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# TRENDS IN THE ILLEGAL PUPPY TRADE THROUGH THE EYES OF BULGARIAN VETERINARIANS

Between June - July 2023 FOUR PAWS conducted a survey among practicing veterinarians in Bulgaria on illegal practices regarding dog breeding and trading in the country.

The questions in the survey focused on practitioners' experiences with their patients and aimed to identify the extent of problems associated with the sale of dogs without identification and registration, and the frequency of health problems seen in puppies after sale. **The results of the survey are indicative of the illegal puppy trade, the consequences of which veterinarians in Bulgaria face in their work.** According to Bulgarian legislation, every dog that has reached the age of six weeks must be identified by the insertion of an injectable transponder (microchip) and registered in the national VetIS database of the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency (BFSA) by its first owner (the breeder) before being sold. The minimum required age for selling is eight weeks<sup>1</sup>.

To identify trends in the above issues and the extent to which breeders comply with the legislation when selling dogs, respondents were invited to answer a number of questions in a survey form. The questions aimed to find out:

- ✦ Were the conditions for compulsory identification and registration of puppies met before the time of sale?
- ✦ Are all mandatory documents provided when a puppy is purchased?
- ✦ What is the health status of the acquired puppies, and can some trends be pointed out?



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## SURVEY RESULTS

### GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE COUNTRY

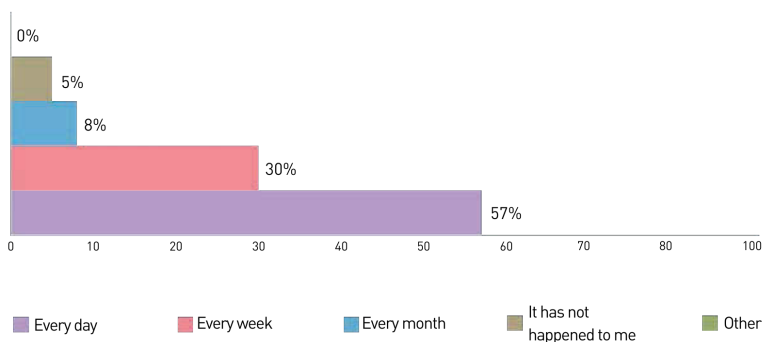
With the assistance and support of the Bulgarian Veterinary Union, the survey was distributed to veterinary practitioners across the country. Responses were collected from 37 practitioners from a total of nine municipal districts. 19 respondents indicated that they practice in Sofia district, seven in Plovdiv district and 10 in six other districts of Bulgaria (Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Montana and Stara Zagora).

Other demographic information about the veterinarians who completed the survey was not collected due to the General Data Protection Regulation.

### IDENTIFICATION AND REGISTRATION

Despite the legal requirements for compulsory identification and registration of all dogs in Bulgaria, when asked "How often adult dogs without identification (microchip) and registration come to your practice?", 57% of respondents indicated that this happens "every day" and 30% answered "every week", with a total of 32 out of 37 respondents saying that this legal framework is systematically ignored. Of the 32 veterinarians indicating that dogs without identification and registration are brought to them on a daily or weekly basis, **only three said that "almost all" owners of unidentified and unregistered dogs who visit them with their paw friends wanted to have their pet microchipped and issued with a European Pet Passport.** Another 10 of them share the opposite trend - "almost none" of the dog owners want their puppies to be registered and the necessary documents to be issued.

**How often do adult dogs without identification (microchip) and registration come to your practice?**



When asked what proportion of the owners coming to vaccinate their pets also want a microchip and a European passport for their pets, **50% of the respondents in the districts other than Sofia said that "almost no one" wanted a passport and a microchip for their pet, 11% wanted "only one of them". A great contrast is noted in this respect between the country and Sofia, where 68% of the doctors surveyed indicated that this is wanted by "most" or "almost all", while only 5% say that owners usually do not want identification and registration. A further 26% noted that owners "usually want either just a microchip or just a European dog passport, but not both of them".**

**Bulgarian legislation is clear that the issue of a European Pet Passport and the microchipping and registration of the dog in the VetIS system must take place at the same time<sup>2</sup>, however, the current technical features of the system allow this norm to be ignored.**

This problem is confirmed by the answer to the question: "How often do you have a dog patient that has either a microchip or a European Pet Passport but not both?" 43% said "every week", 30% said "every day", 16% said "every month", only 8% said "very rarely". Of the veterinarians outside Sofia, 50% responded that "almost none" of the owners who visit them want either a chip or a passport.

How often does a dog come in that has either only a microchip or only an European Pet Passport issued but not both?



