

The Adoption Authority of Ireland sent a delegation of three representatives to Bulgaria from 19-23 September 2017, to report on the current status of intercountry adoption.

1. Irish Embassy

The delegation met with the Irish Ambassador to Bulgaria, Michael Forbes and with Catherine Lawlor, Deputy Head of Mission at the Embassy of Ireland. The history and current situation in respect of Bulgarian adoption by Irish applicants; and the changed landscape of intercountry adoption globally, whereby older children, siblings and children with additional needs are mainly adopted from abroad into Ireland, were discussed with the Ambassador.

2. Bulgarian Central Authority:

The delegation met with the Director and the Head of the Department 'Social Affairs' of the International Legal Child Support and Intercountry Adoptions Directorate at the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice, that is the Central Authority. The Bulgarian Central Authority gave details of the system for processing of intercountry adoptions in Bulgaria. The system is run under the legal framework of The Family Code (2009) and there was discussion relating to consents of birth parents and children, and about decisions to place the child for intercountry adoption. The Bulgarian system requires that efforts to place the child domestically must be made before a child can be placed for international adoption. Time limits, selection and matching criteria, and Court requirements and delays were also discussed.

Currently prospective adopters can wait about 6 years to be matched with a young and relatively healthy child.

The matching is carried out by a panel at the Central Authority. The panel review the characteristics of the child such as age, gender and health, and systematically work through the list of potential family matches, from the beginning of the list. The Ministry representatives said the matching process includes an attempt to place a child within the norm for a biological family. There is no prescribed age gap between adopters and children with the Council deciding on the basis of the most suitable gap. Typically the age of Bulgarian adopters is around 35 - 45 years, similar to international adopters. Married opposite gender couples may apply to adopt as can sole applicants.

There are about 1200 families waiting to adopt. In 2016 there were 555 children placed domestically and 326 for intercountry adoption. The intercountry adoption figure of 326 included 117 children with special needs (these included children over 10 years and sibling groups). The figures are down from those adopted in 2014 and 2015. In the first six months of 2017, there were 117 adoptions of children with special needs, from a total of 153 children. Adoptions were mainly to the US (41), Italy (16), Spain (12), France (8), Canada (6) and Ireland seventh, with 3 adoptions this year to date.

The representatives also stated that Bulgarian law remains closed in relation to information on adoption, and that families must apply to the Court if they want information to be released in later years for the purposes of information and tracing. The Bulgarian Central Authority representatives stated that in practice to date, most adoptees were satisfied with going to the Child Care Centre from where they had come and meeting staff there.

There is a low level of breakdown of adoptions and refusals of referrals, and the representatives believe this is due to the specificity of the information given to the adopters, allowing thorough preparation for the adoption.

3. UNICEF:

The delegation met with the Child Protection Specialist and the Children's Rights Monitoring Specialist of **UNICEF** in Bulgaria. UNICEF has been operating in Bulgaria for the past 17 years. A UNICEF study in the Shumen region of Bulgaria indicated the reasons for abandonment of children including disability, poverty, lack of education, health, homelessness, migration. The representatives highlighted Unicef's technical support and monitoring of the child protection system and the De-Institutionalisation and Foster care programmes within Bulgaria.

In 2010 there were 15,000 children in institutions and in 2017 this number is less than 2,000, with about 700 of the children having disabilities. About 3,500 children are now in small group homes. There are also about 5-6,000 children in kinship care. The birth rate is falling and is at around 65,000 births annually. There are Special Measures in law relating to children with special needs which allows them to be placed quickly with suitable adopters.

UNICEF focuses its efforts on the De-institutionalisation and Foster Care programmes. These programmes have led to the closure of most of the large orphanages and child care centres in the country, and increased use of foster care and small group homes for older children leaving the older institutions.

4. Accredited body, VESTA non-governmental organisation:

The delegation met with the Directors and staff of the **Vesta NGO**. Vesta is the accredited body in Bulgaria that facilitates intercountry adoptions for Irish families, in conjunction with Helping Hands Adoption Mediation Agency in Ireland.

