

**Capitalizing On a Moment:  
UNICEF Bulgaria’s Successful Campaign to  
De-Institutionalize the National Childcare System**

**Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

In 2007, Bulgaria had the highest rate of infants in residential institutions in Europe.<sup>ii</sup> Like many post-Soviet societies, the childcare system was characterized by centralized planning and a reliance on large state-run institutions. Another part of this legacy was a widespread cultural acceptance that these large residential institutions were the appropriate setting for the state to look after children who had been separated from their parents and families.

Despite advocacy efforts by UNICEF and others in the past, there was far from sufficient political will for change in the system, combined with a real dearth of understanding as to the impacts of institutional care on child development, on the part of policy makers, professionals working in the system and the general public. Add to this an entrenched bureaucracy with vested interests in the status quo, and the result is an inhospitable environment for systemic change.

Then in 2007, two things happened. A powerful documentary, with international reach, exposed the abysmal situation of disabled children’s care in a state-run institution in rural Bulgaria. Perhaps Bulgarian politicians would have paid little attention to such a documentary if it weren’t for the second major event that year: Bulgaria joined the European Union.

Into this critical moment stepped a UNICEF country office that had been established just a year earlier in 2006, and until then accustomed to conventional insider advocacy strategies of lobbying, alliance-building and policy recommendations – the key components of UNICEF advocacy around the world.

Over the next seven years, with Country Representative Octavian Bivol passing the torch of leadership to Tanja Radocaj in 2009, UNICEF Bulgaria broadened and diversified its advocacy activities. The shifting political winds were intensified further in 2009 with a change of government at the national level. The Bulgarian Socialist Party – the successor to the Bulgarian Communist party – was replaced by the newly established, center-right Citizens for European Development (GERB) party – with strong pro-European policies and far fewer historical ties to the existing system. In this context, both before and after the change of government, the UNICEF country office boldly stepped into a much more prominent public advocacy role that included celebrity concerts in prime time television slots and public telethon-style fundraising events that engaged one quarter of the Bulgarian population and

raised over a million dollars. All of this went hand in hand with the conventional insider advocacy strategies of the past. The effectiveness of this combination of insider-outsider advocacy holds valuable lessons for UNICEF offices elsewhere.

Another key lesson of the campaign is the importance of gradual, cumulative change in advocacy. Rather than carrying out one single all-encompassing campaign, UNICEF led a seven-year chain of shorter interrelated campaigns –moving from the rights of children with disabilities to foster care development, and from infants in institutions and the right to live in a family environment to prevention work with parents (refer to timeline at end of document). Coming in succession like this, each campaign built on the achievements of the last, all contributing towards the broader systemic change.

In 2016, the last of 24 old-style state-run residential institutions for children with disabilities were closed. The numbers of infants and babies (0-3 years old) in residential care are now one-fifth what they were six years ago. And the use of foster care and community- and family- based care models has been greatly expanded.

## **II. Defining the Objective**

Objectives in advocacy strategy are the destination points where we aim to arrive. They give direction, provide focus and allow one to measure progress. The clearer the objectives, the easier it is to map out the route to achieving them.

When crisis and changing political winds presented UNICEF Bulgaria with a new political landscape, there was no doubt about their ultimate goal: the de-institutionalization of the childcare system. This meant the closure of all state-run residential institutions and the roll-out of family- and community-based alternatives.

The primary reason for this choice of campaign goal was the developmental impact of institutional care on children. The global consensus on children's right is now quite clear that poor institutionalized care results in serious setbacks in terms of cognitive, physical, and psychosocial development.<sup>iii</sup> Given the widespread use of institutions in Bulgaria, this was one of the most urgent issues affecting children's rights. In the words of Milena Harizanova, Child Protection Specialist in the Bulgaria UNICEF country office "it was the issue we could have most impact on."<sup>iv</sup>

In the past such a bold objective –complete de-institutionalization- would have been impossible were two events not to completely transform the politics of childcare in the country and create advocacy opportunities barely imaginable a few months earlier.

