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**XENOPHOBIA, HATE CRIME AND RADICALISATION IN BULGARIA,  
2020-2022**

***1. Changes (positive and negative) in the legislation affecting the interests of minorities including***

***migrants in the period under review:***

***–discriminatory legislation affecting minorities;***

Bulgaria has had little amendments and no major changes. It had parliaments for a very short period of time. Most of the time Bulgaria had interim, caretaker governments with no parliament. Therefore, there was not parliamentary activity and changes in the legislation that affects the minorities.

Bulgaria has legislation to combat hate crime and it was adopted in 2011 after several judgements from the European Court of Human Rights that exposed the deficiencies of Bulgarian legislation for racially motivated crimes. The parliament adopted the law but only for murder and physical assault. The law provides severe punishments for racial or ethnic-based crimes, with homicide carrying up to a life sentence, injury carrying up to 15 years imprisonment, mob attack carrying up to six years, and violence and enticement to discrimination carrying up to four years. The law protects all citizens against discrimination based on race, ethnic background, or nationality. Racial or ethnic discrimination in employment, education, and other social areas carries a fine of up to 2,500 levs (\$1,450).

Therefore, it is limited in scope. It envisages, enhance punishment for killings and physical assaults motivated by ethnic motives only but not for other motives such as arson, etc. It does not protect for motives such as disability, gender etc. It hasn't advanced because of the fact that legislation for human rights is not a priority of any political party. <sup>1</sup>

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***-improvement of anti-discrimination legislation;***

The response of the Bulgarian authorities against hate speech in recent years has been mixed. On the one hand some high-level government members supported or themselves made public comments that were characterized by prejudice, resentment or hatred. On

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<sup>1</sup>ECRI REPORT ON BULGARIA (fifth monitoring cycle), 2014, URL: <https://tandis.odhr.pl/bitstream/20.500.12389/21896/1/08050.pdf>, pg.12

the other hand, it would be wrong to say that the authorities did not take measures to promote tolerance.

In line with ECtHR's ruling and call on Bulgaria to pay compensation to the mother of a young man killed in a homophobic attack in 2008, in December 2022, the Council of Ministers proposed amendments to the Criminal Code, which would recognize homophobia as an aggravating circumstance in respect of certain crimes against the person, including murder.<sup>2</sup>

Amendments occurred regarding the largest religious minority, Muslims, on the Act on Religious Denominations, which aligned the funding mechanism applicable to them with that of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.<sup>3</sup>

## ***2. Law enforcement practices affecting minorities - examples in the period under review:***

***– discriminatory practices;***

***– anti-discrimination practices, including government support measures for minorities;***

***– combating Hate crime:***

***✓ preventive measures directed against the spread of extremist views in society, against the financing***

***of Terrorism, etc.***

***✓ criminal proceedings;***

***✓ guilty verdicts;***

***– law enforcement practices as a manifestation of the conflict between democratic values and security***

***interests, if any;***

During 2021, the BHC (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee) stated that border authorities had no mechanisms to distinguish between migrants and refugees and expressed concern that 19 percent of the persons who filed applications for international protection at the border were prosecuted and convicted for illegal entry. The BHC accused the State Agency for Refugees of refusing registration to asylum seekers who showed up at refugee reception centers and instead calling police to detain them. The

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International Report Bulgaria, 2022, URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/bulgaria/report-bulgaria/>

<sup>3</sup> ECRI Report, 2022, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-sixth-report-on-bulgaria/1680a83581>

agency disagreed, noting some individuals were sent to a migrant detention center due to lack of space in the refugee reception centers' COVID-19 quarantine section.

In 2021 also, UNHCR reported increased cases of “pushback” violence, robbery, and humiliating practices against migrants and asylum seekers along the border with Turkey. As of December 5, the Ministry of Interior reported 50,779 attempts to enter the country irregularly across the border during which border authorities detained 2,349 persons. On September 2, the caretaker interior minister stated at a hearing in the National Assembly that “approximately 200 migrants were pushed back last night at the border and 10 to 15 were detained.” The BHC alleged that the government only detained migrants and asylum seekers when their detention could not be avoided, such as in NGO-monitored areas as well as on trains, but otherwise pushed back everyone else.<sup>4</sup>

Asylum seekers had access to state-sponsored school education, health care, and language instruction. Banks refused to open accounts for refugees, which impeded their ability to obtain legal jobs and receive benefits. The law authorizes mayors to sign integration agreements with persons who have refugee status, but not subsidiary protection holders (persons seeking asylum who do not qualify as refugees), specifying the services they will receive – housing, education, language training, health services, professional qualification, and job search assistance – as well as the obligations of the responsible institutions. NGOs claimed the government made inconsistent efforts to integrate refugees. A project called Together for Integration, implemented by the Sofia districts of Vitosha and Oborishte, the Bulgarian Red Cross, and the Nadja Center Foundation, worked to support the integration of 12 refugee families. According to the head of the Vitosha District's Education, Social Activities, Culture, Sports, and Logistics Department, Milena Madjirska, as of January the district had concluded integration agreements with 13 families, none of which subsequently remained in the country longer than seven to eight months.<sup>5</sup>

Law enforcement authorities don't encourage the reporting of hate speech as a crime and of hate crimes in general. Certain minority groups don't have trust because of the lack of their impartiality and competence.<sup>6</sup>

In 2020, for the first time, a Sofia-city ban of the Lukov March – an ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi youth torch-bearing procession to glorify the legacy of a Bulgarian pro-Nazi politician – was upheld by the Supreme Administrative Court and the march subsequently cancelled. The authorities have taken important steps to prevent and combat antisemitism in all its forms. Bulgaria became a full member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), adopted the IHRA working definition of

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<sup>4</sup>BULGARIA 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT, URL: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/313615\\_BULGARIA-2021-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/313615_BULGARIA-2021-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf), pg.15

<sup>5</sup> 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bulgaria, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bulgaria/>, 2022

<sup>6</sup> PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO HATE SPEECH IN BULGARIA IN 2018, Sofia, 30 November 2018, URL: <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018-Hate-speech-ENG.pdf>

antisemitism, appointed a national coordinator on combating antisemitism, established a working group and initiated the development of an action plan. Since 2019, the Ministry of Interior has worked with an LGBTI NGO on training investigative police officers on recognizing anti-LGBTI hate crimes. A similar cooperation activity includes work with the National Police Academy on a new course covering this topic. Regarding the integration and inclusion of Roma, the authorities introduced in 2016 Bulgarian language classes in preschools of a duration of up to 100 hours for children whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian. The vast majority of the beneficiaries are Roma. The public Employment Agency provided a number of services to promote the socio-economic integration of disadvantaged groups in the labor market. In 2020, nearly 30 000 Roma participated in these activities. The work of the Roma mediators in the areas of education, employment and health has been very positive, also and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when providing information and overcoming existing misunderstandings or mistrust was of crucial importance. As concerns refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, they can apply for family reunification, for which there are no specific conditions as regards income and housing, from the moment they receive protection status. Authorities have made efforts in offering protection and support to the many Ukrainians who have sought refuge in Bulgaria.

The government also initiated in 2022 the development of an action plan on combating antisemitism. The elaboration of the action plan is preceded by the first-ever dedicated public opinion survey and study of attitudes towards Jews in Bulgaria which aims to provide policy makers with robust and reliable evidence needed to devise the courses of action and to establish the practice of regular attitude surveys.<sup>7</sup>

On January 17, 2020, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences organized a roundtable cohosted by the Ministry of Defense to present a report, *Jews' Labor Obligation during World War 2: Rescue Plan or Repressive Measure?*, which denied that authorities forced the male Jewish population into labor camps in the early 1940s and stated that instead the Army Labor Corps drafted Jews as part of a government plan to save them from the Nazis. The Ministries of Education and Culture, VMRO, and several NGOs, such as the Bulgarian-Jewish Research Institute and the Independent Historical Society, supported the roundtable. Shalom criticized the event as “an alarming revisionist attempt to distort the history of the Holocaust” at all institutional levels. In a speech on January 30, Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva stated that sending Jews to labor camps during World War II was part of the “anti-Semitic repressive machine” established with anti-Semitic legislation.

On December 16, 2020, Sofia University fired Mihail Mirchev, a part-time professor, after its ethics commission found his lectures included negative ethnic stereotypes. The firing came after Shalom and other NGOs protested that Mirchev’s lectures featured racist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic content such as, “Is it possible that Bulgaria could turn into a Jewish country if they, being fewer than one percent, own the state, the

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<sup>7</sup> The sociological survey on "Public Attitudes towards Antisemitism and Hate speech in Bulgaria" was conducted by the Alpha Research Agency for Sociological and Marketing Research and presented on 5 April 2022. The full text of the survey (in Bulgarian) is available at: <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/996-obshtestveni-naglasii-kum-antisemitizma-i-ezika-na-omrazata-mnenieto-nashirokata-obshtestvenost-i-na-evreiskata-obshtnost.html?lang=bg>

capital, the media, and the art?” Mirchev said his words had been taken out of context. In November, prior to Mirchev’s dismissal, Shalom’s criticism of him generated numerous anti-Semitic commentaries such as, “Jews can only learn from a heavy hand and a bullet in the back of the head.”<sup>8</sup>

During 2022 there was a sharp rise in the number of refugees and migrants who arrived at the border with Türkiye. Authorities recorded over 85,000 arrivals, more than double the 2021 number. Summary returns, sometimes accompanied by violence, remained widespread.

Rights organizations reported continuing discriminatory practices in the asylum system, with applications by nationals of certain countries, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Morocco and Tunisia, being automatically rejected.<sup>9</sup>

Bulgaria received nearly 1 million Ukrainians, mostly women and children, and provided access to healthcare, social services and education to 150,000 who registered for temporary protection. Many refugees left after September amid growing uncertainty about the government’s extension of the hotel accommodation scheme. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, urged the authorities to provide a lasting solution for accommodation of refugees.

On several occasions, the authorities provisionally accommodated Ukrainian refugees, including families with children, in a temporary accommodation centre in Elhovo, which was designed as a detention facility for people entering irregularly. The NGO the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee highlighted inadequate and undignified conditions at the Elhovo centre.

In August, an appeals court in Varna overturned an earlier district court decision that had approved the extradition to Russia of Aleksei Alchin, a Russian national who had criticized the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The appeal court said that due to Aleksei Alchin’s political beliefs, his rights would likely be violated upon his return.<sup>10</sup>

Various NGOs indicate that hate speech is widespread in Bulgaria, confirming the concerns of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, targeting now in particular Roma and LGBTI people. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in political discourse. While during the 2015 hate speech was mostly directed against migrants, in particular Muslims, this appears to have shifted back in recent years mainly towards members of the Roma and LGBTI communities.<sup>11</sup> The response of the Bulgarian authorities against hate speech in recent years has been mixed. On the one hand some high-level government members supported or themselves made public comments that were characterized by prejudice, resentment or hatred. For example, anti-Roma hate speech at high political level occurred in the aftermath of a conflict between Roma and non-Roma individuals in Vojvodinovo in January 2019 and the ensuing anti-Roma protests and evictions. One of the then Deputy Prime Ministers,

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<sup>8</sup>2020 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, US Department of State, 2021, URL:<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

<sup>9</sup>Amnesty International Report, 2022, URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/bulgaria/report-bulgaria/>

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International Report Bulgaria, 2022, URL:<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/bulgaria/report-bulgaria/>

<sup>11</sup> ECRI Report, 2022, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-sixth-report-on-bulgaria/1680a83581>

instead of calming the situation and preventing or countering expressions of racism, publicly called “Gypsies in Bulgaria [...] exceptionally insolent”, declared that the “tolerance of Bulgarian society has run out” and called for a “solution to the Gypsy problem”.<sup>12</sup> Also, anti-LGBTI statements have also become a common occurrence in Bulgarian political discourse and members of this community are frequently portrayed as posing a threat to the country’s tradition and to national identity and they have long been targeted with hate speech and violence. In 2021, a member of the right-wing Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO) called the Sofia Pride “a manifestation of group mental disorders.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it would be wrong to say that the authorities did not take measures at all to promote tolerance. Below are some examples of the various steps taken and ECRI strongly encourages the authorities to continue and intensify their efforts, including by taking inspiration from ECRI’s General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on combating hate speech. In the case of the Lukov March ban, the decision of the court was preceded by a decision of the Sofia City Prosecutor’s Office to lodge an application in court to cancel the registration under the law on non-governmental organizations of the Bulgarian National Union (BNU) Edelweiss, organizer of the Lukov March. In the course of an investigation, the Sofia City Prosecutor’s Office had identified numerous public statements by members of the leadership and activists of BNU Edelweiss, statements and opinions from the organization containing incitement to violence and hate speech based on racial, ethnic or religious grounds. On the eve of the Lukov March 2018, an international conference entitled “Sofia Says No to Hate Speech” gathered representatives from national and local governments, diplomats, academics, lawyers, NGOs, media and students to counter hate speech and intolerance. Building on the conference, a public campaign “Sofia – City of Tolerance and Wisdom” under the auspices of the Mayor of Sofia was launched together with a “Together Against Hate Speech” Manifesto, committing the signatories to combat intolerance and hate speech, including through counter speech. The public campaign is intended as a long-term project to unite institutions and civic organisations in opposition to hate speech building upon a number of initiatives, events and educational activities, such as the initiative “Let’s Clean Hatred off the Streets of Sofia” to clean swastikas and other offensive graffiti off walls in the Bulgarian capital with the participation of more than 100 volunteers.<sup>14</sup> In early 2019, a number of high-profile personalities and people from various walks of life posted videos on Facebook publicly stating support for the manifesto. An event in the Government Building on 16 February 2019 gathered Bulgarian intellectuals, civil society leaders, senior government officials, municipal leaders and diplomats to show support for the manifesto and add their signatures. A first-ever march of tolerance and unity “Together for Bulgaria, together for Europe” drawing more than 1 500 people from across Bulgarian society onto the streets of Sofia took place on 10 March 2019. Participants included, among others, the Speaker of Parliament, a Deputy Prime Minister, the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, pg.11

