

How to talk about child-family separation in Bulgaria



FRAME
WORKS UK

in partnership with

 Tanya's
Dream
Fund



In this toolkit:

You'll find evidence-based recommendations for how to talk about child-family separation in Bulgaria. Along with practical examples, tips and tools.

It's for anyone working in – or communicating about – child-family separation or family policy.

It builds on [exploratory research \(Eng\)](#) conducted in Bulgaria from August to December 2022. And sits alongside ongoing work by [Tanya's Dream Fund](#) to keep families together and at the centre of the child protection system.



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1 Introduction

Each and every child needs the same things to thrive: a safe and stimulating home and stable, caring relationships. With the right support, most families can and should stay together - so that all children can benefit from the care and support that families provide.

Too many children are unnecessarily separated from their families in Bulgaria today. Children are disproportionately separated from families in poverty, where one member has a disability, and in families from marginalised communities.

Experiencing poverty, having a disability, or being part of a marginalised community does not in itself make families more likely to separate. But the social exclusion, discrimination and lack of support some families are more likely to experience does.

Those of us working to end unnecessary child-family separation face a series of challenges. Child-family separation is not seen as a significant issue in Bulgaria. And in particular, people often think that:

- separation happens when individual parents make bad choices or have poor morals
- separation is a product of eroded values and unstable modern life, and
- the state has a role in supporting families – but lacks capacity to do so.

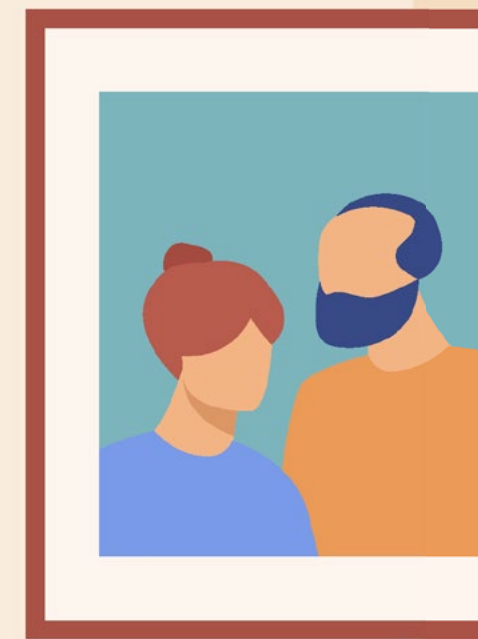
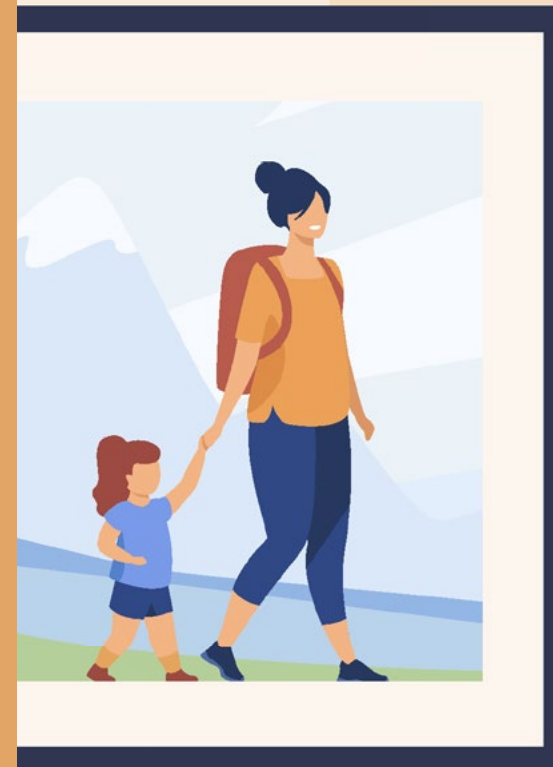
How child-family separation happens – and so what can prevent it – is neither widely known nor understood. This makes it harder to make the case for the changes to policies and practices that help families stay together.