First, the shocking BBC documentary entitled 'Bulgaria's Abandoned Children' showed the conditions inside the state-run residential institution for children with disabilities in the rural village of Mogilino. The images of children living in conditions of neglect and depravation inside the institution sparked both shock at home and outrage abroad.

Second, the entry into the EU meant that the government was particularly attentive to its international image and increasingly susceptible to EU pressure. EU entry also meant that Bulgaria was eligible for structural funds from the European Commission, many of which could be made conditional on social policy reforms.

Unlike campaigns where there is linear progression towards a single objective, the overarching goal of de-institutionalization required sustained advocacy efforts focused on three different objectives that mutually supported each other over the long term.

*Policy reform.* One of the key stepping stones towards reforming the childcare model was to turn the de-institutionalization proposals of UNICEF and others into Bulgarian government policy. This landmark policy change came in 2010, relatively early in the seven-year stretch of sustained advocacy. The challenge then became to maintain political will and to translate the broader reform agenda into lower-level policy on specific issues which would ensure proper implementation.

*Changing the political climate.* In order to generate the political will necessary to first change policy and then to implement the new policy, building social pressure was paramount. Working to influence public sentiment was one of the most important ways to generate this pressure. However, it would also be necessary to work with a broad range of other stakeholders in order to cultivate a generally supportive political climate.

*Demonstrating alternative projects.* Highlighting concrete and strong examples of successful projects showing 'alternative' models was powerful in several ways. This showed local authorities and people working in the system how the new approach would work in real practice. These projects also allowed UNICEF to pre-empt criticism that the new model was unfeasible and merely a foreign idea being imposed on Bulgaria. Examples of 'alternative' projects also helped to establish UNICEF's reputation in terms of knowledge and expertise.

Early successes in public opinion and policy advocacy were followed by the implementation of alternative demonstration projects. Then these projects were used for more public opinion advocacy which led to renewed pressure on decision makers. A cumulative process of building and sustaining momentum (refer to timeline at end of document) was at the heart of the campaign. It allowed for gradual, minor changes that amounted to major reform over the long term.

### **III. Pinpointing the Key Audiences**

The audience in advocacy strategy really refers to two separate groups of people. The first are the people with the authority to deliver directly on the objective. The second are the people that have influence over what those authorities choose to do. From early on in this campaign, it was clear that in order to achieve the ultimate de-institutionalization goal, the campaign would need to aim its efforts at five major audiences.

*The State Agency for Child Protection (SACP)* is the agency responsible for the coordination of policy related to children's rights in Bulgaria. These policies must be approved by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and adopted by the Council of Ministers to ultimately go into effect. However, SACP is the major driver on these issues. UNICEF had a history of collaboration, including capacity-building, with SACP, and was part of the working group that drew up the Vision for De-institutionalization text that would become policy in 2010. However, a lot of the political heavy lifting in support of the policy change had already been done.

The first UNICEF campaign focusing on children with disabilities was in full swing in 2008-09 and de-institutionalization had been a hot election issue. The campaign's public advocacy work had paid high dividends, and the new government made the issue a top political priority when it took office. With the change of government came a new SACP director bringing new energy, political backing and a positive attitude towards civil society participation<sup>v</sup>. In the end, because the campaign had been so successful in applying public pressure and positioning de-institutionalization as a top election issue, once the new government took office the actual policy changes came easily.

*The Ministry for Labour and Social Policy (MLSP)* was very much on the defensive before the change of government in 2009, however, it remained a key audience for UNICEF from the start of UNICEF's efforts. SACP proposals needed the Minister's approval for policy changes. The change of government brought an injection of political will in the Ministry and it became much easier to achieve this approval.

MLSP was also a crucial actor for another reason. The Ministry was the managing authority for the money coming from the EU. The Vision for De-institutionalization and its accompanying Action Plan were the basis for the approval of more than 100 million euros from the EU. The Ministry had a huge incentive to support the policy and they ended up being at the center of developing the overall government strategy and convening the other ministries. According to Radocaj, "if it was only for our advocacy we would be in a much weaker position, but because such a strong obligation was created [with the EU] this worked as a kind of safeguard so that the process didn't slide back." When the new government resigned three years later, the next government –a minority government lead by the Socialist party - which had previously opposed the policy, could not go back to their previous position because of the obligation to the EU. The MLSP was at the center of this dialogue.

