

Exposing Europe's guilty secret: the incarcerated children of Bulgaria

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By Rosa Monckton

It is the smell that assaults you - filthy nappies, unwashed babies, rotting flesh. Then you are hit by the silence, an eerie, unnatural silence, the silence of babies who have given up hope of ever being consoled, cuddled or comforted. It is the dreadful quiet of starving, neglected, unloved children waiting to die.

I was in an institution for children aged three and younger in Bulgaria, and I found myself crouching beside a cot so that the duty "nurse", who was three rooms away but who could survey all the rooms through the viewing glass placed in each dividing wall, was unable to see me. All I could see at this level were bars stretching all the way to the viewing station, bars imprisoning these children, whose only crime is to have been born. What sort of a Europe is it that consigns innocent babies and children to a life like this - a life bereft of all hope?

The poor child whose cot I was hiding next to had hydrocephalus. His swollen head was turned to one side, and I could see his brain oozing out of his skull. The girl in the adjacent cot was so pitifully thin that she looked flattened, like a cardboard cut-out. The next one along had his legs tied together, with an old pillow case pulled over them - I felt a huge growth on one of his spindle-like legs.

The children in this particular wing have no human contact. They are fed lying on their backs, and have their nappies changed only when there happens to be a supply of new ones. Not one single word is uttered to them, so none of them is able to talk. This is how they live, and this is how they die.

Over the past few months I have visited eight institutions in Bulgaria, and have been staggered by the total lack of humanity. The baby world does not exist for these children.

Children in Western Europe are institutionalised because of abuse and neglect, whereas in other parts of Europe, particularly the old communist countries, it is because of abandonment and disability. In Eastern Europe there is still a widely held belief that disabled children are best dealt with by being removed from their families and separated from society.

So the flow of children into the institutional system continues, with many parents being forced by the State to hand over their children at the moment of birth if a disability has been diagnosed. Bulgaria has the second-highest rate of placement of children in institutions in Europe (Russia is top of the list).

In another institution I was taken around by a blonde Cruella de Vil: stiletto heels, heavily made-up, clutching a clipboard as we marched along a corridor. Stopping at each window, she consulted her list, took the pen from behind her ear and pointed: "This one cerebral palsy, this one very handicapped, this one Down's Syndrome, this one don't know...."

I asked to go into one of the rooms and picked up the nearest child, a living skeleton. And what was wrong with him? He was blind. Just blind. But now he was starving to death, rocking and banging his head against the side of his cot. On another visit, I asked the director, a pediatrician, about a child with Down's Syndrome. Why was she here? "She has Down's Syndrome, she will die." I told her that this was not true, that these children could live fulfilled lives.

Angered, she asked: "Are you a doctor?" No, I replied, but I was the mother of a child with Down's Syndrome. "But you are not a doctor, so you don't understand... these children have no use. They should never have been born."

I am working with a charity called The Bulgarian Abandoned Children's Trust and our aim is to re-educate government, doctors, midwives and parents to bring an end to institutionalization and build small-group homes for the children to move into. Because, unlike Romania, which has made huge progress in the reform of its institutions and has shown that it is ready and willing to change, Bulgaria remains in denial. The Government sees little need for change. Nor has it come under the sort of pressure that Romania faced when it was in discussions to join the European Union and reform of its children's institutions was a condition of entry.

One of the problems with the old Eastern bloc countries is that where the State was the guarantor of all moral values, it dehumanised society. The idea of charity, of social responsibility, of caring for others, was eradicated. There seems to be no recognition on the part of the carers that they share something with these children - and that what they share is a common humanity. In homes for the dying in India, you find volunteers serving food, cleaning, or simply talking to patients 24 hours a day. There is a purpose and a feeling of life, and hope, in even the most impoverished homes.

The sterility and eerie silence of the Eastern European children's homes is all the more shocking by contrast. These children are Europe's guilty secret, hidden away from the world. We need to talk about them, to bring the whole issue out into the open. We need a co-coordinated European strategy, operating at the highest levels of government. A tightly run ten-year plan could lead to many of these shameful places closing their doors. This will need to include social reform, services in the community, fostering being made an occupation, easier adoption laws, the building of small-group homes and, most importantly, more support at birth. More than 96 per cent of institutionalized children across Europe have at least one living parent. Help is needed to persuade families that they can cope.

It is too late to help many of the children incarcerated in institutions - their lives are already irreparably damaged. But we can stop the flow of children into these places. We need early intervention programmes in hospitals and maternity wards; we need to make people care. If you are one of those people who hunts through the supermarket to avoid buying a battery-raised chicken, think for a moment about these children, who are treated no better.