

National report for Bulgaria

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Contribution to the European report:

Uwe Hasebrink, Sonia Livingstone and Haddon, L. (eds) *Comparing Children's Online Opportunities and Risks across Europe: Cross-national Comparisons for EU Kids Online*, a report for the EC Safer Internet Plus Programme, 2008.

1. The Internet

1.1 Children's Internet access

The Internet is already widely available throughout Bulgaria. Internet cafés exist, but are not as popular as Internet 'clubs'. These are spaces that usually have more than ten computers, which are almost always occupied by children. Cable Internet is cheap and affordable, and is the preferred method of connecting to the Web in cities. ADSL is also gaining popularity, providing good speed and a reliable connection. The Internet on mobile phones is still not very widespread, but there are already some providers and it is becoming more popular among professionals.

Internet filters are neither popular nor advertised. The general population is unaware of content filters, and it is uncommon for an ISP to provide warnings or advice about using them. They do exist on antivirus software, but this software is still quite expensive for mainstream users.

1.2 Findings on children's access to the Internet and online technologies

According to the Bulgarian Association for Information Technologies (BAIT), by September 2007 there were more than 2,595,600 Internet users, constituting 33.8% of the population. It is expected that by 2011 the average annual growth of Internet users will be 20.1% per year. In 2006, 23% of Bulgarian households already had a PC and 17% had Internet access. By June 2007, mobile services penetration had reached 117.4 %.

Children are the most active Internet users but also most vulnerable. Between 50 and 60% of those aged 7-19 currently use Internet. According to the National Statistics Institute, Internet users between 16 and 24 years of age make up 33.7% of all Internet users (http://www.nsi.bg/ZActual_e/IT_HH2006.htm).

Only 20% of Bulgarian families have Internet access at home, so there is a difference in children's levels of access. However, it is mainly families with children that have home computers. Children without computers at home use the Internet at friends' houses and in cybercafés. Only 6% of children surveyed say they use it mainly at school. Parental education also plays an important role. Parents who frequently use the Internet tend to have computers at home, but in most cases the home computer has been bought for the children because adults can use it at the workplace.

1.3 Findings on children's use of the Internet and online technologies

According to 2006 research conducted by the NCIOM involving 1500 children, more than 65% of children interviewed used the Internet daily.

Boys and girls use online technologies differently. Boys tend to spend more time in front of the computer both at home and in cyber clubs. Girls use the Internet for searching for information and emailing or chatting with friends. They rarely explore new software options. Boys always pretend to know more and have more computer skills. They are also more likely to try new options, which means they acquire skills faster and use the Internet more creatively than girls.

1.4 Internet and media content for children

There is no qualitative method of assessing online content for children. This content is very subjective and it is difficult to draw a line between content for children, content for youth and content for adults at a national level. Internet content in the Bulgarian national language accounts for only a small part of the total accessible content, but children are learning more English and accessing all types of websites.

Some popular sites for children include:

<http://youtube.com>
<http://vbox7.com>
<http://www.myspace.com>
<http://priateli.net/>
<http://www.atol.bg/> (this is a site to look for classmates)
<http://www.teenproblem.net/>
<http://zoom.bg/index.php>
<http://www.ivan4o.com>
<http://zaigravka.com/>
<http://www.sladur.com/>
<http://www.zdrasti.net/>
<http://www.elmaz.com>
<http://www.flirt4e.com/>
<http://www.aha.bg/>
<http://www.flirtbg.com/>
<http://svejo.net>

1.5 Opportunities experienced by children online

Boys spend more hours playing computer games and downloading software, movies and music, and spend fewer hours on lessons and school-oriented searches for information. Girls use the Internet mostly for information searches for school purposes and for emailing and chatting. Girls also use mobile phones for sending sms messages more frequently than boys.

1.6 Risks experienced by children online

According to children, online risks include:

- computer viruses
- pornographic sites
- people (strangers) they communicate with

According to parents and other adults, online dangers include:

- health problems as a result of long hours in front of the computer
- asocial behaviour
- learned violent behaviour
- porno sites and paedophiles
- arranging off-line meetings
- computer viruses

The EB 2007 study involving focus groups of children aged 9-14 showed that:

- Internet use risks are clustered around participating in open chat rooms, sending and receiving emails, instant messaging and chatting with friends, as well as downloading music, films, videos, etc. The two main reasons for considering these applications dangerous are uncertainty about communicating with strangers and the danger of contracting computer viruses.
- Children regularly encounter potentially shocking material, with pornography and

torture of animals topping the list.

- Roughly half of the participants reported instances of bullying. The problem is more widespread among older children, with no significant difference between boys and girls.
- About half the participants have encountered instances of deception, like downloading 'free' files which then incur expenses. This occurs most often in the older groups of children.