*The Health Ministry* also played a role in the approval of the de-institutionalization policy – although it was secondary to the MLSP. It did, however, have direct responsibility for the residential homes for infants and it was required to develop and implement its own policy for the closure of these institutions in order to comply with the broader reform agenda. It was also a crucial partner for piloting and monitoring of new services. UNICEF staff described the Health Ministry in the early days of the campaign as being 'completely intransigent'. On top of this intransigence, another major challenge was the high turnover

of staff, especially its top officials. In order to mitigate this, UNICEF made sure, from early on, to build relationships at different levels in the Ministry to diversify its entry points and make it easier to deal with ongoing changes to leadership and the institution.

The real breakthrough in the relationship came when UNICEF offered to jointly employ a consultant inside the Ministry. Sensing that the Ministry was seriously lacking internal capacity, UNICEF proposed jointly recruiting a consultant that would be chosen by, and would report to, a deputy minister, but who would be under joint management. According to Harizanova, this was a real turning point, “We had access to policy makers, experts in the ministry, and the flow of information was improved.....we became a partner they [could] trust.”<sup>vi</sup>

*Local authorities* were among the winners and losers in the closure of old institutions and the rollout of projects under the new model. It was therefore important to work with communities losing out, to communicate why those closures were happening, and to work with them to retain some local employment. UNICEF engaged local authorities in a positive way by acting quickly and directly approaching municipalities who wanted to participate in showcasing the new model.

*The general public's* opinion was an essential ingredient for keeping up the pressure on policy makers and sustaining political will throughout the campaign. It was also central to the fundraising strategy as money for the implementation of demonstration projects for the alternative model was raised through public appeals. Although public opinion was deeply moved by the Mogilino scandal, a lot of skepticism remained. The perspective remained strong that people with disabilities are best cared for in an institution, and that the BBC documentary was an isolated example.<sup>vii</sup> Overcoming this skepticism was going to be essential in creating the political climate in which the de-institutionalization program could move forward.

#### **IV. Alliances: Strength in Diversity**

While UNICEF Bulgaria was very much at the forefront of the advocacy effort to transform the childcare system, they were supported by a range of allies. For a small country office, one of the key challenges in the campaign was managing relations with such a wide variety of actors. Among the most important of these allies were:

##### *NGOs and the alliance for de-institutionalization*

The NGO sector represented an important set of allies, and in particular, the network of civil society groups established in the wake of the Mogilino scandal. These partnerships not only helped in terms of developing and demonstrating alternative services but also in transmitting the campaign messages into more diverse networks. Another benefit of these alliances was that it expanded the range of tactics and messaging available to the campaign with some of the other NGOs being able to say and do things that UNICEF was not. In classic “Good Cop-Bad Cop” tactics, the country office coordinated with other civil society groups

where they would aggressively criticize the government, and then UNICEF was positioned to offer a constructive proposal of how to solve the problem at hand. One staff member noted “we would be welcomed to come to show [government officials] ‘this is how you can do it.’”

#### *Professionals in the system and their networks*

One of the reasons many civil society groups want to work with UNICEF is the prestige attached to the UNICEF ‘brand.’ While working in the implementation of alternative childcare projects on the ground in Bulgaria, UNICEF had to work with many local doctors, social workers and psychologists. These professionals in turn had their own networks and associations that were in dialogue with the central government and local government. Harizanova described seeing “many times that [local professionals] were sharing the experience gained in the partnership with UNICEF, with other audiences. It was probably good for their image. That was a good channel for [UNICEF] to reach the places we wouldn't have otherwise.”<sup>viii</sup>

#### *European Union Embassies*

The Mogilino scandal, which went public just as Bulgaria joined the EU, catalyzed pressure from EU governments on Bulgaria to take action. The embassies in the country’s capital Sofia, looked to UNICEF for independent information and advice as the international expert on children’s rights. UNICEF was able to provide technical and statistical detail that those embassies needed to align messages with the campaign.

