CHOICE NATIONAL REPORT BULGARIA

April, 2020

Partners

KMOP - Greece

Colour Youth - Greece

Bilitis - Bulgaria

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ACCEPT - Romania

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1. Short introduction about the Project and current LGBT human rights situation (with the focus on LGBT young people) in the country

The CHOICE project challenges the homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. The project seeks to contribute to the promotion of inclusive schools and the prevention & combating of intolerance on the grounds of gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation and/or sex characteristics in Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania and Romania. The project activities will enhance the capacities of secondary school professionals to support diversity and the creation of inclusive school environments; facilitate the reporting of incidents of violence & intolerance on the grounds of SOGI, and enable victims and bystanders (and possibly perpetrators) to access support services; and raise awareness of school community and wider public about SOGI related discrimination/bullying/violence in the school environment.

1.1 Methodology

Primary and secondary research was conducted including a) a desk research, b) an online survey and c) 6 focus groups with educational professionals as well as students and parents.

1.2 Desk research

The desk research included review of existing researches and the collection of secondary data. The goal of this task was developing guidelines, common tools and templates in order to conduct a concise research that will lay down the foundations of the project methodology and serve as the basis for the development of the capacity building material and mechanism for addressing incidents of GBV and discrimination or intolerance in the school environment.

1.3 Online survey.

The online survey was part of the field research with school related stakeholders and was filled in by 106 adults (teachers, school principals, and parents), and 48 young people (students aged 14 to 19).

1.4 Focus groups.

The 6 focus groups were part of the field research with school related stakeholders: students, teachers/school staff and parents. They were conducted in the two main cities of Bulgaria: Sofia and Plovdiv. They presented a snapshot of the situation with prevention/addressing of school bullying, and diversity management at the Bulgarian schools.

2. Key findings of the desk research

2.1 Statistics and Social / Demographic data on hate crimes, hate speech, discrimination and bullying incidents against LGBT students in their countries.

Bulgaria is among the countries where homophobia, transphobia and social unacceptance of LGBTI people remains widespread as evidenced by numerous research, both national and international (e.g. State Department's Human Rights Report 2016, ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map, and Special Eurobarometer on Discrimination 2019 among others).

In the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Map (2019), which compares the national legal and policy human rights situation of LGBTI people across Europe, Bulgaria scored 20% and is ranked 26 out of 28 EU Member States. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that according to the same indexing, Bulgaria scored 24% in 2018, 23% in 2017, 24% in 2016, 27% in 2015 and 30% in 2014, which clearly shows a tendency of regress over the past 5 years.

The LGBT Survey 2013, FRA, shows that Bulgaria comes across the three countries in the EU with "very widespread" offensive language about LGBT people by politicians. According to a report from the Open Society Institute - Sofia, in 2018 the incidence of hate speech against homosexual people has doubled compared to 2016[1]. In 2018, homosexual people are the second most affected by hate speech minority group after Roma, and this result coincides with the intensive debate over the failed ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Opinions, embracing the dangerous and harmful notion that discrimination against LGBT people is a legitimate demand of tradition, nature and religion, mushroomed in the mass media. Further to that, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court that voted on July 27, 2018, to declare that the Istanbul Convention is unconstitutional argued in its decision that the term "gender", used in the Convention, is misleading and introduces a concept that is incompatible with the constitution's understanding of "sex". The court reaffirms the view that "sex" is a binary concept, with two rigidly fixed options: male or female. This decision had an immediate negative impact on

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[1] Open Society Institute. (2018). *Public attitudes to hate speech in Bulgaria in 2018.* Sofia. Available at: https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en

the legal practice for gender recognition of trans people, and also, reinforced prejudice which stopped progress in public awareness raising on sexual and gender diversity.

Against this backdrop of legal vulnerability, the education sphere and more specifically schools were the most affected by the rejection of the contemporary understanding of sexual and gender identities. In 2018, one university dropped a course which included the word "gender" in its title, and the mass media created a scandal around brochures on the prevention of STIs, distributed in some high schools, which included content on men having sex with men. The Minister of Education made a public statement in 2019 that he will do everything possible to extract gender-related content from the public education curricula. Schools began rejecting collaboration with NGOs on projects related to sexual education, sexual health, or the prevention of sexual abuse, because of the fear that the latter may spread "gender ideology". Opposition to the progressive understanding of gender and sexual diversity became so strong and widespread that "gender" became an insulting term used for any person, who deviates from the public norms of decency.

According to Eurobarometer data, published in October 2019[2], 71% of the Bulgarian respondents totally disagree with the statement "There is nothing wrong in a sexual relationship between two persons of the same sex." When asked "How comfortable you would feel if one of your children was in a romantic relationship with a person of the same sex?" 80% respond "uncomfortable". When it comes to the question whether school lessons and material should include information about diversity in terms of sexual orientation, being transgender or intersex the country with the lowest percentage again is Bulgaria. This widespread unacceptance of the sexual and gender diversity, and the same-sex relationships, has its clear implications for making schools unsafe and unwelcoming for LGBTI youth.

Bulgaria is one of the countries in the EU, which does not create official statistics on anti-LGBTI hate crimes or hate speech, because the latter are not explicitly mentioned in the Penal Code as types of hate crimes. When asked for official data on anti-LGBTI hate crimes the National Police and the Prosecution report zero cases. Data on anti-LGBTI hate crimes is collected only by the LGBTI organizations and it consists of individual reports

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[2] Special Eurobarometer – Discrimination in the EU 2019. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2251

from victims collected by means of quantitative or qualitative research. In 2015, GLAS Foundation created an online reporting service, tolerantni.com (initially named wearetolerant.com) for anti-LGBT hate crimes, accessible to people from all over the country. Tolerantni.com was the platform used for the 2017 GLAS Foundation victimisation survey (47 reports within 6 months) which showed that most anti-LGBTI incidents in Bulgaria are taking place at school, followed by incidents in the street and at home. A smaller number of incidents also take place at a bar[3].

In 2019, a new Hate Crimes Recording Coalition[4] was launched. It consists of various human rights organizations, working on protecting the vulnerable groups in society, which are often targeted by hate crimes. The platform was founded and is managed by the LGBTI organizations Bilitis, GLAS and "Deystvie", the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria "Shalom", Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Bulgaria, Roma Lawyers, Center for legal aid "Voice in Bulgaria, "Integro" Association, Equal Opportunities Initiative Association and Foundation for Access to Rights – FAR. By collecting data on cases of hate speech, hate crimes and discrimination, the coalition aims at showing a clearer picture of the level of hate incidents against different groups ins Bulgaria, which often remain invisible. The Coalition also aims at raising awareness of the public and the institutions on the issue of hate crimes and at partnering with the institutions in order to promote effective measures for combating hate crimes. First data analysis will be conducted at the end of 2020.

Although there are no official statistics on cases of bullying which result from homophobia or transphobia, research from the national LGBTI organizations conducted in the last 5 years clearly demonstrates that LGBTI students feel unsafe, receive less support that non-LGBTI youth, and are common subjects to verbal and physical harassment at school. The most recent data comes from the National School Climate Survey for LGBTI Students, conducted by Bilitis and Single Step in 2018. Data from this report clearly shows that LGBTI students do not feel safe at school, which has implications on their academic record and absenteeism, and an overall negative affect on their wellbeing. The main conclusions from this report are presented in the next section.

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[3] GLAS Foundation. (2017). *Report on Anti-LGBTI Hate Crimes and Incidents in Bulgaria*. Sofia. Available at: https://glasfoundation.bg/en/report-on-anti-lgbti-hate-crimes-and-incidents-in-bulgaria-in-2017/?fbclid=IwAR36xVQEbaEc0jWQ7GSF1IHJCXShoVHp4j5VuQN4tn7fyJoi8OuHWh61bPI
[4] The platform can be accessed here: http://hatecrime.deystvie.org/#/

2.2 The situation of LGBT young people

According to the FRA LGBT survey from 2013, only 4% of the Bulgarian respondents have been open about being LGBT while at school before the age of 18 years, and 45% have often heard negative comments about someone who is perceived to be LGBTI. The same survey reveals that LGBT respondents are subject to high levels of repeated victimization and violence, which is particularly high for transgender respondents.