<sup>13</sup> In Bulgaria, A Bisexual Police Officer Set Up An LGBT Union. Then He Was Shunned, 2022, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-lgbt-police-union/31914055.html>

<sup>14</sup> ECRI Report, 2022, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-sixth-report-on-bulgaria/1680a83581>, pg. 13



Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Mayor of Sofia and a number of MPs. The second annual march of tolerance 25 ACFC (2020): § 64. 14 was scheduled for 15 March 2020 but had to be cancelled due to the ban imposed on public gatherings in view of the Covid-19 pandemic. The National Council of Religious Communities has an important role in promoting inter-religious dialogue. It organizes events such as the annual Festival of Religions in Sofia, academic conferences and debates on topics related to religious issues, tolerance, and human rights. In this context, it should also be mentioned that the largest religious minority, Muslims, expressed their satisfaction with recent amendments to the Act on Religious Denominations as mentioned in the first part of the section on the legislation.<sup>15</sup> According to a representative of the Muslim community met by ECRI, this step also represents a recognition of the long-established historical presence of a Muslim community in Bulgaria, which dates back several centuries, and thus sends an important signal of accepting the Muslims as part of the country's heritage instead of seeing them as alien to its traditions. In this respect, it can help to prevent and counter hate speech against this group.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2019, one LGBTI NGO has worked with the Ministry of Interior and helped to train investigative police officers from across all regions on recognizing antiLGBTI hate crimes.<sup>17</sup> This activity could be considered as a promising practice. ECRI was informed by the authorities that during 2019 and 2020 more than 130 investigative police officers attended trainings on hate crimes against LGBTI persons and another 17, who are designated as contact points by the regional directorates of the Ministry of Interior in several cities, were trained in March 2022. Furthermore, in 2021, the Bulgarian translation of a Council of Europe handbook for policing hate crime against LGBTI persons was disseminated within the Ministry of Interior and the LGBTI NGO Deystvie has also started working with the National Police Academy on a course covering the topic of hatred against LGBTI-persons.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding 2020, ECRI, examining the situation in Bulgaria made the following observations:

While since 2014 there has been a mechanism for countering violence in schools, there is no specific system in place to monitor and counter racist and anti-LGBTI incidents in schools. There is still no official data on the LGBTI population in Bulgaria. Furthermore, the authorities have not carried out any study or research into the situation of this group. Also, the authorities did not develop legislation on gender reassignment and gender recognition. LGBTI persons, as well as Roma, are the main victims of public expressions of hatred and prejudice. In both cases, hate speech against these groups also came in recent years from high-level politicians. The positive steps taken to counter antisemitism have unfortunately not been applied to these types of hatred as well. The LGBTI community centre "Rainbow Hub" in Sofia was attacked several times in recent years. The most ferocious was in 30 October 2021 when Boyan Rasate, the founder of Bulgarski Natsionalen Suyuz, Nova Demokratstyia (Nation Union of Bulgaria/New

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pg.14

<sup>17</sup> In Bulgaria, A Bisexual Police Officer Set Up An LGBT Union. Then He Was Shunned, 2022, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-lgbt-police-union/31914055.html>

<sup>18</sup> ECRI Report, 2022, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-sixth-report-on-bulgaria/1680a83581>, pg. 15

Democracy, BNS/ND) attacked the center. Rasate known for his hate speech vis a vis LGBTQIA+(Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and asexual) and migrants. In 2008 Rasate was condemned 6 months for a violent aggression during the Pride.<sup>19</sup>

On February 13, 2021, Sofia mayor Fandakova issued an order canceling the Lukov March after it had begun on the grounds that the municipality had not approved the route proposed by the organizers, after the city was unable to legally ban the event in advance. Approximately 50 participants turned out for the annual demonstration to honor General Hristo Lukov, the 1940s antisemitic, pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions leader. Police divided the rally into smaller groups and escorted them to Lukov's house, where the groups held a commemoration ceremony. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the then-ruling GERB Party, the Democratic Bulgaria Alliance, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions denounced the rally. In February, the Sofia City Court rejected a prosecutor's claim for deregistration of the rally organizer, Bulgarian National Union-Edelweiss, stating the claim failed to provide evidence of incitement of ethnic, racial, and religious hostility or other unconstitutional activity by the party. At year's end, an appeal was proceeding in the Sofia Appellate Court.<sup>20</sup>

In October 2022, the ECtHR ruled that the authorities violated the right to private and family life of the Roma residents of Voivodinovo who were driven from their homes during the violent anti-Roma protests in 2019, and ordered the authorities to pay compensation. In August 2022, the national Commission for Protection against Discrimination said that the expulsion of Roma from Voivodinovo was an act of discrimination.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance urged the authorities to do more to tackle hate speech and prejudice against Roma.<sup>21</sup>

In June 2022, a court in Sofia ordered Boyan Rassate, the Bulgarian National Union Party's candidate in the 2021 presidential election, to pay a BGN 3,000 (EUR 1,500) fine for a break-in at an LGBTI community centre – the Rainbow Hub – in 2021, during which the facility was vandalized and an activist assaulted. He was cleared of charges of assault.<sup>22</sup>

According to Amnesty International, The authorities failed to take steps to develop a national strategy and an action plan to combat discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.

In February, Blagovest Asenov, the leader of the National Resistance organization, accused on social media Jews and Jewish NGOs of being “anti-Bulgarian,” as well as of causing

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<sup>19</sup> Bulgaria: candidato presidente di destra guida raid contro centro LGBT, Alessandro Garzi, 3 Novembre 2021, URL:<https://www.ilgrandecolibri.com/bulgaria-raid-centro-lgbt/>

<sup>20</sup> ECRI Report, 2022, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-sixth-report-on-bulgaria/1680a83581>, pg.13

<sup>21</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2021,12 April 2022, URL:<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2071249.html>

<sup>22</sup> ECRI Report, 2022, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-sixth-report-on-bulgaria/1680a83581>, pg.



the “refugee crises in Europe” and “forcing the COVID pandemic” on authorities. Police issued Asenov a warning, but a prosecutor dismissed the case, citing lack of evidence of a criminal offense.<sup>23</sup>

In at least two cases, Roma have become victims of local mob protests and threats, also leading to attacks against and demolition of Roma houses. As concerns the integration and inclusion of Roma, unfortunately the authorities do not collect Roma-specific data in key areas such as education. Available estimates, however, still point to a high number of Roma children that do not attend preschool education, attend school regularly or complete their secondary education. In some cases, de facto segregation appears to exist in kindergartens and schools.<sup>24</sup>

During 2021, societal intolerance against minority groups persisted and manifested in frequent discrimination against Roma and ethnic Turks. Political and government actors sometimes condoned or prompted it. Human rights organizations reported that racial discrimination against Roma increased during the ongoing coronavirus state of emergency. Media outlets often described Roma and other minority groups using discriminatory, denigrating, and abusive language, highlighting instances in which Romani persons had committed a crime. Nationalist parties such as Ataka, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, Vazrazhdane, and the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria routinely resorted to strong anti-Romani, anti-Turkish, and anti-Semitic slogans and rhetoric.

According to the Standing Roma Conference, local authorities disproportionately targeted illegal Romani dwellings for demolition and evicted Roma families without providing adequate alternative accommodation.<sup>25</sup>

NGOs alleged that local authorities and politicians “punished” Roma communities for political gain. For example in May local activists of Democratic Bulgaria (a political alliance) initiated checks for residents’ address registrations in the Romani neighborhood in Razlog and petitioned the regional building and construction authority to demolish houses in that neighborhood after a group of Roma attacked and beat a 25-year-old person in a restaurant. In July the mayor of Gurkovo cut the water supply to the local Roma neighborhood after its residents became more insistent in demanding he deliver on his campaign promises made to them during the 2019 local elections.

According to the NGO Trust for Social Achievement, life expectancy was 10 years lower and infant mortality was twice as high in the Romani community compared with the general population. In addition, one-third of Romani men and two-fifths of Romani women between the ages of 45 and 60 had a disability. Health mediators helped Roma and other marginalized communities improve their access to health care; the National Health Mediators Network employed 290 mediators in 144 municipalities.<sup>26</sup>

According to the umbrella coalition of NGOs and activists Standing Roma Conference, national census officials in September refused to register residents of the Nadezhda

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<sup>23</sup> 2020 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, US Department of State, 2021, [URL:https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/](https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/)

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem

<sup>25</sup> 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bulgaria, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bulgaria/>, 2022

<sup>26</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2022, 12 April 2023, [URL:https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2089461.html](https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2089461.html)

neighborhood in Silven who wished to identify their ethnic identity as “Roma.” Similarly, the United Macedonian Organization-Ilinden cited cases in Blagoevgrad in which national census counters told individuals they visited that “Macedonian” was not an available option for ethnic identification.

Romani NGOs stated that municipalities set discriminatory requirements to restrict Romani women’s access to reproductive health services. For example the assisted reproduction program in Veliko Turnovo, Vratsa, and Kyustendil and the one-time allowance for giving birth in Svilengrad all require the mother to have completed secondary school. According to the BHC and Doctors Without Borders, Romani women were routinely segregated within maternity hospital wards. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concern about the “persistence of child and/or forced marriages, in particular among Roma girls.” NGOs criticized authorities for treating early marriages as an ethnic Romani rather than a gender problem but acknowledged that child marriage was pervasive in Romani communities.

NGOs identified an overall rise in the occurrence of hate speech and hate crimes. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination reported an increased number of hate speech complaints, mainly originating in media statements, social networks, and other online publications.

There were reports of Roma being denied access to public sites such as banks, swimming pools, and discos. For example in September the DSK Bank’s branch in Lukovit refused services such as money transfers and social security payments to members of the local Romani community on the basis they were not clients of the bank. Overall, it should be noted that members of the Roma community were particularly badly affected by the pandemic-related measures taken by the authorities, in particular as many of them have precarious labor engagements in the informal sector of the economy.<sup>27</sup>

The negative, discriminatory practices towards minorities are many. In 2022, a report from Bulgaria Helsinki Committee was published on the differences of behavior towards minorities in the context of criminal procedure investigation. Interviewing 1000 prisoners it found that people from Roma minority tend to complain for having ill treatment during the detention and inside the police custody. Regarding Roma community there continues to be a serious problem their housing. Roma people that leave in illegal houses and others that leave there many years, many generation and they are exposed to evictions. In 2022, a decision from the European Court of human rights gave a decision, *Paketova and others vs Bulgaria*<sup>28</sup>, regarding a force eviction of an entire neighborhood back in 2019. The practice and the legislation that backs this still continue and basically there are no changes.<sup>29</sup>

Roma community is exposed also to hate speech. There is an investigation to hatred and discrimination. There is a decision from the European Court for Human Rights, in

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<sup>27</sup> 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bulgaria, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bulgaria/,2022>

<sup>28</sup> [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22tabview%22:\[%22document%22\],%22itemid%22:\[%22001-219776%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22tabview%22:[%22document%22],%22itemid%22:[%22001-219776%22]})

<sup>29</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2022, 12 April 2023, URL: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2089461.html>

2021, Behar and Gutman vs Bulgaria concerning the two Bulgarian nationals' victims of statements made by Volen Siderov in respect to Jewish people. The practices continue to exist.<sup>30</sup>

There are also other issues such as the access to medical care that is lacking, to employment, to discrimination.

There are also other ethnic and religious minorities that face problems as well. Splinter groups from Orthodox Church can't register their church and can't have their place of worship. For example Jehovah Witness. There is a problem also with Macedonians. This conflict with Macedonia in advance and in the context of EU accession that pretend that in Macedonia there are discriminated Bulgarians. Macedonian associations that try to register their associations. Six judgments and 15 other cases pending in the European Court for Human Rights. So far they have not registered any of their association. In 2023 there were two clashes between Macedonian and Bulgarians. There is no prospect of resolution. It is deep structured in the Bulgarian history. Freedom of expression, of Assembly, attacks to their clubs sport.<sup>31</sup>

Physical abuse against the migrants. Abuses by private individuals and smugglers also. The police abuses that physically, arbitrary detained them. For instance, An international media consortium, including *Lighthouse Reports*, *Radio Free Europe*, *Sky News*, *ARD Monitor*, *Domani*, *Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen*, *Le Monde*, and *Der Spiegel*, published investigative reports on December 6 and 8, alleging border police shot and seriously wounded a Syrian migrant before he crossed the border from Turkey and that border police kept migrants detained at the border with Turkey in unofficial holding cells in degrading conditions before deporting them in military trucks.