#### *Media – BTV*

Media BTV was the largest TV channel in Bulgaria in terms of influence, ratings and coverage. Given the extent of the TV campaigns (see Actions section) and the strong emphasis on public advocacy through the media in the campaign, this alliance was extremely important. Although media support was *pro bono*, the relationship didn't come without its challenges. The imbalances in terms of knowledge of the issues led to occasionally unrealistic expectations for quick results by partners<sup>ix</sup>. Taking the time to explain to TV executives why certain steps were crucial for sustainable reform –even if they didn’t make sense for good television- was important. A concerted effort was also made to work together to prepare the messages that would be repeated in all TV coverage – ensuring consistent, coherent messaging across TV programs. In order to ensure multiplication of the campaign, it was also important to work with key journalists and contacts from other media outlets, so that they would support and amplify the messaging of the campaign through their own platforms.

#### *Celebrity champions*

Given the emphasis on mass public engagement, UNICEF also recruited multiple celebrity champions –from sports personalities to famous musicians and actors. They were

encouraged to use whatever platforms they had available to talk about the issue, whether it be TV, radio or social media.

### *The Office of the President*

In Bulgaria, the nation's executive power resides in the Council of Ministers, presided over by the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the office of the Bulgarian President still retains a very influential voice. Getting that voice on the side of the campaign was a major achievement. Despite being from the governing Socialist Party, the president took an early public stand on the issue, going against what the government was saying at the time, and reinforcing UNICEF's solution-focused messaging that 'this needs to change and we can change it.' When the current President Plevneliev took office in 2012, one of his advisors, described as "very knowledgeable and engaged on child protection issues" provided an important entry point.<sup>x</sup> By building on this link to the new president, the campaign was able to solidify the alliance once more.

### *Corporate partners*

Finally, UNICEF also partnered with different actors in the corporate sector, including two different corporate banks. The banks gave corporate donations and encouraged employees and clients to support the cause. UNICEF was able to send prepared messages through their customers, clients, employees and management. According to Jacklin Tzocheva, Communications Officer at the country office in Bulgaria, the banks "would also like to see results overnight and would like to see results in numbers and figures...at the beginning it was very difficult to convince them to donate to something that would be more sustainable, because they see sustainability with other eyes."<sup>xi</sup> This was also an issue with people working in the media and with citizens more generally. With all of its partners, UNICEF dealt with this through open and frank communication around the need for sustained action with a longer-term outlook for effective reform.

## **V. Building Messages around Problems - and Solutions**

Effective advocacy requires smart messaging. The clearer the objectives and the political map of audiences and allies, the easier it is to design strong messages and define the way in which those messages are communicated.

In the case of Bulgaria, the overall goal of de-institutionalization could not have been clearer. The core message that flowed from that boiled down to one basic argument: the current system does not work and there is a better one available. This core argument embodied a classic two-part structure for advocacy messaging: this is the problem and this is the solution. In the words of Radocaj, "If you don't show what is wrong with the current situation, why would people want to do anything about it? But then if you don't show how things can look differently and what we can achieve if we really focus on this...why would people support it?"

Even though the campaign focus evolved over time, that core message remained the same. What changed was the way in which that core message was articulated in order to appeal to three distinct audiences.

1. *An institution is not a good place for a child because it lacks an important human dimension of care*

When that message was communicated to the general public, the problem was communicated in a very human, very emotional way – drawing its power from those stories of the children more than on evidence. The fundamental message was that institutional care is not good for a child’s development, which was made more human by posing questions such as, “Can you imagine a child that spends 24 hours a day looking at the same white wall?” Or, “Can you imagine a child that eats three times a day, alone, drinking from a bottle propped up by a pillow next to him/her?” The solution was then communicated as a request to donate to the campaign. “With your help, we will build at least one center to support parents of babies and young children.” The objective here was not only to generate support for the reforms but to actually engage the public directly by offering them a chance to participate in the solution through donations that would be used to fund projects under the new model.