We can start to overcome these challenges by making choices about how we frame our communications.

What is framing?

Framing is the choices we make about what ideas we share and how we share them. It's what we emphasise, how we explain an issue, and what we leave unsaid. These choices affect how people think, feel and act.

Unlike a set of key messages, frames can be adapted to different contexts. This means we can tailor our communications for different audiences and channels while talking about our issue in a consistent way.





1.1

Recommendations at a glance

- 1 **Talk about the importance of family stability for all Bulgarians** to show why supporting children and families matters
- 2 **Use an explanatory metaphor to explain how we all need solid ground** to build and raise our families
- 3 **Put individual stories in context** to show the systems and environments that aren't helping families - and what changes are needed
- 4 **Share solutions, as well as challenges** to show how change is both necessary and possible
- 5 **Use some arguments with caution** to make sure what we say is what people hear



2

Five recommendations to build support for action

Together, we can build the understanding that helping families to stay together is essential for the wellbeing of our children - and our nation.



2.1

Talk about the importance of family stability for all Bulgarians

Right now, child-family separation isn't seen as an urgent or significant issue in Bulgaria. We need to start by showing why child-family separation matters – to everyone.

People already believe that family stability is fundamental to children's wellbeing. We need to show that families need stability too – and that interventions that help stabilise families can also bring stability to our nation.

How to do it

- 1 Talk about the stability that all children and families need
- 2 Connect family stability to national stability
- 3 Explain how policies and programmes that improve family stability will improve the stability of all Bulgaria



What it looks like

Before

Unnecessary child-family separation can seriously derail a child's life.

It's time to invest in family support services to make sure that vulnerable families are supported to look after their children. If we don't, it's the most vulnerable children that suffer most.

After

All children, like all families, need stability in their lives.

It's time to invest in our family support systems to stabilise family life for all and prevent unnecessary child-family separation. Because it's stable families that create our stable, thriving communities.

Why it works

People are concerned about the instability facing Bulgaria - and Bulgarian families.

If we connect support for families at risk of separation to improving our national wellbeing, we show why this issue matters to everyone - and build support for action.

Tip: collectivise the issue. Use words like 'we,' 'us' and 'ours' to broaden perspective and get people thinking collectively early on.

Sequencing family stability: start with everyone, then get specific

What we say first matters. It shapes the way people understand what comes next - including how open people are to our message.

Start out on common ground: talk about the stability all families need - and then bring in the needs of specific families or groups. Like monthly social benefits for families living in poverty, or health mediators for families from marginalised ethnic groups.



What it looks like

Before

Parents of children with disabilities face significant challenges: exclusion from kindergarten, judgement from teachers and friends.

It's not surprising that these families are more likely to separate - they need more support.

After

The stability of our nation depends on the stability of our families. When children are separated from their families, this disrupts our society.

We need to ensure all families have the support they need to stay together - and this means providing in-home care for children with disabilities.

Why it works

If we start with a narrow focus on vulnerable groups we risk reinforcing distance and indifference. People aren't willing to see themselves and their families as at risk. Instead, they draw on stereotypes of who is affected by family separation - and are less likely to support collective action.

Flexing family stability: from measured, to strident

We can use this recommendation flexibly for different audiences, channels and outputs. Dial up or down the tone to fit your aims and communication style. In campaign communications we might want to be more strident. In a one-to-one conversation, we might want to be more measured.



What it looks like

Measured	Strident
All children need stability and support to thrive, and so do our families. Stable, supported families are the foundation of a stable society.	Unnecessary separation can destabilise a child's development and lead to instability in families, communities and nations. When one family is forced apart it doesn't just destabilise one child's life, or one family's future. It disrupts our communities and our country.

Tip: don't over-emphasise vulnerability in ways that make families seem broken beyond repair. This can reinforce stigma towards different social groups.

2.2

Use metaphor to explain how we all need solid ground

Most people don't understand the causes of child-family separation, or the policies and practices that can prevent it. This means they're more likely to make assumptions about why it happens – and are vulnerable to misinformation to help fill in the gaps.