Another research report[5], exploring the situation of LGBT people in Sofia indicates that seen from their personal experience as LGBT students, participants perceived the school environment as fear-inducing, diversity disrespectful and challenging. Almost all of the LGBT participants experienced bullying in schools, especially if they are transgender as one transman reveals, "…children, they are monsters, they want to bully you…". In terms of content taught in the educational institutions, community members emphasized the lack of LGBT-related content in the educational programs, especially the non-existent or outdated information on trans matters in textbooks. As one transman participant assured, "…especially in schools, that's just something you don't talk about, hm…we talked about LGBT people, but just the L and the G, parts of the word…but B wasn't discussed and T was like a far concept…".

The most recent national research on the situation of LGBTI young people in educational settings is the school climate survey, conducted in 2018 by Single Step Foundation and Bilitis Resource Center[6]. This online survey generated 880 valid answers of students from 13 to 19 years old from all country regions. The general results show that for LGBTI youth, school can be an unsafe place for the following reasons: high level of verbal harassment (over 70% have experienced it personally), low level of intervention by staff / school personnel when witnessing verbal harassment, low level of reporting of incidents, because the students did not believe that effective action will be taken.

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[5] Viktorija Bondikjova, Carmen Rivas, (2019). *"I just want basic things! – We are not there yet" Understanding the needs, services and challenges of LGBT community members and NGOs in Sofia,* Research Report, Sofia. Available at: https://www.speakactchange.org/resource/i-just-want-basic-things-we-are-not-there-yet-understanding-the-needs-services-and-challenges-of-lgbt-community-members-and-ngos-in-sofia-bulgaria-research-report/

[6] Gabrovska, N., Dragoeva, L., Naidenov, P. (2020). *Attitudes Towards LGBTI Students in Bulgarian High-Schools*, Sofia – Single Step Foundation. Available at: https://bilitis.org/en/portfolio/attitudes-towards-lgbti-students-in-bulgarian-high-schools/

LGBTI students most commonly felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, their appearance and their gender expression:

- 48.3% reported feeling unsafe at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation;

- 31.2% felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender;

- 22.5% reported feeling unsafe because of their body size or weight.

The vast majority (82.9%) of LGBTI students reported hearing other students make these derogatory remarks often or frequently in school. In addition, the majority (71%) also reported often or frequently hearing the word "gay" in a negative manner to offend someone for the way they look or act. In addition, more than half (57.4%) of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff. When teachers and school staff were present, they most often did not intervene when homophobic remarks were made. Less than one-quarter (18.4%) reported that these school personnel intervened most of the time or always, and two-thirds (46.6%) reported that staff never intervened.

Findings from the same survey demonstrate that negative remarks about someone's gender expression were pervasive in schools. The majority of LGBTI students reported hearing either type of remark about someone's gender expression often or frequently at school (64.1% about not being "masculine" and 36.2% about not being "feminine"). More than half (59.7%) of LGBTI students reported that they had heard these types of remarks from teachers and other school staff. Similar to negative comments about gender expression, people may make negative comments about transgender people because they can pose a challenge to "traditional" ideas about gender. Nearly half (47.7%) of LGBTI students in our survey reported hearing these comments frequently or often.

The vast majority (70.6%) reported being verbally harassed at some point in the past year based on any of these personal characteristics. LGBTI students most commonly reported experiencing verbal harassment at school because of their sexual orientation or how they expressed their gender:

• More than half of LGBTI students (60.2%) had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation; nearly one-fifth (19.3%) experienced this harassment often or frequently; and

• Half of LGBTI students (51%) were also verbally harassed at school because of their gender expression; more than a tenth (14.9%) reported being harassed for this reason often or frequently.

• Although not as common, many LGBTI students were harassed in school because of their gender: 36.3% had been verbally harassed in the past year for this reason.

With regard to physical harassment, a third (34.2%) of LGBTI students had been physically harassed (e.g., shoved or pushed) at some point at school during the past year based on any personal characteristic. Their experiences of physical harassment followed a pattern similar to verbal harassment — students most commonly reported being physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression:

• 26.4% of LGBTI students had been physically harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and 6.5% reported that this harassment occurred often or frequently;

• 23.1% had been physically harassed at school because of their gender expression, with 6.8% experiencing this often or frequently;

• 16.1% respondents had been physically harassed because of their gender, with 17.8% experiencing this often or frequently.

LGBTI students were less likely to report experiencing physical assault (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) at school than verbal or physical harassment, nonetheless, 19.1% of students in our survey were assaulted at school during the past year because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender:

• 15.2% of LGBTI students were assaulted at school because of their sexual orientation;

• 14% were assaulted at school because of how they expressed their gender; and

• 10.1% were assaulted at school because of their gender.

Reporting of Incidents

Less than half of these students reported incidents to staff (46%), and less than one tenth indicated that they regularly reported incidents of harassment or assault (16.8%) to school staff ("Always" or "In most cases").

Less than half of the students (45%) said that they had told a family member.

LGBTI students, who feel left out at school and unable to share with anyone from the staff, often don't share at home, too. Which leaves them without any safety net whatsoever, vulnerable to heavy psychological conditions and risky behaviors.

Other forms of harassment: over 34% of LGBTI students reported having experienced cyberbullying in the last year, and 47.6% reported sexual harassment (one in ten, have experienced it regularly).

An important conclusion of the national school climate survey is the overall lack of trust towards the school personnel. The students either don't think anyone would do something or that even so, it would be ineffective. A total of 54.9% don't find the school staff effective in its response to reporting (36.2% "not at all effective" and 38.7% "somewhat ineffective").

School Anti-Bullying Policies

The majority of LGBTI students (68.2%) did not have any policy in their school or did not know about one, and only 3.3% said that their school had a policy that mentioned sexual orientation or gender expression.

On the positive side, the majority of students (77.5%) could identify at least one school staff member whom they believed was supportive of LGBTI students at their school.

School-based resources, such as supportive school personnel, better trained psychologists and counselors and policies for reporting bullying, harassment and assault, have helped in particular cases to create a more positive school environment for LGBTI students.

2.3 National legal framework on hate crime, hate speech, discrimination and bullying.

While Bulgaria recognizes some hate crimes in the law, the list of motivations constituting aggravating circumstances does not include sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. If reported, hate crimes targeting LGBT people are treated as hooliganism. LGBT victims' rights are not assured: the transposition of the Victims' Directive has been insensitive to the support and protection needs of this group.[7]

The Penal Code (Penal Code of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1968, amended 2017) sanctions hate crimes in Chapter III: Crimes against the Rights of the Citizens. In the absence of a definition of "hate crime", the term which is used is "crimes against the rights of the citizens". There is no general penalty enhancement for hate crimes. The law criminalizes some deeds motivated by hatred, or instigating hatred towards people, based on race, nationality, ethnicity, religious or political belief. Article 162 imposes legal sanctions on the incitement and proselytizing of discrimination, violence and hatred based on race, nationality or ethnicity, by means of speech, print or other mass media. Paragraph 2 of Article 162 penalises any deeds of violence or damage to the property of someone, based on the race, nationality, ethnicity, religion or political belief. Article 163 criminalizes participation in crowds that attack other groups of the population, based on their race, nationality or ethnicity, while articles 164 to 166 criminalize actions against religious freedoms and actions which incite hatred on the basis of religion.

The Penal Code does not contain any substantial provisions describing an act as a hate crime and / or hate speech based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sexual characteristics. There are also no provisions characterizing this bias as an aggravating circumstance. Some level of protection against insults based on sexual orientation may be obtained from administrative or civil law under the Law on Protection against Discrimination (Protection against Discrimination Act [Bulgaria], in force since January 2004), but the latter does not provide protection on the basis of gender identity and / or "gender expression".

Hate speech

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[7] Filipova, G. Pisankaneva, M. (2018). Invisible Crimes – Anti-LGBT Hate Crimes in Bulgaria. In *P. Godzisz, ed., Running through hurdles*. 1st ed., pp.69-89. Available at: http://www.lgbthatecrime.eu/resources/cf-research-book

Hate speech specifically appears in the legislative texts of the Penal Code, where it is described as a crime, and in the media's regulatory documents, e.g. the Code of ethics of Bulgarian journalists. According to the Penal Code, hate speech is a form of hate crime, as such speech can incite more severe hate crimes and violence. Therefore, reporting cases of hate speech to the relevant authorities (Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor's Office) is critical for holding perpetrators of such crimes accountable, which is the most important element to countering hate speech both online and offline. Article 162 (1) of the Penal Code criminalizes "the advocating of or incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence based on race or national or ethnic origin through speech, print or other mass media, electronic information systems or other means. The punishment is imprisonment from one to four years and a fine of 5,000 to 10,000 leva. Article 162 (2) criminalizes the "use of violence against another person or damage to his/her property on account of his/her race, national or ethnic origin, religion or political opinion"; those guilty of the crime face imprisonment from one to four years, and a fine from five to ten thousand leva.[8]

2.4 National Central policies (if any) in partner's country on preventing / combatting anti-LGBT hate crime, hate speech, discrimination and bullying.