2. *Placing children in institutional care hinders their development*

With government policy makers and professionals working in the system, it was essentially the same message but the problem was cast less in human terms and more in terms of evidence and data. One example of such message was “Every month a child is in an institution, it is delaying his or her development by two months.” By putting the emphasis on child development but referring to statistical evidence, this kind of message drew on multiple sources of legitimacy. According to Radocaj, “Evidence from science and from the experience of other countries, this was more used in trainings, meetings and conferences with professionals. That kind of argument worked better with professionals who need more than a touching story.” The solution, meanwhile, was cast in terms of policy reform proposals and showing how viable alternative models are working in other places.

Of course some political figures will only be moved by political pressure. This is a call that we must continuously make in advocacy – which of our audiences need to be persuaded and which need to be pressured. This judgment call will determine where we spend our time and resources.

3. *Bulgaria is making this change for the benefit of its children, and there is a feasible and successful new model with which all of society will benefit.*

The third audience for whom the core message had to be adapted was people involved in the system at the local level such as social workers, health care workers and local authorities. UNICEF recognized early on that they had two objectives with this audience. One was, to the extent possible, to minimize the natural resistance that would come from

criticism and fear of change to the *status quo*. The other was to slowly build support among people who would have to be involved in the implementation of de-institutionalization at the local level, and the success of the new model. Their message, especially to communities that stood to lose out due to institution closures, was to explain why UNICEF was advocating for these particular reforms by presenting the evidence of the problems with the current system. Support was also offered in terms of working with these communities to retain at least one community based service, such as one of the smaller group homes under the new model, that would allow them to keep some staff employed. In terms of setting up the new alternative childcare centers, because UNICEF decided to work first with eligible municipalities that expressed interest in taking part, there was a lot less resistance to overcome in these communities.

This represents an important lesson for advocacy, generally. By starting in places where there is least resistance, it is possible to get a foothold with the least amount of energy and resources. Once concrete examples of success are at hand, new messages can be created for the next phase of the campaign. When people can see examples of what is being proposed and how it works in practice, they can much more easily imagine how it would translate to their context.

Another valuable advocacy lesson from working with this audience is about the importance of keeping messages focused on the systemic issues at hand. A fine balance had to be struck between criticizing the system and keeping these local stakeholders on board. For people who are integral to realize the new reality of the given objective, it's essential that they don't perceive campaign messages as a personal attack.

One of the ways that this can be avoided is by testing message content. According to Tzocheva, "For the public campaign, we tested everything...the TV organized the testing of the TV clips and messages with focus groups." <sup>xii</sup> Time and resources were then invested in working with media partners to ensure that these tested messages were the ones that were repeated over and over.

This feedback loop ensured that the public communications work was not undermining the work being done at policy and community level. This is indicative of a concerted effort that was made institutionally to ensure that the work of UNICEF's departments was aligned and synchronized, something that ultimately proved to be a key ingredient to its success.

## **VI. Taking Action**

UNICEF's de-institutionalization campaign in Bulgaria involved working inside the political system to develop alliances, make policy recommendations and lobby politicians – many of the more traditional institutional advocacy activities. However, it was the combination of these inside efforts with the willingness to take on a much more prominent public, or 'outside,' advocacy role that worked to great effect.

The centerpieces of this enhanced public advocacy role were two very different, but complementary television campaigns. These, alongside targeted placement of expert consultants and a high-level ministerial meeting were important elements for building support.

### 1. *A prime-time telethon: The Magnificent Six*

The campaign launched a prime-time telethon for television where six teams of Bulgarian celebrities competed in a live singing competition and the public voted to decide the winners over the course of twelve episodes. During the broadcasts, campaign videos showing the problems with the existing childcare system were shown; experts spoke about the benefits of the alternative models being proposed; and donations from the public were received by phone and text message. According to Radocaj, the public engagement effort was particularly groundbreaking in Bulgaria, “When you get one quarter of the population at these two major TV campaigns to respond by donating a small amount of money...you get their much stronger commitment and understanding of the cause.”