Use the metaphor of solid ground to build understanding of the real causes of child-family separation. And of the changes to systems and services that can make a difference for families.

How to do it

- 1 Talk about the solid ground we need to build and raise our families.
- 2 Name systems and services that shore up ground and stabilise family life.
- 3 Explain how it's harder for families forced on to unstable ground to stay together – like families experiencing poverty or social exclusion.

Tip: get creative. Use different images and synonyms to convey the idea of 'solid ground.' Like secure base, stable foundations, well-tended and prepared soil, or shored-up ground with strong roots.



What it looks like

Before

All families need help when they're struggling - and monthly social benefits can be the help families need to stay together and thrive.

After

All of us need solid ground to build our lives and grow our families. Monthly social benefits can help lay a strong foundation for families to stay together and thrive.

Why it works

The solid ground metaphor explains why families need support – instead of just stating that it's something families need.

Before

Right now, more than 1 in 5 Bulgarian families live in poverty - and will experience challenges and hardship throughout their lives.

This means that families living in poverty are at higher risk of child-family separation. They need more support.

After

Quality childcare, healthcare and schooling should provide the stable base our families need to thrive.

But right now, more than 1 in 5 Bulgarian families live in poverty. These vital supports are often unaffordable and out of reach.

Families are forced to build their lives on shaky ground – leaving them at higher risk of child-family separation.

Why it works

This longer example explains how systems and supports should work for families - and what it means when families don't have access to them

Naming childcare, healthcare and education systems gets people thinking about the broader contexts that shape lives and decision-making – and how those contexts can and should be changed.

Tip: avoid a narrow focus on individual households.
Use solid ground to talk about factors that can affect all families, as well as specific social groups.

Use solid ground with the news media

Metaphors are memorable and shareable. They provide a strong mental image – and make abstract or complex concepts simple and concrete. This means they work well in news headlines or press quotes.



What it looks like

Before

Closure of maternity hospital will harm Haskovo's families.

After

Closure of maternity hospital will "rip the ground from under" Haskovo's families.

Why it works

The solid ground metaphor makes the same point – but tells a fuller, more memorable story.

2.3

Put individual stories in context

People understand that some families are more likely to struggle and separate – but not why. In our research, people often blamed individual parents for “making bad choices” or (for Roma parents in particular) “having bad values.”

We need to show the systems and circumstances that shape family life across Bulgaria. To name what’s not working for families. And to explain what needs to work differently to help families stay together.

How to do it

- 1 Name the systems, policies and conditions that affect family life.
- 2 Focus on the options available to families – not choices made by individuals
- 3 Make individual experiences part of a larger story: connect them to other families with similar experiences.



What it looks like

Before

Elena lost her job when the pandemic hit.

“I just had to make some tough decisions,” she says. “Mila had to stay at home and out of school. And that’s when the social worker got involved.”

After

Like a lot of people with insecure work, Elena lost her job when the pandemic hit.

“I just didn’t have the same options,” she says. “We couldn’t afford the bus to get Mila to school. And that’s when the social worker got involved.”

Why it works

Talking about shared experiences stops stories from being dismissed as exceptional or isolated.

Talking about options (instead of choices) gets people thinking about what is and isn’t available to families.

Tip: connect to wider social trends. Use phrases like “Like a lot of families in Varna, we had to...” or “Hundreds of families are forced apart across Bulgaria” to make these connections easier to see.

Messengers matter: putting stories in context

Who delivers a message matters. Expertise on a topic – gained through study or experience – improves credibility and makes it more likely that our audience will hear us.

People with direct experience of child-family separation can be powerful messengers – particularly for groups at risk of, or affected by, separation. If you work with people with experience, try supporting them to tell their stories with context. If you're sharing your own story, think about where you could add more context.



What it looks like

Before

"When my son was born with a disability, I was told it was better to leave him. I felt so alone and by myself – I had no support."

After

"When my son was born with a disability, my doctor said it was better to leave him. I didn't realise it at the time, but so many new parents are put under this pressure. We all need more support."