UNHCR reported increased cases of "pushback" violence, robbery, and humiliating practices against migrants and asylum seekers along the border with Turkey. As of December 12, the Ministry of Interior reported 162,340 attempts to enter the country irregularly across the border during which border authorities detained 4,585 persons. In May Human Rights Watch accused authorities of "beating, robbing, stripping, and using police dogs to attack Afghan and other asylum seekers and migrants, then pushing them back to Turkey without any formal interview or asylum procedure." In June the NGO Mission Wings reported receiving at least 150 reports of pushbacks during meetings with

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<sup>30</sup> [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22tabview%22:\[%22document%22\],%22itemid%22:\[%22001-207929%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22tabview%22:[%22document%22],%22itemid%22:[%22001-207929%22]})

<sup>31</sup> 2020 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, US Department of State, 2021, URL:<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

migrants in Turkey in May. The BHC noted 1,681 cases involving 23,742 persons whose rights were allegedly violated in the border area in the first half of the year.

According to reports by Caritas Sofia and the BHC, authorities forced an underage Afghan citizen with humanitarian status out of the country three times on April 27-28, after police allegedly confiscated and destroyed his identity card, abused him physically, and stripped him of his clothes, money, and mobile phone. The Afghan citizen had reportedly been accepted into the country under the relocation program from Greece and had signed an integration agreement with the Ovcha Kupel District in Sofia. He was reportedly trying to help his asylum-seeking younger brother, who had crossed the border from Turkey, reach a refugee reception center.<sup>32</sup>

The Office of the Grand Mufti and regional Muslim leaders again said several municipalities, including Sofia, Stara Zagora, and Gotse Delchev, continued to reject, on what they said were nontransparent grounds, their requests to build new, or rehabilitate existing, religious facilities. Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadji said he had raised the issue in several meetings with Sofia Mayor Fandakova, including in March and October, but the mayor's office had not provided by year's end any information on the reasons for the city's continued rejections of the construction applications.<sup>33</sup>

In 2021, the Office of the Grand Mufti said it was continuing to search for ways to litigate its recognition as the successor to all pre-1949 Muslim religious communities for the purpose of reclaiming approximately 30 properties, including eight mosques, two schools, two baths, and a cemetery seized by the former communist government. Pending a decision on who was the rightful successor to the Muslim religious communities, some courts continued to suspend action on all restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti. In May, the Targovishte District Court ruled against the Office of the Grand Mufti's claim regarding a former mosque and Muslim school in Popovo, stating the office was not the proven successor. In October, the Varna Appellate Court confirmed the lower court's decision. In October, the Tutrakan Regional Court ruled against the Office of the Grand Mufti's claim to a former Muslim

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<sup>32</sup> 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bulgaria, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bulgaria/>, 2022

<sup>33</sup> 2020 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, US Department of State, 2021, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

school converted to a secular school during communism, refusing to recognize the office as the proven successor.<sup>34</sup>

In January, 2021, the Armenian Community Association objected in an open letter to the April 4 date the President had set for general elections, which coincided with Armenian Easter, stating it was a “sign of disrespect for Armenian religious customs and culture.” Pavel Gudjerov, the mayor of Rakovski, home to the largest Catholic community in the country, also addressed the President, urging him to change the date, but the President did not reverse his decree.<sup>35</sup>

On November, 2022, Russiophile far-right party Revival drafted a law in the Bulgarian parliament which would introduce sanctions on citizens depicted as “foreign agents”.

In a statement published on November 2, the Civil Society Development Council, an advisory body to the Ministerial Council, headed by the then interim Minister of EU Funds Management, Atanas Pekanov, condemned Revival’s plan.

“The project affects civil and political rights, the freedom of expression of Bulgarian citizens, and contradicts the Constitution, the laws of the European Commission and international acts to which Bulgaria is a party,” the Council said.<sup>36</sup>

According to the draft, filed on November 1, those who voluntarily register or are found to be “foreign agents”, will be financially sanctioned, publicly shamed and prohibited from carrying out activities in the educational system, state institutions, won’t be eligible to participate in political activities or campaigning, have creative activity or influence the public in any way.

This also include media groups that have received foreign grants of more than 500 euros.

Revival had no obvious allies in the current parliament, which is predominantly pro-EU, so its chances of progress on this draft are modest.<sup>37</sup>

Bulgaria was not among the countries included in the report of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on hate crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This could be explained with the lack of official statistics

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<sup>34</sup> 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, JUNE 2, 2022, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

<sup>35</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2022, 12 April 2023, URL: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2089461.html>

<sup>36</sup> Outcry in Bulgaria Over Far-right’s Plan to Punish ‘Foreign agents’, **Svetoslav Todorov**, November 2, 2022 URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/02/outcry-in-bulgaria-over-far-rights-plan-to-punish-foreign-agents/>

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem

on anti-LGBTI hate crimes. In the absence of specific mentioning of the anti-LGBTI hate crimes in the Penal Code, the law-enforcement institutions are not required to collect, record, store and analyze data related to such crimes. If reported, hate crimes targeting LGBTI people are treated as hooliganism. In the absence of a definition of “hate crime” in the Penal Code, the term used is “crimes against the rights of the citizens”. There is no general penalty enhancement for hate crimes although the law criminalizes some deeds motivated by hatred, or instigating hatred towards people based on race, ethnicity or nationality, religious or political belief. The Penal Code does not contain any substantial provisions describing an act as a hate crime and/or hate speech based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics. There are also no provisions characterizing this bias as an aggravating circumstance.<sup>38</sup>

In October, the ECtHR ruled that the authorities violated the right to private and family life of the Roma residents of Voivodinovo who were driven from their homes during the violent anti-Roma protests in 2019, and ordered the authorities to pay compensation. In August, the national Commission for Protection against Discrimination said that the expulsion of Roma from Voivodinovo was an act of discrimination.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance urged the authorities to do more to tackle hate speech and prejudice against Roma.<sup>39</sup>

### ***3. The attitude of the society towards immigrants, foreigners, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities:***

***–have sociological surveys or other studies been carried out in your country to determine the motivation of public sentiment towards these groups? If yes, what are the results? What, in your opinion, had a decisive influence on the formation of this motivation (the activities of political parties and NGOs, the media, any events in the socio-political and economic spheres, government actions, etc.) - without a Pandemic and the war in Ukraine;***

***–how the general attitude of society towards immigrants, foreigners, other minorities has changed;***

***–describe negative social manifestations in relation to immigrants, foreigners, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, give examples;***

***–radical manifestations by minorities groups towards the majority of the population, if any. What are the reasons for these manifestations in your opinion?***

According to the 2011 census, the total population was 7,364,570, a decrease of over 7 per cent since 2001. 91 per cent of respondents provided responses on their ethnicity: of those, 84.8 per cent identified as Bulgarian, 8.8 per cent as Turks and 4.9 per cent as

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<sup>39</sup> Amnesty International Report 2022/23; The State of the World's Human Rights; Bulgaria 2022. 27 March 2023 URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/bulgaria/report-bulgaria/>



Roma. However, the number of self-identifying Roma declined by more than 45,000 since the 2001 census and was far lower than unofficial estimates, leading commentators to suggest that many Roma had been reluctant or unwilling to declare their identity. The census only permitted respondents to classify themselves into these three ethnic groupings.

The population identified as ethnically Bulgarian is significantly more urbanized in comparison to the other two ethnic groups: 77.5 per cent of Bulgarians live in urban areas, compared to 37.7 per cent of Turks and 55.4 per cent of Roma.<sup>40</sup>

There are also smaller numbers of Russians, Armenians, Vlachs, Karakachans, Ukrainians, Macedonians, Greeks, Romanians and others. The 2011 census indicated that 1,130 Jews lived in the country, but local Jewish organizations estimated the actual number was between 5,000 and 6,000.

Regarding religious identity, 21.8 per cent chose not to respond when taking part in the 2011 census. Of those who did, 76 per cent identified as Eastern Orthodox, 0.8 per cent as Catholic and 1.1 per cent as Protestant, while Muslims made up around 10 per cent of the population.

In its 2014 report, the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities reported that only three ethnic groups - Bulgarians, Turks and Roma - were included in the census and those wishing to declare other identities, such as Macedonians and Pomaks, were not encouraged to do so.<sup>41</sup> As the existence of both minorities is not recognized by authorities, in practice any official figures on these communities are not seen as reliable. Another issue was that the number of census respondents self-identifying as Roma was much lower than unofficial estimates, and a significant number of persons preferred not to declare their ethnic identity. The census results indicated that 1,654 respondents who described their ethnicity as 'other' identified as Macedonians, although many Macedonian organizations do not consider these figures at all credible. There are an estimated 160,000-240,000 Pomaks living mainly in the Rhodope Mountains, who are most probably descendants of Bulgarian Christians who converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule, while retaining the Bulgarian language as well as certain Orthodox practices. The authorities do not consider Pomaks as a distinct ethnic minority and there was no mention of them in the 2010 census (nor in the preceding censuses of 1992 and 2001).<sup>42</sup>

The Bulgarians are a Slavonic people and generally Eastern Orthodox Christians.

During the five centuries of direct Ottoman rule, the population of Bulgaria became increasingly heterogeneous, acquiring in particular large Turkish and Slavic-speaking Muslim minorities. Although many Turks and Muslims left the country after 1878, the population of Bulgaria retained its ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity.

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<sup>40</sup> Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Bulgaria*, July 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce1523.html> [accessed 9 May 2023]

<sup>41</sup> ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES, 2014, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/168008c669>

<sup>42</sup> Council of Europe, Advisory opinion, 2020, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/4th-op-bulgaria-en/16809eb483>

Pastoralist nomads include Romance-speaking Vlachs and the Greek-speaking Karakachans (also called Sarakatsans). Vlachs and Karakachans were forced to settle in fixed communities during the communist period. The yet smaller communities of Albanians and Muslim Tatars were obliged during the communist period to adopt Bulgarian names as were other Muslim minorities such as the Pomaks and the ethnic Turks. Muslim Cherkez (Circassians), who were settled in Bulgaria in the nineteenth century by the Ottoman authorities, appear to have been entirely assimilated within the Turkish community.

The majority of Bulgarian Jews are Hispanic-Ladino speakers and are the descendants of Sephardic Jews who fled from Spain to the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ladino-language education was resumed in several schools after 1989. About 40,000 Jews were recorded in Bulgaria during the interwar period, most of whom emigrated to Israel after 1945. Although the Jewish minority was recognized by the communist authorities, most of the country's synagogues were closed.<sup>43</sup>

There are different motives for different minority. There is a hierarchy of the attitudes. At the bottom there are Roma, Turkish minority. Roma minority does not exist at all. As you go up, there are the Armenians, Jewish, minorities, communities such as British that are relatively wealthy and don't face any problem.

Against a backdrop of protracted political instability, declining living standards and corruption, hostility towards minorities and migrants in Bulgaria has become increasingly open encouraged by nationalist and far right parties. Against this backdrop, a pattern of civil unrest has emerged, fueled by inflammatory rhetoric from nationalist politicians that has led to violent attacks and discriminatory practices targeting ethnic and religious minorities as well as migrants.

This has been accompanied by an apparent rise in popular hostility towards minorities and migrants. Recent surveys conducted by the Open Society Institute (OSI) found that instances of hate speech in Bulgaria have steadily increased. A survey in 2016 found that 58.2 per cent of respondents reported hearing statements expressing disapproval, hatred or aggression towards representatives of minority social groups in the previous twelve months, compared to 46.8 per cent in 2014. According to the research, Roma are the most frequent targets of hate speech, with 92 per cent of respondents having heard hate speech directed at members of this group. There was also a significant increase in the share of respondents who had heard statements against Muslims - from 10.6 per cent in 2014 to 38 per cent in 2016. Furthermore, the study noted a decrease in the proportion of respondents who expressed disapproval at the use of hate speech, suggesting that such language is becoming normalized. Being conducted also in 2018, the survey from Open Society reveals that the Roma have been steadily perceived as a main target of hate speech: the four surveys carried out show that the largest share of people who have heard hate speech report that it has been targeted at the Roma. The dynamics in the groups that are most often perceived as targets of hate speech concern mainly the other four groups: Turks, Moslems, gay people and foreigners. In 2014 and

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<sup>43</sup> Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Bulgaria*, July 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce1523.html> [accessed 7 May 2023]

2016 increased incidence of hate speech targeted at Moslems and foreigners was registered that was undoubtedly related to the increased influx of migrants into the country and the shortcomings of the national migration policy. In 2018 reports of encountering hate speech went down for all of the examined groups with one exception: instances of hate speech against the Roma, Turks, Moslems and foreigners decreased but those against gay people doubled compared to the 2016 levels. In 2018 gay people are the second minority group most targeted by hate speech, following immediately the Roma, and this leap is due to the debate involving the failed ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention). The spread of hate speech apparently evolves in waves that are directly linked to the political situation and affect different minorities but maintain a constant background of anxiety and tension in the public. If until 2018 hate speech was used by marginal political actors (the three nationalist formations), the debate about the ratification of the Istanbul Convention brought hate speech into the stock-in-trade of one of the two largest political powers (BSP), in contradiction with the values of the European political family to which the party belongs. Within the context of counteracting the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in particular, hate speech has evolved together with anti-European rhetoric which threatens to undermine the main political consensus in the country. Increased nationalist trends in politics and the law enforcement authorities turning a blind eye towards crimes motivated by racial, ethnic and religious hatred have resulted in withdrawal of public support for antihate speech criminal policy: in 2018 the share of those who know that hate speech and violence motivated by ethnic, racial or religious hatred is a crime has been the lowest of other surveys carried out so far.<sup>44</sup>

Bulgarian Roma suffer from acute social exclusion and the transition from planned to a market economy has worsened their overall economic and employment situation. High rates of poverty, unemployment, low human development indicators, poor living conditions, low quality infrastructure, and lack of access to other services all point to severe social exclusion. In urban settings specifically, the fear of ethnically motivated violence has been a factor in the early dropout of Roma girls and boys from school.

