



solidar

 **TOGETHER FOR
SOCIAL EUROPE**

SOCIAL RIGHTS MONITOR 2020



COUNTRY MONITOR: BULGARIA

Despite recent improvements, Bulgaria continues to underperform in addressing structural inequalities, which are expected to worsen with the Covid-19 outbreak. Income inequality stands at a quintile ratio of 8.1, 53% of people live either on or below the minimum wage, and Bulgaria ranks 19th in the Gender Equality Index. Even though unemployment levels at 4.6% are below EU average, these rates do not reflect the situation of Roma, young people and people with disabilities. Not only are these social groups employed at a lower rate but they are also more vulnerable to precariousness and worse living conditions as reported by SOLIDAR's National Strategy Group (NSG) in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the NSG considers

youth and Roma mediators as well as compulsory quotas for people with disabilities as positive improvements in active targeted employment measures. As for the state of social protection, both the Country Specific Recommendation and the NSG indicate the need to address the barriers to essential services, with co-payment in healthcare as a particular concern in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a significant deterioration of the civic space has been noted in Bulgaria with the NSG especially concerned with threats to CSO activity on the counts of anti-Bulgarian-ness, inconsistencies in restrictions of freedom of assembly and constraints to freedom of press favoring pro-government voices.

	2018	2019	EU-28 2019
Gini index ¹	39.6	40.8	30.1
Unemployment ²	5.2%	4.2%	6.3%
Gender Equality Index	58.8 (2019) ³	59.6 (2020) ⁴	67.9 (2020)
In-work poverty ⁵	10.1%	9.0%	9.2%
Housing Overcrowding ⁶	41.6%	41.1%	15.6%
CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor ⁷		NARROWED	N/A

Selected indicators on the state of social rights

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET

The Bulgarian National Strategy Group (NSG) led by the Institute for Social Integration has reported no major changes to the taxation system in the last year in Bulgaria. The flat 10% personal income tax, lowest rate for such in the EU⁸, continues to be incapable of financing an adequate welfare system, as reported by the NSG. Despite steady economic growth throughout 2018 and 2019⁹, taxation revenues as percentage of GDP remain one of the lowest in the EU¹⁰. Furthermore, a decreasing social

protection expenditure since 2016¹¹ increases the already high tax burden on low income families.

As a result, the NSG considers that Bulgaria is underperforming when addressing existing inequalities. Even though unemployment rates are below EU average at 4.6%¹², severe income disparities exist between the highest and lowest earners. The income inequality rate is the lowest in the EU at 8.1, but has been

1 Eurostat (2020). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc_di12

2 Eurostat (2020). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2019). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019/country/BG>

4 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/country/BG>

5 Eurostat (2020). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate : <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

6 Eurostat (2020). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en

7 CIVICUS (2020). Civic space monitor - Bulgaria: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/bulgaria/>

8 European Commission (2020) Taxation Trends in the European Union: 2020 Edition https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/sites/taxation/files/taxation_trends_report_2020.pdf

9 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

10 European Commission (2020) Taxation Trends in the European Union: 2020 Edition https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/sites/taxation/files/taxation_trends_report_2020.pdf

11 Eurostat (2020) General government expenditure by function (COFOG) <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitView-TableAction.do>

12 National Statistical Institute (2020) Labour Force Survey Quarterly Data: Unemployed and unemployment rates – national level <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6481/unemployed-and-unemployment-rates-national-level-statistical-regions>

increasing since 2018¹³. 76% of people declaring monthly income receive less than a monthly net figure of EUR 460, and 53.85% of the same total declare a monthly net income equal or below the minimum wage of EUR 286^{14,15}. In comparison to 2017, the percentage of population in the lowest income bracket seems to be on the rise by 1.8% of the population of 2017, whereas the highest income bracket has increased by 14% in population, as reported by the NSG.

