

**INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF THE STRATEGIC GUIDELINES AND REGULATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICES FOR OLDER PEOPLE AND ELDERLY PEOPLE****Tanya Vazova<sup>1</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>PhD in Economics, Chief Assistant of the Department of Social Activities at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Plovdiv University «P. Hilendarski», Plovdiv, Bulgaria  
E-mail: tvazova@uni-plovdiv.bg, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0768-9720>*

**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines international and national legal frameworks, policy documents and initiatives that aim to improve the quality and accessibility of social services for older people. It focuses on the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Social Charter, which lay the foundations for the protection of the rights and dignity of this group. At the national level, Bulgaria implements numerous laws, including the Social Services Act and the Disability Act, which guarantee legal protection and access to social services. Despite the established legal framework, challenges have been identified such as fragmented legislation, insufficient resources and lack of coordination between institutions. The study highlights the need for an integrated approach to provide quality services, including active living, deinstitutionalisation and social integration measures. Guidelines for policy improvement and adaptation to demographic and socio-economic changes are proposed.

**Keywords:** social services, elderly people, legal framework, national strategies, demographic challenges.

**Introduction.** Demographic changes worldwide associated with population ageing pose new challenges for social and health systems. Increasing life expectancy combined with declining fertility rates is leading to a significant increase in the proportion of older people in society. This requires a rethinking and adaptation of policies, services and resources aimed at meeting their specific needs and ensuring social integration and active participation in community life. Older people not only need support and care, but also represent an important resource for society through their experience, wisdom and ability to contribute in different areas.

International and national efforts to improve the quality of life of older people are based on a legal framework that ensures the protection of their rights and dignity. Fundamental documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Social Charter and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing provide principles and guidelines for the development of policies that take into account the need for sustainable and effective social services. At national

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level, Bulgaria is also taking steps to implement these international standards by developing laws and strategies to meet the needs of the growing older population.

However, the issues related to the provision of social services for older people remain complex and multi-layered. Limited resources, lack of coordination between institutions and fragmentation of legislation are just some of the problems that hinder the achievement of high quality and accessibility of these services. These challenges highlight the need for a systematic approach to policy development based on needs analysis, innovative practices and adaptation to local conditions.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the international and national dimensions of strategic guidelines and regulations for social services for older people. By examining key legal documents, policies and best practices, the study seeks to identify gaps and challenges, as well as offer recommendations for optimizing these services. Particular attention is paid to an integrated approach to social care that combines health, social and cultural aspects into a holistic system aimed at improving the quality of life and social inclusion of older people.

This research fits into the broader context of efforts to achieve sustainable development and social justice, providing a basis for future research and policy initiatives aimed at improving the lives of older people in Bulgaria and beyond.

**Methodology.** This study is based on a systematic approach to analyse the legal and strategic framework for social services for older people. The methodology combines quantitative and qualitative methods aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the issues under study.

An analytical approach was used to examine key international and national documents related to social services for older people. Fundamental international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Social Charter, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as well as European Union policy documents including the Green Paper on Ageing and the European Pillar of Social Rights are examined. At the national level, laws such as the Social Services Act and the Disability Act have been analysed, as well as relevant regulations and strategies.

Data were collected from various official sources, including reports of national and international institutions, scientific publications, policy documents and legislation. This information has been used to identify the key characteristics and challenges facing social services for older people.

A comparative method was applied to study social services in Bulgaria in the context of best practices in other European countries. This allows identifying potential improvements and adapting successful models to national conditions.

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Inductive and deductive techniques are used to formulate conclusions and recommendations based on both empirical data and theoretical analysis. This approach ensures logical consistency and reliability of results.

The collected data are systematized in order to draw patterns, identify weaknesses in existing policies and regulations and formulate practical guidelines for improving social services for the elderly.

This study is limited to the analysis of available documentation and secondary data, which may limit the ability to include specific empirical observations. It is recommended that future studies include qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups with representatives of the target group and service providers.

This methodology provides a basis for detailed and systematic analysis, aiming to contribute to a better understanding and optimisation of social services for older people.