Anti-Semitism also remains a feature among right-wing extremists, as illustrated by the annual march through Bulgaria's largest cities, Sofia and Plovdiv, to commemorate Hristo Lukov, a World War II general. Lukov espoused anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi views, and the march, which takes place despite a ban from the mayor of Sofia, is accompanied by pro-facist and xenophobic slogans. The march is endorsed by ultranationalist groups and occurs in spite of protests from Jewish groups and foreign governments. In February 2018, the march occurred again in Sofia after a court overturned a municipal ban.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, 44 per cent of Bulgarians harbour anti-Semitic attitudes - 10 percentage points higher than for Eastern Europe as a whole.

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<sup>44</sup>PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO HATE SPEECH IN BULGARIA IN 2018,2018,URL: <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018-Hate-speech-ENG.pdf>

While past research by organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League has detected very high levels of anti-Semitism, the Bulgarian authorities have failed to collect comprehensive data on anti-Semitic incidents. In October 2017, the government announced that it had appointed a national coordinator to combat anti-Semitism.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, 2018 marked the 75th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews. Groups of ordinary citizens, intelligentsia, parliamentarians and clergy intervened on 10 March 1943 to stop Nazi forces from rounding up the Jewish population, numbering 48,000 at the time. The anniversary was marked by a ceremony involving then Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and Dr. Alek Oscar, president of the Bulgarian Jewish organization Shalom, at the Sofia synagogue. The event also remembered the over 11,000 Jews in Bulgarian-occupied Thrace and Macedonia who were deported to Nazi concentration camps. But Bulgaria's benign version of those events from World War II has been challenged, as over 11,000 Jews from the Bulgarian-occupied zone in present-day North Macedonia were sent to the concentration camps in the first days of March 1943, before King Boris halted further deportations.

Some argue that the silence around those who were handed over to German custody casts a shadow over the heroism of those who worked for the rescue.

"The names of all 11,343 people put into sealed wagons and deported to Treblinka by the Bulgarian police and army are known. The manner in which the Bulgarian soldiers and officers treated them on behalf of the state and under the Bulgarian flag is also known. The astonishing cruelty in the last days of their lives is documented. The indifference to the tragedy of those whose last life was spent under the control of the Bulgarian army and police shows a particular moral bankruptcy," Bulgarian journalist of Jewish ancestry Emmy Barouh wrote on Thursday in an open letter to President Radev. She also expressed fears that the anniversary in 2023 might be "used for political purposes".<sup>46</sup>

During 2021, Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly on social networking sites and as comments under online media articles. The Organization of Bulgarian Jews, or "Shalom," reported a trend of increasing online anti-Semitic speech and conspiracy theories in the context of the coronavirus pandemic as well as periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. Souvenirs with Nazi insignia were available in tourist areas around the country.<sup>47</sup>

The situation of migrants and refugees in Bulgaria is illustrative of the discrimination faced by other minorities. Unused to hosting large numbers of refugees, the government was unable to respond effectively to the first influx of around 11,000 Syrian asylum seekers in 2013. In 2014, the government's policies shifted focus from helping refugees at the borders to reducing inflows, including through the construction of a barbed wire fence along the 100-mile land border with Turkey. Human rights groups have criticised

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<sup>45</sup> Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Bulgaria*, July 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce1523.html> [accessed 9 May 2023]

<sup>46</sup> Bulgaria Marks Uneasy Anniversary of Jewish Community's Rescue in WWII, Balkan Insight, 2023, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/09/bulgaria-marks-uneasy-anniversary-of-jewish-communitys-rescue-in-wwii/>

<sup>47</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2022, 12 April 2023, URL: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2089461.html>

this 'containment plan' and documented the actions of border police, often using excessive force, when summarily returning asylum seekers to Turkey.

There have been some improvements in access to medical services, better accommodation and sanitary conditions, but the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance noted in its 2017 monitoring report that the situation for asylum seekers and refugees remains precarious, with organized anti-migrant demonstrations further stoking friction between local communities and refugees. In addition, self-described 'migrant-hunters' have received praise from the public as well as the head of country's border police local police and national press for illegally detaining or searching migrants during organised 'civic patrols'. One such individual was acquitted in August 2017 in a high-profile case involving the 'arrest' of three Afghan migrants at the Turkish border.<sup>48</sup>

In recent years, the arrival of large numbers of Muslim migrants, combined with increased use of xenophobic and racist rhetoric by nationalist politicians, has also led to a dramatic rise in the number of hate crime attacks against Muslims and Muslim places of worship. Anti-Muslim demonstrations have led to vandalism of dozens of mosques; however, arrests and convictions are very rare. Research by the Open Society Institute shows that hate speech towards Muslims increased sharply between 2014 and 2016. In January, 2020, Alpha Research published a survey of Orthodox Christians and nonbelievers/atheists on their attitudes toward religious minority groups which found 3.4 percent of respondents hated, and 5.6 percent feared, Muslims; two percent hated, and 0.4 percent feared, Jews; 1.5 percent hated, and 2.6 percent feared, Protestants; and 0.5 percent hated, and 0.6 percent feared, Catholics. The rates of mistrust of various groups – which the survey's authors interpreted as reluctance to openly disclose hatred – were: of Muslims, 25.8 percent; Jews, 10.4 percent; Protestants, 10 percent; and Catholics, 7.6 percent. While the average rate of acceptance of a person of a different religion in one's neighborhood or working environment was approximately 50 percent, only 3.2 percent of respondents would consider marrying a Muslim, 6.3 percent a Jew, 8 percent a Protestant, and 11.7 percent a Catholic.<sup>49</sup>

A facet of Bulgarian nationalism is what journalist Konstantin Galabov calls “a love of freedom,” which has also played a part in shaping the attitudes toward minority groups in the country. While strongly attached to their country, Bulgarians are not particularly receptive to far-right ideologies that could encourage the persecution of minorities. The assimilationist policies against ethnic Turks in the 1980s, regarded as one of the few blots in the country's record of peaceful inter-ethnic relations, did not enjoy significant popular support.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Annual report on religious freedom, 12 May 2021, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem

<sup>50</sup> COVID-19 in Bulgaria: Nationalism, Identity and the Middle-Ground Approach - May 18, 2020, URL: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/covid-19-in-bulgaria-nationalism-identity-and-the-middle-ground-approach/>

According to Pepka Boyadzhieva, Krastina Petkova, and Galin Gornev who undertook a sociological survey of more than 700 Bulgarians in different parts of the country between March and May 2010,<sup>51</sup> Bulgarian national identity is from an emotional standpoint anchored between pride and shame, with the former exceeding the latter. Also, the comparisons with other nations seem to create an emotional discomfort for Bulgarians, who have a tendency to underestimate rather than overestimate the position of their country when it comes to indicators such as the

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<sup>51</sup> The research develops a theoretical framework and provides empirical data regarding the emotional dimensions of Bulgarian national identity in the context of contemporary Bulgaria. The paper tries to answer the following questions: 1) which are the components of contemporary Bulgarian national identity? 2) Which are the emotional dimensions of national identity and how they relate to other key identities – personal, gender, regional, and political? 3) How these different emotional components of the Bulgarian national identity relate to differences in social action? 4) What are the emotional effects of the comparison of Bulgarians with other nations?

The main theoretical premise of the paper is the conception of the social construction of national identity and emotions. It is argued that on the one hand national identity and emotions are determined by different social structures and characteristics, and on the other that they (and their interaction) in turn have an impact on social relations and social action. The role of emotion in identity processes in the present study is twofold: 1) as an outcome of identity-based comparisons; 2) as a communicative medium and mediator of social action.

Analysis is based on data collected in a sociological survey. In the period March – May 2010, 710 respondents from 6 regions of Bulgaria were interviewed. The sample was balanced with regard to age, gender, education and ethnicity. Priming was one of the methods applied in the study. For data processing we used mainly ANOVA, factor analysis and regression analysis. Three Lickert type scales were developed – scale for measuring the intensity of national identity, scale measuring the pride of being Bulgarian, and scale for measuring the shame of being Bulgarian. Thus we analyzed the intensity of national identity, the pride and shame of being Bulgarian for different social groups (defined by age, gender, political preferences, and residence).

Results show that the cognitive and group centered components of Bulgarian national identity are significantly more pronounced as compared to the emotional component. In other words, Bulgarians acknowledge belongingness to the nation and share solidarity with fellow Bulgarians rather than feel happy that they are Bulgarians.

The majority of respondents do not perceive a serious threat regarding Bulgarian national identity in the context of the processes of Euro-integration and globalization. Slightly more than 25% of the respondents believe that Bulgarian national identity is under pressure, whereas about 45% are confident that there are no signs of such pressure.

Respondents point to the EU as the main source of pressure for change of national identity. However, it needs to be noted that many of them (20%) consider that such pressure for change comes from Bulgarians themselves. Overall the "emotional climate" in Bulgarian society regarding the challenges facing national identity is within the normal and there is no reason for worries. The fact that part of the respondents look at the possibility for changes in national identity with hope and optimism leads to the conclusion that there are quite a few Bulgarians who are dissatisfied with the main facets of Bulgarian national identity and are ready to accept outer pressure for its change.

Emotionally Bulgarian national identity is "crucified" between pride and shame. Although the ratio between pride and shame is in favor of pride, the balance is very fragile – respondents are almost equally proud and ashamed of being Bulgarians. It might be suggested that these results reflect the complex, full of contradictions historical fate of Bulgarian people, which has been marked with wrong political choices, followed by dramatic losses, long term dependency on foreign powers and inability to protect national causes.

It is worth mentioning that the things Bulgarians are most ashamed of are part of our contemporary life – lack of law and order, dirty streets and social places, inefficiency of our public institutions. But these are things that can be handled and it is up to Bulgarians to solve these problems. It is important to determine how this emotional "crucifixion" of Bulgarians between pride and shame affects their behavior. Does it "paralyze" them and doom them to constantly wandering between different (extreme) decisions or could it mobilize them to perform something positive?

The study clearly shows that emotions do prompt action. There is a strong positive correlation between strength of national identity and readiness to support petition for protection of Bulgarian national identity; between pride and support of petition; between pride and integration with the EU. The results provide support for the model, according to which emotions lead to action when they result from experience of unfairness. Anger emerges as the emotion with the strongest emotional energy leading to behavior. It was anger which defined the strength of impact of the other factors (such as identity threat) and eventually had the decisive effect on behavior (support for petition) and intergroup orientation (integration/separation with Russia and/or EU).

Analysis showed that comparison with other nations seems to create emotional discomfort for Bulgarians. This trend deserves special attention. No matter whether primed with characteristics of a nation that is ahead of Bulgaria on the basis of objective indicators (Germany) or with characteristics of a nation that is far behind Bulgaria when estimated with the universal development criteria (Albania), the effect is the same - decrease of the feeling of pride and increase of the feeling of shame. With these results we are faced with a serious national syndrome – low self-esteem. And this is based not only on real problems and failures of the country but on underestimation of the achievements of Bulgaria and inability to adequately assess its actual position.

The emotional intelligence of a nation is based on its ability to recognize and adequately and duly regulate its dominant emotions. There is no doubt that emotions such as pride, shame, and anger "clash" in every nation. In countries like Bulgaria, which has gone through numerous historical vicissitudes, lagging modernization, and as a result late integration with the EU, these emotions are often more pronounced and polarized. Hence we can argue that Bulgarian emotional intelligence is put to severe test.