Bulgaria's performance in the Gender Equality Index has improved since 2015 but it still remains below the EU average, ranking at 19th with a score of 58.8¹⁶. Even though the gender employment gap at 8.6% and the gender pay gap at 13.5% are below EU average¹⁷, the move towards gender equality is taking place at a slower speed than the rest of the Union. EIGE indicates that more improvements have to be seen in the income and work-life balance domains¹⁸. Yet both the European Equality Law Network and the NSG have not reported any new policy developments for gender equality since 2018^{19, 20}. Furthermore, the NSG discloses a lack of access to information regarding gender mainstreaming initiatives through the National Council on Equality between

Women and Men, the official advisory body to the Council of Ministers.

GOOD PRACTICE

The programme “Warm Breakfast and Warm Lunch” has been introduced nationwide and intends to improve the wellbeing of Roma minority children. This is achieved by ensuring that local municipalities guarantee access to two meals a day for this vulnerable group in exchange for their enrolment in formal education. Not only does the programme cover their nutritional needs but it also provides these children with a safe space to develop educational skills during the day.

The education system in Bulgaria still faces major challenges in terms of quality and inclusiveness. The latest data on underachievement shows that Bulgaria ranks the lowest in the EU, with geography and socio-economic background strongly influencing academic performance²¹. The rate of early leavers is also amongst the highest in the EU at 13.9 %²², the ROMA population being more vulnerable to this trend due to school segregation and serve

13 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer>

14 Draganov, Nikolay (2019) Close to 80% of the income in Bulgaria is less than 460 euro <https://en.baricada.org/bulgaria-income-2018/>

15 Bellamy, Daniel (2019) Bulgarians endure lowest minimum wage in the EU <https://www.euronews.com/2019/02/08/bulgarians-endure-lowest-minimum-wage-in-the-eu>

16 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) Gender Equality Index 2019: Bulgaria <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019/BG>

17 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer>

18 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) Gender Equality Index 2019: Bulgaria <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019/BG>

19 European Equality Law Network (2019) European equality law review 2019/2 <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/5005-european-equality-law-review-2-2019-pdf-3-201-kb>

20 European Equality Law Network (2020) European equality law review 2020/1 <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/5182-european-equality-law-review-1-2020-pdf-1-057-kb>

21 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

22 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard 2020 <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer>

poverty barriers²³. The NSG reported that the expected results of the transfer of competence on programme design to education centres to adapt to local specificities in 2018 have not materialised. Despite complying with these changes, schools have closely imitated each other, thus not finally implementing real change at this level. Furthermore, the NSG requests an increase in the capacity of municipal- and state-level childcare to develop early-leaver programmes to tackle the low rate of participation in early childhood education.

ACCESS TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Currently at 2.4%, the share of long-term unemployment in Bulgaria has been declining since 2013, slowly converging towards the EU average²⁴. Although this results from positive labour market developments, the figure does not reflect the situation of the most vulnerable, for which integration into the labour market remains slow. Roma, young people, and people in rural areas have an unemployment rate of 55%, 12.5% and 9.4% respectively²⁵ ²⁶. In the hopes of ameliorating this situation, Bulgaria has introduced youth and Roma mediators and developed mobile labour offices to reach out to these groups²⁷.

The National Strategy Group has recently noticed a significant development in the integration of people with disabilities. Following

consultations with social partners, Parliament voted in favour of the Integration of Persons with Disabilities Act in force since 2019 and reinforced by the National Strategy for People with Disabilities²⁸. Amongst the newly introduced measures are employment quotas for companies with over 50 employees with additional financial benefits to assure the accessibility of the workplace. Non-compliance with the quotas results in fines of EUR 2,500 or higher as a way to finance a Compensation Fund destined for the improvement of social services for people with disabilities. The NSG welcomes this measure as a step in the right direction to address this labour market inequality, as the employment rate of people with disabilities in Bulgaria remains the lowest in the EU at 39.5%²⁹.