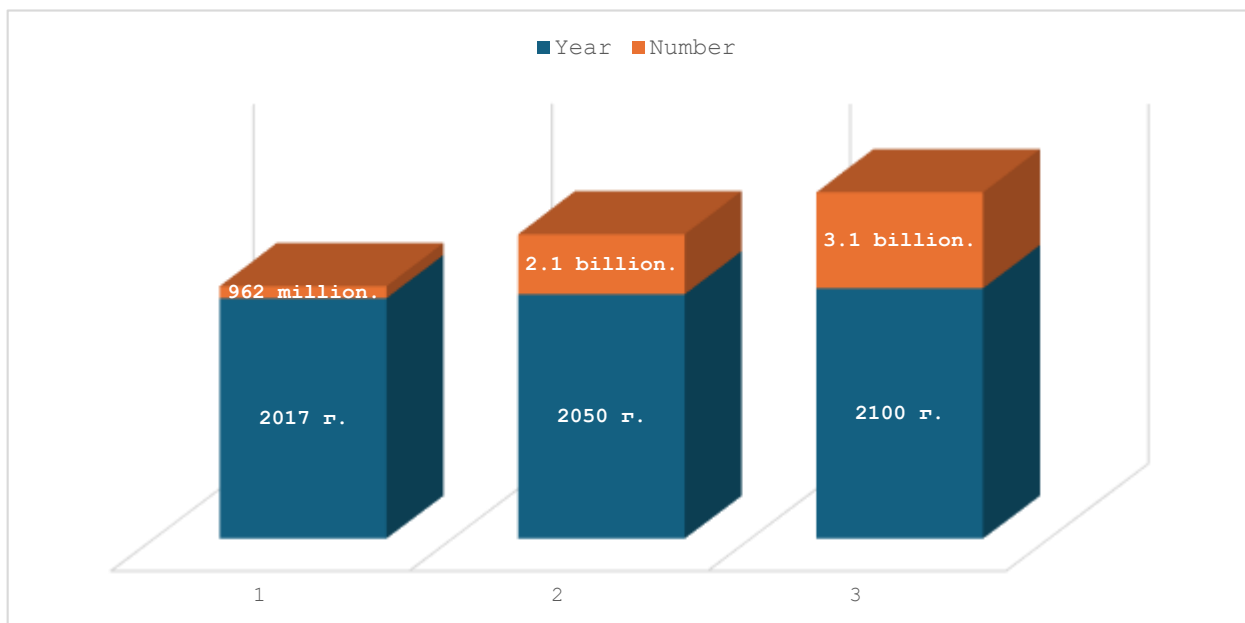
**Demographic situation and expectations.** Population ageing is a serious demographic problem that affects the society and economy of many countries around the world and directly influences the demand for and provision of social services. This phenomenon occurs when the average age of the population increases and the number and proportion of people aged 60-65 years and over increases. There are many causes of population ageing, including the migration of young people, declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy.

One of the key indicators used to analyse population ageing is the Age Dependency Ratio (ADR). The age dependency ratio shows the number of persons in the 'dependent' age group (population under 15 and 65 and over) per 100 persons in the 'independent' age group (15 to 64 years). It is calculated as a percentage. However, the use of the CHD as a long-term indicator of ageing poses conceptual problems as it assumes that 65-year-olds today are the same as those in the past or future. In reality, people aged 65 today are at a different stage in their life cycle than decades ago - they are in better health and are expected to live longer, resulting in different social and economic behaviours. Therefore, both the biological and social aspects of old age depend not only on age but also on life expectancy. Therefore, the traditional definition of old age and CHD needs to be complemented with indicators that account for changing life expectancy.

A new indicator, the Estimated Age Dependency Ratio (EADR), is being developed. In this indicator, the old-age threshold is not fixed but is based on life expectancy. People are considered elderly when the average remaining life expectancy for their age group is below 15 years. This new indicator offers a very different perspective on ageing in Europe, contrary to previous views.

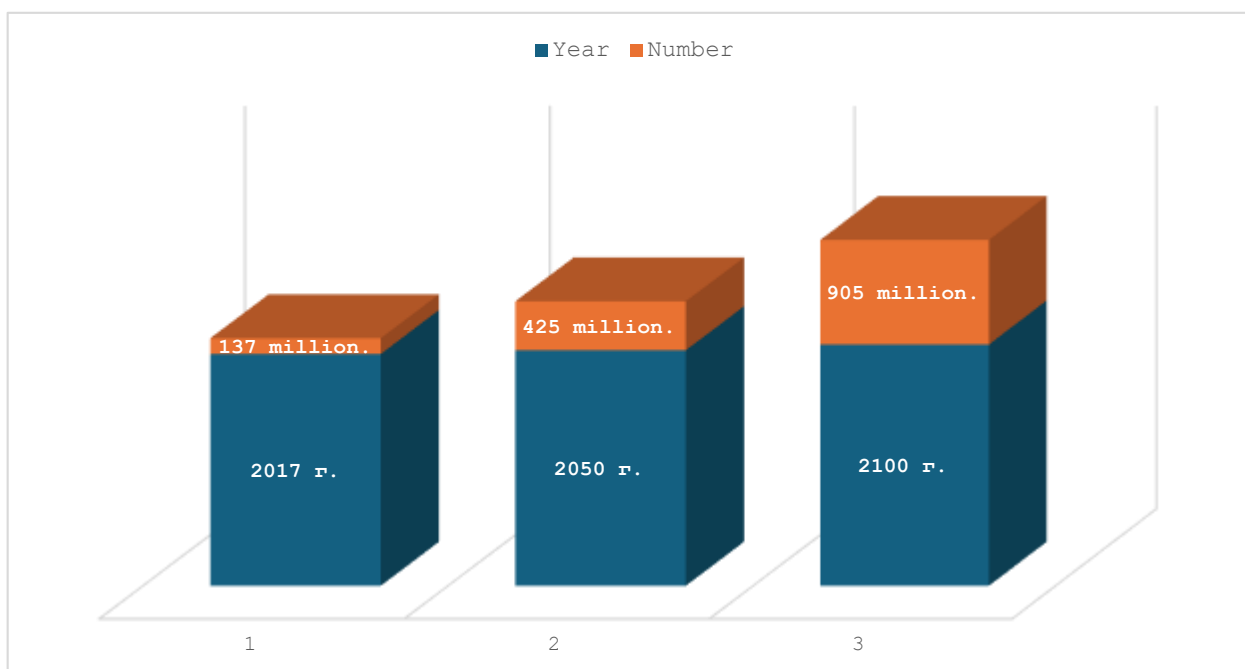
According to data from World Population Prospects: the 2017 Revision, the number of older people - those aged 60 or older - is expected to double by 2050 and triple by 2100, growing from