**43%**

Every week

**30%**

Every day

**16%**

Every month

**8%**

Very rarely

**3%**

Other

Answers to the above questions are supplemented by more specific comments on the topic in the additional free-text comment option:

**"We have laws, but no enforcement!** Chipping is compulsory, but there is no way we can demand it of the owner" is one of the comments that illustrates the problem that vets face when trying to adhere to the regulations that may be opposed by the owner. "Recently I have seen a lot of dogs coming from Serbia that **have crossed the border without any documents (including rabies vaccine)**. There are both puppies and dogs of breeding age with **passports without stamps and signatures.**"

## COMPULSORY DOCUMENTS AND REGISTRATION OF PUPPIES

**New puppy owners often pay a high price when buying a pet** - both in the literal sense, for example when the puppy is of a particular breed, and unfortunately in the figurative sense when the puppy turns out to be sold without the necessary paperwork from the breeder. It is the obligation of the breeders to carry out the initial medical examinations, to microchip the puppy, to issue a passport and to vaccinate the puppy. In practice, puppies often arrive at their new home without the necessary documents and the responsibility for this subsequently falls on the new owners. This commonly leads to the payment of additional costs for the new owner on top of the initial price quoted by the seller.

**A common practice in the illegal puppy trade is for breeders to skip the initial visits to the veterinarian that should take place during the first weeks of a puppy's life, during which it should be vaccinated, microchipped, registered and issued with a European Pet Passport.** Instead, they pass the responsibility on to the new owners, who are usually fooled by these tricks of the breeders because of the low awareness of the legal requirements for buying and selling dogs in Bulgaria.

24% of the veterinarians surveyed said that "every day" owners come to them with their recently bought puppies that have neither a chip nor a passport and are not registered; 60% said this happens "every week" and 11% - "every month". Only 3% said it had not happened to them before.



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How often do new owners come to you with a puppy they've already bought that hasn't yet been issued a passport, microchipped or registered and has yet to be done?

60%

Every day

24%

Every week

11%

Every month

3%

It has never happened to me

2%

Other

However, these do not seem to be the only violations that are systematically committed. When we asked veterinarians if they had dog patients with incorrectly filled European passports, 22% said it happens "every week", 38% said it happens "every month", and only 11% said it has not happened in their daily practice.

Have you had cases of owners coming to you with a dog with an age on the passport that does not match the dog's age (or with other data where you have observed a discrepancy)?



38%

Every month

29%

Other

22%

Every week

11%

It has never happened to me

"I have had cases where dogs come in with vaccination books bought without stamps, without data, with stickers stuck on vaccines of unclear origin" is one of the comments shared by veterinarians on this issue.

"It is a very common practice for owners to bring in their newly bought puppy, which supposedly has a passport and vaccines, **but the passport is just a health book and the vaccines are just patches without a doctor's signature and stamp,**" suggests one of the comments.

One respondent adds that the minimum age for selling is also not respected:

**"It is most common to sell dogs at the 30th day of birth,** without the first vaccine, without passport or with a vaccination booklet, not a European pet passport."

The opinion of the respondents, provided in the form for additional comments, is that the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency, in its role as the competent authority, should impose **stricter control and higher sanctions on veterinarians who still issue health books instead of passports.**

One of FOUR PAWS' previous studies on the illegal puppy trade<sup>3</sup> found that



51% of puppies bought in Bulgaria were advertised on social media and another 29% on classified websites. 43% of the veterinarians interviewed in the current study said that every week young puppy owners come to them for the issuance of a passport and microchipping. The dogs were bought online - from a classified site or social network. **35% of vets said that at least once a month, a dog bought online comes to them without the necessary documents.** Despite the issuing of an European Pet Passport, microchipping and registration being the responsibility of the first owner (the breeder) and should happen before the age of sale of the puppy (eight weeks of age), 78% of the respondents said that they observe a trend where this is neglected daily, putting the responsibility in the hands of the new owners.

100% of veterinarians surveyed in Plovdiv district reported that in their practice this happens at least once every week or every month, in Sofia district 68% said that this happens every week or every month.

## THE HEALTH OF PUPPIES

Compulsory medical procedures (such as deworming and vaccinations) are extremely important for dogs, both in early life and in adulthood. This is not only to comply with legal requirements and avoid administrative penalties, but also to protect its health and life, as well as the health of people who are in direct contact with it. **54% of the vets said that “at least once a month” they have owners who have recently bought a puppy and it has turned out to be sick shortly after arriving in its new home, and 16% witness it “every week”.**

Shocking were the responses to the question, "Have you ever had to euthanize a puppy(s) at a young age because of an illness that developed in the first weeks/months of their life?"