The combination of celebrity appeal, professional opinion, and storytelling succeeded in making the campaign issues visible to a mass public audience. By mobilizing in this way, the campaign engaged the general public to be part of building the solutions. According to Radocaj, “People were incredibly proud, wherever I went, people would come up to and say ‘I called, I called, I also tried to help, I’m happy about it.’ People were proud of this possibility to contribute.”

While this high level of direct citizen support heightened expectations and levels of accountability on UNICEF and partners, it also meant that political pressure intensified on the government. In this regard, the show also played a more direct lobbying function as well. Ministers and public officials were always invited to be present on the show and regularly attended. As Radocaj joked, “The only time I get to see Minister of Finance was on a show like this, even he appears there, because it really had a very high rate of viewers.” She added, “This format really helped to mobilize, to build commitment, political will and support of citizens.” The success of the first show paved the way for bTV to host a second show. In the process, the programs raised \$1.6 million to be used to develop community care centers to replace the residential institutions.

### 2. *A reality-documentary series*

The second television campaign was a lot less glitzy, but no less important. It was a series of educational documentary programs in which viewers got to follow the lives of real families as they tackled some of the campaign issues. The first one was a 12-episode series looking at foster care. A later show with the same format focused on parenting skills. The documentaries allowed a much more in-depth look at the issues. According to Tzocheva, “When there is a telethon, you have 4 videos of 5 minutes each, which is 20 minutes. Here, you have one hour for one story.”<sup>xiii</sup> This gave UNICEF the opportunity to tap into the

heightened citizen interest and engagement and build on that with this much more focused and detailed educational series. Video footage from the show was also used to make short videos for trainings and conferences with other audiences such as healthcare professionals.

### *3. International ministerial conference*

In terms of influencing high-level policy makers, another action taken, with strong support of UNICEF Regional Office in Geneva, was to organize an International Ministerial Conference hosted by the President of Bulgaria. The conference brought together nearly two dozen ministers and high level policy makers from Eastern Europe and Central Asia and it put the Bulgarian government in a position where they were telling other countries how well they were doing and really taking public ownership over the progress being made. According to Radocaj, “That was a really very important step in making them more convinced and proud of this change.” She adds, “For the specific audience of government people at the ministerial level, when they talk to their peers from other countries, this is what impresses them.” As well as consolidating political will and momentum, organizing the conference also allowed UNICEF to strengthen its relationships at the highest level of the government and reaffirm its profile as an international authority on child rights.

### *4. Filling capacity gaps In state institutions*

The initiative UNICEF took early on to support the joint recruitment of a consultant to support the Ministry of Health was identified as a critical strategy to help build relationships with other actors at different levels, including local authorities and the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP). This is a good example of UNICEF leveraging its institutional assets. In terms of access to information and know-how UNICEF is often in a much stronger position than policy makers and public officials. Providing this type of support to other institutions gave UNICEF access that it wouldn't otherwise have had to information and policy makers, and allowed it to consolidate its role as a trusted partner.

### *5. Development of demonstration models and showing results for children*

While it might be considered more of a programmatic than an advocacy activity, the roll-out of alternative demonstration projects in the Bulgaria campaign was, in fact, an incredibly important advocacy action. Showing examples of successful projects under the new model not only helped to challenge skepticism among professionals and local authorities as to its practical implementation, it was also an incredibly powerful advocacy tool for influencing public opinion and generating and maintaining political will. Showing that UNICEF could “walk the walk as well as talk the talk” further consolidated its reputation as a trusted partner with the necessary knowledge and expertise.

## **VII. Results and Key Lessons for UNICEF Advocacy**

UNICEF Bulgaria’s efforts to de-institutionalize the childcare system were successful on many levels. De-institutionalization became policy in 2010 with the publication of the

government's *Vision and Action Plan for De-institutionalization*. Since then, great strides have been made to implement that policy by closing state-run residential institutions and rolling out family-and community-based care alternatives.

