

## SYSTEMIC BARRIERS IN BULGARIA'S SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR: A MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS OF FUNDING, ACCESSIBILITY, AND POLICY REFORM

Assoc. Prof. Lilyana Rusanova, PhD, Technical University of Gabrovo, Bulgaria

### Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the social services sector in Bulgaria, focusing on systemic barriers and challenges from recent reforms following the adoption of the 2020 Social Services Act. Using a mixed approach, we integrate document analysis with a quantitative survey of 65 social service providers to identify gaps in funding, human resources, and accessibility for vulnerable populations, such as people with disabilities, older people, and families. Our findings reveal persistent shortcomings exacerbated by underdeveloped infrastructure, insufficient coordination, and legislative shortcomings. The study contributes to the discourse on social services modernization by offering evidence-based policy recommendations, including improved financing mechanisms, enhanced inter-institutional cooperation, and the integration of digital technologies. These insights are crucial for promoting an inclusive and equitable social protection system in Bulgaria and are in line with the broader objectives of the European Union.

This study aims to: 1. Assess the adequacy of social services in meeting the needs of vulnerable populations. 2. Identification of systemic barriers, including funding, human resources, and accessibility. 3. Expert evaluation of the reforms in the field of social services in Bulgaria.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on social services in Bulgaria by providing a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by service providers. Unlike previous studies, which have focused primarily on legislative reforms, this research offers a detailed examination of the practical barriers to effective service delivery. By incorporating the perspectives of experts working in the field, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve the quality and accessibility of social services in Bulgaria.

**Keywords:** social services, institutional barriers, policy reform, vulnerable populations, Bulgaria, EU social policy

### Theoretical framework

Social services in Europe have emerged as a critical domain of academic inquiry and political discourse, reflecting their pivotal role in addressing social inequalities and enhancing societal well-being. Over the past decade, the conceptualization and delivery of social services have undergone significant transformations, driven by the need for integrated, efficient, and responsive systems. Research underscores the critical importance of social services in enhancing the quality of life for vulnerable populations, reducing inequalities, and promoting self-reliance in managing social risks [1],[2]. Over time, social services have evolved from being perceived as a

peripheral component of minimum income schemes to becoming a central pillar of modern social protection systems. These systems aim to ensure the timely identification of vulnerable populations and the provision of tailored interventions to meet specific social needs. Despite these advancements, the absence of a unified definition of social services across European nations remains a persistent challenge, complicating comparative analyses and cross-country policy evaluations [3]. The increasing political and academic attention to social services has also catalyzed scientific research into methodologies for assessing their quality, effectiveness, and impact. Groundbreaking work by Stake, Schwandt [4], and Parasuraman et al. [5] has laid the foundation for evaluating service delivery models, emphasizing the importance of empirical data in shaping evidence-based policies and innovative solutions [6].

Bulgaria provides a compelling case study for examining the implementation of social services within the broader European framework. The country has established a robust national legal framework to regulate the provision of social services, anchored by: The Social Services Act [7] and the National map of social services [8].

The heterogeneity in categorizing social services—ranging from long-term care and childcare to social housing and employment support—underscores the complexity of this field. Scholarly literature reveals diverse theoretical frameworks for defining and conceptualizing social services, each offering unique insights into their role and function within modern welfare states. According to the European Commission [6] social services encompass the development of individualized programs for social adaptation, the provision of support to vulnerable individuals, and the safeguarding of their rights to ensure full participation in society. This approach extends the significance of social services beyond immediate individual or group benefits, emphasizing their broader societal impact and contribution to social stability. According to the scientific literature, the following approaches can be distinguished in defining social services:

**The Functional Approach:** This perspective conceptualizes social services as a set of targeted interventions aimed at mitigating social inequalities and promoting individual and collective well-being [9]. By focusing on the prevention of social risks and the facilitation of social integration, this approach emphasizes the importance of addressing individual needs. Notably, it distinguishes social services from broader social insurance and welfare schemes, concentrating instead on specific challenges and crises faced by individuals and communities.