Why it works

Phrases like "so many new parents" show the scale of what is happening.

Being specific about who did what drives people's attention to practice that can be changed.

Tip: share a range of stories with families of different ages, ethnicities, locations. This helps break down stereotypes of who is affected by child-family separation.

2.4

Share solutions, as well as challenges

Only sharing bleak facts and statistics can trigger disbelief (this can't be true) and fatalism (this can't be solved).

Most people recognise the state's responsibility to support families – but aren't sure if or how it's possible to keep struggling families together. We can change this by talking about the problem of child-family separation in Bulgaria – and how it can and should be fixed.



How to do it

1. Talk about the support that should be there for all Bulgarians and how this helps families to stay together.
2. Share specific examples of good policy and practice.
3. Share a range of different solutions: from increasing the winter fuel allowance to more affordable kindergartens nationwide.

Tip: balance urgency (we need to act) with efficacy (we can act) in tone and content. This helps show that change is both necessary and possible.



What it looks like

Before

Children with disabilities are often cared for in small group homes – leaving them socially isolated and separated from their families. Our Government needs to...

After

In-home support for parents of children with disabilities can help families stay together – and stay part of our communities. Our Government needs to...

Why it works

Sharing specific examples and asks builds understanding of how we can end unnecessary separation – and who is responsible for acting.

Before

Unnecessary family separation is a real and growing problem in Bulgaria and children are suffering.

After

Timely state support for parents can help families stay together and provide the best care for children across Bulgaria.

Why it works

Talking about what the state can do (or is already doing) for families sets an expectation that the state can and should act.

Tip: focus on improving access to support, as well as the need for more of it. A new maternal care hospital in Sofia, for example, won't help families in Madzharovo.

2.5

Use some arguments with caution.

What we leave out of our messages matters. Some ways of talking about an issue can backfire – and reduce support for the changes we want to see.

When talking about child-family separation, three ideas can cause us problems:

- 1 Arguing that we should support families and prevent child-family separation because it's unfair not to.
- 2 Arguing that we should support parents because of our family values.
- 3 Appealing to children's rights – without explaining what they are and what they mean for children and families.

Avoid using: fairness and family values

Messages that focus on fairness and family values are easily hijacked: to criticise politicians, life in general, or specific social and ethnic groups (particularly Roma communities).

Instead of fairness or family values, try invoking our shared need for family stability.



What it looks like

Before

Unnecessary child-family separation is symptomatic of wider unfairness in our society.

After

Unnecessary child-family separation happens when families don't get the stability and support they need.

Why it works

People recognise that every family needs stability - and so does Bulgaria.

Use with caution: children's rights

Messages that focus only on children's rights risk being misunderstood. Most people support what children's rights are for (like keeping children safe), but don't automatically connect these things to "children's rights." Some people dismiss rights as "weaponised" – by children against parents, or as part of a wider social breakdown.

If you want to talk about children's rights, start by talking about what children need.



What it looks like

Before

Children should have their rights realised. Right now, children's rights are disrespected and under threat across Bulgarian society.

After

Children need safe and stable homes to thrive. This is every child's right – and builds strong social foundations for all.

Why it works

Being specific about needs makes this tangible and harder to misinterpret.

Talking about wider benefits helps people to see why they have a stake in protecting children's rights.

Tip: use straightforward, human language where possible. Complicated or technical language signals that this is an issue for other people to solve.



3

Bringing it all together

These recommendations are designed to work together to strengthen our communications – but you don't need to use every recommendation, every time. Choose what will work best for your audience and context.





3.1

Creative campaign ideas

Here are some fictional
campaigns that use these
recommendations in
different ways.



Example campaign: Our families thrive on solid ground



OUR PLANGET INVOLVEDABOUT US

ENBG

3

Our families thrive on solid ground

2

We're working together to shore up ground for every family in Bulgaria.

Get Involved

5



Affordable EducationMonthly BenefitsAccessible Healthcare

What it means

Solid ground means comprehensive healthcare, a good education (including skills for new parents), affordable childcare, and psychological support when times get tough.