962 million globally in 2017 to 2.1 billion in 2050 and 3.1 billion in 2100. Population ageing is poised to become one of the most significant social transformations of the twenty-first century.



**Figure 1: Increase in the number of people aged 60+ in the world**

The number of people aged 80 or older is projected to triple by 2050 and increase to nearly seven times its 2017 value by 2100. Globally, the number of people aged 80 and over is projected to grow from 137 million in 2017 to 425 million in 2050 and to 909 million in 2100. In 2017, 27 per cent of all persons aged 80 and over lived in Europe, but this proportion is projected to decline to 17 per cent in 2050 and to 10 per cent in 2100 as the populations of other regions continue to increase in size and they themselves age [1].

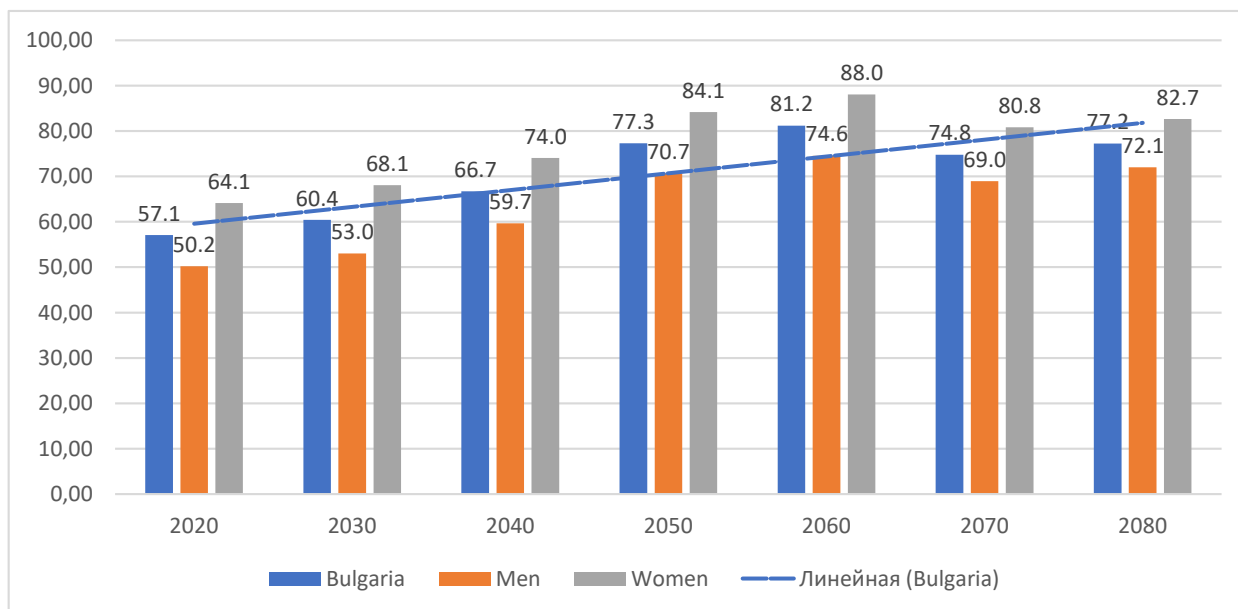


**Figure 2: Increase in the number of people over 80 in the world**

Population ageing is emerging as a long-term and irreversible social process for European countries, including Bulgaria [2]. According to EUROSTAT projections, the share of the population in Bulgaria aged 65+ will increase from 17.4% in 2010 to 32.7% in 2060.

According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI) for 2022, the ratio of the population aged 65 and over to the population aged 20 to 64 in 2022 is 40.8%, compared to 30.6% in 2012, and is expected to reach 57.4% in 2050. The ratio of the population aged under 20 and aged 65 and over to the population aged 20 to 64 in 2022 is 73.4%, compared to 59.6% in 2012, and is expected to reach 93.2% in 2050.

The ageing process is more pronounced among women than among men. For 2020, the relative share of women aged 65+ is 25.3% and of men 18.1%, compared to 2025, when the relative share of women aged 65+ will be 26.7% and of men 19.1%, and 2050, when the relative share of women aged 65+ will be 32.5% compared to men 26.7%. This difference is due to the higher mortality rate among men and, as a consequence, their lower life expectancy.