Human Development Index and economic development relative to nation-states that are objectively less affluent.<sup>52</sup>

One crucial staple of Bulgarian nationalism is the tendency towards defensiveness coupled with a wary pessimism, which is due to the public's perception that the country has on many occasions been on the "wrong side of history." The multitude of national catastrophes, a consequence of Bulgaria's forceful incorporation into foreign entities such as the Ottoman Empire, the constraints imposed by its membership in the Eastern Bloc, as well as the detrimental territorial changes brought about by its involvement in major armed conflicts of the 20th century, inevitably inform discourses on identity and national character in Bulgaria. While other Balkan countries have also had to contend with constant struggles for national recognition, historian Maria Todorova describes Bulgaria as being characterized by a 'weak nationalism,' which is due to organized national movements developing somewhat later than in the case of Serbia and Romania, as well as the Bulgarians' lack of a credible messianic claim, i.e. not inspiring intellectual fashions such as the Philhellenism in the case of the Greeks or being able to claim to be torch-carriers from the Roman Empire as in the case of Romania.<sup>53</sup>

Intersex people in Bulgaria still experience stigmatization, institutional and verbal discrimination, and harassment, lack of medical care, lack of legal recognition, and lack of visibility of their bodies at any age. "Invisibility", "ignorance", "hostility" are among the key words, which could describe the status of intersex people in the four countries. Intersex people still face numerous problems in a variety of areas, the most serious of which are registration at birth, medical treatment, and legal gender recognition. The research showed that a major hindrance to the equality of intersex people is the lack of knowledge on variations of sex. Characteristics and the diversity of human sexes even among health professionals, but also among educators, and the general society. Political and media messages have also strengthened the social exclusion of several social groups, including sexual and gender minorities over the last year.<sup>54</sup> The special Eurobarometer on Discrimination in the EU (2019) showed that only 16% of Bulgarians would feel comfortable with an intersex person in the highest elected political position compared with 54% EU average. 26% would feel totally comfortable with having an intersex colleague at work, compared to 66% EU average. Only 7% would feel totally comfortable with their child being in love with an intersex person, compared to 44% EU average. 35% thought that school lessons should include information about diversity in terms of being intersex, compared to 65% EU average. Opinions embracing the dangerous and harmful notion that discrimination against LGBTI people was a legitimate demand of tradition, nature and religion, mushroomed in the mass media. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court that voted on July 27, 2018 to declare that the Istanbul Convention was unconstitutional argued in its decision that the term "gender", used in the Convention, is misleading and introduces a concept that is

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<sup>53</sup> COVID-19 in Bulgaria: Nationalism, Identity and the Middle-Ground Approach - May 18, 2020, URL: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/covid-19-in-bulgaria-nationalism-identity-and-the-middle-ground-approach/>

<sup>54</sup> Policy Brief Achieving Equality for Intersex People in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and the UK, 2021, URL: [https://bring-in.eu/sites/default/files/docs/BRING-In\\_D2.9\\_Policy%20Brief\\_EN.pdf](https://bring-in.eu/sites/default/files/docs/BRING-In_D2.9_Policy%20Brief_EN.pdf)

incompatible with the constitution's understanding of "sex". The court reaffirmed the view that "sex" was a binary concept with two rigidly fixed options: male or female. This decision had an immediate negative impact on the legal practice for gender recognition of trans people, and also, reinforced prejudice which stopped progress in public awareness raising on sexual and gender diversity. The massive influence of the anti-gender movement in Bulgaria (from 2018 onwards) led to demonizing intersex people as a "third" gender, along with others who did not fit into the traditional gender norms. Different media outlets spreading fake news about the threat from "gender ideology" used "third gender" to denote any person who supported the so-called "Eurogay values"<sup>10</sup>. Some media were still commonly using the term "hermaphrodite" to refer to intersex people, even when they published a story that aimed to invoke empathy and social support to a disadvantaged intersex person in need of medical care. "Hermaphrodite wants a child" was the title of an article in the online media (<https://www.bgdnes.bg/Article/6586651>) that aimed to raise funds in support of an intersex woman living in extreme poverty.<sup>55</sup>

A May 2020 report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights indicated that nearly 30 percent of LGBTQI+ persons had experienced workplace discrimination and nearly 40 percent of them did not report it to the police due to fear of discrimination. A study from March 2020 by the NGOs Single Step and Bilitis reported that 83 percent of LGBTQI+ students had experienced homophobic insults, 70 percent had suffered harassment, 34 percent had been physically abused, and 19 percent had been assaulted, while 50 percent never reported incidents to the authorities. However, according to the GLAS Foundation, tolerance toward LGBTQI+ persons was increasing. In March 2020 a polling agency presented research commissioned by GLAS showing that 6.4 percent of respondents would vote unconditionally in the forthcoming elections for a political party that supports LGBTQI+ rights while another 34.8 percent would not mind voting for such a party if they also liked its views on other topics.<sup>56</sup>

In June 2021 a study commissioned by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation identified increasing ethnocentrism and "indications of potential racism," with only 22 percent of respondents expressing willingness to co-reside with Turks and 15 percent with Roma, while 15 percent were willing to have family relations with Turks and 5 percent with Roma.<sup>57</sup>

#### ***4. COVID -19 Pandemic and its impact on the level of Xenophobia and the Radicalization of the Society.***

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<sup>55</sup> Achieving Equality for Intersex People in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and the UK,2021, URL: [https://bringin.eu/sites/default/files/docs/National\\_Situation\\_Report\\_Bulgaria\\_FINAL\\_27.02.2021.pdf](https://bringin.eu/sites/default/files/docs/National_Situation_Report_Bulgaria_FINAL_27.02.2021.pdf), pg. 7

<sup>56</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2022,12 April 2023, URL:<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2089461.html>

<sup>57</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2021,12 April 2022, URL:<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2071249.html>

Bulgaria has been severely affected by the Covid-19 health crisis since early 2020. The negative social and economic consequences, including as a result of the necessary lockdowns and other restrictions, has impacted the entire society. The country has actually been quite careful in charting a middle course between the very tight lockdown in Serbia that saw a 12-hour curfew imposed by the police for younger people and the more laissez-faire attitude (with limited emphasis on official restrictions) seen as a hallmark of the Swedish recipe for dealing with the crisis.

In the context of a continuous political deadlock since 2020, in the elections of November 2021, the Revival party won 13 seats in the 240-member National Assembly after campaigning against, Anti EU, Anti-NATO, and COVID-19 restrictions and vaccines even though Bulgaria was plagued by the highest infection rates in Europe. It later emerged that many top Revival members had actually been vaccinated.<sup>58</sup> They started to speak out against the alleged “anti-democratic” and “unconstitutional” nature of some of the government policies.<sup>59</sup> They even tried to storm the parliament on January 2022.<sup>60</sup> A dozen protesters breached the police cordon and tried to enter the parliament. However, the police quickly regained control and prevented the break-in. “Resignation” and “Down with the measures” were the most popular chants from the protesters, who were not wearing face masks, defying the restrictions. They claimed the virus was made up or not as severe as stated by the authorities.

Bulgaria remains the least vaccinated EU member state with only around 30% of the population having a complete vaccination cycle. Prime Minister Kiril Petkov has set the goal of persuading 75% of people to get the jab.<sup>61</sup>

The party's leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, has long operated on Bulgaria's political fringes, once calling for "Russophobic garbage" to be "exterminated like pests." He was arrested years ago for involvement in an attack on a Romany community. The United States is another of Revival's perennial targets, accused of pulling the strings in Sofia. Kostadinov has often said "everything is determined by Kozyak," the street in the Bulgarian capital where the U.S. Embassy is located.

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<sup>58</sup> Maria Tsantsarova and the anti-vaxxers of "Vazrazhdane". How journalism becomes hacking(in Bulgarian),2022,URL:<https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32042657.html>

<sup>59</sup> The Vazrazhdane Party: A Study in Polarization in Bulgaria, March 7, 2022, Becca Richards, URL:<https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/03/07/the-vazrazhdane-party-a-study-in-polarization-in-bulgaria/>

<sup>60</sup> Bulgarian Far-Right Protesters Try To Storm Parliament During Rally Against COVID Restrictions January, 2022,URL:[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a34Jel\\_Kils](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a34Jel_Kils)

<sup>61</sup> Far-right ‘vaccinated anti-vaxxers’ try to storm Bulgarian parliament, 2022, URL:<https://www.intellinews.com/far-right-vaccinated-anti-vaxxers-try-to-storm-bulgarian-parliament-231560/>

Ahead of the November 2021 elections, Kostadinov was accused of pilfering state money meant for his party to buy himself real estate and a luxury car. Kostadinov, who also made a failed run in Bulgaria's November 14 presidential election -- held concurrently with the parliamentary poll -- denied the charges or that he's a shill for the Kremlin.<sup>62</sup> An estimated 1,000 people took part in the rally on January 12 in downtown Sofia that turned into a clash with police.

There has been a paucity of incidents of xenophobic nature in Bulgaria during the pandemic. In fact, even though Bulgaria collects official statistics on the ethnic demographics in the country, Mutafchiyski, the face of the coronavirus response team, has been opposed to the idea of disclosing data pertaining to the ethnic breakdown of the infected people in order not to foster divisiveness within the wider society. While discrimination against minority groups such as Romani people is certainly a feature of the political and social landscape, the crisis has probably reinforced the notion that pointing fingers at ethnic outsiders is not a constructive endeavor. In a sense, this spirit of tolerance has been applied to expatriate Bulgarians as well – the prime minister has in a number of instances reiterated that Bulgaria is not in a position from a moral and legal standpoint to close its borders to the Bulgarians who want to return from abroad for medical or other reasons, the health risks notwithstanding. However, this permissiveness has also invited criticism stemming from instances in which the virus has spread due to such travelers failing to observe quarantine rules.<sup>63</sup> In February 2020 the leader of the informal ultranationalist organization National Resistance, Blagovest Asenov, accused Jews and Jewish NGOs through social media of being “anti-Bulgarian” as well as of causing a “refugee crises in Europe” and forcing the COVID-19 pandemic on authorities. Police issued a warning to Asenov, but a prosecutor dismissed the case citing lack of evidence of a criminal offense. The Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO) Shalom reported death threats, increased incidents of anti-Semitic hate speech in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and Jehovah’s Witnesses reported fewer instances of harassment and threats, attributing the change to COVID-19 restrictions. Jehovah’s Witnesses said some media continued to misrepresent their activities. Protestants stated media published information about members of their community who tested positive for COVID-19, while not doing so for members of any other religious group. An Alpha research survey issued in January of Orthodox

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<sup>62</sup> Revival on the Rise: Ahead Of Elections, Far-Right Party Is Tapping Into Bulgarian Public Anger

2022, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-elections-revival-pro-russian/32060748.html>

<sup>63</sup> COVID-19 in Bulgaria: Nationalism, Identity and the Middle-Ground Approach - May 18, 2020, URL: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/covid-19-in-bulgaria-nationalism-identity-and-the-middle-ground-approach/>

Christians and nonbelievers found rates of mistrust of Muslims was 26 percent, of Jews and Protestants 10 percent, and of Catholics 8 percent.<sup>64</sup>

In November, 2020, Shalom notified Sofia Municipality about anti-Semitic and racist posters put up all around Sofia by activists of the Nationalist Social Club 131. In June, Shalom stated organizations such as Revived Bulgaria-Bulgarian National Unity and Military Union-Bulgarian National Movement “Shipka” were spreading online propaganda stating Jews were involved with the COVID-19 pandemic in order to provide “a deadly pseudo-antidote” aimed at “mass extermination of people.” After authorities issued a summons to Revived Bulgaria-Bulgarian National Unity leader Lyudmila Kostadinova informing her that she would be held criminally liable if she continued, the messaging stopped.<sup>65</sup>

Roma have also been scapegoated and targeted by hate speech in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In Bulgaria, politicians and some media have referred to Roma people as a threat to public health and requested special measures targeting them on this basis. A Bulgarian member of the European Parliament publicly called for Roma neighbourhoods to be closed during the pandemic, because in his view “Gypsies have a very low health culture [and] have no personal hygiene”. In addition to such generalising prejudice, he also characterised organisations which defended Roma as “anti-Bulgarian traitors”.<sup>66</sup>

## ***5. Armed conflict in Ukraine and its impact on the level of Xenophobia, Legislation and Law***

### ***enforcement practice of the country, on the activities of radical groups.***

The war in Ukraine has amplified the rift within Bulgaria between pro-Western liberals and illiberal pro-Russians. The population of the EU’s poorest and most corrupt member state appears more divided than ever, with no apparent path towards unification. While these divisions existed before the war, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine a year ago helped solidify them. Those defining themselves as liberal and pro-Western support Ukraine and are throwing themselves into helping refugees. The other group, which believes the country should abandon its pro-Western path and return to the Russian orbit, is preoccupied with issues such as whether Bulgaria will lose its sovereignty if the country joins the eurozone, or if the minds of young people will be twisted by the teaching of so-called “gender ideology” in schools. The separation of the two sides of Bulgarian society began years before the start of the Russian war in Ukraine, but after the invasion the population and politicians openly split into those supporting Ukraine and its refugees, and those backing Russia.

Bulgaria has a long history of close ties with Russia, and Russians are generally seen and referred to as “brothers” and “liberators”. Following five centuries of Ottoman rule,

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<sup>64</sup> Annual report on human rights in 2021, 12 April 2022, URL: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2071249.html>

<sup>65</sup> 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, JUNE 2, 2022, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

<sup>66</sup> ECRI Report, 2022, URL: <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-sixth-report-on-bulgaria/1680a83581>

in the late nineteenth century, a period of national renewal started, which led to a series of national uprisings against the Ottomans, culminating in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. This paved the way to Bulgarian independence, which was finally achieved in 1908. During the war of 1877–78, Bulgarian and Russian soldiers fought side by side, and to this day, Bulgarians commemorate the Russian soldiers who fell as “liberators” in that conflict. In addition to Russia’s role in Bulgaria’s independence, ethnic Bulgarians and Russians share a common cultural heritage, including a Slavic language and origin and Orthodox Christian religion.

However, the war in Ukraine has radically changed approval for Putin in Bulgaria as positive ratings for the Russian strongman have almost halved to 32%. In contrast, negative ratings have more than doubled. A survey published by the Alpha Research Agency earlier in March showed that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s popularity in Bulgaria had dropped significantly four days after the war in Ukraine started.