Part II from the Law on Protection against Discrimination (01/2004)[9] is especially dedicated to the prevention of discrimination in the sphere of education:

Article. 29, (2): The principal of the educational institution undertakes effective measures to prevent all forms of discrimination in the school environment on behalf of the pedagogical or non-pedagogical staff, and the students.

Article 30: The principal of the educational institution puts the text of the law, as well as all policies from the internal rules, which refer to the protection against discrimination in an accessible place.

Article 31: The principal of the educational institution who has received a complaint from a student that feels bullied by a person from the pedagogical or non-pedagogical staff or

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[8] *Denitza Lozanova, Sevdalina Voynova, Snezhina Gabova, Svetlana Lomeva, (2017). Mapping out the National Context of Online Hate Speech in Bulgaria, Sofia. Available at: https://www.positivemessengers.net/images/library/pdfs/OHS-report_Bulgaria-eng_form.pdf*
[9] *Law on Protection against Discrimination, https://www.legislationline.org/topics/country/39/topic/84*

from another student is responsible for conducting immediate investigation, for taking measures to stop the bullying, and for disciplinary sanctioning.

In 2015, Bilitis researched how the above articles of the Law for Protection against Discrimination (01/2004) have been transposed in the Internal Regulation Documents of the secondary schools of Sofia[10]. In the first place, our research aimed at finding references to the Law in the schools' internal policies, and mentions of all characteristics featured in the law: (article 4, paragraph 1): "gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, human genome, citizenship, origin, religion or faith, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal and public status, disability, age, sexual orientation, family status, marital status, and all other grounds stated in a law of international treaty, which has been signed by the Republic of Bulgaria." According to a change in the Law (State Newspaper from April 7, 2015), the category "gender" also refers to cases of change of gender.

Such references were identified only in very few school internal policies. Only 2 out of 72 published online secondary schools internal regulation documents (of schools that are based in Sofia, Bulgaria) explicitly mentioned sexual orientation as a protected ground. One of those schools is "Angel Kanchev" 137th Secondary School:

"The pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff is obliged to follow all policies stated in Part 2 of the Law for Protection against Discrimination (Protection in Exercising the Right to Education and Learning), and this obligation has been included in their job descriptions."

A very important policy document for schools, which regulates the provision of support in cases of bullying, is the **Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School** and its annexes. An Order by the Minister of Education (RD09-611/18.05.2012) obliges every school to adopt such a mechanism and to design a plan for its implementation. The mechanism for combating bullying at school was designed by a cross-sector working group, which was created by the Ministry of Education in 2012. This group involved experts from: the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Agency for Child Protection, the Agency for Social Assistance, the Ministry of Interior, the Central Commission for Combating Anti-Social Behavior by Youth, and non-governmental organizations, such as the National Network for Children, Foundation "Steps for the

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[10] Bilitis Resource Center. (2015). *Schools for All? The Status of LGBTI Students and Teachers in Bulgarian Schools.* Available at: https://bilitis.org/about/publications/

Invisible Children in Bulgaria," Foundation "Association Animus," the Union of Psychologists in Bulgaria, and UNICEF. The mechanism includes a definition of bullying as "conscious negative deeds, which are long-term, directed towards one and the same student and conducted by another student or a group." The types of bullying are explained in detail, including physical, verbal, psychological, and social (isolation, ignoring, etc.). Furthermore, the document enumerates signs for recognizing physical and psychological bullying. It also addresses virtual (cyber) bullying, and describes the roles of all stakeholders in situations of bullying.

The Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School requires every school to develop and adopt preventive measures against bullying and counteraction measures to address existing cases of bullying in an effective way. It is stressed that counteraction against bullying requires a holistic approach, persistent and coordinated efforts for prevention of bullying, as well as the creation of safer school environment. Creation of a Coordinating Council for Counteraction against Bullying at every school is also recommended. Possible types of action in the classroom are described. The mechanism calls for the creation of space in which students can openly discuss bullying and form attitudes of empathy, tolerance, and respect for differences, as well as conflict resolution skills that prevent bullying. The mechanism also lists possible activities at the school level, for example: the creation of a safety network, and the definition of responsibilities of each staff member in relation to possible bullying interventions. The links between the school and other institutions responsible for prevention and dealing with violence and bullying are also described. Last, but not least, the mechanism recommends involving parents in the integrated system for counteraction against bullying at school.

The review of the Unified Mechanism for Counteraction against Bullying at School showed one important omission: there is no mention of the vulnerable groups that are common victims of bullying based on grounds of difference, similar to the ones included in the Anti-Discrimination Law. The lack of such content contributes to the low levels of awareness of bullying against minority groups (i.e. identity-based bullying). LGBTI students are part of these groups and among the most invisible. The result is that some forms of bullying against LGBTI are completely "normalized" and neglected at school.

The school plans for counteraction of bullying at school (based on the mechanism) also lack the enumeration of the grounds which have been protected by the Law on Protection against Discrimination (01/2004). These grounds should be in focus when adequate measures for the prevention of and dealing with bullying are being formed.

Grounds on which Discrimination is Prohibited in School Internal Policies

The most commonly mentioned grounds in school internal policies on which discrimination is prohibited are the following: race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, nationality, language, ability, social status.

The exclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as protected grounds in most schools' internal policies speaks to the lack of awareness of expressions of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, which according to the FRA LGBT Survey (2013) are very widespread in educational institutions. The mentioning of "gender" in the policies does not protect gender expression, transgender, or intersex identities.

The first step towards the development of an inclusive school environment for LGBTI students and staff is recognizing the scope of the problem. The document-based research conducted by Bilitis demonstrates that the discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity are not recognized in school internal policies and codes of conduct. The schools' policies should define the responsibility of the coordinating bodies for prevention of and dealing with bullying at school in providing support to LGBTI students and other vulnerable groups.

Last, but not least, the school internal policies do not provide any alternative method of reporting discrimination, violence, and bullying besides face-to-face reporting. The best practices in many EU countries include the provision of an alternative, anonymous way to report violence and bullying at school. This may include the placement of a special post-box for complaints, or the creation of a special email account to be checked by a specific person who is trusted by the students.

2.5 Good practices (if any) from other projects implemented in the country and / or organizations in preventing / combatting SOGI-based violence in the school environment.

Good practices for providing science-based information and forming positive attitudes towards homosexual, bisexual, transgender and intersex identities in school are of private nature. They usually come from an external source and not from the educational system, for example: a project, implemented by a non-governmental organization with international funding. Their effect is short and depends on the duration of the external project. In 2011-

2012, Bilitis for the first time introduced an interactive educational methodology on SOGI in two metropolitan schools as part of the EU-funded project "It Takes All Kinds". It was about discussions and forming of positive attitudes towards minorities, discriminated on the grounds of sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and other characteristics[11].

The only school currently known to have a GSAClub (Gender and Sexuality Alliance Club) is the American College of Sofia (private high school). Some of the good practices which existed in previous years, such as for example the organizing of "living libraries" at schools in which LGBTI activists were openly talking about their personal life stories in front of students were banned in the last year because of the hysteria created by the proponents of the anti-gender ideology.

While talking about LGBTI identities at school has become a very sensitive topic, which raises controversy, the public schools still widely recognize the need to talk openly about bullying, and to address this phenomenon in a holistic way. A mainstream good practice for increasing the sensitivity to the widespread forms of bullying in schools is conducting of

"Week of handling different forms of harassment in schools"[12]. This initiative became popular ин 2012 when the national anti-bullying mechanism was adopted. It can be used to introduce activities that focus on increasing the acceptance of diversity as a way of preventing bullying at school.

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[11] Bilitis Resource Center. (2015). *Schools for All? The Status of LGBTI Students and Teachers in Bulgarian Schools.* Available at: https://bilitis.org/about/publications/
[12] http://uchilishtnonasilie.blog.bg/drugi/2012/11/18/sedmica-na-spraviane-s-tormoza-v-uchilishte-19-23-11-2012.1021452

2.6 Contact information (and short description of services providers) of LGBT and other Human Rights – organizations / bodies / institutions in the country providing support for LGBT young people.