**The Institutional Approach:** Within this framework, social services are viewed as an integral component of the welfare state, regulated, financed, and delivered by public authorities at various administrative levels—local, regional, or national [10]. This approach highlights the role of diverse providers, including public, private, and non-governmental organizations, in ensuring equitable access to services for vulnerable groups and fostering mechanisms for social inclusion.

**The Political Approach:** This approach underscores the multifaceted nature of social services, defining them as a constellation of policies and programs designed to address basic social needs and prevent social marginalization. It emphasizes principles such as universal accessibility, a broad spectrum of interventions, and the personalization of service delivery [1], [2]. By framing

social services within the broader context of social policy, this approach highlights their role in promoting social cohesion and reducing disparities.

**The Professional Approach:** This perspective situates social services within the realm of social work as a professional practice.

In line with broader European trends, Bulgaria has embarked on significant reforms in its social services sector. The adoption of the Social Services Act in 2020 marked a pivotal moment in the modernization of the country's social protection system. Scholars such as Vekova [11], Rusanova [12], and Kolarova [13] argue that this legislation not only redefined the operational framework of social services but also reshaped the conceptual foundations of the welfare state in Bulgaria. The Act defines social services as activities with preventive, supportive, restorative, and corrective functions (Article 3, Paragraph 1, Social Services Act, 2021) [7]. According to the Institute for Market Economics [14], the new legal framework seeks to enhance the planning, financing, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms of social services, with the overarching goal of improving their quality, efficiency, and sustainability. Within the framework of the analysis and justification of the new legal framework, the following challenges to the development of social services in Bulgaria are indicated:

- Underdeveloped infrastructure and limited access to social services, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.
- A predominance of public institutions in service provision, coupled with limited participation from private and non-governmental organizations;
- A localized service delivery model that fails to fully align with contemporary demographic and social realities, such as urbanization and population aging;
- Inadequate mechanisms to safeguard the rights of social service users, as highlighted in the Preliminary Impact Assessment Report on the Social Services Act (2018).

The dynamic evolution of the social services sector in Europe, and particularly in Bulgaria, underscores the need for a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities within this field. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing academic and policy discourse by identifying key trends, challenges, and potential pathways for the future development of social services. By doing so, it seeks to inform evidence-based policy-making and foster a more inclusive and effective social services system. These services can be accessed either independently or as part of an **integrated service package**, reflecting a holistic approach to social protection. According to the NMSS, Bulgaria currently offers **27 distinct types of social services** nationwide, with a maximum capacity to serve **165,110 users** [8].

Bulgaria's social service delivery model aligns with the broader European approach, characterized by a **diverse ecosystem of providers**. Municipalities play a pivotal role as the primary service providers, with local authorities legally mandated to deliver all types of social services. In addition, **non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** have emerged as key actors, particularly in the context of projects funded by EU structural funds. While the role of NGOs is still evolving, their contribution to expanding service accessibility and innovation is increasingly recognized.

A defining feature of Bulgaria's social policy is its emphasis on **quality assurance**. The legal framework establishes rigorous quality standards and evaluation criteria, ensuring that services meet predefined benchmarks. To oversee compliance, the government has established a **State Agency for Quality Assurance in Social Services**, which provides methodological support to service providers and monitors adherence to quality standards.

In conclusion, social services in Bulgaria represent a **system of structured, multi-dimensional interventions** aimed at:

- Mitigating social risks,
- Promoting social inclusion, and
- Safeguarding access to fundamental social rights.

Delivered through a network of **public, private, and non-governmental providers**, these services are underpinned by a strong commitment to **quality assurance, accessibility, and efficiency**. The Bulgarian model exemplifies the broader European approach to social services, highlighting the importance of universal access, tailored support, and continuous quality improvement.

This framework not only addresses immediate social needs but also contributes to long-term societal resilience, making it a critical area of study for policymakers and researchers alike. Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of these services on social cohesion, economic stability, and the well-being of vulnerable populations, particularly in the context of evolving EU policies and funding mechanisms.