**Figure 3: Age dependency ratio by sex, looking to 2080**

Source [3]

The ageing trend of the population is also leading to changes in its basic age structure - under, in and over working age. Both the ageing of the population and the legislative requirements linked to the age at which a person can start receiving pension benefits have an impact on the population aged in and over working age <sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The age limits for the distribution of the population in the categories above the working age in Bulgaria are defined in accordance with the Ordinance on Pensions and Social Security Seniority adopted by Decree No. 30 of the Council of Ministers (State Gazette No. 21/17.03.2000). The Ordinance sets out in detail the age for entitlement to a retirement pension for the relevant year, which is regulated in the CSR as follows: entitlement to a retirement pension from 2016 is acquired on reaching the age of 60 years and 10 months for women and 63 years and 10 months for men, for 2018. - 61 years and 2 months for women and 64 years and 1 month for men; for 2023 - 62 years for women and 64 years and 6 months for men; for 2029 - at age 63 for women and 65 for men; for 2033 - at age 64 for women and 65 for men; for 2037 - at age 65 for women and men.

The working-age population in 2022 is 3 775 thousand people, or 58.5% of the country's population, with 1 975 thousand men and 1 799 thousand women. In 2022, the number of working age population decreases by almost 331 people, or 1.4%, compared to the previous year. By the end of 2022, there are 1,694 thousand people over working age, or 26.2%, and 977 people under working age, or 15.2% of the country's population.

The decline in the working age population could have wide-ranging and complex implications for Bulgaria's social systems. A shrinking labour force can lead to difficulties in the economy - with fewer people of working age, it may be more difficult to maintain social systems and services for the elderly and old. With the growing need for longer active lives, there may also be a greater need for lifelong education and training to ensure that people are skilled and competitive in the labour market. Demographically, it will be necessary to develop measures and policies that support the working age population to remain active and healthy for longer, and to improve family policies to stimulate fertility.

Distribution of population in towns and villages by age and sex according to data from the National Statistical Institute. By 2022, 73.6% of the population of Bulgaria lived in urban areas and 26.3% in rural areas, compared to 2012 when 72.9% of the population of Bulgaria lived in urban areas and 27.1% in rural areas.

Despite the strong urbanisation of the population, by 2022, 28.2% of people aged 65 and over live in villages, to 53.6% of people aged between 20 and 64, compared to 2012 when this ratio was 25.9% to 56%. By 2022, 21.8% of people aged 65+ live in cities, to 59.1% of people aged 20-64, compared to 2012 when the ratio was 16.7% to 69.6%.

There is a trend of an increasing share of the adult population in the villages, in contrast to the period 65 years ago, when the share of young people in the villages was higher than in the cities. This determines the higher territorial dispersion of the elderly population, which additionally poses a challenge for access to social services and their organisation.

**The international legal basis for services for the elderly and older people.** Older people occupy a key place in society as bearers of wisdom, experience and values that enrich all generations. In view of the growing challenges associated with an ageing population, there is a growing awareness of the need to clearly protect their rights and well-being. This is why various documents and initiatives at international level underline the importance of these efforts, laying the foundations for respecting human dignity and ensuring decent living conditions for all, regardless of age.

One of the most important founding documents in this regard is the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 10 December 1948.

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It affirms the idea that all human beings possess inalienable rights and establishes universal principles - human dignity, liberty, equality and fraternity - that continue to have a profound impact on a global scale today. The Declaration defines rights such as freedom of religion, belief and expression, as well as social, economic and cultural rights, including the right to a standard of living adequate to maintain the health and well-being of the individual and his or her family.

On the basis of these universal principles, the **European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** was signed in Rome in 1950 and entered into force in 1953. The Convention, ratified in Bulgaria in 1992, adapted and extended the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, creating mechanisms for the protection of human rights in the European context. Through this document, the European Court of Human Rights was established, which provides any citizen whose rights are violated by a state actor with the opportunity to bring a case in the international arena. This innovation gives individuals the power to assert their rights across national borders, and the Court's decisions are binding on the States that are party to the Convention.

Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights play a key role in the promotion and protection of human rights globally and in Europe. They reinforce the fundamental principles of equality, freedom and justice and lay the foundations for the protection of the dignity of every individual. Their importance is particularly great for vulnerable groups, including older people, whose contribution and needs must be recognised and respected by society. These documents affirm the importance of continued efforts to preserve human rights and create a fairer future for all.

Also, the **European Social Charter**, ratified in Bulgaria in 2000, plays a key role in protecting the rights of older people by explicitly providing measures to ensure opportunities for their full participation in society. Article 23 of the Charter obliges member states to adopt appropriate measures to enable older people to lead independent and free lives, to receive the necessary assistance and to preserve their personal dignity in social and health care settings. These principles extend and support the rights enshrined in earlier documents such as the Universal Declaration and the ECHR.

**The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**, adopted by the United Nations in 1966, also plays an important role in promoting the social and economic rights of people, including the elderly. Bulgaria ratified this Covenant in 1970 and it lays the foundations for international standards that guarantee citizens access to adequate social services, health care and decent living conditions.

A major shift has also been observed globally since the **First World Assembly on Ageing** in 1982. If ageing was then a major concern of mostly developed countries, today we understand

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that such a dramatic demographic transformation has profound implications for every aspect of individual, community, national and international life in developing countries as well.