The 2005-2006 Eurobarometer survey found that 13% of parents/guardians think that their child has encountered harmful or illegal content on the Internet at some point. But according to the NCIOM poll, more than 30% of children received insistent proposals for off-line meetings and 10% of children think that the intentions of the person on the other side were rather bad.

It is true that most children use the Internet at home, but the risks come from their parents' ignorance and the belief that what children are doing at home is what they have learned at school. The results of the 2006 national study show that parents think their kids are safer in cyber clubs than in the street, and therefore they encourage children to attend. Parents are usually unaware of what their kids are doing on the Internet and can only rarely prevent the risks.

1.7 Internet regulation and promotion

In principle the Bulgarian government does not regulate Internet communications and is only responsible for the provision of services. However, in 2002 amendments to the Penal Code were introduced which made child pornography a criminal offence with heavier sanctions than ordinary pornography cases. These sanctions include imprisonment for up to eight years, fines of up to 5,000 EUR and in some cases, confiscation of property.

The State Agency for Child Protection runs a hotline for reporting violence against children, and plans to launch a National Telephone Helpline are underway. The General Directorate for Fighting Organised Crime also operates a hotline for reporting computer-related crimes, but this includes offences like hacking and fraud as well as pornography.

A new law about electronic communication was enacted in May 2007, and later amended in December 2007. The law regulates public relationships involving electronic communication, but again does not in any way regulate *the content* of these communications. In 2006-2007, the government teamed up with various NGOs to launch a national campaign for safer Internet use. This included TV clips, brochures and information leaflets, and in 2007 a Handbook on Internet Literacy was also published as a translation of a Council of Europe publication.

As stated above, the SACP operates a National Child Hotline to report violence against children and also has set up a website: <http://www.stopech.sacp.government.bg>. The website has separate sections for children and for adults, and allows users to alert authorities about the commercial sexual exploitation of a child. The website is part of the national strategy to combat trafficking and sexual exploitation of children.

Although the government and regulators have not implemented programmes specifically promoting Internet use, there is a programme within the Ministry of Education called e-education. Its main goal is to provide modern computers to secondary schools. Unfortunately, the level of computer literacy among teachers is still lower than that of the students. The publication of the aforementioned Handbook is just a small step. Another move towards media literacy came in 2007 with an initiative to raise the computer literacy of all teachers in secondary schools. Teachers were obliged to take weekend courses, but these focused on using Microsoft Office and not the Internet.

So far there are very few NGO initiatives trying to raise public awareness of the risks the Internet poses to children. It is extremely difficult to raise money for NGO research and there is no recent representative data on which a campaign or lobbying could be based. There is no

chance of groups lobbying for the introduction of restrictions, because Bulgarian society is very sensitive to any form of control. One example is the negative reaction of the so-called 'Internet Society', which is a CSO, to the governmental attempt some years ago to regulate the provision of Internet access.

1.8 Media literacy

The EB 2007 study involving focus groups of children aged 9-14 showed that:

- Viruses and calls and chats from unknown people top the list of spontaneous worries.
- However, the existence of such threats does not appear to cause great concern among children. The children surveyed had two main ways of dealing with risks. The first is anti-virus protection, and the second is compliance with certain rules of behaviour when being contacted by strangers (i.e.: not providing personal details, hanging up the phone, leaving open chats, etc.) Generally, children expressed confidence in their ability to deal with these risks.
- The overwhelming majority of children are actively engaged in illegal downloading. Older children expressed some awareness of the impropriety of this act, with only a nascent perception of its illegality. Illegality is not seen as a deterrent for continued downloading.

The Eurobarometer 2005-2006 survey also showed that 46% of parents/guardians think their child knows what to do if he or she feels uncomfortable online, compared to the 21% who think they do not.

1.9 Factors shaping public discourses about the Internet

There are few NGOs tackling the issue of Internet safety for children, and most operate individually. However, NGOs have been more active in raising awareness since the end of 2006. In this year the ARCFund (which plays the role of awareness node in Bulgaria) helped establish a Public Council on Internet Safety. The Public Council gathers three times per year and every time when there is a need. GERT is one member of the Public Council. The members all speak with one voice, and take part in national initiatives funded partially by EC funds.

Some risks are emphasised more than others, like the lack of knowledge and awareness about online dangers among parents. Usually parents are proud of their children's Internet skills and do not pay any attention to the risks that children could be exposed to online. Parents are happy to see their children stay at home with the computer instead of being outside.

NGOs have not been very successful at getting media coverage, and there is currently no means of assessing the success of NGO awareness campaigns.

A conference entitled 'Look who is on the other side of the net' was held at the end of 2006 to report on the campaign for safer use of Internet. In addition to the conference, the SACP distributed several posters and ran a very intensive TV campaign.

