

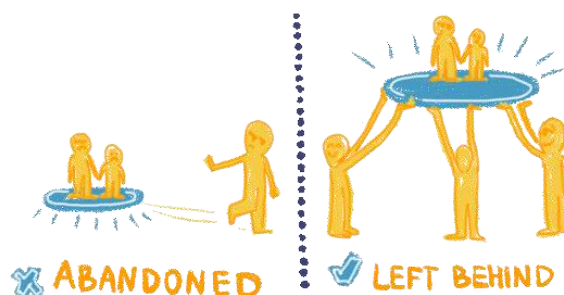
not in school neither in Bulgaria, nor in another country. Political will was expressed to support the people working in the social system, especially providing more funding for their compensation and capacity building, so the whole system can better address all the social issues arising.



Institutional Commitment

The representatives of the relevant institutions - the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Ministry of Education and the State Agency for Child Protection of the Child have outlined the current measures to implement the relevant legislation on national and local level. While the problem of children left behind is well known for them, it has been stated that there is a need for a specific focus on this group, especially in two dimensions:

- Collecting and analysis of data;
- Improved coordination between institutions, in order to achieve the goal of integrated services involving the social, health and educational systems;
- Developing an operational definition of children left behind.



The adoption of the National Action Plan for the European Child Guarantee by the Bulgarian government and the expected adoption of the 2-year Action Plan provide a good opportunity to build on the recommendations included in the ROMACT report. Financial resources through the Operational Programme Human Resources will be available for the measures in the plan and municipalities and civil society organisations have been encouraged to develop

relevant projects (i.e. through the [open measure “Future for the Children”](#)). Specific recommendations for future actions were outlined with regards to maintaining contact with parents who move abroad for several months and cannot be easily “detected” by the governmental information systems.

The international aspect

Participants recognised the international dimension of the issue, which is clearly not specific for the Bulgarian context. It has been noted by the PACE rapporteur on the impact of labour migration on children that the current moment presents a good opportunity for concrete actions with the adoption of the new Council of Europe [Strategy for the Rights of the Child](#), as well as a new action framework, that is much more participative.



It was stated by the Head of the Roma and Travellers Team Division at the Council of Europe that while the full scope and impact of the issue is yet to be understood, we know enough to be able to say that there is mass violation of human rights. She expressed the readiness of the Council of Europe to actively work through the ROMACT programme with all relevant stakeholders, so the issue can be addressed in a systematic way.

Access to the internet has been presented as a significant factor when dealing with issues of labor migration and family separation. It is becoming clearer that the lack of a good internet connection could present a violation of basic human rights, especially for families who maintain their communication online. Access to the internet should become a focus for institutions, along with all other measures.

The UNICEF Representative for Bulgaria presented the organization’s four key recommendations and stated their commitment to continue working in close collaboration with all stakeholders:

- Introducing changes in the legislation to reduce the complexity of procedures for transferring guardianship;



- Ensuring the education, healthcare, child and social protection providers are sensitive to the needs to this particular group of children and there are protocols in place to address abuse, emotional challenges and other issues;
- Reducing the stigma and providing capacity building to service providers;
- Including the children left behind as a vulnerability factor when making assessment of child's needs to ensure the children are not excluded from services.

UNICEF confirmed that they do not have any indication that the number 25% (from their report from 2014) is lower at the current moment and they observe a deterioration of the situation. The organization called for actions to ensure up-to-date data on the issue.

THE CURRENT STATE

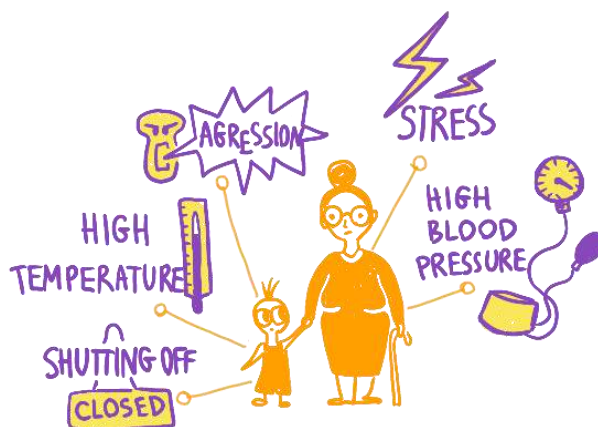
The current situation with migrant children was presented in detail through the ROMACT [Report Children left behind: between labor migration, institutional standards, and extended family](#), the practice with such cases shared by the office of the Ombudsman and the research by the Institute for Philosophy and Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