LGBTI Organizations			
Organization	Service	Contact	Website
LGBT Youth Organization Deystvie	Legal advice, Litigation	*E-mail* info@deystvie.org *Facebook @lgbtdeystvie* *Mobile phone 00359 884 851*	https://deystvie.org/
GLAS Foundation, Bulgaria	Online reporting of anti-LGBT crime	E-mail simeon@glasfoundation.bg Facebook @glasfoundation *Mobile phone 00359 882 886 410*	http://glasfoundation.bg/

Bilitis Resource Center Foundation	Psycho-social support, accompaniment, specialized assistance for trans and intersex people	E-mail bilitis@bilitis.org Facebook @bilitisfoundation *Mobile phone* 00359 888 243 666	http://bilitis.org
Single Step Foundation	Psychological and legal assistance	E-mail nikoleta@singlestep.bg Facebook @singlestepbg Helpline 0800 900 18	https://singlestep.bg/

Human Rights Organizations			
Bulgarian Lawyers for Human Rights Foundation	Legal advice, Litigation	Open hours for counseling: Tuesday 10:00 – 12:00 EET Thirsday 14:00 – 16:00 EET Phone: 02/ 980 39 67 Mobile phone: 0885 787 209	http://blhr.org/
Bulgarian Helsinki Committee	Legal advice, Litigation	E-mail bhc@bghelsinki.org Facebook @BulgarianHelsinkiCommittee Phone 02 943 4876, 02 944 0670, 02 943 4405	http://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/

Organizations providing support to victims of gender-based violence			
Animus Association Foundation - Sofia	Psychological support; crisis center for women and children, victims of violence; hotline for victims of violence; legal counseling	E-mail animus@animusassociation.org Facebook @AnimusAssociation Phone 02 983 5205; +359 2 9835205; 9835305; 9835405	http://animusassociation.org/
Demetra Association - Burgas	Support for victims of violence; psychological and social counseling; support for victims of sexual abuse	E-mail office@demetra.bg Phone 056/82 52 05	http://demetra-bg.org/
Pulse Foundation- Pernik	Psychological and legal counseling for victims of violence; crisis center	E-mail pulse.women@gmail.com Phone +359 (76) 60 10 10 Hotline (+35976) 60 10 10	http://pulsfoundation.org/

		(+35976) 60 33 60	
IMAGO Association, Sofia	Psychological and legal advice	E-mail beznasilie@gmail.com Facebook @AssociationImago Phone 0884 944 411	http://nasilie.eu/
Gender Alternatives Foundation, Plovdiv	Legal and psycho-social support	E-mail office@genderalternatives.org Facebook @Gender.Alternatives.Foundation Phone 032 / 26 07 08 0879 26 01 01	http://genderalternatives.org/bg/

Samaritans Association, Stara Zagora	Psychological and legal support; sheltered housing	E-mail sapi@sapibg.org Facebook @samaritans.bg Phone 042/621 083 Hotline for women and children, victims of violence 042641111	https://www.samaritans.bg/
SOS-Families at risk Foundation, Varna	Psychological and legal support; sheltered housing	E-mail sos@mail.bg; sos@ssi.bg Phone 052 609 677	http://sos-varna.org/

3. Focus groups

3.1 Short presentation of field research (focus groups), target groups.

The field research included 6 focus groups: 2 with teachers and school professionals (33 participants in total), 2 with parents (18 participants in total), and students (18 participants in total) from the two largest cities in Bulgaria (Sofia and Plovdiv). The focus groups with school professionals and parents were organized and facilitated by Georgi Shoshev, Vice-President of the Education Trade Union at Podkrepa Labor Confederation, specifically hired for this task by Bilitis. His involvement helped to reach out to teachers, school administrators and parents of students from different schools in Sofia and Plovdiv, and to ensure diversity in the focus groups. The focus groups for students were organized and facilitated by Boryana Atanasova from Bilitis. One of the focus groups was specifically formed by students who self-identified as LGBTI. The other focus group was formed by students who did not self-identify as LGBTI. Each focus group lasted for about 2 hours and had the same structure and set of questions.

3.2 Basic Knowledge (of terminology and legal framework).

3.2.1 Basic knowledge of terminology and legal framework by teachers.

Overall, teachers did not know the terminology around bullying, hate crimes, hate speech and discrimination well.

The teachers' focus group in Sofia began by defining the term "bullying at school" by the participants and then pondered the question of what might be the reason for it. Many of the participants actively gave examples of school harassment without giving a precise definition. One teacher (male, 50) gave an example of bullying at school, stating that he witnessed "aggression and violence against a boy". The opinion that was prevalent among the teachers in this focus group was that bullying at school is due to family upbringing and the family environment, as well as family models. What made a strong impression was one teacher's statement (female, 57): "Harassment is a too strong word. Isolated cases are not a mass phenomenon". This statement demonstrated neglecting and downplaying of school violence cases, where teachers become direct or indirect witnesses.

Similarly to the teachers from Sofia, these from Plovdiv did not give an exact definition of bullying in schools. Some of them explained that bullying is a result of the lack of home education and that many parents did not know how to raise their children and gave them bad examples. Others shared that bullying is a result of non-tolerance. One teacher said that some parents did not have any financial difficulties and spoiled their children. Many of the teachers thought that bullying in schools is the result of problems at home.

It is noteworthy to mention that there was a widespread perception that the Bulgarian school cannot be designated as a place of harassment because it also happens in every other institution. In regards to the concepts of "hate crime", "hate speech" and "discrimination", most participants claimed to have heard of them, but at the same time had difficulties defining each of them accurately. Teachers in general shared the opinion that the prevention of violence at school should target the entire school community - teachers, psychologists and educators, principals, students, and other staff members.

3.2.2 Basic knowledge of terminology and legal framework by parents.

Overall, parents were able to provide examples of bullying and school harassment, but did not know the terminology around bullying, hate crimes, hate speech and discrimination well.

The participants in the focus group for parents in Sofia actively gave examples of school harassment without giving a precise definition. One parent gave an example of bullying at school, stating that he heard of a lot of cases where children and students were bullied, but nothing actually happened. The opinion that was prevalent among parents was that bullying at school was due to the family environment, as well as the environment at school. In regards to the concepts of "hate crime", "hate speech" and "discrimination", most parents claimed to have heard of them, but at the same time had difficulties defining each of them accurately. The parents in general had the same opinion as teachers: the prevention of violence at school should target the entire school community - teachers, psychologists and educators, principals, students and other staff members.

The participants in the parents' focus group from Plovdiv agreed that growing up in an aggressive environment and watching many movies with intense aggressive content creates a high level of acceptance of such behavior among young people. They added that some parents did not care that their children had access to adult content and that they did not talk to their children. One parent (male, 40), stated that "one child is bullied when he

wants to attract someone's attention," that lack of attention and care is the reason for the aggressive students. Most parents said they have heard of cases of bullying in which there was lack of intervention by the school staff, "If I don't go and address the issue, will anyone do something?". Everyone agreed that there was violence at school and that all students were involved in the process at some point - some as abusers and others as victims.

Most parents from Plovdiv were unaware of national policies for dealing with bullying at school and said that "If there are any, they most probably do not work." Those participants who were members of school parent/teacher boards were aware of the common national policy for prevention and addressing of bullying at school. They knew that this policy required the school to address every case by involving all stakeholders, parents, teachers and external service providers (when necessary), and to work both with the victims and the perpetrators. When asked how effective this policy was, the majority of the participants said that the schools are making efforts to address such cases to the extent possible.

3.2.3 Basic knowledge of terminology and legal framework by students.

Overall, the students who took part in the focus groups showed very good understanding of the definitions and were able to provide concrete examples of different kinds of bullying and harassment. In comparison to the teachers and the parents, the students were much better equipped with relevant terminology.

Almost all of the participating non-LGBTI students were able to provide a definition of bullying at school and then to explain the reasons for it giving examples. One student (female, 17) said: "In my opinion, being bullied at school is when one individual 'beats up' psychologically and physically another individual." Another student, (male, 16), shared the following: "Harassment is when someone abuses you and thus lowers your self-esteem." Some of the students managed to identify bullying and violence by dividing it into mental and physical, adding that it is a violation of someone's rights and invasion of privacy. A third participant, (female, 19) said that bullying is due to two things - on the one hand, upbringing, on the other, understanding, and how much a person understands a thing, and that sometimes people do not want to be put in someone else's shoes. Some said that bullying is due to the low self-esteem that some students have, or the environment in which a student grows up. When asked how serious and how frequent the cases of bullying at school were, all students without hesitation said that they are very serious and are encountered daily in Bulgarian schools. One participant, (female, 17), shared the following: "instead of you collapsing, you crash someone else's psyche."