The Madrid Action Plan proposes a bold new agenda to tackle ageing in the 21st century. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Political Declaration adopted at the **Second World Assembly** on Ageing in April 2002 mark a turning point in the way the world addresses the major challenge of "building a society for all ages" [4], reaffirming the principles and recommendations for action of the International Plan of Action on Ageing, endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1982, and the UN Principles on Ageing, adopted by the General Assembly in 1991, which provide guidance in the areas of independence, participation, care, self-care - fulfilment and dignity.

**UN Convention on the Rights of Older.** The UN Principles for Older Persons were adopted by the UN General Assembly (Resolution 46/91) on 16 December 1991. Governments are encouraged to incorporate them into their national programmes wherever possible. There are 18 principles which can be grouped into five themes: independence, participation, care, self-realization and dignity.

**The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union** is another important international document that guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms that apply to all EU citizens when they are within the scope of EU law.

The Charter was originally launched in Nice in 2000 and was amended and re-launched in 2007.

**The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (ratified by a law adopted by the 41st National Assembly on 26.01.2012 - State Gazette No. 12 of 10.02.2012) and its Optional Protocol is an international document adopted in 2006 by the United Nations and entered into force in 2008. The Convention accepts different types of disabilities and promotes the recognition of the diversity and specific needs of people with disabilities, prohibits discrimination and requires equal access to rights and opportunities for all, recognises the right of people with disabilities to equal access to work, *social services and vital resources*. Bulgaria is a member state of the United Nations and has signed and ratified this convention, which imposes obligations to provide appropriate social services and support the inclusion of people with disabilities in society.

**Council Declaration on the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2012): The way forward**

Here, some of the key principles relate to promoting health care and disease prevention, providing services that enable older people with health problems to live with as much independence as possible, being treated with dignity and compassion.



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**The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) 2017** recognises the importance of social services for older and elderly people as a means to improve the quality of life and social integration of citizens in the European Union (EU). Social services for the elderly within the EPSR are based on several principles and values related to promoting access to social services for users, without discrimination and depending on the wishes of the persons who use them. This includes appropriate services that are accessible to all, regardless of financial, physical or other constraints. The importance of the quality of social services for the elderly and older people is also emphasised. They should be provided by competent and trained professionals and respond to the specific needs and preferences of individuals. These services must promote the independence, dignity and active participation of older people in society. EPSR recognises the need for social services that support and care for older people with care dependencies, including people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, encouraging them to participate in the planning and decision-making process relating to social services that affect them. Social services for older people include a wide range of areas such as health, social care, education, training, culture, employment and others. EPSR encourages EU Member States to develop and improve social services to meet the needs of senior citizens and ensure their social integration and well-being.

On 27 January 2021, **the European Commission presented its Green Paper on Ageing**. It covers a range of issues and challenges related to the growing number of older people in the EU and how to tackle this demographic phenomenon. Topics covered include: health and active ageing; lifelong learning; new opportunities and challenges in retirement; poverty in old age, etc. The Green Paper launches a broad debate on a number of topical and controversial issues related to older and old people, helping to formulate EU policies, programmes and legislation aimed at better managing the challenges of ageing. This process is important because it allows different stakeholders to participate in the formulation of decisions that have an impact on the lives of older citizens in the EU.

The international and national dimensions of the strategic guidelines and the regulatory framework for improving the quality and accessibility of services for older and elderly people demonstrate the commitment of the international and European community to improving the living conditions of this vulnerable group. The extensive legal basis, made up of key international documents and initiatives, underlines the importance of their rights and provides a strong basis for the development of social services at local and national level.

**National regulatory framework related to the provision of social services for the elderly and the elderly.** The regulatory framework at national level related to the provision of social services for the elderly and the elderly helps to understand the rules and mechanisms that regulate

the care of this group of persons in a given country. The following table outlines the different laws and acts that are relevant to social services and the rights of the elderly:

*Table 1**Regulatory framework of services for elderly and old people in Bulgaria*