The numbers speak strongly: in 2010 there were 24 old-style institutions for children with disabilities; the last of these was closed in February 2016. In 2010, there were 2,455 children aged 0-3 in institutionalized care and as of September 2015 there were just 578. And while in 2009 there were less than 200 children in foster care, as of September 2015 that number had increased to 2,312.

The Bulgaria campaign for de-institutionalization holds various nuggets of strategic wisdom that can be applied to other UNICEF efforts, globally. Four major lessons stand out.

1. *Align all institutional capacity on one issue over a sustained period.*

One of the things that really distinguishes the campaign in Bulgaria was its seamless combination of public opinion advocacy, policy advocacy, capacity building, demonstration projects, and fundraising. For this to work, it needed people working on communications, policy, lobbying, and program to be coordinating closely, and to the extent possible, synchronizing their efforts over an extended period.

Institutionally, this is no small task. It requires thoughtful coordination and an intense commitment of human and other resources to make it work. And yet, this is often where other campaigns fall short, thus unable to ultimately deliver on their objective.

Radocaj praised her predecessor, Octavian Bivol, and emphasized the importance of leadership in the complex coordination of such a multi-faceted advocacy campaign. Success with this type of complex effort, as with most advocacy, takes a lot of time. Sustainable change is not achieved in a year or two. This need for leadership and for internal institutional alignment over an extended period is particularly consequential for UNICEF where country representatives change frequently. According to Harizanova, "From now on, we will be focused on a few topics instead of changing them every year."<sup>xiv</sup>

2. *Use a combination of outside-inside strategies in order to realize UNICEF's full advocacy potential.*

UNICEF is recognized the world over as an authority on children's rights - the go-to reference for information, know-how and policy advice. Expertise is its established political currency. However, a danger embedded in that strength is not paying sufficient attention to the other elements of advocacy that combine with expertise to create genuine political clout.

When the political context shifted in Bulgaria, UNICEF had a relatively low profile and worked mostly behind the scenes in its advocacy efforts and capacity-building. A decision was then made to begin a multi-year campaign with public advocacy at its center that would propel UNICEF to a leading position in the public debate and completely transform its

institutional profile. The decision to jump into public advocacy in such a bold way was a courageous one. It would have been much easier at the time to maintain a low profile. The sustained public advocacy effort allowed UNICEF to apply political pressure via public sentiment, to fundraise enough money to implement new projects and to sustain a generally favorable political climate in support of its objectives.

Combining these outside public activities with the more traditional insider advocacy activities of research, capacity building and policy work paid great dividends in Bulgaria and is an example of how to tap into the institution's full potential.

3. *Capitalize on opportunity – use momentum and recognize potential for cumulative change.*

In advocacy, getting started and creating political momentum is what requires most energy. Sometimes, however, a lucky gust of changing political winds blows at one's back. When this happens, as it did in Bulgaria, the challenge then becomes how to harness those winds to maximum benefit. The scandal created by the BBC documentary on the Mogilino residential home, coming the same year that Bulgaria entered the EU, was a double burst of wind in the sails of the de-institutionalization campaign.

UNICEF capitalized on the new advocacy opportunity not with one major all-encompassing campaign, but with a series of smaller inter-related campaigns that allowed it to maintain political momentum and to cumulatively build toward the systemic change that was its ultimate goal.

The first campaign focusing on the closure of the Mogilino home and the rights of children with disabilities allowed UNICEF to build alliances and to begin to reposition itself in the public debate. The second campaign --to develop and promote foster care-- built on these alliances and further deepened the public debate on institutional childcare. All in all, UNICEF led a seven-year chain of interrelated campaigns (refer to timeline at end of document), each one building on the achievements of the last. According to Harizanova, "there was very clear connection between the campaigns and this allowed us to build momentum to the overall objective."<sup>xv</sup> This approach allowed UNICEF not only to maintain momentum over an extended period –thereby capitalizing on the initial impetus gifted through changing politics - but also to avoid institutional overreach and to achieve important, incremental changes in the childcare system.