The LGBTI students gave plenty of definitions for bullying at school through real examples from their own experiences. Student (male 18 years old): "In my opinion, bullying at school is any kind of action, which somehow harms a person's dignity, and most often it happens because that person does not fit into the general picture. We are not just talking about sexual orientation, but also about behavior, etc." Student (male, 17 years old): "Another reason for harassment is if a person has similar problems as yours and let it out on you. This has happened to me. One girl harassed me years ago, because I was attracted to people of the same gender. Now we are friends and she actually has a girlfriend". Harassment at school is a common phenomenon among students; it is often due to different reasons and results in different actions. Sometimes students have difficulties understanding who they are and accepting themselves and this tension is often expressed outwardly and towards others like them.

The participants in this focus group were clearly aware of what bullying means because they themselves had often been bullied. They could easily provide both a definition and examples of bullying at school, which in itself showed that LGBTI students are one of the most vulnerable groups in school.

Most of the participating students were not well acquainted with the national plans for action to combat bullying at school, but some of them shared about initiatives they had participated in as the Pink T-shirt Day - an event dedicated to combating bullying at school. One boy, in particular, shared a case of this event in which a teacher confronts students about wearing pink t-shirts and asks them directly "So what? Now you're fags as well?" That was an example of verbal harassment and discrimination during an event dedicated to addressing these issues.

3.3 State of LGBT students in educational settings.

3.3.1 State of LGBT students in educational settings according to the teachers.

On the subject of the situation of minority students in educational settings, all of the involved teachers and school principals strongly believed that schools were safe enough for children and young people from different minority groups and that there was equal treatment for minorities at school. The prevailing opinion was that some minorities (referring to Roma people) enjoy even greater privileges than the majority, at not only

school, but also everywhere. One teacher (female, 44) shared that "at school, they pay great attention to the Roma people because Roma people know their rights."

Although everyone agreed unanimously that people from different minority groups receive equal treatment at school, the ways in which the participants expressed this opinion indicated that they themselves experienced difficulties and discomfort in regards to people from other minorities. Some of the participants made statements, which showed that they were not adequately prepared to discuss minority issues in a non-biased way. One teacher (female, 50) shared the following, "there is much warmer attitude towards Arab people and Syrian people than towards Bulgarians." Another teacher (female, 44) said: "there is a need that people from minorities find their way to be more integrated." At the same time, the teachers shared their observation that students were not afraid of other minority students, and children and young people were tolerant of those who are different. The participants also believed that the government / school authorities were doing enough to protect the students who are most often victims of bullying at school, but there is not enough protection for the teachers. A female teacher (60 years old) stated the following: "the country protects the child and the parent first, and we as teachers sometimes are neglected," which showed her fear that teachers could be victims of bullying as well.

Regarding topics related to minority students at school, Plovdiv teachers shared the same opinion as those from Sofia, claiming that minority students are even tolerated in comparison to Bulgarians and that everything is being done for them. One teacher (male, 50), shared the following: "they even receive scholarships at maximum value, they are being treated like gods." The popular opinion was also shared here that the minority in Bulgaria are the Bulgarians themselves. As a result of these comments, it can be argued that many participants were not aware of what a minority in a country really is and why a group of people or a community is characterized as a minority. Also, most of them didn't understand the difficulties faced by people from different minority groups in Bulgaria. However, everyone believed that Bulgaria is a "model for tolerance".

When asked if any of the participants had heard of the so-called "invisible minorities", including people with different sexual orientation, none of them had heard of such a concept. Almost every participant believed that there is no restriction on the free expression of minority characteristics at school, even on the contrary – some people even "show off", such as the ones with different sexual orientation. Many of them thought that of course, it is not appropriate for LGBTI people to become victims of bullying at school, but they believed that the bullying is provoked by LGBTI students themselves as they show off

too much and flaunt their sexual orientation. Teachers in this focus group did not find the school climate unfriendly and believed that in the event of discrimination or violence, any student may seek support from a pedagogical advisor or other specialist at school who would never refuse to help. The LGBTI topics were still far from the mindset of most of the participants. This topic annoyed some of the participants greatly, and a few demonstrated that they feel uncomfortable to answer such questions.

All teachers and school staff involved in the focus group shared the opinion that eradication of school violence must be done with the help of specialists and psychologists and that the good inter-agency communication was essential for achieving positive results. At the same time, the participants protected the image of their schools by stating that school response is always adequate when an incident of student violence occurs.

3.3.2 State of LGBT students in educational settings according to the parents.

On the subject of the situation of minority students in educational settings, all parents believed strongly that schools are safe for children and young people from different minority groups and that there was equal treatment for minorities at school. Although everyone agreed unanimously that people from different minority groups received equal treatment at school, the ways in which they expressed this opinion indicated that they themselves experienced difficulties and discomfort in regards to people from other minorities. One parent even shared the following, "they are much more accepted now, although they sometimes kill people (referring to Roma/migrants), there was such case years ago". Another person said that "they themselves should find a way to be integrated, they should want to learn the language and to be among us (referring to Roma and migrants)." No specific examples of lack of integration of LGBTI students in educational settings were given. The parents were obviously not aware of such cases, or felt uncomfortable to share.

On the question regarding the situation of the LGBTI students, some of the parents from Plovdiv refused to answer directly, because they believed that these topics were not subject to discussion at all, while others said that enough has been talked about that lately. Many of them said that they would feel uncomfortable if their child were to study alongside gay students. Most parents were not aware of the extent to which there was verbal and physical harassment against gay students, but they believed that schools would respond relatively well in the case of bullying of gay students.

3.3.3 State of LGBT students in educational settings according to the students.

When asked about the status of minority students in educational settings, all students firmly answered that schools are overall not safe, incl. for minority students. Some participants said that it depends on the school, but in most schools, it is not safe because many people are prejudiced against minority people and often avoid them. All shared the view that the most vulnerable were the Roma students and those with different sexual orientation. The students in this focus group had never heard of the concept of "invisible minorities", but they understood what it was and thought that the majority of such people feel depressed, afraid to express themselves, and feel like outsiders because they are scared to show that they like someone of the same gender. One student shared the following, (male, 18), "No one stops people from expressing themselves at school, but you obviously have to worry about expressing yourself because you do not know whether you will be accepted or rejected. There is certainly a link between bullying at school and the discovery of a minority trait." Another student, (female, 18), shared that LGBTI students are certainly restricted in expressing themselves. "Maybe if they noticed someone like them, they would share it to this person, but in front of a large group of people they would not." Most students could not imagine a quick solution to the problem of bullying in schools and thought that it is impossible to count on the government/school authorities, but that people need to change their thinking and become more informed.

All participating students agreed on the fact that bullying was a widespread problem and were aware of the serious consequences it causes. Student (female, 19): "There may be at least one child in each class who is bullied. There was a boy in my class who was somehow different and a group of several people who harassed him almost every day. Unfortunately, I was one of them. They were the cool ones in class and as a student, you want to be cool, otherwise you are isolated. Now I'm sorry about that. Surely, this boy was very much affected by the harassment. The harassment was verbal and physical. Some people from this group pushed him to show him that he was weak."

As for organizations providing victim and perpetrator support services, most students could only identify the Child Protection Agency. On issues related to LGBTI youth at school, all students shared the view that homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic comments were made mainly by students to other students, and this happens every day.

When asked if the school staff responded appropriately when something like that happens, one student from the group of non-LGBTI pupils (female, 17) said, "I don't think there is an

adequate reaction, I don't think anyone reacts at all when someone is offending or abusing somebody else, at least in my environment." Another student (male, 16) said: "Often, in the form of a joke, but not directly aimed at judging others by how they behave, how they walk, how they talk and say 'ah, look at him, he is so gay', but they don't know him and they make a joke purposefully in front of other people."

Some students gave examples of physical abuse by teachers, as well as such where the teachers made homophobic statements. They stated that teachers contributed to the lack of awareness on LGBTI topics in society and that their position as authority reinforces hatred.

Participants from the LGBTI group said that only physical harassment can be proven at school because cameras at schools only record video and not audio.

Regarding the national anti-bullying policies at school, one student said he had never heard of such policies. Another participant knew that there is a phone to call in case of harassment. Most participants believed that the policies were only on paper and not adhered to.