Given the legislative framework and institutional structure, social services in Bulgaria can be defined as a system of structured interventions aimed at supporting individuals and communities in overcoming social risks, promoting social inclusion, and ensuring access to fundamental social rights. These services are delivered through a network of public, private, and non-governmental providers, with a strong emphasis on quality assurance, accessibility, and efficiency.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted in three distinct phases, each designed to systematically explore the barriers to the development of social services in Bulgaria. The methodology combined desk research, quantitative data collection, and rigorous sampling techniques to ensure a comprehensive and reliable analysis.

**Desk Research.** The initial phase involved an extensive literature review of theoretical and empirical sources, including scientific reports and policy analyses at both national and international levels, empirical studies on social service provision and development, and legislative documents governing social services in Bulgaria and the EU.

This review provided the theoretical foundation for the study and informed the development of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire, designed and administered via Microsoft Forms, consisted of 16 questions organized into four thematic blocks:

**Demographic Profile (5 questions)** – Capturing key characteristics of respondents, such as their professional roles and institutional affiliations.

**Profile of Social Needs in Bulgaria (5 questions)** – Identifying priority needs and gaps in service provision across different types of social services.

**Interaction Between Social Service Providers (4 questions)** – Examining collaboration dynamics and partnerships within the sector.

**Overall Policy Assessment (2 questions)** – Evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies and frameworks governing social services.

**Quantitative Survey.** The second phase involved a nationwide quantitative survey, targeting over 200 organizations providing social services in Bulgaria. These organizations were identified through the National Social Services Map, a comprehensive database of social service providers in the country. A total of 65 organizations participated in the study, representing a diverse cross-section of the sector.

The survey sample was designed to meet several key criteria to ensure robustness and relevance:

**Geographical Coverage** – The sample included providers of both specialized and universal social services across Bulgaria. According to respondents, the study covered: Specialized institutions (44%), Residential-type services (37%), and Consultative services (19%).

**Service Providers** – The study included all major types of social service providers: Municipalities (48%), which play a central role in service delivery, and NGOs and private organizations (52%), which are increasingly active in the sector.

Collectively, the participating organizations employed 1,030 staff members and served 3,738 beneficiaries, reflecting the scale of their operations.

**Diversity of Target Groups** – The survey encompassed services for children, families, adults, people with disabilities, victims of violence, ensuring a broad representation of social needs and vulnerable populations.

**Professional Experience** – The survey was conducted among various organizations, but according to the empirical information received, it covers organizations with more than 15 years of experience in the provision of social services. Notably, 98% of respondents reported more than 15 years of professional experience, and 85% held leadership or social work positions, ensuring a high level of expertise in the responses.

**Institutional Representation** – To ensure reliability, only one representative per organization was allowed to complete the questionnaire. This approach ensured that responses reflected a holistic institutional perspective rather than fragmented individual opinions.

While the study does not claim full representativeness due to its reliance on voluntary response sampling, the data collected are considered highly reliable for several reasons:

- The rigorous selection criteria for respondents ensured that only well-informed and experienced professionals participated.
- The requirement for one expert per institution to complete the questionnaire minimized bias and ensured a consistent institutional perspective.

- The diversity of the sample in terms of geography, service types, and provider categories enhanced the generalizability of the findings.

This methodological approach provides a structured and data-driven assessment of the challenges facing the Bulgarian social services

**Results and Discussions**

In order to identify the critical points in the social services sector in Bulgaria, the first section of the study focuses on the priority needs of the population, the available gaps and the possible improvements of the social services sector in Bulgaria.

The data from Table 1 show a clear hierarchy of priority social needs in Bulgaria. The highest priority is given to: People with disabilities (71.5% of respondents rank them in the top 3), Elderly people (69.5%), Families with children (62.6%). These results reflect demographic and social changes in the country, including an aging population, an increase in the number of people with disabilities, and growing challenges for families. Older people and people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable groups that require a comprehensive approach and long-term strategies. Taking into account this assessment and the priority needs of the population proposed by the specialists, chi-square tests were carried out to investigate the relationship between the type of customers currently served by all surveyed organizations, regardless of the type of services they provide and regardless of whether they work with the respective priority Groups. Within the framework of the analysis, it emerged that regardless of the type of social services, the hierarchy of priority social needs in Bulgaria remains unchanged.