4. *If possible, lock in your progress.*

A final advocacy lesson from the campaign in Bulgaria relates to the challenge of locking in progress once it has been made. One of the major difficulties to overcome when working in a tumultuous political context is that advocacy gains made with one government can be quickly swept aside when a new government takes office. One way to avoid this is to work with authorities and encourage them to make commitments to outside actors based on policy commitments that reflect the campaign's advocacy goals. In Bulgaria, once the Vision

for De-institutionalization and the Action Plan were used as the basis to access funds from the EU, this made it much more difficult for future governments to reverse policy commitments. Radocaj called this a “...safeguard so that the process didn’t slide back.”

## CONCLUSION

Advocacy will always be much more of an art than a science - a continuous dance between strategic planning and adapting to opportunities that arise along the way. This requires both a clear vision of what the campaign seeks to achieve and a strong understanding of where the attainable levers of power and influence lie. UNICEF’s profile gives it unique access to unlock the know-how, the resources and the critical points of authority and influence—something not always available to other civil society actors. The Bulgaria case shows us just how much can be achieved when one reaches for those levers at the opportune moment, backed by a sustained strategy, alongside diverse partners, and driven by courage, persistence and a good deal of creativity.

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**the democracycenter**

### TIMELINE of UNICEF Bulgaria’s Advocacy Campaign

*The campaign was sustained over seven years with gradual introduction of new topics, all pointing toward the overall goal of de-institutionalization.*

- 2007:** BBC documentary ‘Bulgaria’s Abandoned Children’
- 2008-2010:** Campaign “Changing lives of children with disabilities”
- 2009–2011:** “Every Child Needs a Family” campaign –promoting foster care
- 2010:** Campaign “The Invisible Children” showing the problems with existing system and supporting community-based care for children with disabilities
- 2010:** Government developed and adopted “A Vision for De-institutionalization” and “Plan of Action”
- 2010 -2013:** “A Family for Every Child” campaign to stop placing children 0-3 in residential care
- 2012:** International Ministerial Conference hosted by government of Bulgaria
- 2012-2014:** “Best Start for Every Child” campaign for prevention of family

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<sup>i</sup> This case study is one in a series of four case studies commissioned by UNICEF on effective advocacy strategies. A note on methodology: the case studies were based on a review of background documents provided by UNICEF offices as well as information gathered through in-depth interviews with UNICEF staff who worked closely on the advocacy campaign.

<sup>ii</sup> UNICEF Regional Office for CEE/CIS. TransMonEE 2015 Database (released June 2015)  
<http://www.transmonee.org/index.html> Accessed April 27 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "The Science of Neglect: The Persistent Absence of Responsive Care Disrupts the Developing Brain": <http://bit.ly/1rGyBWp> Accessed April 28 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> Milena Harizanova, Interview by the author, April 1, 2016.

<sup>v</sup> Tanja Radocaj, interview by the author, April 5 2016. All subsequent quotes in the text by Ms. Radocaj, unless otherwise noted, are drawn from the same interview cited here.

<sup>vi</sup> Milena Harizanova, Interview by the author, April 1, 2016.

<sup>vii</sup> Jacklin Tzocheva, interview by the author, April 6 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> Milena Harizanova, Interview by the author, April 1, 2016.

<sup>ix</sup> Jacklin Tzocheva, interview by the author, April 6 2016.

<sup>x</sup> Tanja Radocaj, interview by the author, April 5 2016.

<sup>xi</sup> Jacklin Tzocheva, interview by the author, April 6 2016.

<sup>xii</sup> Jacklin Tzocheva, interview by the author, April 6 2016.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jacklin Tzocheva, interview by the author, April 6 2016.

<sup>xiv</sup> Milena Harizanova, Interview by the author, April 1, 2016.

<sup>xv</sup> Milena Harizanova, Interview by the author, April 1, 2016.