Another important statement was that bullying at school is covered to avoid scandal. One participant said the following: "In most cases, schools deny that there is any bullying at all, because if this information spreads, the image of the school will be seriously harmed. The school principals and staff have no interest in spreading it, so the bullying is often disguised." Most of the other participants also agreed with this claim, considering that harassment is in fact equal to stimulating it.

3.4 School specific questions.

3.4.1 School specific questions for teachers.

All teachers who participated in the focus groups agreed that bullying and school harassment do not occur frequently and that they are often exaggerated and overexposed by students.

When asked "How serious are the incidents of bullying in schools in Bulgaria", the majority of the teachers from Sofia expressed the opinion that "here and there they appear but are

overexposed". They thought that some cases were too exaggerated and that there were not as many incidents as supposed. At the same time, there were comments, which indicated that school staff could sometimes be abusive of children, especially young ones. One teacher (female, 39), shared the following: "I often witness violence against young children from the school staff, because the latter are not able to control their nervous outbreaks."

All teachers from Plovdiv believed that the problem of school violence was being addressed, but not enough, and the parents themselves should be involved in the process. As a solution, one teacher (female, 39), suggested doing something like "a school for parents" with the idea of putting parents in the teacher's place for a day to see what it was like to teach and to have to take care of a more harmonious environment at the same time and that it was not easy. The teachers from Plovdiv expressed their frustration with the fact that they felt pressured to be responsible for the school climate as well. According to them, children and students needed more examples that are personal and the latter to be provided mostly at home. One teacher said, (female, 40), "I notice the kids, they accept the different ones, but things start from the parents." Participants in this focus group found that parents often express their negative attitudes toward different minorities at home, which children see and directly apply at school. On the issue of having national policies to encourage openly speaking at school about differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other characteristics, participants stated that there is only a mechanism to counteract bullying, but did not know to what extent it applies. One of the participants mentioned an example of good practice in some schools - organizing Pink T-shirt Day - an international initiative dedicated to combating school bullying.

3.4.2 School specific questions for parents.

All parents who took part in the focus groups share a common understanding that bullying is widespread at school and generally agree that school policies are not effective in dealing with the problem of violence at school.

Unlike the teachers, the parents from Sofia however expressed the opinion that incidents of bullying "often appear, but sometimes the children fear talking about them, when they return home". They thought that there were even more incidents than they knew of, but the schools did not want to spread information about such situations in order to protect their name. This statement in a way contradicted the statement, which was previously made

concerning the policies for prevention of bullying. One parent even stated the following: "I have personally heard of violence against children from the school staff."

An important example of the lack of effectiveness of the current school policies for prevention and eradication of bullying was given by a parent whose daughter had been a victim of bullying. The participant shared the opinion that sometimes school principals and specialists did not do enough or worse, did not know what to do or neglected a situation, because they just did not want to deal with it. "My kid was bullied at school from another student for months and I tried to initiate a conversation between me and the principal several times. This kid physically and mentally abused mine, because it was overweight. It was hell. My daughter didn't want to go to school at all. I wanted this other kid to be expelled or just transferred in another class, but that never happened. I filed several complaints. Nobody did anything about it."

One parent from Plovdiv (female, 37) stated that "sometimes schools conceal cases of violence because if such information goes out, the reputation of the school is at risk." According to most parents, the country does not even do the minimum to protect students in Bulgarian schools from phenomena such as discrimination, harassment and violence at school, and that students are often alone in the problem; only rarely they decide to turn to a parent or teacher.

When asked whether LGBTI topics were discussed at school, all parents unanimously agreed that they were strongly against such topics becoming part of any curriculum. They would not want their children to become familiar with "gender ideologies", because the latter may lead to their children becoming "genders" – word, often used in Bulgaria as an insult and a way of describing the LGBTI people. The strong impact of the anti-gender movement, which hit Bulgaria in 2018, was felt in all discussions with parents and teachers on the topic of LGBTI identities.

3.4.3 School specific questions for students.

All students shared the same understanding that if an LGBTI teacher revealed their identity at school, this would have a very negative impact on their authority. All students shared the opinion that curriculum in the school did not in any way prepare students to build tolerance and acceptance and generally agree that school authorities do not know how to build trust between them and students and do not have the knowledge and capacity to provide a safe environment for minority students at school.

The participants in the group of non-LGBTI students thought that other students should be able to express their minority characteristics freely, but for teachers, this may have its negatives: "If the teacher is gay, that is exactly the kind of person who would help but if he came out, his reputation would collapse and be crushed. But he would be a defender. If I were in their place, I wouldn't do it." Another student (female, 18) replied "Yes and no. It is better for a teacher not to hide and not to worry, but there is also a danger that others can start making fun of him/her and he/she could completely shut up. For teachers, they may lose their authority in front of other school staff and students." The majority of the students had no specific idea how a student who has fallen victim to homophobic bullying at school could be helped, and when it comes to anti-bullying programs at school, no one believed that they exist.

The students from this group shared the opinion that the curriculum does not provide sufficient information on the topics of school tolerance arising from different attributes. They shared that both in their free classes, nor in psychology or philosophy, were they talking about tolerance or different people, and that no one mentions topics like bullying in school. A participant (female, 17) said that teachers will not sit down and initiate a conversation on such topics, only if an incident occurs, then they realize that they have to do something. "They think everything is getting better and they are waiting for the situation to get worse."

All students believed that the curriculum in the school did not in any way prepare students to build tolerance and acceptance. Student (male, 18): "In 10th grade, we had a textbook, where sexual orientation has been mentioned with only two sentences and that it was heterosexual and homosexual, but some parents and students railed against it and said it was not normal for this content to be taught at school and this textbook was no longer published." Non-Binary Student (17): "Last year, in Law and Ethics, I asked the lady why we were not discussing LGBTI topics, and she replied that she doesn't want such things to be shoved in her face and that LGBTI people can live their lives, but she would prefer not to see them." Some students said that in Bulgaria in general either nobody talks about tolerance or speaks in a negative context. According to them, the word "tolerance" itself became a dirty word, which now causes even more aggression. They said that it would be more effective for people to work on how to be more tolerant rather than just talking about it. One student shared, "Some student's parents are afraid that if their child is exposed to information such as LGBTI topics, they can magically become such person."

The LGBTI students stated that the school psychologists could not be fully trusted. "At our school, everyone knows they can't go to the psychologist at school because he can't keep his mouth shut and sometimes he accidently shares things and sensitive information about someone with someone else." They also added that only SOGI-based bullying points are absent in the regulations of some schools.

Students, who were part of the "invisible minorities" in schools, said that such a person often lives in fear and constant tension and when he hears LGBTI-phobic statements he tries to defend himself so as not to be exposed. Anti-LGBTI comments are made by everyone, constantly, every day, at any convenient time, both by teachers and students. There are isolated cases where management takes action against anti-LGBTI comments, but this happens more often when it comes to physical bullying rather than verbal abuse.

According to most LGBTI students, what could be done in such cases was that teachers and students go on exchanges, to travel to Western countries, and to take examples, which they could bring and apply in Bulgaria. They thought that the unfriendly and hostile school environment demotivates and diminishes achievements, making them hate the institution as a whole, some of them tried to find any excuse not to go to school because they could not bear to be in that environment. Many LGBTI students shared that they were growing up with the need to always "make up for being LGBTI" - trying to do everything right, being the perfect student, the perfect child, which at one point became very overwhelming and led to burnouts.

The LGBTI students believed that the environment did not at all encourage people with different sexual orientations to express themselves freely and also added that if a teacher comes out as an LGBTI person, the attitude towards the teacher will immediately change and the respect will be lost. Regarding programs for combating violence at school, most LGBTI students said they did not know about such programs, or did not believe they existed at all. According to them, what the school community can do is to have more events and initiatives organized by the student councils, which raise awareness on the issue, change perceptions (decrease tolerance of bullying), and last, but not least, build acceptance of diversity at school.

3.5 Training needs.

3.5.1 The Training Needs of Teachers.

Only a few teachers shared that they had received specific training on prevention of and combating bullying and that it was useful, one example being that they already referred to Roma people as Roma, and not as Gypsies (the word Gypsy is used more like an insult in Bulgarian). Most teachers believed that such training was necessary for everyone who works at school. There were just a few who thought that such training should only be provided when there are serious cases in a particular school. The majority of the teachers shared the view that it was very important for the training to be practical and to include steps to prevent violence in school.