Because we know that when we tend the earth beneath our feet, we can put down strong, solid roots. **Our families grow and thrive together.**

Share your story with us

What solid ground helped your family to thrive?



Submit

This campaign uses and extends the solid ground metaphor to build support for the long-term policies and services that keep families together.

- 1It gets creative with solid ground and connects to our pride in Bulgaria's agriculture
- 2Mentions every family first, before bringing in specific families and needs
- 3Collectivises with 'us' and 'our'
- 4Shares specific examples of supports and services families need
- 5Uses images to reinforce the idea of cultivating and caring for the ground beneath our feet
- 6Uses a credible messenger
- 7Focuses on what's possible when families get what they need.
- 8Shares solutions early



All Our Families BulgariaToday 10:00

Georgi is a farmer and a father: he knows we have to fortify ground to crops to grow and thrive. The same is true for Bulgaria's families.

4From ending attendance fees at kindergartens, to in-home help for children with disabilities.

2What **#SolidGround** helps your family to thrive?

1



"Bulgaria is known for our fertile ground and thriving crops - this doesn't happen by accident. We tend the soil, keep it stable.

My son was so ill when he was born, I felt the ground fall beneath my feet. In-home care gave us the stability we needed to stay together. And now we thrive"

7Georgi, farmer and father

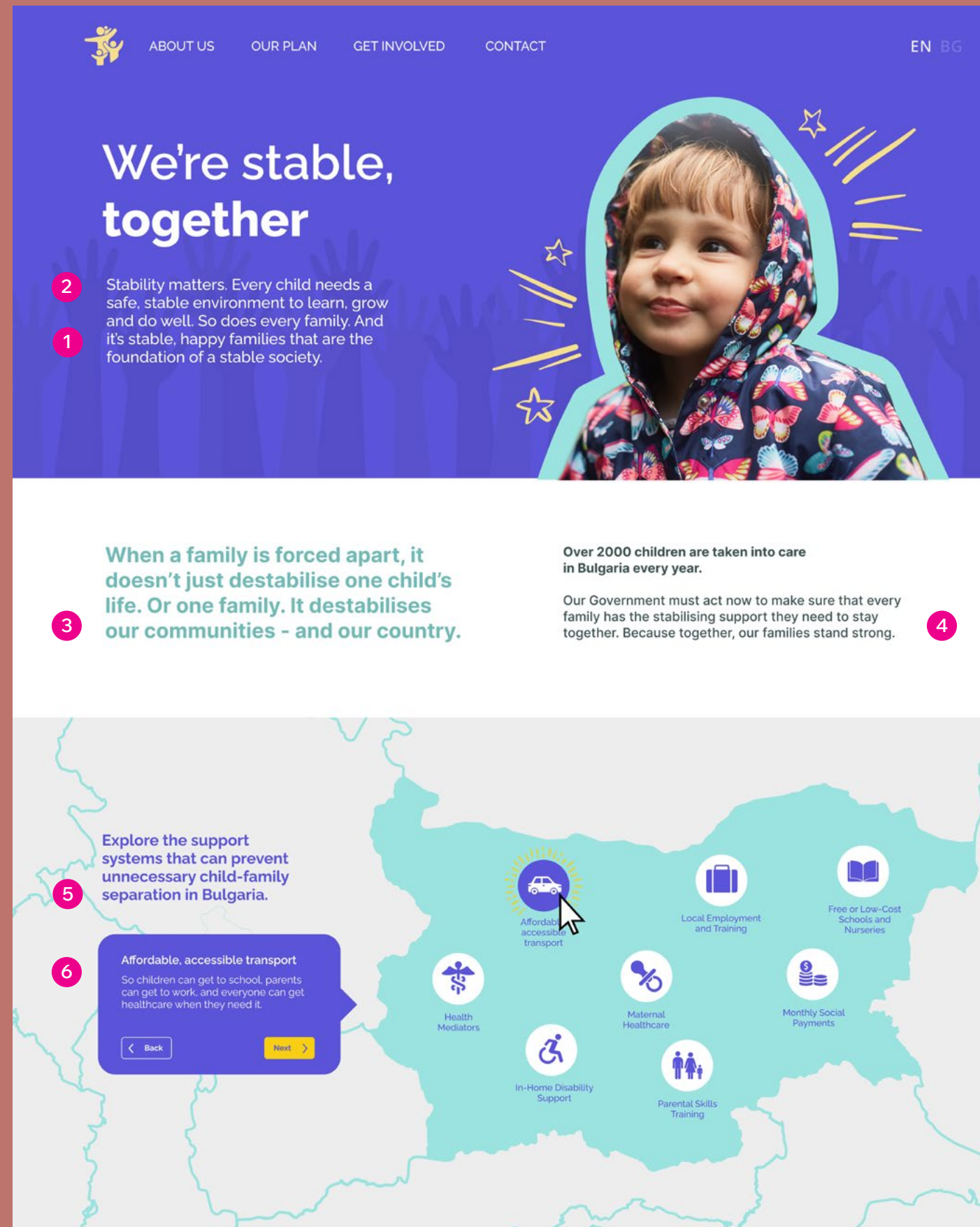


You and 27 others10 Comments

Like

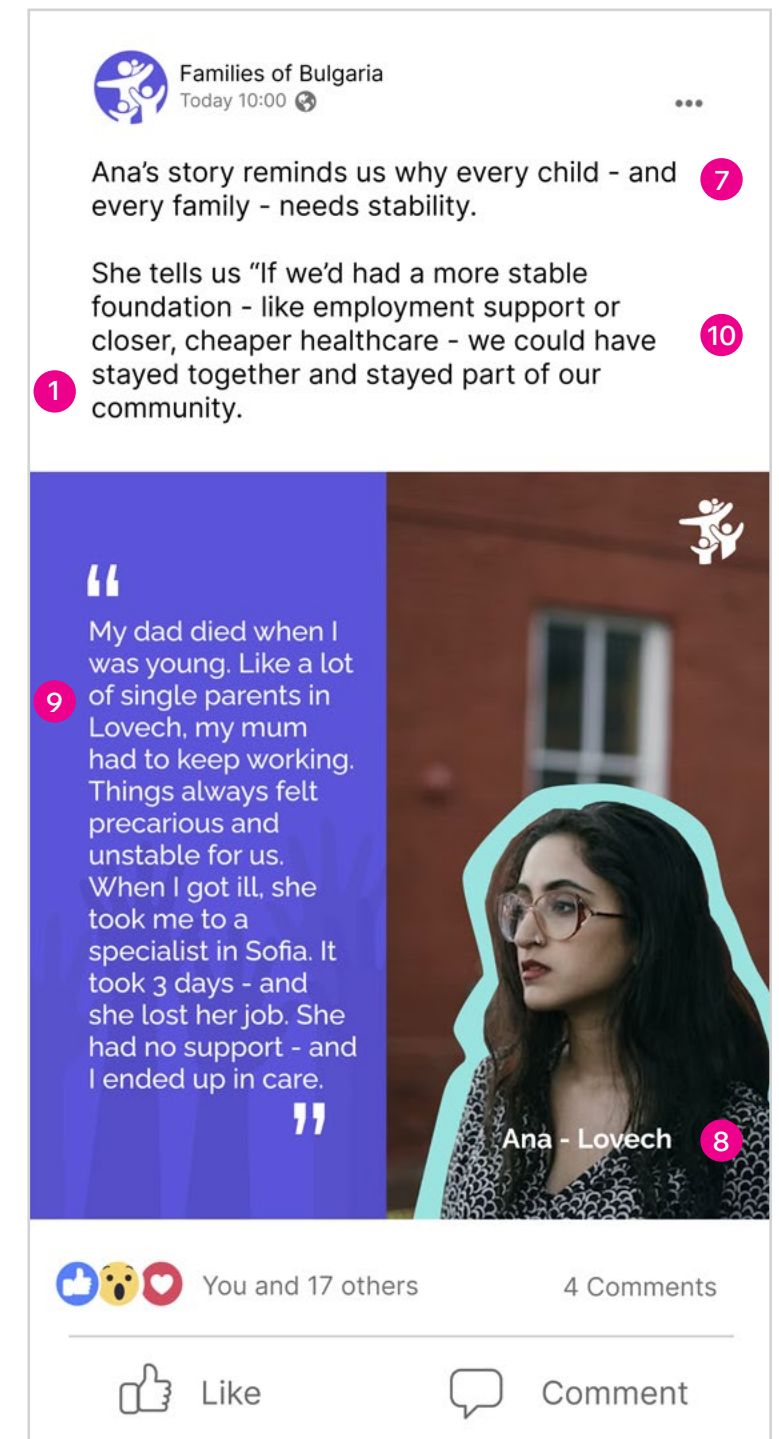
Comment

Example campaign: We're stable, together