In order to obtain more in-depth information, respondents were asked to identify specific reasons for the existence of the relevant need, as well as to point out major gaps in the process of providing social services oriented to the specific group.

The empirical information collected as a result of the study is presented in detail in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 1. Priority Social Needs in Bulgaria**

In the next few years, what social needs should Bulgarian prioritise?	Number of Respondents			
	Ranked 1 <sup>st</sup>	Ranked 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Ranked 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Total who ranked this social need among the Top 3(% out of 64
Children	13	12	10	35 54,7%
Families	23	10	7	40 62,6%
Youth	6	12	4	22 34%
Elderly	38	2	5	45 69,5%
Disabilities	39	5	2	46 71,5%
Mental Healt	10	9	10	29 45,8%
Other	1	4	2	7 11,2%

From the data presented in Table 1, it is obvious that the priority groups of the population in need of social services are people with disabilities (71.5%), the elderly – 69.5% and families – 62.6%.

In more detail, the following trend emerges:

1. Of all 45 respondents in the survey who identified older persons as a priority group, the questionnaire sought answers to the questions about the reasons for these assessments. The results of the study show that social isolation, dementia, financial dependence and the health status of individuals are the primary reason for seeking social services and prioritizing the needs of adults.

2. With regard to persons with disabilities, the main priorities for all 46 respondents are challenges such as the need for therapy and rehabilitation, unemployment problems and limited architectural environment, and hence social isolation.

3. Families have problems with child neglect, institutional care for children, divorce and single parents.

As within the framework of the survey, respondents represent three main groups of services – services in a specialized environment, residential services and consulting services, we deepened the survey in search of an answer to the reason for the emergence of these problems.

**Table 2. Reasons for the emergence of a gap between the available social services and the outlined priority groups according to the section: specialized services, residential services and counselling services**

Number of respondents who indicate service gap	Service Gap (pick one most important gap)					
	Capacity to meet demand		Effectiveness of solution		Accessibility to client (cost, physical distance, lack of information)	
	n	Reasons for service gap	n	Reasons for service gap	n	Reasons for service gap
Specialized institutions n=29 <sup>1</sup>	19	Adequate funding	8	Case management issues	2	Lack of information in users
	12	Lack of human resources	6	Need for a more flexible approach to organising support	11	Physical Distance from Consumers' Homes
	10	Insufficient capacity and waiting list	4	Need for coordination in the use of ancillary services	15	Lack of cooperation from friends and relatives
Residential-type services n=24 <sup>2</sup>	15	Adequate funding	3	Case management issues	6	Lack of information in users
	11	Lack of human resources	5	Need for a more flexible approach to organising support	6	Physical Distance from Consumers' Homes
	16	Insufficient capacity and waiting list	3	Need for coordination in the use of ancillary services	5	Lack of cooperation from friends and relatives

<sup>1</sup> 29 out of a total of 65 who provide services in Specialized institutions

<sup>2</sup> 24 out of a total of 65 who provide Residential-type services

Consultative services n=12 <sup>3</sup>	4	Insufficient capacity and waiting list	5	Need for coordination in the use of ancillary services	3	Lack of cooperation from friends and relatives
	5	Adequate funding	2	Case management issues	5	Lack of information in users
	7	Lack of human resources	4	Need for a more flexible approach to organising support	1	Physical Distance from Consumers' Homes

Within the response of the organizations, it can be pointed out that the most significant problem area and the existence of a gap between priority needs and available social services lies in the financing of social services and the lack of sufficient human resources. A significant problem with residential services and services in a specialized environment is the lack of covers, as well as the formation of a long waiting list of users. This is especially true for specialized services for people with intellectual disabilities, dementia and the elderly. In the case of counselling services, the difficulties stem from the lack of information among users about the available social services and their benefits.

In order to identify the need for external support in the provision of social services, we used the same ranking approach in order to identify the most important challenges that social service providers face.