Vesta has facilitated intercountry adoptions in 2017 of 33 children to the US, mostly of children with special needs. They have facilitated 5 adoptions to France and 5 to Italy, none to Spain and 3 to Ireland, in 2017. Their experience is that over the past five years, other country's applicants have changed their profiles so as to begin adopting older children and siblings.

Vesta's Director was involved in working groups that drafted the Family Code of 2009, and is currently involved in a group drafting amendments to that Code. The Family Code of 2009 was set up to reduce delays for children being placed in families, and to stop the practice whereby children aged out in institutions. Vesta staff outlined some of the delays that can be encountered within the system, and their discussions about these with the Minister for Justice. The number of abandoned

children within the child care system has remained consistent over the past number of years. The Bulgarian Government received major European funds to take children out of institutional care through resourcing group homes, foster families, social workers and social services.

The Authority delegation gave Vesta post placement reports on the children adopted into Ireland from Bulgaria; and stated that the quality of medical and developmental information being gathered through the Central Authority and Vesta on children referred to Irish applicants is of very high quality.

Vesta representatives and interpreters assisted the AAI delegation throughout this trip. This assistance confirmed for the delegation, the value of local expertise and knowledge in relation to accessing a specialist children's service such as adoption, when travelling abroad.

5. Children's Centre:

The delegation travelled from Sofia and visited the Children's Care Centre. The Care Centre is a well-maintained and well-resourced facility for children with special needs, and most children there were living with their families. The Children's Care Centre provides three types of care, residential, daily and set hours. It provides medical and rehabilitation services to a defined catchment area.

The Director stated that the children at this Care Centre have varying levels of disability and special needs such as prematurity, heart problems, hydrocephalus, cerebral palsy, brain impairment. Since 2010 there have been 300 domestic adoptions and 60 intercountry adoptions from the Children's Care Centre.

The Children's Care Centre is a State sponsored institution for children whose families could not otherwise afford the services needed to meet their child's needs. It caters for 217 children currently, aged from newborn to 10 years old. There are 95 resident children plus 8 newborn premature babies. Most of the children have families resident in the local cities and the wider surrounding area. Their children's needs are such that due to the level of care required in some cases, this cannot be managed at home.

About half of the children live at home and avail of daily support from the Care Centre, or have been assigned a few hours daily or weekly to receive specific therapies. Referrals are administered through the medical and social services pathways and children are generally in the age range of 0-7 years, although the Care Centre caters for a small number of children aged up to 10 years old when there has not been a place to refer the child on for further care.

The Children's Care Centre has a large number of well-resourced individual therapy and family meeting rooms, and a high staff child ratio of about 1 staff member to 2 children in the mornings and 1 staff to 10 or 12 children in the afternoons and evenings. There is a Doctor on duty for 24 hours, and there are nurses on the staff. The delegation was shown the neonatal area with medical equipment; three rooms for physiotherapy; three for individual speech and language; occupational therapy rooms; one art therapy room; one music therapy room; a sensory integration room; a toy library that was initially donated to the Centre by a foreign adoption agency; a number of play areas; eating areas; cots; kitchens. All rooms were well-equipped and resourced. The Centre provides supportive group therapy for parents of children with disability who attend the service.

Conclusion:

There is concern for the future of this programme as the waiting time for applicants in Bulgaria is now up to six years. Some applicants are looking at alternatives where waiting times are shorter. In the delegation's opinion, the Bulgarian programme is open and transparent and would appear to be very child centred. The various parties which the delegation met could not forecast whether the waiting times would improve. VESTA stated that moves were afoot to seek to have the Family Code amended to make it mandatory for children being placed into foster care to be registered for adoption. This might lead to more children becoming available. VESTA also noted that adopters had changed preferences over the years inasmuch as they were initially seeking babies but are now prepared to accept older children.

Each body that the delegation met presented as openly informative, and welcoming to Irish applicants. The full intercountry adoption system viewed over this trip was transparent and robust with the child's needs at the centre of the decisions taken by the Bulgarian authorities and agencies.

AAI delegation:

Dr Imelda Ryan, Board member

Des Tracey, Manager ICA Unit

Celia Loftus, Principal Social Worker

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