All panelists aligned around the alarming conclusion that the situation is deteriorating, that it affects a wide range of the population regardless of ethnicity and the problem is often overlooked by institutions. One of the challenges of introducing the issue was to define whether such children are at risk, or there are some potential risks.

The Office of the Ombudsman presented their practice regarding the issue. It was stated that almost 400 signals to the Ombudsman out of 1000 related to children rights were regarding children with one or two parents working abroad. It was shared that these children are at a high risk for their rights to be violated.

The empirical research conducted by scientist at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences outlined the main negative effects on children when left behind by their labour migrant parents:

- Deteriorated physical and mental health;
- Increased alcohol, tobacco and drugs consumption;
- Worsened emotional state: untypical anxiety, depression;
- Self-isolation, aggression;



- Worsened academic performance, absenteeism;
- Access to inappropriate content on the internet, risk of exploitation, including sexual exploitation;
- Change of values - regarding education and family.

List of full presentations:

- [Presentation of Liliya Makaveeva, ROMACT National Project Officer for Bulgaria](#) (in Bulgarian)
- [Presentation of Eva Zhecheva PhD, Director of the Children's Rights Directorate, Office of the Ombudsman of Bulgaria](#) (in Bulgarian)
- [Presentation of Ana Popova PhD, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences](#) (in Bulgarian)



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY

The panel involving key representatives from the civil society who work on the ground with children of labour migrants confirmed the main conclusions from the interventions from government institutions and the findings of the report and provided their perspective on the way forward.



The point of view of the United Nations was voiced by the Vice-chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child stating that the issue has a systemic nature therefore it needs to be addressed in a systematic manner and encompassing all its dimensions. The need for better coordination between institutions and centralized collection of relevant data through information systems was reaffirmed. From an international perspective there is enough guarantee that there will be significant progress on the issue.

Several good practices of addressing the challenges were presented by Save the Children - Romania, among which:

- Introducing legislative changes to recognise the specific group, including provisions regarding temporarily delegating the parental authority;
- Widespread information and awareness raising campaign;
- Direct intervention services for 12 500 children.

Participants shared that regardless of all regulations and protocols in place, institutions could feel distant and even scary for certain groups which leads to lower trust and lack of collaboration with them. The need for “friendlier” and more humane social services was discussed. The [ROMACT's guide for local services in Romania](#) was mentioned as a valuable resource in this regard.

Civil society experts shared the view that it is key to have systems and mechanisms that detect vulnerability as early as possible and activate access to specific services.

The question of poverty was raised by participants. A view that poverty is the root cause for labour migration resulting in leaving children behind was raised. It was also acknowledged, however, that many such families live well above the poverty line. It was underlined that despite the relative financial independence, children from such families are still under high risk in terms of mental health, access to health services, educational achievements and social integration. There was a call to start thinking about services targeted to the whole family, rather than individual children - parents and relatives also need social and health protection. (*“The best care for families comes from families.”*)



A recommendation was raised to synchronize information systems across different EU countries, once more underlining the international dimension of the problem.

Organizations suggested that often the implementation of written procedures is very formalized and measures towards going beyond “box ticking” are much needed. An observation was shared that there are only a few instances where institutions self-activate, unless there is a signal from citizens or NGOs. At the same time, in many communities the problem with children of labour migrants is perceived as normal and part of the reality, therefore citizens do not have the culture to signal the institutions and to take action.

Civil society representatives reaffirmed the challenge already raised by other speakers related to the custody process, which is very punitive. In practice, parents remain without any parental rights after transferring them to a relative, along with losing some social benefits. Due to that parents often do not inform the social services about their plans for migrating. Change in legislation is required.