Safer Internet Day was held for the first time in 2007. The online competition was launched by the ARC fund and was supported by the education system and public authorities. More than 2,500 children have already participated.

2 The Educational system

2.1 General education

According to the HDR from 2006 the adult literacy rate (among those aged 15 and older) in 2005 was 98.2%, and the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio was 81.5%. Bulgaria has a strong educational tradition and used to have general population literacy close to 100%. School enrolment for children is compulsory until 16 years of age, but recent economic trends have caused many schools in the countryside to shut down. As a result, some children living far away and without proper transportation simply dropped out. In addition, it is very difficult to assess the literacy of minority groups.

The generation of 50 year olds has a higher percentage of people with higher education because when they were young Bulgaria's entire education system was public and free of charge. The generation of people in their 40s has a similar level of education, but there is no disaggregated statistical data to show exact numbers. Approximately 20% of the adult population aged 40 to 50 has some type of university degree. The higher education rate among younger generations (those born after 1970) is lower, despite the fact that the number of universities increased substantially in this time. However, higher education does not necessarily mean good computer literacy; those aged 30 are much more computer literate than their elders even without any degree.

The education system has been in a constant state of flux since 1989. There was a shift from pure lecturing to interactive teaching, and curricula lost their universality. Instead of providing basic knowledge in all the fields, like literature, languages, mathematics, sciences, history, geography, and biology, education became more oriented towards teaching practical skills. For example, secondary school programmes in the 1960s and 1970s did not have notion of "free or optional matter". Every child had to undergo exactly the same kind of education until the 8th grade, and then there was "school specialisation". This meant a student went to language school or technical school or art school, but each pupil had a compulsory panel of subjects which ensured the universality of their preparation. It also meant that after graduating from a language school an adolescent could enter a technical university, or after graduating from a technical secondary school an adolescent could continue with the law faculty. Universities were all public and access to them was through entrance exams.

Now, secondary schools are more specialised and do not necessarily provide a standardised curriculum. Therefore, secondary education predetermines the area of graduate study to an extent. Although entrance to public universities is still evaluated through entrance exams, students also have the option to enrol by paying. There are also many private universities with higher taxes which make them more or less elitist.

2.2 Education and the Internet

Internet, IT or media education is not a subject on regular curricula. Children and adolescents are mostly self-educated in this field with the exception of those who can rely on more educated parents.

3 Wider society

3.1 Social change

The social changes in Bulgaria in the 1990s were dramatic. The economic transition was very long and controversial, and its main consequences were the polarisation of society, the disappearance of the middle class, the massive impoverishment of the population and the loss of a national perspective and motivation for the younger generation. In the early 90s, half a million young people left the country, most of them with higher education. The birth rate has dropped dramatically alongside the age of having children. The average age of the population on the whole has increased.

People with better education are usually better employed than those with lower education, while those in the public sector are paid much less than those in the private. In the private sector there is a clear distinction between people with and without education. A 20% gender

pay gap exists, as well as regional income differences; the salaries in the capital Sofia are much higher than in remote regions, especially the north-western part of the country. Bulgarian is the official language and therefore Roma people face difficulties in getting well-paid positions which require a higher level of education.

Half of the country is rural and makes a living from agriculture. Although the Internet provision is much better in urban centres, almost every village has at least one Internet access point. However, broadband is still just a dream for many places.

3.2 Role of the state

The state regime has a largely *laissez-faire* attitude, and the field of communications is especially liberal. Citizens do not regard Internet safety as a government responsibility. The government cannot cope with many issues like teacher salaries, adult pensions and natural disasters, and the Internet is regarded as more or less an elitist issue by the general population.

However, parents and schools are both starting to take responsibility for the risks that children face on the Internet.

There is no censorship with regards to free speech. When they are online children can access the same things as adults, and often even more because young people are more computer literate.

4. Other factors affecting children's online experiences

English is taught from the 4th grade (when children are 9 years old) optionally and there are many language schools after the 7th grade (13 years old) where English is compulsory. Although other languages such as French, German, Spanish and Russian are equally offered in schools, English is the most popular. Therefore, Bulgarians aged 10-30 usually have a fair to excellent level of English.

The Bulgarian language exists on the Internet, and national sites are usually maintained in both Bulgarian and English. The general population can read only Bulgarian while the older members read Russian and the younger ones tend to know more English, German and French (the English readers are the biggest group).

In families who can afford to have a computer and the Internet at home, parental fears about the risks to children in unsupervised spaces outdoors have been one factor that has led them to encourage their children to stay indoors, to spend time in friends' homes or to participate in adult-supervised activities elsewhere. The first options have supported the emergence of a 'bedroom culture', where children's rooms have become increasingly media-rich and have rising amounts of Internet access. However, this is not the majority of Bulgarian families.