WORKING CONDITIONS AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

The NSG points out that precariousness is widespread in Bulgaria as has been confirmed by several studies in recent³⁰. With 21% of the economy developing in the grey sector and 16% of labour undeclared³¹, precariousness is concentrated in the agriculture, manufacturing, and construction industries. The main drivers of this labour market trend in Bulgaria are high involuntary and marginal part time work and a lower-than-average perception of job security³². This is further evidenced by the fact that the

23 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

24 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard 2020 <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer>

25 National Statistical Institute (2020) Labour Force Survey Quarterly Data: Unemployed and unemployment rates – national level <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6481/unemployed-and-unemployment-rates-national-level-statistical-regions>

26 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

27 Ibid.

28 European Equality Law Network (2019) European equality law review 2019/1 <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/4930-european-equality-law-review-1-2019-pdf-1-051-kb>

29 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

30 Marshall, Shelly (2019) Living Wage: regulatory Solution to Informal and Precarious Work in Global Supply Chains <https://books.google.bg/books?id=qRmEDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA99&lpg=PA99&dq=precariousness+bulgaria&source=bl&ots=aCDWvP-Mds4&sig=ACfU3U1h1KORgpYqxiZRIVbVm4wZSUeUjQ&hl=bg&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjxnNGSsongAhVP1BoKHUCNDXgQ6AEwChOECAGQAQ#v=onepage&q=precariousness%20bulgaria&f=false>

31 Eurofound (2019) Bulgaria: Latest developments in working life Q3 2019 <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/article/2019/bulgaria-latest-developments-in-working-life-q3-2019#footnote-ZrS0P-2>

32 European Parliament (2016) Precarious Employment in Europe: Patterns, Trends and Policy Strategy https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2753967/175863_2016_Final_Publication_Precarious_Work_European_Parliament.pdf

most recurrent reasons for recent unemployment are redundancies and end of seasonal or temporary job³³. The NSG further adds that low trade union density also weakens the capacity to reach collective labour agreements at company level in all sectors, further hindering the possibilities to face precariousness. Young people recently entering the labour market, older workers closer to the retirement age and people with disabilities are the most vulnerable to this trend, as identified by the NSG.

Given these working conditions, emigration to other EU, notably to Germany, the UK and Spain, are contributing to the diminishing working-age population and to the changes in economic development³⁴. In 2018, 50,000 Bulgarians, mostly between the ages of 25 and 49, left the country in search for better employment and living conditions³⁵. This trend further exacerbates the labour market shortages and is expected to hit the education and healthcare sector in rural areas the hardest³⁶.

INCLUSION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

Despite the enactment of the National Strategy for Integration on Migration, Asylum and Integration 2015-2020, the NSG believes that not enough action is being taken to process the asylum petitions. The Strategy has not been followed by any specific action plans, targeted funding allocations, or provision of social

inclusion programmes such as civic education, language classes or vocational training³⁷. Nevertheless, a separate regulation adopted in 2017, which regulated the agreement between asylum seeker and the State³⁸, ensured access to a social protection and integration service package through municipalities on a voluntary basis. Not only is the implementation of this more recent act slow, but the NSG also indicates a lack of reporting concerning the number of agreements reached. They are of the opinion that only 64 Syrian asylum seekers have officially been accepted through this procedure, given that this is the only available information.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19

Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bulgaria declared a state of emergency in March 2020. To curve the impact on the healthcare service and prevent the pandemic from further spreading in the country, this unprecedented decision introduced restrictions on mobility within the country and obligatory quarantine on people entering the country³⁹.