This campaign uses family stability to show the impact of child-family separation on Bulgarian society. And show that interventions that help stabilise families also bring stability to our nation.

- 1 It connects family stability to social stability
- 2 Starts with children's needs
- 3 Collectivises with 'our'
- 4 Names who must act
- 5 Names the systems and services that stabilise family and nation
- 6 Focuses on access to support – not just the need for more of it
- 7 Puts Ana's story in context
- 8 Uses a credible messenger
- 9 Connects to the shared experiences of single parents
- 10 Names specific problems and solutions.



Example campaign: A stable foundation for all of Bulgaria's families

Our Pledge Get Involved About us Contact EN BG

1 A stable foundation for all of Bulgaria's families

2 It's time to reinforce the foundations that underpin our families - and our society.

3

Read and share our #StableFoundations pledge for MPs

4

7

We all need the same foundations to build our lives and raise our families. Like good schools, local employment options, affordable childcare, and skills classes for new parents.

But right now, these foundations aren't strong enough. Some of us are forced to build our families on shaky ground. And this shaky ground is destabilising families - and our country.

Over 400,000 of our children are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. 1 in 3 don't have enough books and school supplies. And rates of unnecessary child-family separation are far too high.

[VIEW PLEDGE](#)

f i

This campaign flexes the solid ground metaphor to call local and national policymakers to action.

- 1 It uses a more everyday version of solid ground – a stable foundation
- 2 Connects family stability to national stability
- 3 Sequences family stability – starting with everyone, then specifics