Organizations working on the ground raised the issue of local social services that are severely understaffed and underpaid. Cases where only one social expert is working for a few municipalities were mentioned in the discussion.

INSTITUTIONAL NEXT STEPS

Experts from the Ministry of Education, the Agency for Social Assistance and the Municipality of Borovan joined the discussion around the questions:

- *How can we put in practice the recommendation for inter institutional coordination?*
- *What are the needs of institutions in order to provide better services for the extended families?*



The Ministry of Education’s expert shared that the overall governmental approach is designed in a way that services are available to children and families through schools (as a single point of contact), but in practice there are many deficits in this model. More work is needed for institutions to come to the children and their families, not the other way around. It was stated that there is a need to make the system less formal, a need to be closer to the children in order to achieve anything meaningful.

Aiming to ensure interventions as early as possible in children’s development, plans to move nurseries to the Ministry of Education system have been shared.

Regardless of the location of parents, it is important for institutions to work with them. There is a need to build on some well designed programmes addressing child behaviour, where there are trained experts to work with parents - including innovative ways to approach parents (parent-teacher associations outside of schools, joint activities).

While schools are a crucial player in solving the issues with children of labour migrants they cannot be left as the only option. A clear need for increased coordination with other social and health services was once more stressed upon.

Participants in the panel suggested building on the already established municipal local councils for children to coordinate efforts on supporting children left behind and their families. There is a will to bring more meaning to this existing mechanism.

Audience interventions suggested that it is important to place the children of migrant workers in the broader context of the children needing support. There is a need for a similar approach to all groups, regardless of the reason.

During the discussion with the audience, a good example of integrated services in Veliko Tarnovo was shared by the [Know-How Center at NBU](#) and they committed to share the details of the topic of children left behind with their local board.



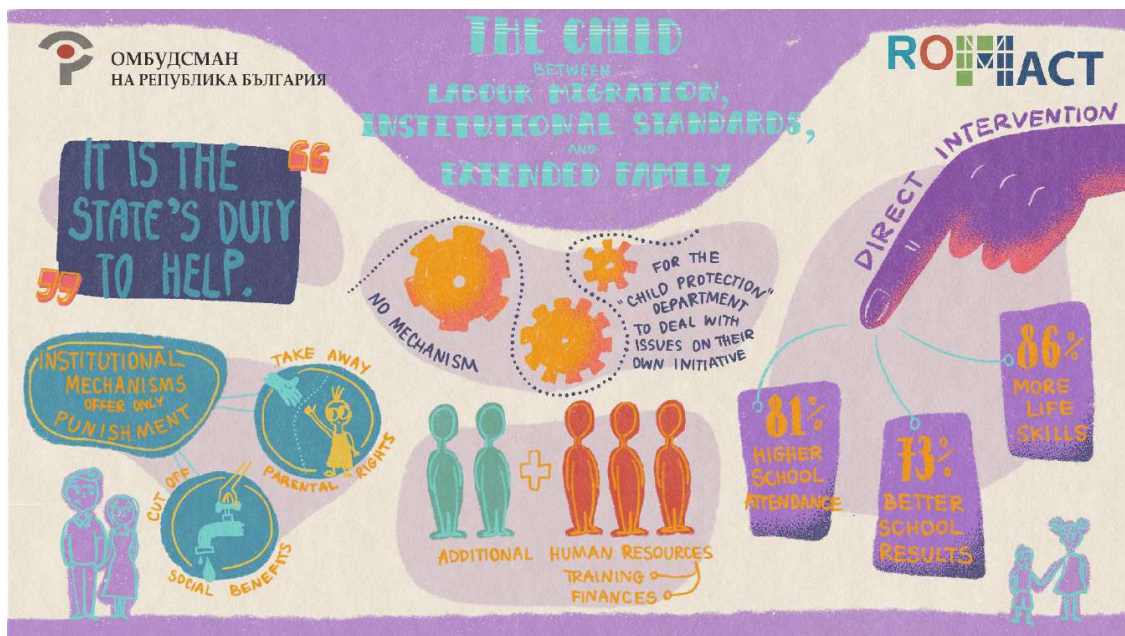
Another key question was raised during the discussion: *Why do parents not take their children abroad?* It could be raised on EU level and stakeholders can refer to some good practices in

the field of refugee integration where there is a system in place. Labour migrants in Europe lack information about social systems in their destination country.