Bulgaria is traditionally one of the most pro-Russian countries in Europe. From 2020 to 2022, between 55% and 58% of Bulgarians expressed positive assessments of Putin.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made 40% of Bulgarians view Russia in a negative light compared to just 3% who now view Russia positively, a survey by sociological agency Trend shows.

According to the study, 46% of those surveyed have not changed their mind.<sup>67</sup>

In the first days after the invasion, thousands of Bulgarians started aiding refugees and gathering funds to help the Ukrainian army. Several went even further – fighting for Ukraine as part of the international legion there. The name of only one of them, Ivan Kalchev, is publicly known.

Kalchev, an IT expert, member of the Green Movement party and prominent civic activist, decided to go and fight for Ukraine days after the Russians invaded. He said he was fighting for Bulgaria’s and Europe’s freedom.

While in Ukraine, Kalchev occasionally posted on Facebook through trusted people in Bulgaria, inspiring his supporters. However, his posts also attracted a lot of comments from the other side of Bulgarian society wishing for his death at the front.

In July, Kalchev returned to Bulgaria for a ten-day leave and launched a campaign to gather funds and buy much-needed equipment for the international legion in Ukraine. The campaign was so successful that Kalchev gathered double the funds needed in just a few hours. He used the extra money to buy more equipment and launched another

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<sup>67</sup> Russia loses Bulgarian supporters due to Ukraine war, 2022, URL: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/russia-loses-bulgarian-supporters-due-to-ukraine-war/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russia-loses-bulgarian-supporters-due-to-ukraine-war/)



campaign to raise funds for the construction of a special drone for Ukraine. That one was also successful.

Although he was running in the upcoming election as a candidate for Democratic Bulgaria, Kalchev chose to stay in Ukraine in September and participate in the liberation of Kharkiv.

At the end of September, he returned to Bulgaria, saying he is continuing the same fight in another way. While campaigning, Kalchev is also still actively helping Ukraine and fighting for other causes in Bulgaria. But while the number of people responding to devastating events in Bulgaria and abroad has grown, so have their opponents. The voices of those criticising the Bulgarians who help the people of Ukraine, Turkey and Syria, especially on social media, have become louder.

A typical accusation is that Bulgarians who help foreigners do not care about poor retired people at home. The pro-Russian political parties, that approximately are 15, such as Vazrazhdane, Revival of the Fatherland, United Social Democracy party and the Political Movement Social Democrats, The Movement of Non-Party Candidates, The Bulgaria of Labor and Reason party, participate in this rhetoric, and it has been claimed that such accusations are often started by trolls paid by Russia. Ivaylo Dichev, a professor of cultural anthropology at Sofia University, says that one of the reasons why Bulgaria has so many pro-Russian parties is that "many of these [politicians] are paid or were traditional clients of the Soviet Union and now of Russia." He says that some of these politicians may have a direct financial interest related to their politicking, while others are just trying to exploit people's discontent.<sup>68</sup>

A political debate over whether and to what extent Bulgaria should support Ukraine with military and other forms of aid has been raging since the war started.

Pre-war, President Rumen Radev was recognised as a political figure fighting against corruption, which helped him to win his second mandate. However, he alienated many of his admirers when he started taking increasingly open pro-Russian positions since February 2022.

Another pro-Russian politician, Vazrazhdane leader Kostadin Kostadinov — dubbed Kostya Kopeyking because of his pro-Russian aspirations — has started a petition for a referendum on delaying euro adoption until 2043.

Kostadinov and his party argue that should Bulgaria adopt the euro, people will rapidly become poor and will starve. Vazrazhdane claims that Bulgaria would entirely lose its monetary sovereignty, and that the decisions of the European Central Bank would harm Bulgaria's interests. Shortly after the start of the war, Revival supporters staged an ugly

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<sup>68</sup> For Putin, Against 'Global Liberalism': Why So Many Bulgarian Parties Support Russia, October 2022, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-elections-pro-russian-parties/32061638.html>

protest action at the 2022 celebrations of Bulgaria's independence, throwing snowballs in the face of the Bulgarian prime minister and waving Russian flags. In fact, Russian flags are an indispensable attribute to the frequent protests staged by Revival in the past couple of years.<sup>69</sup>

Revival and its leaders have managed to capitalize on the nationalist vote and pro-Russian attitudes in the country, almost entirely wiping out voter support for the more established Far Right parties.

Another issue that has preoccupied those on the illiberal side of the divide is “gender ideology” — a term created by Russia and quickly adopted in Bulgaria several years ago when far-right parties fiercely opposed the adoption of the Istanbul convention on the prevention of domestic violence and violence against women.

At the time, they claimed that the adoption of the convention would open doors to the introduction of a “third gender” and would turn young people into homosexuals. The constitutional court backed the nationalists, saying the convention contradicts the Bulgarian constitution that states there are two genders – female and male. A later constitutional court decision banned gender reassignment.

Now the leader of the the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the successor to the communist party, Bulgaria's incumbent president, Kornelia Ninova, has launched a fight against “gender ideology” in schools in a bid to take votes from Vazrazhdane.

Ninova claims “gender ideology” is increasingly widespread at schools. In one video, posted on her Facebook profile, she reads a lesson from a sixth grade textbook that mentions homosexuality. Ninova claims this is pushing youngsters towards the “third sex”.

Additionally, lot of Ukrainian people complain for being harassed from pro-Russian people. Also, Russian citizens complain, vehicles were destroyed and attacked. But these are isolated incidents.<sup>70</sup>

## **6. Activities of radical groups. Radical Right groups and parties:**

***–the emergence of new neo-Nazi and nationalist groups, movements, political parties and groups***

***(brief description);***

***–the main events of the far right in 2020-22;***

***–how the influence of neo-Nazis and radical nationalists on civil society, local and central legislative***

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<sup>69</sup> Zankina, Emilia. (2023). “Pro-Russia or anti-Russia: Political dilemmas and dynamics in Bulgaria in the context of the war in Ukraine.” In: The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on [Right-wing Populism](#) in Europe. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for [Populism](#) Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. URL: <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0012>

<sup>70</sup> Own interview with a Bulgarian expert

*/ executive authorities has changed over the period;*



Antidemocratic propaganda spread during the war in Ukraine. A party is pro-Cremlin, “Revival” (Vrazrazhdene), an extreme, anti-vax nationalist party. They don’t call themselves Neo-Nazi, but they are extreme. Their origin is in these circles. The party was founded in 2014 by Kostadinov. On local social media, he’s often nicknamed “Kopeykin”, from the Russian currency unit, alluding to his Russian sympathies.

In 2020, the Sofia Prosecution demanded the party cease operating, citing erroneous and counterfeited data regarding registration. However, in 2021, the Sofia City Court dismissed the case.

The party gathered more exposure in 2021 when it vocally opposed health measures and vaccination, initiating protests. Another controversy ensued after a TV investigation found that many of the party members are actually inoculated.

Revival entered parliament after the November 2021 elections and also secured seats after the October 2022 snap elections, with its best result yet.

In interviews on Ukraine, Kostadinov has highlighted that people only hear the Ukrainian side of the conflict and has criticized NATO’s presence in the region.

Russian flags are often present at party demonstrations. In their most recent election campaign, Revival called for a referendum on Bulgaria’s membership in NATO and the EU, a more patriotic and religious approach in the educational system, and has also targeted the adoption of the euro currency.<sup>71</sup> In October 2022, Kostadin Kostadinov, leader of the far-right pro-Moscow Revival (Vazrazhdane), left a press conference at Sofia’s Bulgarian News Agency after his demands for certain journalists to be removed from the event were not met.

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<sup>71</sup>Outcry in Bulgaria Over Far-right’s Plan to Punish ‘Foreign agents’, November 2, 2022

URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/02/outcry-in-bulgaria-over-far-rights-plan-to-punish-foreign-agents/>

His anger was targeted at newspapers and websites who have attacked his rhetoric and presence in politics and which he called “foreign agents” serving the US.

“We have not sent invitations for this event to outlets such as Capital, Dnevnik, Mediapool, Club Z and similar metastasis”, Kostadinov said, although press events in the Bulgarian News Agency are traditionally open to all media.

“They should leave the press conference because we don’t want to be covered, or attend a single space together, along with media employees who are twisting the public consciousness in favour of foreign countries.

“They only present themselves as Bulgarian media but in fact they represent foreign interests ... We can’t communicate with these yellow-brown-ish waste systems of the US embassy”, said Kostadinov, often nicknamed “Kopeykin”, from the Russian currency unit, alluding to his Russian sympathies.

After no action was taken, Kostadinov, along with other party members, left the room.<sup>72</sup>

The previous extreme nationalist parties have declined. The party gained voted recently and particularly after the conflict in Ukraine. They are hostile to ethnic and religious minorities, Roma, migrants, Jehovah Witness, against Ukrainians in Bulgaria, physical assaults against them. They are against Macedonians also. The majority of population is against Macedonian people. In November 2020, EU member Bulgaria blocked the start of North Macedonia’s long-awaited EU accession talks in an argument over history and identity.<sup>73</sup>

To North Macedonia’s dismay, Bulgaria demanded that the term “Macedonian language” be scrapped from the EU negotiating framework, insisting that Macedonian is just a dialect of Bulgarian.<sup>74</sup>

Bulgaria also said its neighbor needed to “accept the truth” that no Macedonian identity, separate from the Bulgarian, even existed before World War II.

Many Bulgarian historians still insist that a Macedonian identity was only “artificially” created after World War II when the new federal Yugoslavia created a Macedonian republic – one of six federal units.

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<sup>72</sup> Bulgarian Far-Rightist Quits Presser After Failing to Expel Critical Media, October 5, 2022, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/05/bulgarian-far-rightist-quits-presser-after-failing-to-expel-critical-media/>

<sup>73</sup> North Macedonia Eurovision Contestant Accused of Spreading Bulgarian Propaganda, March 17, 2021, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/17/north-macedonia-eurovision-contestant-accused-of-spreading-bulgarian-propaganda/>

<sup>74</sup> Bulgaria Blocks Start of North Macedonia’s EU Accession Talks, November 17, 2020, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/17/bulgaria-blocks-start-of-north-macedonias-eu-accession-talks/>

To add insult to injury, Bulgaria has also demanded that Skopje renounce the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, which Bulgaria does not recognize.

They propagate Russian positions.

In April, 2022, the opening of a Bulgarian cultural club in the North Macedonia town of Bitola named after Ivan Mihailov, a controversial 20th Century nationalist movement leader who became a Nazi collaborator, has been criticised as a threat to ongoing attempts to achieve a breakthrough in the two countries' dispute over history.

The opening of the cultural club named after Mihailov, which was attended by top Bulgarian politicians, "does not contribute to rapprochement between the two peoples", North Macedonia's President Stevo Pendarovski said at the weekend.

The event in Bitola was attended, in an unofficial capacity, by a spectrum of top Bulgarian politicians, including Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, Vice-President Iliyana Yotova and Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska.

Bulgarian Socialist Party member and MP Dragomir Stoynev, MP Andrei Gyurov and former defence minister and leader of the right-wing VMRO-BND party, Krasimir Karakachanov, were also present, as well as former foreign minister Ekaterina Zaharieva.

The event was held amid an increased police presence and a nearby protest by outraged locals.

Dragi Gjorgiev, co-chair of the joint North Macedonia-Bulgaria Commission for Historical and Educational Affairs, said it was nothing short of a "deliberate provocation".

"This is a historical figure who, due to his ideas about the non-existence of the Macedonian nation, is extremely negatively perceived by Macedonians," Gjorgiev told Deutsche Welle on Monday.

"And when the name of such a person is imposed as the name of a cultural club on the territory of North Macedonia, and that person has nothing to do with culture, then it can be understood only as an arrogant provocation, or even as an act that leans towards the opposite of the so-called friendship [which Sofia says it wants]," he added.

The opening of the club comes amid fresh attempts from both countries, as well as from the EU, for a breakthrough in the bilateral history dispute which would lift Bulgaria's blockade on its smaller neighbour's progress towards the EU. Although regarded by right-wingers in Bulgaria as a national hero, Ivan Mihailov, also known by his nickname Radko, who was the last leader of the clandestine Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, VMRO, has a very negative image in North Macedonia.

Born during Ottoman rule in 1896 near the town of Stip, in today's North Macedonia, Mihailov on one hand advocated for the formation of an independent Macedonia, within geographical borders that now cover today's North Macedonia, western Bulgaria and northern Greece, with its capital in Thessaloniki.

But on the other hand, Mihailov did not recognise the existence of a Macedonian national identity as separate from the Bulgarian identity. According to some historical accounts, Mihailov ruthlessly ordered assassinations of his revolutionary compatriots if they were seen as competition to him inside the VMRO.

During the World War II, Mihailov lived for a period in Zagreb, as the guest of Ante Pavelic, the founder and head of the fascist organization known as the Ustasa and later the leader of the Independent State of Croatia, NDH, Nazi puppet state.

Before the end of the war, in September 1944, Mihailov returned to Skopje, where he tried but failed to establish a Nazi puppet state similar to the NDH in Croatia.

After World War II, he was living in exile, regarded as an enemy of the state and Nazi collaborator by Socialist Yugoslavia, of which Macedonia was part. He died in Rome in 1990.<sup>75</sup>

On October 2022, another club opened from Bulgarians living in North Macedonia. The opening of a cultural club named after the wartime King Boris III of Bulgaria – who led Bulgaria into the Nazi-led Axis alliance in World War II and occupied much of today's North Macedonia.