- 4 Uses the solid ground metaphor to explain how child-family separation happens
- 5 Uses the solid ground metaphor to explain what can prevent child-family separation
- 6 Shares solutions often
- 7 Shares specific examples of supports and services families need.

Anton Iliev ✓ Today 10:00

I've signed the #StableFoundations pledge because every child and family in Bulgaria should have the stability they need to grow, thrive and succeed.

1

2

Today, I commit to strengthening the foundations of our families and our society...

[READ PLEDGE](#)

You and 300 others 124 Comments

Like Comment



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3.2

Content Checklist

- ❑ **Start with family stability to show why supporting children and families matters.**
 - ❑ Sequence family stability: start with every family, then get specific.
- ❑ **Explain how child-family separation happens using the solid ground metaphor.**
 - ❑ Extend the solid ground metaphor to explain what can help keep families together.
- ❑ **Add context to individual stories to reduce individual blame.**
 - ❑ Name systems, conditions and policies that affect families.
 - ❑ Talk about options, not choice.
 - ❑ Connect to other families' experiences or wider social trends.
 - ❑ Choose a credible messenger.
- ❑ **Mention solutions, early and often, to show change is possible .**
 - ❑ Avoid fairness and family values – and if you need to talk about children's rights, start with children's needs.
 - ❑ Use straightforward, human language.



4

Further Reading

[Hyatt, T. and Lindland, E. \(2023\). Talking about child-family separation in Bulgaria Exploratory research and recommendations. FrameWorks UK \(Eng\).](#)

Go to frameworksuk.org for more information.