Figure 1. Cooperation with other institutions (n=65)

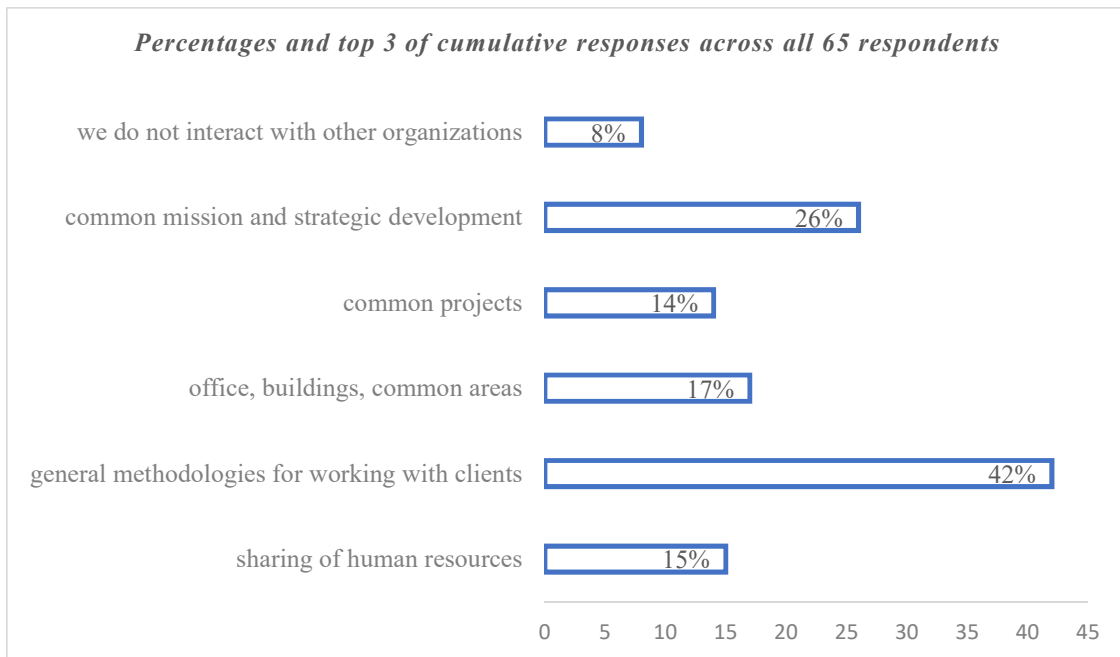


Figure 1 shows that all social organizations apply the established methodologies for working with clients (42%), which shows that there are uniform standards and procedures, regardless of the type of institution and the clients served. The data show that the interaction with

<sup>3</sup> 12 out of a total of 65 who provide Consultative services

other institutions within the social sphere is realized through sharing a common vision and strategic development, with some of the services sharing common buildings. The interaction in the development of common projects is rated lower (14%), and only 8% do not interact with other institutions.

In order to deepen the understanding of the gap in interaction, we asked where it is necessary to deepen communication with stakeholders, other institutions, including government agencies and structures. (Fig. 2). The accumulated empirical data allow us to draw several conclusions: 1. Most distinctly, social institutions need stronger interaction with stakeholders, volunteers and administrative structures, followed by opportunities to work on joint projects in order to improve the organizational structure and methods of working with clients. Last but not least, the need for an exchange of good practices was also outlined.

Figure 2. Top 3 gaps in the organizations of social services in Bulgaria (n=65)



Finally, due to the many years of experience of the specialists, in the last section of the study we sought information on the overall policy evaluation. Almost all experts pointed out that policies in the field of social services correspond to the European development of the country and support them (93%). In terms of policy recommendations, the organisations proposed the following improvements:

In the field of funding: **1. Increasing the cost of social services** as a percentage of the country's GDP and more transparent mechanisms for access to projects financed by EU funds. **2. In the area of cooperation with other institutions**, the need for more support from volunteers, stakeholders and the dissemination of good practices in the process of providing the service is outlined. **3. Social organizations focus on the need** for digital transformation of services, especially in small settlements and in residential-type services and specialized institutions for adults and people with mental disabilities. **4. The problem with human resources is more than**

**obvious** and the recommendation of the experts is aimed at improving the training programs, as well as the creation of mechanisms for retaining young specialists and experts in small settlements.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights the need to:

1. **Increasing funding:** Additional resources need to be directed to priority groups, especially people with disabilities and the elderly. This includes both state funding and attracting European funds.
2. **Improving access to services:** A strategy should be developed to reduce waiting lists and improve information accessibility. This may include using digital technologies to provide services.
3. **Staff training and motivation:** Training and upskilling programs for social workers are needed, which will improve the quality of services and increase user satisfaction.
4. **Integration of services:** The coherence between the different types of services (specialised, residential and consultative) needs to be improved. This includes the creation of multidisciplinary teams and the improvement of coordination between institutions.