Protesters chanted “Fascists” and “Killers” at members of the club attending the opening. They also sang the national anthem and carried banners saying, “No negotiations with Fascists” and, “Fascism must fall”.

The protest saw scuffles between protesters and the police guarding the club entrance. Some protesters were seen throwing eggs at the club building.

The opening of the club comes against the backdrop of a bitter dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria over history and identity.

Bulgaria insists that the Macedonian Identity and language have a Bulgarian origin. Among other things, it wants North Macedonia to change textbooks referring to the three-year occupation in World War II as “occupation” and alter that to “Bulgarian administration”.

Bulgaria has blocked North Macedonia's EU accession over this dispute for almost three years and only this summer agreed to conditionally lift the veto.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Bulgarian Club Named After Nazi Ally Outrages North Macedonia, Sinisa Jakov Marusic,

April 18, 2022, URL:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/18/bulgarian-club-named-after-nazi-ally-outrages-north-macedonia/>

<sup>76</sup> Demand for Referendum on French Deal Divides North Macedonia, Sinisa Jakov Marusic, July 25, 2022, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/25/demand-for-referendum-on-french-deal-divides-north-macedonia/>



Both club openings have enraged North Macedonia's small Jewish Community, which has announced filing charges against the leaders of the club in Ohrid, for spreading Fascism, Nazism and Antisemitism.

"Fascism must not be allowed back in Macedonia through such a grand entrance, it is inadmissible", the head of the Jewish Community, Pepo Levi, told the media on Wednesday showing a photo of Tsar Boris III shaking hands with Adolf Hitler.

Nazi-allied Bulgaria refused to deport its Jews to Germany during World War II, however, and has been widely praised for this; however, this was not the case with the Jews in the territories it occupied.

Under Bulgarian rule, 7,144 Macedonian Jews were deported in 1943 to the Nazi death camp in Treblinka. Only a handful survived.<sup>77</sup> The Macedonian Jewish community was virtually wiped out. On the site of the Jewish neighborhood in Skopje stands a Holocaust Museum run by the Jewish Community.<sup>78</sup>

The opening of the two Bulgarian clubs in Ohrid and in Bitola, both sponsored by private donors, and named after Nazi collaborators, added insult to the injury for many Macedonians and challenged diplomatic efforts to overcome the broader disputes.<sup>79</sup>

In January 12, 2022, No Vax protesters organized from Revival party made an assault in the Bulgarian parliament against the green certificate of Covid.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> North Macedonia Jews Condemn Naming Bulgarian Club After 'Collaborator' King, Sinisa Jakov Marusic, August 10, 2022, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/10/north-macedonia-jews-condemn-naming-bulgarian-club-after-collaborator-king/>

<sup>78</sup> Club Named After Bulgarian King Stirs Anger in North Macedonia, Sinisa Jakov Marusic, October 7, 2022, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/07/club-named-after-bulgarian-king-stirs-anger-in-north-macedonia/>

<sup>79</sup> Attacks on Bulgarian Club Further Complicate Skopje-Sofia Relations, Sinisa Jakov Marusic, November 25, 2022, URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/25/attacks-on-bulgarian-club-further-complicate-skopje-sofia-relations/>

<sup>80</sup> Bulgaria, corteo di attivisti No Pass assalta il Parlamento, Paolo

Brera, URL: [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/01/12/news/bulgaria\\_corteo\\_no\\_pass\\_assalta\\_il\\_p](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/01/12/news/bulgaria_corteo_no_pass_assalta_il_p)

[arlamento-333560297/](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/01/12/news/bulgaria_corteo_no_pass_assalta_il_p/parlamento-333560297/)



There are several other parties, ATAKA, VMRO, which used to be part of the government till 2021. They were discredited by their participation in the government, 2017-2021, with the leading party of GERB that is a member of the European People Party. This alliance with Borisov made them look inappropriate at citizens rising discontent. The vote for Revival is a protest vote. Since 1989 Socialists attracts votes that were in favor of Communists, it is a protest vote. That communist regime was overthrown. Revival is a protest vote but in a different basis, the voters are against EU, NATO etc. Part of these people are against these alliances. The voters are in favor of creating a strong alliance with Russia. The people are very willing to accept such an alliance. Pro-ethnic Bulgarians. The issue of slavophilia, of Russian policy of Russia towards the people of Slavic origin, based in religion, language.

In Facebook and social media are very active, they propagate their ideology. Revival has a Facebook profile, Telegram and other groups. The other parties such as Ataka have a TV, their own television, an open propaganda channel. VMRO has also a TV channel and active in social network. National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria has also.

There are some other marginal, pro-Nazi groups, as Bulgarian National Union, Lukovo March that have several Facebook accounts. There are also other groups that come and go because of the Meta policy to stop their presence.

The pro-russian groups have very close connection with Russia. Three parties are very strong, Revival, Ataka, Russophiles that is a group under prosecution for espionage. They receive money from Russia however nothing can be proved. Ataka has no parliamentary presence but they have a TV channel, they employ a lot of people. They secretly receive money from Russia.

There are several other organizations connected with Trump and USA that are antiabortion, and homophobic. The influence of religion in Bulgaria is minor. Historical

reasons and other made this. These antiabortion propaganda don't receive any public attention.

In October 2020 vice presidential candidate Elena Guncheva of the Vazrazhdane party referred on social media to local politicians of Jewish and Turkish origin, saying they should consider themselves “guests” in this country. After Shalom complained of “xenophobia and hate speech” to the Central Electoral Commission, which condemned her words but stated it could not interfere in the political campaign, Guncheva addressed Shalom specifically on social media, reiterating that “Bulgaria is the land of Bulgarians.” Jewish community leaders also expressed concern regarding periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments and what they said was an increasing trend of anti-Semitic and xenophobic propaganda and graffiti. In June Shalom approached the local government in Provadia after discovering that the old local Jewish cemetery had become an illegal landfill with bones scattered around the site. Shalom asked the municipality to clean the cemetery and to allow a rabbi to collect the bones. As of December the municipality had not responded to Shalom.<sup>81</sup>

In March 2020 the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization political party, part of the governing coalition at the time, issued a position declaring the country “a zone free of LGBTQI propaganda.”<sup>82</sup>

## ***7. Activities of radical groups. Islamists.***

***–the emergence of new Islamist parties and groups (brief description);***

***–the main activities of the Islamists in 2020-22;***

***–how has the influence of Islamists changed over the period on Muslims in your country, as well as on local and central legislative/executive authorities;***

Bulgaria has radical groups only allegedly. 12 persons were convicted for such activities. It was a group founded from Saudi Arabia. On February 19, 2020, the Plovdiv Appellate Court confirmed the Pazardjik, 80 km from Sofia, District Court's 2019 verdict convicting 12 Romani Muslims on charges of supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, propagating Salafi Islam, characterized by the government as an antidemocratic ideology, and incitement to war. The appellate court also confirmed the lower court's sentences: 8.5 years in prison for the group's leader, Islamic preacher Ahmed Mussa, and incarceration ranging from 12 to 42 months for 10 of the other Romani, all men. The 12th Romani, the only woman in the group, received a two-year suspended sentence. A final appeal of the case to the Supreme Cassation Court by both defendants and prosecutors was pending at year's end. The group of Roma people was influenced from Islamic group from Middle East that turned to radical Muslims. Women started to veil their faces and the

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<sup>81</sup> 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, 2022, URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem

governments made a law to prohibit. In his preaching's in the Pazardzhik mosque, Moussa had also incited hatred and urged his followers to wage war on religious grounds.<sup>83</sup> Their leader said "it is good to cut the head of Christian" in a private meeting.

There are Muslims that are not fundamentalists. The type of Islamism in Bulgaria is like the secular Christianity that does not fuel any type of radicalism.

#### ***8. Activities of radical groups. Radical left groups and parties:***

- the emergence of new ultra-left parties and groups (brief description);***
- the main activities of the ultra-left in 2020-22;***
- how the influence of the ultra-left has changed over the period on civil society, on local and central legislative/executive authorities;***

There are anarchist, communist groups very small. They undertake street mobilization. They are radical in their ideology but there are no violent actions undertaken from such groups.

#### ***9. Hate crime (statistics and summaries), law enforcement actions, criminal cases, racist attacks,***

***violence and terror over the period (data from government agencies and NGOs):***

- vandalism in cemeteries, attacks on religious buildings;***
- Interethnic clashes;***
- cases of violence on racial, ethnic, religious grounds, attacks on human rights activists and anti-fascists;***
  
- hate killings;***
- terrorist attacks based on radical nationalism and religious fanaticism.***

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<sup>83</sup>Bulgarian imam jailed for Islamic State support, 10/12/2019 -  
URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/20191210-bulgarian-imam-jailed-for-islamic-state-support>

There is no prosecution for hate crime. Organizations that collect hate crime incidents does not exist. So far there is no comprehensive platform for such a collection of data.

Hate speech is widespread in Bulgaria, confirming the concerns of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, targeting now in particular Roma and LGBTI people. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in political discourse, especially in the run-up to local or national elections, of which several were held in 2021 (three parliamentary elections and one presidential election). While during the 2015 in its last report, ECRI already noted that surgery relating to a change of sex is covered under the national health insurance system. Hate speech was mostly directed against migrants, in particular Muslims, this appears to have shifted back in recent years mainly towards members of the Roma and LGBTI communities.

Roma have been scapegoated and targeted by hate speech in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is an estimated average of 750 000 Roma persons living in Bulgaria, approximately 9.94% of the population.<sup>84</sup> In Bulgaria, politicians and some media have referred to Roma people as a threat to public health and requested special measures targeting them on this basis. A Bulgarian member of the European Parliament publicly called for Roma neighbourhoods to be closed during the pandemic, because in his view “Gypsies have a very low health culture [and] have no personal hygiene”. In addition to such generalising prejudice, he also characterised organisations which defended Roma as “anti-Bulgarian traitors”. Furthermore, the European Court of Human Rights in its 2021 judgment in the case of Budinova and Chaprazov v. Bulgaria found that the anti-Roma statements made by a Bulgarian politician were a violation of Article 8 (right to private and family life) in conjunction with Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Although the levels of public expressions of antisemitism in Bulgaria are still relatively low, the country is not exempt from the rising trend of anti-Jewish hatred observed in many member states of the Council of Europe. The authorities informed ECRI about antisemitic statements made by some politicians, officials and other public figures in the last few years. Antisemitic rhetoric continues to appear on social networks and in some media, especially online. Several incidents of vandalism of Jewish graves and monuments, as well as displaying Nazi symbols or selling souvenirs with Nazi insignia in tourist areas have been reported around the country. Antisemitic incidents in football have also been noted in Bulgaria, with some extremist fans uttering racist chants and making Nazi salutes during matches.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Council of Europe, Roma and Travelers (2012), Estimates on Roma population in European countries.

<sup>85</sup> The Sofia Globe (29 October 2019), UEFA penalises Bulgarian Football Union over racist behaviour at Bulgaria-England Euro 2020 match

Year	Hate recorded crime by police <sup>86</sup>	Prosecuted	Sentenced
2020	727	353	289

### *Racist and xenophobic hate crime*

2020-11	Violent attacks against people	UNHCR
Nine asylum seekers from Iraq and Syria were beaten and had their valuables taken by police officers when crossing the state border.		
2020-11	Violent attacks against people	UNHCR
A Tunisian asylum seeker traveling with 10 Syrian Palestinian asylum seekers was beaten and had his money taken by police officers while crossing the border.		

### *Anti Roma hate crime*

2020	Attacks against property	OSCE Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights
Photos from an exhibition dedicated to LGBTI and Roma communities were ripped off.		
2020-05	Violent attacks against people	European Roma Rights Center (ERRC)
A Roma community isolated by the police and under COVID-19 related curfew was targeted when the authorities sprayed disinfectant on the community and their houses from an airplane.		
2020-05	Violent attacks against people	European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) OSCE Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights

<sup>86</sup> The numbers recorded by the police refer to cases registered under substantive offences, some of which are hate speech provisions, and specific penalty enhancements in the Bulgarian Criminal Code. However, most (706) of the offences under the latter category include crimes committed out of "hooligan motives", which fall outside of the OSCE's hate crime definition. The number of sentencing judgments refers also include discrimination-based offences which fall outside the OSCE's hate crime definition.



A teenage Roma boy was beaten, punched in the head, burned with cigarettes, stuffed in a garbage can, and thrown off a bridge by a group of four men. The victim suffered facial injuries, including swelling in the ear.

2020-06	Violent attacks against people	European Roma Rights Center (ERRC)
A Roma man in a wheelchair was subjected to racist insults, slapped and spat on by three male perpetrators. The victim's nephew was also attacked.		
2020-08	Attacks against property	European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) OSCE Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights
An open-space LGBTI and Roma rights photo poster exhibition was vandalized shortly after it opened, with some of the posters ripped from their stands.		