<b>Law</b>	<b>Area of regulation and basic principles</b>
<b>Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (SG No. 56 of 13.07.1991)</b>	It establishes the framework for the governance and safeguarding of citizens' rights and freedoms in society.
<b>Social Assistance Act (SAA) - (SG No. 56 of 19 May 1998)</b>	It regulates the public relations related to guaranteeing the right of citizens in the Republic of Bulgaria to social assistance through social benefits.
<b>Regulations for the implementation of the Social Assistance Act (SG No. 133 of 11 November 1998).</b>	Clarifies and specifies the rules and procedures for the implementation of the LSA.
<b>Law on Equality between Women and Men (SG No. 33 of 26 April 2016).</b>	It regulates the institutional mechanism for equality between women and men in Bulgaria, providing guarantees for equality through the implementation of a long-term state policy.
<b>Law on Persons with Disabilities (PWD) - (SG No. 105 of 18 December 2018, in force from 01.01.2019)</b>	Defines the rights and protections of people with disabilities in various areas of public life, including education, work and social services. Includes rules for the provision of social services for this group of persons.
<b>Regulations for the implementation of the Disabled Persons Act (DPA) - (SG 27 of 2 April 2019, in force from 01.04.2019).</b>	Clarifies and specifies the rules and procedures for the implementation of the HMA.
<b>Protection from Discrimination Act (PDA) - (SG No. 86 of 30 September 2003, in force from 01.01.2004)</b>	Regulates the protection of all natural persons on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria against all forms of discrimination, at the same time contributing to its prevention and promotes equal opportunities measures.
<b>Law on Protection from Domestic Violence (SG No. 27 of 29 March 2005).</b>	Protects victims of domestic violence and promotes their judicial protection.
<b>Ombudsman Act (EA) - (SG No. 48 of 23 May 2003, in force from 01.01.2004)</b>	Regulates the status, functions and competences of the Ombudsman in Bulgaria. - The Ombudsman plays an important role in protecting the rights of citizens, including those who use social services.
<b>Social Services Act (SSA) - (SG No. 24 of 22 March 2019, in force from 01.07.2020)</b>	It regulates the provision of a variety of social services, including those for the elderly and disabled.
<b>Regulations for the implementation of the Social Services Act (SSSA) - (Adopted by PMS No. 306 of 9.11.2020, SG No. 98 of 17.11.2020, in force from 17.11.2020)</b>	Clarifies and specifies the rules and procedures for implementing the LSA.
<b>Personal Assistance Act (PAA) - (SG No. 105 of 18 December 2018)</b>	Regulates the provision of personal assistance to people who need care and support, including the elderly and the aged.
<b>Ordinance on the quality of social services (SG No. 48 of 28 June 2022)</b>	Regulates various aspects related to the provision of all social services defined by the Social Services Act. Ensures high standards of social service provision and protects the interests and rights of both users and workers in the sector.

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Statutory instruments ensure that older people and older people receive social services and support that enable them to live with dignity and respect for their rights and needs. The issue of social services and support for the elderly in Bulgaria affects many aspects of social policy and legislation. The introduction of a number of regulations in the country aims to ensure that these vulnerable groups in society live in dignified and safe conditions, receiving the necessary support and services.

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria lays down the foundations of the welfare state, establishing the principles of social justice, equality and the protection of social rights.

The Social Assistance Act (SAA) is key to regulating the provision of social assistance. It sets out the mechanisms and procedures for assisting individuals and families in difficulty, including the elderly and disabled.

The Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA) focuses on ensuring equal opportunities and protection from discrimination. It seeks the integration of persons with disabilities into society, emphasising their right to access social services, education and employment.

The Protection from Discrimination Act provides a general framework for protection against all forms of discrimination, including on grounds of age or disability, ensuring equal access to all public services and rights.

The Protection from Domestic Violence Act addresses specific measures to protect victims of domestic violence, which often affects older people. It provides mechanisms for immediate protection and support for victims.

The Ombudsman Act strengthens the protection of citizens, including the elderly, by providing the opportunity to lodge complaints in cases of violations of their rights by state and municipal authorities.

The Social Services Act (SSA) and the Personal Assistance Act (PAA) are aimed at regulating the quality and accessibility of social services. They set standards for the provision of assistance and support tailored to the individual needs of each person, including older people.

The Regulation on the Quality of Social Services further specifies the standards and criteria for the assessment of social services, ensuring the high quality of support provided to vulnerable groups.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the legal framework in Bulgaria regulating the provision of social services is based on legislative acts and regulations that seek to ensure a dignified treatment of this vulnerable group of the population. Despite the well-defined normative basis, a number of challenges are often observed in practice that hinder the effective implementation of laws and the provision of quality social services. Among the main problems is

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the scarcity of resources, resulting in limited capacity to provide adequate care. Inadequate oversight and monitoring mechanisms are also a serious problem as they do not provide a sufficient level of scrutiny over the quality of services and compliance with regulatory requirements. Another significant challenge relates to the difficulty in coordination between different institutions and services involved in the provision of social services. The lack of an integrated approach and coordination between government bodies, local authorities and NGOs and private organisations often leads to inefficiencies and duplication of efforts. This can delay or even prevent people in need from accessing the help they need. Continuous improvement of social services and their delivery mechanisms is crucial to ensure high quality services and effective support to the elderly and older people in Bulgaria.

### **Strategies - national and European**

**The European Health Strategy** covers periods of several years and is updated periodically. The first strategy, "For a Healthier Europe: Coherent Action to Improve Health in Europe", was adopted in 2000 and covers the period up to 2008. Subsequently, the European Commission and EU Member States update the Health Strategy at intervals to reflect current health challenges and priorities. These updates are based on consultations with stakeholders and evaluations of previous strategies. The last update was made in 2022.

**The European Disability Strategy (2010-2020)**, paves the way for a "Europe without Barriers" and aims to improve the lives and integration of people with disabilities in the European Union (EU). This strategy was adopted in 2010 and contains a number of measures and targets aimed at providing equal opportunities for people with disabilities in different areas of life, including education, employment, health, social services and many others. Despite the progress made, people with disabilities often face significant barriers and risks that make them more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. In March 2021, the European Commission adopted an improved **Disability Strategy 2021-2030**, which builds on the results of the previous European Disability Strategy 2010-2020. Its objectives aim to improve the lives of people with disabilities in the European Union by recognising the diversity of disabilities, including long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, while taking into account their often invisible nature.