This study underscores the urgency of reforming Bulgaria's social services sector to meet EU standards. By addressing funding, coordination, and legislative gaps, Bulgaria can build a resilient system that prioritizes vulnerable populations. Future research should evaluate the impact of these reforms on social cohesion and economic stability.

### **References**

- [1] Manfred; H, Mathias M, Barbara S. (2006). Study on social and health services of general interest in the European Union. Final synthesis report prepared for DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. Vienna: European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research. Available from Internet: [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/spsi/docs/social\\_protection/2008/study\\_social\\_health\\_services\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/docs/social_protection/2008/study_social_health_services_en.pdf)
- [2] Implementing the Community Lisbon programme (2006): Social services of general interest in the European Union, COM(2006) 177 of 26 April 2006. Available from Internet <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2006/123/>
- [3] Ana Llana-Nozal at all (2022). Provision of social services in EU countries. Reform of the national framework for the provision of social services in Spain, OECD SOCIAL, EMPLOYMENT AND MIGRATION WORKING PAPERS No. 276 Avalibel at [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/provision-of-social-services-in-eu-countries\\_ba4fbaf2-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/provision-of-social-services-in-eu-countries_ba4fbaf2-en.html)
- [4] Stake, R. E. & Schwandt, T. A. (2006). On discerning quality in evaluation. In I. F. Shaw, J. C. Greene & M. M. Mark (Eds.) The Sage Handbook of Evaluation. pp.404-418. London, Available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225083670>
- [5] Parasuraman, A., Zeithmal, V. & Berry, L. (1985) A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. Journal of Marketing, 49.
- [6] Directive 2006/123/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2006 on services in the internal market. Available from Internet <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2006/123/>

- [7] Social Services Act. Promulgated, SG No. 24/22.03.2019, effective 1.07.2020 - amended, SG No. 101/27.12.2019; amended with Decision No. 9 of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Bulgaria of 14.07.2020 - SG No.65/21.07.2020; amended and supplemented, SG No. 71/11.08.2020, SG No. 110/29.12.2020, effective 31.12.2020, SG No. 14/17.02.2021, effective 17.02.2021, amended, SG No. 8/28.01.2022, effective 1.01.2022
- [8] National Map of Social Services (2024) promulgated, SG, No. 68/13.08.2024 Available at: <https://asp.government.bg/bg/deynosti/sotsialni-uslugi/planirane-na-socialnite-uslugi>
- [9] Bahle.T. (2003). The changing institutionalization of social services in England and Wales, France and Germany: is the welfare state on the retreat? Volume: 13 issue: 1, page(s): 5-20 Issue published: February 1, 2003 Available from Internet: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928703013001035>
- [10] European Commission (2022) Study on social services with particular focus on personal targeted social services for people in vulnerable situations, VC/2020/0175 ISBN: 978-92-76-52096-2 doi:10.2767/552978
- [11] Vekova, L. (2020) Social Services in Bulgaria – Legal Changes, Development and Challenges, 2020, Ed. University of Shumen» Bishop Konstantin Preslavski, Vol. 24, Issue 1, pp. 503-516
- [12] Rusanova, L. (2024) Evolution of Social Services in Bulgaria – an attempt to project a model of social services, Journal Social work, Issue Year: XII/2024 Issue No:2, pp:1-23 Available at: <https://www.swjournal-bg.com/issue.php?id=42>
- [13] Kolarova, Ts. (2024). Dynamics of Development and Functions of Social Services in Bulgaria, Social sciences 2024, Vol 13, N2, pp.35-41 Available at: <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ss.20241302.13>
- [14] Institute for Market Economy (2022) An integrated approach to social assistance in Bulgaria. Available at <https://ime.bg/en/>