***Anti-Semitic hate crime***

2020-01	Attacks against property	Kantor Center
Tombstones at a Jewish cemetery were vandalized.		
2020-01	Attacks against property	Bulgarian Hate Crime Recording Coalition
Tombstones at a Jewish cemetery were destroyed, and a brick fence and a metal door were damaged.		
2020-01	Threats	Bulgarian Hate Crime Recording Coalition
A Jewish woman received an anonymous phone call conveying anti-Semitic death threats.		
2020-07	Violent attacks against people	Bulgarian Hate Crime Recording Coalition
A Bulgarian-Israeli Jewish man was subjected to anti-Semitic insults and attacked with a piece of wood by a male neighbour. The offender was prevented from physically assaulting the victim, who was left in fear of his safety.		
2020-08	Threats	Bulgarian Hate Crime Recording Coalition
A synagogue received an e-mail containing threats of a terrorist attack. A day before the incident, the same synagogue had received a similar threatening e-mail.		

### ***Anti Muslim hate crime***

2020-01	Attacks against property	Office of Grand Mufti in Bulgaria
Tombstones at a Muslim cemetery were damaged by two teenagers.		
2020-10	Attacks against property	Office of Grand Mufti in Bulgaria
Street signs around the city were vandalized with anti-Muslim stickers.		

### ***Anti-disability hate crime***

2020-06	Violent attacks against people	European Roma Rights Center (ERRC)
A Roma man in a wheelchair was subjected to racist insults, slapped and spat on by three male perpetrators. The victim's nephew was also attacked.		

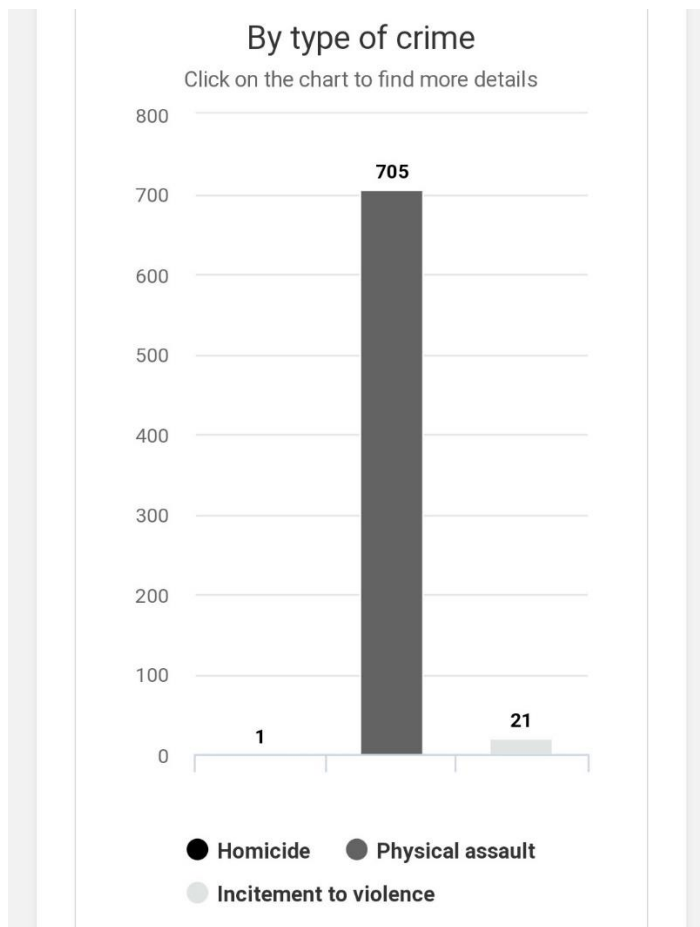
### ***Anti LGBTI hate crime***

020	Attacks against property	OSCE Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights
Photos from an exhibition dedicated to LGBTI and Roma communities were ripped off.		
2020-08	Attacks against property	European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) OSCE Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights
An open-space LGBTI and Roma rights photo poster exhibition was vandalized shortly after it opened, with some of the posters ripped from their stands.		
2020-09	Violent attacks against people	Bulgarian Hate Crime Recording Coalition

Several teenage girls were subjected to homophobic insults, harassed, had eggs and stones thrown at them, spat on, beaten, and injured by a group of teenage boys because of their appearance and perceived sexual orientation.

Year	Hate crimes prosecuted by police	Prosecuted	Sentenced
2021	18	384	303





In February, 2021, Jewish groups strongly protested remarks by a television quiz show host on Bulgarian National Television denying there were gas chambers in Nazi extermination camps and stating that Jews disliked working, especially in the camps, preferring others “to do all the work so that they can collect the profit.” The director general of the station and the show’s host apologized for the remarks. According to NGOs, souvenirs exhibiting Nazi insignias and imagery continued to be widely available in tourist areas around the country and few local governments responded to complaints about them.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly in online comments and on social networking sites, for example, calling Jews “lampshades,” and in online media articles and in the mainstream press. Antisemitic graffiti, including swastikas and offensive slurs appeared in public places. The Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO) Shalom reported increased incidents of antisemitic hate speech online in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing election campaigns, and vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and Jehovah’s Witnesses reported no instances of harassment or threats

from the public, which they attributed to moving most of their activity online due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In February, 2021, Blagovest Asenov, the leader of the **National Resistance** organization, accused on social media Jews and Jewish NGOs of being “anti-Bulgarian,” as well as of causing the “refugee crises in Europe” and “forcing the COVID pandemic” on authorities. Police issued Asenov a warning, but a prosecutor dismissed the case, citing lack of evidence of a criminal offense.

Shalom expressed “strong concern” regarding Alternative for Bulgarian Revival Party leader Rumens Petkov’s appearance for a TV interview on September 21 while wearing a yellow badge reading “Unvaccinated” on his lapel. Shalom said Petkov’s badge was a reference to the yellow stars Jews were forced to wear during World War II and stated he was minimizing the Holocaust. In a subsequent public statement, Petkov denied the accusations of antisemitism and apologized to “everyone who felt offended.”

In February, Jewish organizations protested the “scandalous and slanderous content” of a question posed by Orlin Goranov, host of the game show “Last One Wins,” to contestants on Bulgarian National Television. Goranov asked for the name of the chess player who allegedly denied there were gas chambers in Nazi extermination camps and who claimed that Jews disliked working, especially in the camps, preferring others “to do all the work so that they can collect the profit.” According to press reports, the host was quoting, without naming him, the late world chess champion Bobby Fischer. The Director General of the station, Emil Koshlukov, apologized on Facebook and fired the scriptwriter for including the question. The show’s host also publicly apologized on the air.

In June, Shalom reported spotting stickers with Nazi symbols inside public transportation vehicles in Sofia and inside ski lifts in Bansko. Shalom also reported increased incidents of antisemitic hate speech online in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing election campaigns. In October, vice presidential candidate Elena Guncheva of the Vazrazhdane Party referred on social media to local politicians of Jewish and Turkish origin, saying they should consider themselves “guests” in the country. After Shalom complained of “xenophobia and hate speech” to the Central Electoral Commission, which condemned her words but stated it could not interfere in the political campaign, Guncheva addressed Shalom specifically on social media, reiterating that “Bulgaria is the land of Bulgarians.” In November, the Israeli embassy issued a public letter condemning her comments.

Jewish community leaders expressed concern regarding periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments and what they said was an increasing trend of antisemitic and xenophobic propaganda and graffiti. In June, Shalom approached the local government in Provadia after discovering that the old local Jewish cemetery had become an illegal landfill, with bones scattered around the site. Shalom asked the municipality to clean the cemetery and to allow a rabbi to collect the bones. At year’s end, the municipality had not responded to Shalom.

On January 29, unknown persons defaced with a swastika a memorial plaque in Plovdiv for a Jewish man killed in 1943. The Plovdiv municipality cleaned the plaque, but police had not identified the perpetrator by year's end.

On August 22, vandals drew racist and antisemitic symbols, including a swastika, on the fence of the Sofia Synagogue. Police had not identified any suspects by year's end.

Shalom condemned remarks by Miroslav Ivanov, a candidate for parliament from the Bulgarian National Union-New Democracy Party during a television interview in July. The party has no representation in parliament. According to press reports, among other comments, Ivanov said that Jews were happy under Hitler because they could work freely, Nazi gas chambers were used for deworming, and that a Nazi salute he was shown to be doing in a picture was actually a "Roman salute." Shalom called for Ivanov to be prosecuted for Holocaust denial and spreading antisemitic propaganda.

For the second consecutive year, Jehovah's Witnesses reported no cases of hostility or harassment against their members by nongovernment officials, which they attributed to COVID-19-related restrictions that forced them to switch to online gatherings.

The Church of Jesus Christ reported no instances of harassment of missionaries, compared with three such incidents in 2020. The Church attributed the change to having moved most of its activity online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Office of the Grand Mufti said Muslims were targets of periodic hate speech, such as at a protest in November in front of the Embassy of Turkey in Sofia against alleged interference of Turkey in the general elections, where participants chanted "death to Turks." According to the office, since most of the Muslim population in the country is ethnic Turkish, Bulgarian society frequently conflates "Muslim" and "Turk." The office also cited several instances of offensive graffiti on Muslim properties, such as a swastika on a mosque in Plovdiv in January and obscenities spray-painted on a mosque in Kazanlak.

On February 14, Regional Mufti of Plovdiv Veli again hosted the annual Tolerance Coffee, gathering representatives of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities, local government officials, foreign diplomats, and representatives of civil society. According to the press release from the mufti's office, the event commemorated the 2014 attack on the local Cumaya Mosque and was intended as a sign of respect and tolerance among all people, regardless of their ethnic background or religious beliefs.

The National Council of Religious Communities, whose members include representatives of the BOC, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, AAC, and Jewish communities, continued to serve as a platform for the largest religious groups to organize joint events and defend a common position on religious issues, such as legislative proposals, political statements, and actions by others, and religiously motivated vandalism. The BOC only occasionally participated in the council's activities, according to reports from members of the council and public reports of council activities. The council again substantially curtailed activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including by canceling the annual Festival of Religions in Sofia for the second year in a row.



In October, the Office of the Grand Mufti expressed concern that municipal authorities had excavated the area around the historic Kursun Mosque in Karlovo and piled up a large amount of dirt in the yard, calling it a desecration. In a subsequent meeting with Regional Mufti of Plovdiv Taner Veli, Karlovo mayor Emil Kabaivanov explained the piles of dirt were the result of archaeological excavations dating back three years. At year's end, the Office of the Grand Mufti's litigation (which the office initiated in 2012) against Karlovo Municipality regarding ownership of the mosque was pending in the Sofia Appellate Court.<sup>87</sup>

## 10. Conclusions for the period

Bulgaria has been plagued by political gridlock since 2020 when the Southeast European country of nearly 7 million people was rocked by nationwide protests, as public anger over years of corruption boiled over. Much of the ire was directed at longtime leader Boyko Borisov and his center-right Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party. Bulgaria seem more divided than ever, after no event or situation managed to bridge the gap between them over the past two years.

During this time, the lengthy political crisis in the country has made it even harder for the two groups to understand those who differ from them or even attempt to find common ground. Most importantly, the year crisis has strengthened the pro-Russian voices and the extreme right party, "Revival" as a vivid clash of traditional versus liberal stances in Bulgaria. The repertoire of extreme right mobilization and incidents remain similar with the traditional motives, an anti-Roma sentiment that characterizes in a top down way the pattern of incidents, law enforcement authorities that lack the standards of a democratic culture. Also, a diffused anti-LGBTQI stance remain a central motive for the mobilization of far right formations and anti-democratic sentiment of specific categories of population.

As the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance stated in 2009, in Bulgaria, the legal and institutional framework against racism and discrimination has been strengthened and initiatives have been taken to improve the situation of Roma and of refugees. However, anti-racism or anti-discrimination legal provisions are rarely applied, the situation of Roma and asylum seekers remains worrying, the public's awareness of problems of racism and intolerance still needs to be raised, and the response of the justice system to racist publications and to allegations of racist or

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<sup>87</sup> Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria, JUNE 2, 2022, URL:<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bulgaria/>

discriminatory behavior on the part of the police should be improved. Since then the situation has not improved substantially.<sup>88</sup>

## ***11. Recommendations:***

***– General recommendations for adjusting the legislative framework***

***– General recommendations for executive authorities in the field of law enforcement, ensuring public safety and observance of human rights.***

Legislation for hate crime should be expanded.

The authorities should build on the positive actions they have taken to prevent and combat antisemitism in order to take similar measures also with regard to other groups that are vulnerable to hate speech.

The authorities should set up a system to monitor and counter racist and anti-LGBTI incidents in schools.

The authorities should develop legislation on gender reassignment (change of a person's sex) and recognition in line with international human rights standards.

The authorities have to set up an LGBTI working group, which should include relevant organizations from the LGBTI community, to carry out research into existing forms of discrimination against LGBTI persons with a view to developing a national strategy and action plan to combat intolerance and discrimination against LGBTI persons.

The authorities take all necessary measures to prevent threats and violence against Roma by groups of local residents.

The authorities ensure that no de facto segregation of Roma children takes place in kindergartens and schools.

The authorities protect Roma housing from demolitions that are not in line with relevant safeguards (such as a sufficient notice period, the possibility of legal remedies, and the provision of alternative accommodation) provided for by relevant international texts.

The authorities increase the number and scale up the successful work of Roma mediators in the areas of health, education and employment.

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<sup>88</sup>European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 02 March 2009, URL:[https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance-publishes-report-bulgaria\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance-publishes-report-bulgaria_en)