In 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the WHO Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing **and Health 2016-2020**. The strategy promotes the health and well-being of older people by emphasizing the need for integrated care and support within global health systems. It stresses the importance of active ageing and achieving longer and healthier lives through measures to maintain and improve the physical and mental health of older people; prevent

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disease and promote healthy lifestyles, the prevention of various chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, etc., which are often associated with ageing; recognises the need to protect older people from abuse and violence and encourages the establishment of protective measures and services; promotes the participation of older

In 2021, the Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030 Plan was adopted. This is the second action plan of the WHO Global Strategy on Ageing and Health, building on the UN Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and aligned with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals timeline.

**The Europe 2020 strategy** is a key document of the European Union, which aims to guide and coordinate the economic and social policies of the EU Member States over a decade (2010-2020). The role of the Europe 2020 strategy is multifaceted, with one of its main objectives relating to promoting investment in areas such as social services, employment and education in order to improve the standard of living of all citizens.

**A European strategy on care for carers** and care recipients. The aim of the strategy is to provide quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and to improve the situation of both care recipients and , professionally or informally. The strategy is accompanied by two recommendations to Member States on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care and on access to high quality

long-term care at affordable prices.

In addition to the general efforts and guidelines defined at European level, Bulgaria is developing and adopting a number of national strategies aimed at improving the provision of social services.

The provision of social services in the community is among the strategic objectives of the first **National Strategy for the Reduction of Poverty and Social Exclusion for the period 2003-2006**, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 6 October 2003. Improving the provision of social services and ensuring equal access to high quality services, including for the elderly and old people, are among the strategic objectives of the strategy.

**The National Strategy for Demographic Development 2006-2020** (updated by Protocol No. 4.1 of the Council of Ministers' meeting of 1 February 2012 - Updated National Strategy for Demographic Development of the Republic of Bulgaria 2012-2030 [5] plays a key role in the provision of social services, as it defines the scope, priorities and guidelines of social programmes and initiatives related to the demographic challenges facing Bulgaria.

**The National Health Strategy (2014-2020)** is the leading strategic document that specifies the objectives for the development of the health care system until 2020. The document was adopted

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by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria on 21.09.2013. The National Health Strategy for the period up to 2020 and the **National Strategy for Mental Health of the Citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021 - 2030** are extremely important strategic documents for health care in Bulgaria. These strategies summarize the priorities and objectives for the development of the health care system during the specific period and is in line with the country's commitments both at European and international level. It is well known that the population of Bulgaria is continuously ageing, which brings to the fore the pathology of old age, for which there are also no profiled services developed in the country [6].

At the beginning of 2014, in connection with the serious challenges arising from the ageing of the population and the increased need for quality services and care for the elderly and people with disabilities, the Council of Ministers adopted the **National Strategy for Long-Term Care** by Decree of the Council of Ministers No. 2 of 07.01.2014. The implementation of the comprehensive reform of the adult care system started with the adoption of the National Strategy for Long-Term Care (NS LTC) in 2014, which established the conceptual framework for the construction and development of an effective modern system of social and integrated long-term care services and placed special emphasis on the deinstitutionalization of care for the disabled and elderly.

The strategy aims to establish a framework and guidelines to improve the care and services provided to consumers who need long-term care. The strategy covers different aspects of care and provides for a number of measures and initiatives to improve the quality and accessibility of care for these groups of people. Important elements of the strategy include creating the conditions for independent and dignified living for the elderly and people with disabilities by improving access to social services and enhancing their quality, expanding the network of these services in the country, deinstitutionalisation, and promoting interaction between health and social services. The vision of the Strategy is based on fundamental principles that aim to achieve sustainability and long-term impact of the results achieved. Creation of conditions for independent and dignified life of the elderly and people with disabilities by improving access to social services and increasing their quality, putting the user at the centre of the service, respecting the rights and dignity of users and involving them in the decision-making process; accessibility, transparency and non-discrimination in the design and delivery of services; effectiveness and efficiency of services, intersectoral interaction and innovation; preventive measures (prevention of institutional

In addition, the development of a new Social Services Act was launched in 2014 as an important instrument for improving the social care and services system in Bulgaria. The aim of

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this law is to establish clearer standards and guidelines for the provision of these services and to protect the interests of those in need.

The **National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality for the period 2016 - 2020 / 2021 - 2030** [7] - the aim of the strategy is the creation and implementation of a long-term and sustainable state policy for achieving gender equality, which includes guarantees for equal treatment and equal obligations, after overcoming gender stereotypes, equal access to the resources of society and equal participation in decision-making of women and men in the Republic of Bulgaria with a view to their successful personal and social realization and stimulation.

The main document outlining Bulgaria's policy towards older people is **the National Strategy for Active Ageing in Bulgaria (2019-2030)**, adopted by a decision of the Council of Ministers on 15 March 2019. Having taken into account the operational objectives of the National Concept for Promoting Active Ageing (2012-2030), the National Strategy develops and builds on four priorities, with specific measures identified for each of them.