Based on the observations we can recommend the following topics to be included in a training for teachers:

- Specific information about LGBTI identities and minorities;

- Practical steps for prevention and addressing cases of identity-based bullying at school;

- Introducing the norm-critical approach in education as a tool for deconstructing social norms, explaining stereotypes, and helping to change perceptions;

- Institutions/NGOs who can provide help (list of contacts).

3.5.2 The Training Needs of Parents.

Parents in general believed that training on the prevention of bullying is necessary for everyone who is linked to school. They saw a solution to the problem when students had someone they felt closer to them and they trusted and could speak to while at school. When asked what they would like to learn in such training, one of the participants stated that they would like to learn more about the different minorities and the issues they faced on a daily basis. Everyone shared the view that it was very important for the training to be practical and to include steps to prevent violence at home and at school. At the end of the meeting, one of the parents said "we as parents know that when a parent is active, a result is always achieved". The general observation from the focus groups with parents was that most parents were trying to put themselves into the shoes of their children. Some of them admitted they had never thought about some of the questions asked during the focus group and that because of this the whole discussion was eye opening.

Based on the observations we can recommend that the topics to be included in a training for parents should be more or less the same as the topics for teachers / school staff:

- Specific information about LGBTI identities;

- Practical steps for prevention and addressing cases of identity-based bullying at school;

- Institutions / NGOs who can provide help (list of contacts).

3.5.3 The Training Needs of Students.

All students stated that LGBTI topics were not discussed at all in school, and they found talking about such topics very important for the acceptance of LGBTI people at school, and added that it would be good to devote classes for making projects on such topics or external trainers from specialized organizations to introduce students to topics such as LGBTI. On the basis of the findings in the focus groups with students, we recommend the following topics for the trainings of students:

Information on the national policies for the prevention of bullying at school, and specific knowledge of ways to react in cases of bullying, based on the child-rights centered approach;

Practical steps for addressing the identity-based bullying;

Disseminating contact information of state-supported agencies / services and NGOs, which provide support to victims of bullying, especially anti-LGBTI bullying;

Enhancing knowledge on hate crimes and hate speech and ways to report / counteract.

Students can also be trained with peer-learning approaches for dissemination of information on bullying and LGBTI students can help address the topic from the bottom-up in the school environment.

Living libraries are a good way of familiarizing other students who are less aware of minority issues with the lived experiences of LGBTI students at school. This approach can be applied, if the school is open to events encouraging diversity, and if there is a strong student council, which can promote such events.

4. Online survey

4.1 Short presentation of the survey and its target groups.

We created two separate online surveys – one was targeting LGBTI as well as non-LGBTI students between the ages of 16-19 in schools, the other was targeting school professionals such as teachers, school principals, psychologists, pedagogues from schools all around the country and parents.

4.2 Demographics.

Students:

The respondents in the online survey for students were between the ages 15-20 years. Most of the collected answers came from students aged 17 to 19.

Forty seven out of 48 students who completed the survey indicated that they were studying in a municipal / public school and only one student indicated that they were studying in a private school.

Thirty-four of the students who completed the survey checked that their sex is female, and the 14 of the students checked "male". Amongst all respondents, 32 self-identified as women, 13 as men and 3 as non-binary.

When it comes to sexual orientation, out of the total of 48 young people, 17 indicated that they were heterosexual, 15 bisexual, 10 homosexual, 2 asexual, 3 pansexual, and 1 person answered with "I don't know."

Teachers / Parents:

The second online survey was distributed among teachers/school professionals and parents. It generated answers from people between the ages of 20 and 60 years. Most of the answers came from people aged 28, 34 and 50 years.

The majority of the survey respondents were teachers (54 people out of 103 respondents), followed by parents (39 people). Some answers came from school principals (4 people) and school administration staff (6 people).

Most of the respondents indicated that their sex is female - 73 out of 103 respondents. The respondents who indicated that their sex is male were 30. In terms of gender, 74 people from respondents identified themselves as women, 28 identified themselves as men, and 1 respondent identified as intersex.

In relation to sexual orientation. 63 people from the respondents self-identified as heterosexual, 19 as homosexual, and 16 as bisexual. One person self-identified as pansexual. There were also 3 people who decided not to answer this question and 1 person who checked "other category".

4.3 Discrimination, bullying and harassment.

22 out of 48 students say that offending at school is done relatively often or very often. Very few are those who say that offensive comments are made "rarely" (3 people) or "never" (1 person). Most students also said that specific negative comments such as "gender" (predominant in Bulgaria) and "faggot" were mostly being made by students (27 pupils) and sometimes by teachers as well (14 pupils).

In most cases, when such comments were made (verbal harassment), teachers and school staff either did not intervene (11 people) or were rarely involved (17 people). When asked if the intervention and reaction of the school authorities was adequate, half of the students (24 people) strongly stated that it was not, while some of them (19 people) are not sure.

The school professionals and parents, who participated in the survey, shared many different opinions when it comes to how often negative comments were being made. About one third of the respondents say that such comments were made very often (28 respondents out of 103), and 38 respondents answered that such comments were made sometimes, which in itself shows that hateful and insulting comments did not remain unnoticed for the professionals. Concerning more specific insults such as "faggot" and "gender", the majority of the respondents (64 people) claimed that these were mostly done by students.

When asked who was involved in any type of verbal harassment (such as negative comments), 16 out of 48 students say that this had never happened, or rarely happened (17 students). Only 2 people answered that a teacher or a pedagogue always intervened in cases of verbal harassment. The half of the students-respondents also said that the reaction was not adequate.

For teachers and parents, the answers to the questions on the reaction of school staff to cases of verbal harassment vary, and yet the answers "rarely" (32 people out of 103) and "sometimes" (24 people) outweigh the answers "always" (17 people) when asked how often the school staff intervened. The surprising thing here is that most teachers and educators also considered the reaction of the school staff to cases of verbal harassment as not adequate (26 people out of 103) or they said, "I'm not sure" (31 respondents).

19 students answered positively whether they had information on cases of regular verbal harassment targeting LGBTI + students. Half of the students-respondents believed that school authorities were not responding adequately to such cases.

On the question of physical violence, 24 of the students answered that they had never witnessed or heard of physical violence against LGBTI + students. Only 3 people out of 48 answered this question with "relatively often". Thirty-two students out of 48 said that the perpetrators of such physical assault were mostly students, and again the most were unsure if there was intervention by school staff in such cases (24 people), and 19 people said that it was often not adequate.

Unlike students, about 63 people from the group of teachers and parents said that they did not have information on cases of regular verbal harassment targeting LGBTI + students. Most thought the reaction was often adequate (37 people) or were unsure if it was adequate (40 people). Again, the majority of teachers and parents (62 respondents) stated that they had never witnessed or heard of physical harassment against LGBTI + students. 57 people said that this was mostly done by students. 45 people from the group of school staff professionals and parents were not sure whether there has been interference with cases of physical abuse of students or not.

About online bullying in school - 19 out of 48 students reportеd having witnessed / having information about online bullying. The majority of students (31 pupils) said that they had heard of such harassment against LGBTI + students.

Unlike the students, over half of the teachers surveyed said they had not witnessed or heard about online harassment.

4.4 Policies, action plans and support systems.

When it comes to systems for reporting bullying at school, here 31 people from all the surveyed students (out of 48 people in total) have chosen to respond, with prevailing answers that such systems do not exist, or that most students are unsure or ignorant. One student shared the following: "There is no such system. You should tell the class teacher, but honestly I wouldn't. It is not taken seriously, and most teachers are homophobes." Four out of 31 people who answered this question said that school psychologists or their class teachers were the only ones they knew that would probably respond, but often would not rely on them.

The same question was answered by 88 school professionals and parents (out of 103 respondents in total), most of whom also said that there were either no such reporting systems or they were simply unaware of them. Seven out of 88 people who answered this question mentioned the school psychologist, but also added that very often the psychologists in schools are unreliable. There are two people who expressed an opinion that such questions are stupid and didn't give a specific answer.

Regarding support systems and national policies in the event of bullying at school, 19 students said that either there were none and 22 students said they were not sure if there were any at all. However, 44 school staff professionals and parents responded that such systems existed.

Whether LGBTI + topics are included in the content of some subjects, 36 students out of 48 in general say that such topics are not included. Here, just over half of the teachers also respond in the negative. Almost the same amount of teachers answered negatively to the question whether there were national laws restricting the discussion of such topics in school. Most young people answer with "I'm not sure" to this question.