Participants in the panel aligned around a few key needs:

- Additional human resources for social workers, pedagogical advisors, including constant training and supervision;
- Increased financial support for social workers, as many can be themselves defined as "working poor";
- Development of skills to focus on prevention - even at the stage of the decision to go abroad (there is often lack of relevant information);
- Specific skills to work with Roma, Turkish and Millet communities, so the support is relevant and efficient;
- Creation of a fund for municipalities for urgent needs regarding children left behind (especially for small municipalities with limited budgets).

All stakeholders in the panels have stated their commitment to continue working on the problems of children of labor migrants in 2023 and to continue the collaboration.



ANNEX 1: AGENDA AND GRAPHIC RECORDINGS

9:30 - 10:25 Opening remarks and introduction to the public discussion

Moderator: **Prof. Dr. Diana Kovacheva**, the Ombudsperson of Republic of Bulgaria

- **Ms. Eleni Tsetsekou**, Council of Europe, Head of the Roma and Travellers Team Division (video message)
- **Ms. Denitsa Sacheva**, MP, Deputy Chair of the Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy in the National Assembly
- **Mr. Iskren Arabadzhiev**, MP, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Labour, Social and Demographic Policy in the National Assembly
- **Mr. Viorel Badea**, MP, PACE rapporteur on the impact of labour migration on children
- **Ms. Nadia Klisurska**, Deputy Minister of Ministry of labour and social policy
- **Ms. Maria Gaidarova PhD**, Deputy Minister of Education and Science
- **Ms. Teodora Ivanova PhD**, Chairperson of the State Agency for Child Protection
- **Ms. Christina de Bruin**, UNICEF Representative in Bulgaria

10:25 – 11:05 The situation of children left behind in Bulgaria

Moderator: **Mr. Dimitar Dimitrov**, ROMACT expert/ Bulgaria Country Executive Director, Reach for Change

- **Ms. Liliya Makaveeva**, ROMACT National Project Officer: "Children left behind: between the labour migration, institutional norms and the extended family"
- **Ms. Eva Zhecheva PhD**, Director of the Children's Rights Directorate, Office of the Ombudsman of Bulgaria: "The institution of the Ombudsman in defence of the rights and interests of children whose parents are migrant workers. Specific complaints, practices and recommendations"
- **Ms. Ana Popova PhD**, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: "Risks for children of labour migrants caused by deficits in their socialization"

11:15 – 11:55 What can and needs to be done

Moderator: **Ms. Ana Oprisan**, Program Manager of ROMACT, Council of Europe

Point of view of the UN

- **Associate Professor Velina Todorova PhD**, Vice-chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, United Nations: "The Committee on the Rights of the Child about the Rights of Children in Situation of Migration of their Parents"

The experience of Romania

- **Ms. Anca Stamin**, Save the Children, Romania

Recommendations of the CSOs' and International Organisations' experts

- **Ms. Elena Atanasova**, UNICEF **Ms. Plamena Nikolova**, Director of "Policies for Children", National Network for Children
- **Mr. Ognyan Isaev**, ROMACT expert / Program Director of the Trust for Social Achievement

11:55-12:25 Actions to be taken by child protection authorities

*Moderator: **Ms. Liliya Makaveeva**, National Project Officer of ROMACT for Bulgaria*

- **Ms. Tatiana Predova** and **Ms. Anelia Yotova**, state experts, Directorate "Inclusive Education", Ministry of Education
- **Mr. Emil Todorov**, Director of the "Child Protection" Directorate at the Agency for Social Assistance and **Ms. Tsvetanka Bahchevandzhieva**, acting head of department in the "Child Protection" Directorate, Agency for Social Assistance: "Measures and activities for the protection of children at risk"
- **Ms. Desislava Markovska**, Deputy Mayor of Borovan Municipality