This question had an open-ended response, allowing veterinarians to share their experiences in detail. **Only 27% said it had never happened to them and they had no such experience.** In the remaining responses, the comments indicated a lack of animal welfare during the breeding period:

"About two weeks ago we had a case of a newborn French Bulldog puppy. The mother was bred six months after her previous pregnancy despite her poor health condition. This puppy was not sucking well and was drowning, we diagnosed him with a congenital defect of the palate - it was cleft to a very large extent...**From time to time (once every three-four months) we also have cases of distemper and parvovirus.** Most often these are early weaned puppies, purchased from questionable kennels, who come in for vaccine or treatment and the problem is identified. **Given their fragile health and age, the prognosis is not always good.**"

**"Most have parvovirus..."** Parvovirus is one of the most common and yet one of the most fatal diseases that develop in puppies. **It most often occurs when a puppy is not given the necessary vaccines on time in accordance with the vaccination schedule.** The first vaccines are usually administered around day 30 of the puppy's life, which means the responsibility falls into the hands of the breeder.

"Yes, unfortunately, and most often in animals coming from licensed kennels, due to congenital diseases." This opinion also raises the question of the control of breeding and rearing conditions that is exercised over already registered kennels and to what extent it protects dogs - both puppies and mother dogs.

At the end of the survey, veterinarians had the opportunity to provide additional comments on the topic, with a large majority of respondents sharing experience and information about problems with illegal breeding and the illegal puppy trade. Emphasis was placed on control responsibilities:

- ✦ the local authority overseeing the registration of domestic dogs on its territory;
- ✦ the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency as the main controlling and regulating authority, which should ensure that the conditions laid down in Article 174 of the Veterinary Medicine Law are met;
- ✦ on the practices applied by veterinarians in the registration and identification of domestic dogs: "Vaccines must be issued to veterinarians according to a list, against a written chip and passport number. This will stop the illegal practice of breeders buying their own vaccines and administering them themselves."



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## CONCLUSION

The results of the survey with veterinarians from all over Bulgaria show **serious gaps in compliance with the legal requirements regarding the breeding, raising and selling of dogs.** Violations of the mandatory identification and registration of dogs, as well as the provision of documents to puppies, are noted. Neglect of these compulsory practices subsequently leads to diseases, often identified by veterinarians as a clear consequence of poor breeding practices.

**FOUR PAWS** appeals once again for the problem of illegal dog breeding in Bulgaria to be addressed by all responsible institutions and for a legislative revision to be undertaken that better allocates responsibility and competence between the various authorities and institutions responsible for controlling breeding facilities, as well as for measures to be stepped up to counteract the increase in illegal and inhumane practices in the breeding and keeping of dogs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Notes:

1 Article 174 of the Veterinary Medicine Act

According to Article 72 of Regulation No 41

(1) each dog shall be identified by a veterinarian and issued with a passport;

(2) the identification of the animals shall be carried out by microchipping before they are weaned and before they leave the establishment of origin.

The data from the identification and veterinary manipulations carried out shall be entered into the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency's Integrated Information System (VetIS).c

2 Art. 174 (1) Owners of dogs over 6 weeks of age shall present them to a registered veterinarian practicing in a veterinary medical establishment for:

1. official identification by the insertion of an injectable transponder and the issue of an identification document (passport) meeting the requirements of the Ordinance referred to in Article 51, paragraph 5;

(3) After the actions referred to in par. 1 and 2, the veterinarian shall enter the data into the Integrated Information System referred to in Article 51(3) of BABH within the time limit referred to in Article 39(2)(14).

3 "Identification, registration and minimum age for sale massively ignored in Bulgaria";, conducted in 2022 in seven European countries. „PANDEMIC PUPS How unprecedented demand during the pandemic fuelled the illegal puppy trade in Europe – a FOUR PAWS report" (Link to: <https://www.four-paws.org/campaigns-topics/campaigns/buying-a-puppy/pandemic-pups>)



**FOUR PAWS** is an international animal protection organization that helps animals exposed to direct human influence, uncovers cases of violence, rescues animals in need and protects them. Founded in 1988 in Vienna by Helmut Dungler and friends, the organization fights for a world where people treat animals with respect, compassion and understanding. FOUR PAWS' campaigns and projects target companion animals, including stray dogs and cats, farm and wild animals such as bears, big cats and orangutans that are raised in inappropriate conditions, as well as in areas of disaster and conflict. With offices in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Great Britain, Vietnam, Germany, Kosovo, Netherlands, USA, Thailand, Ukraine, France, Switzerland and South Africa, as well as rescue centers in eleven countries, FOUR PAWS provides emergency assistance and long-term solutions.

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