Students have a tendency, in the case of any problem, including harassment at school, to turn to their friends, as most of them say that they cannot trust the school psychologist. The most common answer is that such forms of support do not exist in Bulgarian schools and are not reliable. It is positive that some of the young people give examples of forms of

support with the LGBTI + self-support group, organized by Bilitis - BraveLab, the online chat support of another LGBTI organization – Single Step, and the LGBTI Community Center - Rainbow Hub.

On the same question, a large part of the surveyed teachers and parents (48 out of 103) are not able to say if there is such support, (14 respondents do not know if there is such support, 10 identify the school psychologist as such support, 18 answered that such support is missing, and 5 point out that there are NGOs providing such support.

The majority of students (28 out of 48) say the government does not provide any information to combat homophobic and transphobic harassment and only two students answer with "yes" (yes, there is such information) to this question. Here almost half of the teachers and parents do not give a firm answer and answer with "I am not sure" (50 people), the other part of them also claim that such information is missing.

Most students (23 people out of 48) and many respondents among the teachers and parents (41 out of 103) point out that it is the private organizations that provide support services for young people who are victims of anti-LGBTI bullying. From the answers of both groups it is clear that many of the respondents are not aware and are not sure which organizations provide such services and whether there are any.

4.5 State of LGBT students in educational settings.

30 students out of 48 believe that schools are not safe enough for LGBTI youth. Here, 50 people of the surveyed teachers and parents respond in the same way.

Again, 29 of the students surveyed students say that bullying cases at school were often relatively serious and 10 people say they were very serious. For teachers and parents, the answers vary, with almost equal numbers of teachers and parents citing answers as "not serious" (23 people), "very serious" (23 people) and "not sure" (21 people). The percentage of those who say they are relatively serious is slightly higher.

Again, most young people find that LGBTI students are not treated equally in school (29 out of 48 pupils). Here, 44 out of 103 of teachers and parents say the same, but 37 people say LGBTI students receive equal treatment.

Thirty-nine students out of 48 say that the state is not doing enough to protect LGBTI + students at school, compared to nearly 58 people from the group of school staff and parents responding in the same way.

Young people give different answers to the question exactly how many students do not hide their sexual orientation and/ or gender identity at school. Most teachers and pedagogues have no idea if students are hiding this information about themselves, which indicates a lack of connection between them and the students themselves.

Twenty-eight students say that there are no teachers who can safely share that they are LGBTI, with 9 of the students surveyed saying that they know about teachers who do not hide that they are LGBTI.

Forty-one out of 48 students believe that other students and teachers should have no problems being "out" in school. About 56 teachers and parents share the same opinion. 24 of the surveyed teachers answered with "no" to this question.

Both the focus group students and the students from the online survey here share that there are no dedicated hours in school to discuss topics such as LGBTI. Almost half of the teachers surveyed also agreed, and just as many of them could not determine exactly how such topics would be discussed if they were ever addressed. Twenty-two teachers and parents say that LGBTI topics are often discussed in a neutral way. The answers to this

question are quite similar for the students - 12 of them cannot give a firm opinion on how these topics are discussed in school either. An equal number of students say that LGBTI topics are discussed both neutral (5 students) and negative (5 students).

Interestingly, some of the students can identify much more thoroughly the necessary steps to be taken at school to make LGBTI students feel more secure. Student comment on recommendations:

"Treating LGBT topics and people as something completely normal and common in primary school children. Having a well-trained psychological staff that will certainly deal with LGBT issues. To recognize hate-based harassment of the LGBT community as such and to treat it with the same importance as other types of harassment. Add sex education classes for upper education (mostly 11/12 grade) to cover topics on sexuality and gender identity, as well as include discussions/ lessons on the safety of sexual intercourse between two women, between two men, with a trans man, etc. "

Other students also highlight the need for sex education classes at school where LGBTI issues are among the topics discussed.

From the questions with open answers it became clear that some of the teachers and parents felt strongly encouraged to discuss these topics and to disseminate more information. An example for that is this teacher's comment: "At least once or twice to spend hours discussing topics such as sexual orientation and gender identity to inform teachers and students. These classes would not only help LGBT people in schools, but would also prevent/ remove some dose of prejudice from others."

Other respondents among the teachers/parents also give answers like "I don't know" or answers that apparently express intolerance and ignorance when it comes to LGBTI students and show a lack of desire to work with such students: "they do not need protection, everything is fine."

4.6 Training needs.

The majority of survey respondents among school staff and parents (88 people) say they have never received any bullying prevention training for students who identify as LGBTI. Only 14 people say they have taken such a course. Sixty-six out of 103 of respondents are

interested in participating in such a course in the future. Twenty-eight people say they have no interest in taking part in such training.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The desk and field research demonstrated many deficiencies of the current school system in Bulgaria, which lead to ineffective addressing of the issue of bullying, especially identity-based bullying. In summary these are the following:

- Inadequate policy framework: the national mechanism for addressing bullying does not pay attention to identity-based bullying, consequently, this kind of bullying is not recognized by the school staff;

- Negative stereotypes of minorities reiterated at school: The majority of teachers, school staff and parents share many of the wide-spread negative stereotypes of minorities (especially Roma), and tend to downplay discrimination in the school environment;

- Invisibility of LGBTI at school: There is very low awareness of the actual experiences of LGBTI students at school, and the latter remain an "invisible" minority;

- Little collaboration between school staff, parents, and students in prevention and addressing violence at school;

- Lack of internal support systems for the ones most severely affected by bullying at school (LGBTI students are among the most common victims).

On the positive side:

- Interest in training on effective methods for prevention and addressing of bullying at school expressed by all target groups;

- Understanding the importance of collaboration between all stakeholders in the school system also underlined by the participants from all target groups;

- Interest in learning more about the LGBTI identities expressed mainly by the young people involved in the research.

On the basis of the above findings we can make the following recommendations:

EU-wide comparative research on effective anti-bullying policies and practices will facilitate an informed national-level response.

5.2 Recommendations for Policies.

- The National Mechanism for Prevention and Addressing of Bullying at School should include a definition of identity-based bullying. Specific Guidelines for School Policies on Prevention and Addressing of bullying, enriched with the best practices for dealing with identity-best bullying, disseminated by the Ministry of Education would support a unified response to this negative phenomenon.

- The positive trends that exist locally should be encouraged and multiplied. The Ministry of Education and its regional structures, the Regional Directorates on Education should find a way to exchange good practices between schools.

5.3 Recommendations for Schools.

- Zero tolerance of hate speech: Teachers and the entire school-staff should be informed about the consequences of tolerating hate speech and should be equipped with tools to counteract such behavior. This means that they should not only react in every occasion of verbal and physical harassment, but hate speech from school staff shouldn't be tolerated either. The School's Code of Conduct (internal regulations document) should include explicit rules for reaction in cases of hate speech.

- Discussions about diversity: profound discussions about diversity, acceptance and social differences, that clearly name sexual orientation and gender identity among other characteristics, need to take place at school. If the curriculum does not include such topics, the school administration should find space for such discussions to happen during extra-curricular activities.

- Effective anti-bullying school policies: It is completely up to the school administrations about how visible their anti-bullying policies will be and how well they will communicate them. Currently, this is not the case and further efforts should be made in this direction. A visible school anti-bullying policy which encourages

anonymous reporting of cases of harassment and assault will raise the trust of the most vulnerable students in those responsible for their signals.

- Creation of support systems for victims and perpetrators of bullying: the school psychologists and counselors are those seen as most trustworthy by students who are victims of bullying. They should be trained and prepared to work and support LGBTI students as well as their parents if need be. Systematic work with perpetrators is also needed, as well as putting them in touch with external service providers, such as special services for juvenile delinquents.

- Connection between school-staff and parents: no significant improvements would be possible without the active and informed participation of parents. On one hand, school administrations should communicate their anti-bullying strategies and efforts with the parents regularly and should find ways to involve them in events, out-of-class lessons and many different formats that inform both students and parents about the consequences of hate-speech and bullying at school.

5.4 Recommendations for NGOs and municipalities.

- NGOs could be a source of knowledge as well as expertise on different practical approaches to address hate speech and bullying at school. A cross-sectoral task force, involving NGOs that have a proven record of accomplishment in providing support to youth who are victims of hate speech/bullying and their parents could play a role in designing effective new in-school initiatives that address these phenomena.

- The regional inspectorates on education and the municipal education departments should encourage schools to be open and pro-actively seeking partnerships with local NGOs, social services, and other public and private actors that work for inclusive education in order to transform the school into a real community center.