**National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020)** -The characteristics of this strategy include a comprehensive approach that covers all stages of the educational process: from pre-school education to adult learning. The main priorities of the strategy include promoting the development of all learners, improving the quality of education, ensuring equal access to learning opportunities and promoting education that responds to the needs of the economy and the labour market.

The strategies described, both at international and European as well as national level, play a crucial role in improving the quality of life and social integration of older and disabled people, outlining the general guidelines and objectives that Member States should follow to ensure equal opportunities and access to quality social services. These strategies are based on regular consultation and evaluation to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.

National strategies are aligned with European guidelines and adapted to local conditions and challenges. They focus on the provision of integrated care, de-institutionalisation and improving access to services for the elderly and older people. Particularly important are measures to promote active life, improve health and social inclusion, and promote vocational training and employment for older people. These strategies not only reflect society's commitment to older and elderly people, but also support sustainable development by ensuring that all citizens can live with dignity and fulfilment. It is important to stress the importance of continuing to update and adapt these strategies to meet the new challenges and needs that arise as demographic and socio-economic conditions change.

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The analysis provides a comprehensive theoretical and methodological basis for the study of social services for the elderly and the elderly in Bulgaria, highlighting the need for a precise definition of concepts, a clear establishment of the legal framework and an understanding of the specific needs of these groups, which is key for the development of effective social policies and services. Based on the content of the paper, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 1. Importance of terminology and definitions:** the analysis clearly highlights the importance of accurately defining the terms 'elderly' and 'old people' and their role in the context of social services. Accurate and precise terminology is essential for effective planning and delivery of social services, as it creates a basis for targeted policy and interventions aimed at the specific needs of these groups.
- 2. Regarding the legal framework:** the legislative framework highlights the importance of the rights and well-being of older and elderly people, encompassing a wide range of regulations that aim to regulate the provision of these services and guarantee the rights of older people. The key international and national documents that establish the basis for the provision of social services and the protection of the rights of older people in Bulgaria are examined: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights; the European Social Charter and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing; national legislation - the Social Assistance Act, the Disability Act, the Social Services Act (SSA), the Personal Assistance Act, as well as a strategy document. Statutory laws and regulations at the national level regulate separate aspects of social services, resulting in legal fragmentation. This creates numerous obstacles and difficulties for both social service providers and users themselves, and negatively affects the efficiency and quality of services provided. This situation clearly highlights the need to create a single legal framework to ensure access to quality services for all older and elderly people.
- 3. Health and age-related changes and problems:** the main health problems and age-related changes that often accompany ageing are associated with reduced physical activity, muscle weakness, balance problems, chronic diseases such as diabetes, arthritis and cardiovascular disease, and cognitive impairments such as dementia and depression. The main physical, psychological and social challenges faced by older and elderly people include difficulties in self-care, the need for constant medical supervision, social isolation, loss of independence, and limitations in participation in community and family life. This determines the need for comprehensive services to meet these needs, providing integrated care, social support and rehabilitation adapted to the specific requirements of the vulnerable group.



4. *The ageing process*: demographic changes are characterised by the increasing proportion of elderly and old people in the population as a result of the continued increase in life expectancy and low fertility rates, leading to an ageing population. These changes are reflected in an increasing number of people over 65 years of age, who make up a growing percentage of the total population. Migration processes, such as the emigration of young people abroad and urbanisation, which is leaving rural areas with a predominantly elderly population, are also having an impact. These demographic developments pose significant challenges for the social system, which must provide adequate care and services for the growing number of elderly and old people, while adapting to the declining number of economically active people.

The findings show that the provision of social services for the elderly and the aged implies and requires the need for a well-structured regulatory framework, a thorough understanding of the socio-economic and health challenges faced by this group, and a commitment to the implementation of international standards and proven best practices. These elements are key to the development of effective policies and services to ensure quality care and support for older people in Bulgaria.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis reveals that the effectiveness of these services depends on a clearly defined regulatory framework, strategic planning and coherence between different institutions and stakeholders. International documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Social Charter provide fundamental principles for the protection of the rights and dignity of older people, which serve as a guide for the development of national policies. At the same time, national legislation in Bulgaria, despite its well-articulated objectives and principles, faces a number of challenges related to lack of resources, fragmentation of legislation and limited coordination between institutions.

Demographic changes, characterized by an increase in the number of elderly people and a decrease in the economically active population, make it urgent to develop sustainable and adaptive models for the provision of social services. This includes promoting deinstitutionalisation, integrating health and social services, and improving the quality of care through investment in staff training and qualifications. The analysis also shows that the introduction of innovations and the application of good practices from other countries can significantly improve the efficiency and accessibility of social services.

In conclusion, the sustainable development of social services for older people requires a strategic approach that brings together a legal framework, resourcing and cross-sectoral

coordination. This is a prerequisite for achieving high quality services, protecting the rights and dignity of older people and ensuring their social integration and active contribution to society. This study contributes to expanding knowledge in this area and provides a basis for future initiatives and research aimed at optimising social policies and services for older people.

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