The NSG also reported additional repercussions in the integration of migrants. As in-person public administration procedures had been suspended, only permits were extended for long-term migrants with residence permits,

33 National Statistical Institute (2020) Labour Force Survey Quarterly Data: Unemployed and unemployment rates – national level <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6481/unemployed-and-unemployment-rates-national-level-statistical-regions>

34 Georgieva, Maria (2019) Reversing the brain-drain: How Plovdiv lures young Bulgarians home <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/may/07/reversing-the-brain-drain-how-plovdiv-lures-young-bulgarians-home>

35 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

36 Ibid.

37 European Commission (2020) Governance of Migrant Integration in Bulgaria <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/governance/bulgaria>

38 Official Journal of the Republic of Bulgaria (2017) Decree № 144 of 19 July 2017 on the adoption of an Ordinance on the terms and conditions for concluding, implementing and terminating the agreement on the integration of aliens with asylum or international protection <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=116399>

39 Reuters (2020) Bulgaria will not extend state of emergency, but some curbs stay: minister <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bulgaria/bulgaria-will-not-extend-state-of-emergency-but-some-curbs-stay-minister-idUSKBN22G28K>

family members of Bulgarian citizens and family members of EU citizens, leaving out beneficiaries of international protection. Furthermore, the NSG informs that asylum seekers were immediately put into quarantine with no access to assistance or counselling. Furthermore, access to justice and legal protection was limited for detainees facing deportation due to similar measures.

To combat the socio-economic impact, Bulgaria has mobilised BGN 870 million (+/- €445 million) to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic⁴⁰. Amongst other fiscal measures, the employment protection scheme for companies in sectors severely affected by the preventative measures or those who prove a 20% of income loss provided the possibility for the State to fund 60% of workers' salary, with the company paying the rest of the amount.

Nevertheless, the NSG raises some concerns on the effectiveness of employment protection.

The coalition government modified the Bulgarian Labour Code's dismissal provisions to facilitate labour conditions regulation during the state of emergency. However, the NSG warns this decision has lifted key protective measures and given more flexibility for employers to proceed with dismissals of permanent staff. As a result, this measure has contributed to the rise in unemployment mostly from the catering and tourism sectors between March and May 2020, according to CITUB⁴¹. The precariousness of this environment also applied additional pressure on youth employment. The unemployment rates for this age group increased at a much higher rate, rising from 12% in March to 14.2% in April⁴². The NSG declares that most of these dismissals were carried out on mutual agreement between the interested parties with an additional verbal promise to rehire them once quarantine measures were to be lifted. This has left them not only with an uncertainty regarding their future employment situation, but also reduced their entitlement to compensation.

40 European Commission (2020) Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2020 National Reform Programme of Bulgaria and delivering a Council opinion on the 2020 Convergence Programme of Bulgaria <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0502&from=EN>

41 Jordanova, Veselina (2020) One in five unemployed from closed hotels or restaurants <https://www.dnes.bg/business/2020/04/23/vseki-peti-bezraboten-ot-zatvorenite-hoteli-ili-restoranti.447193>

42 Eurostat (2020) Unemployment by sex and age – monthly data <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INCLUSION

Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU and this is reflected in the current living conditions, the impact of the income inequalities and the situation of those receiving the lowest income, as reported by the National Strategy Group (NSG). The AROPE rate of 32.5%⁴³ has been the highest in the EU ever since Bulgaria's accession. Even though improvements have taken place since 2015, the degree of such positive change has slowed down since 2018⁴⁴. In this context, the in-work poverty is also rising and currently stands at 10.1% for the overall population and 15.4% for youths⁴⁵. Poverty disproportionately impacts some social groups, with the AROPE rates for Roma reaching 86%⁴⁶, 49.5% for people with disabilities⁴⁷, and around 20% for elderly people⁴⁸. 19%⁴⁹ of children are furthermore at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which is why Bulgaria ranks second to last in the EU at 45th in the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission Flourishing Index⁵⁰. The impact of poverty also varies geographically, as rural areas are more at risk of poverty exacerbated by barriers to accessing services. The North West's AROPE rate is currently double that of the South Western capital region⁵¹. Furthermore, the NSG expects these living conditions to worsen as a result of the socio-economic and health COVID-19 crisis.

The positive impact of social transfers on reducing poverty in Bulgaria is below EU average and has been decreasing since 2018 reaching the current rate of 23.7%. This underlines why

the NSG regards the evaluation of poverty eradication efforts as being insufficient. Given the lack of sufficient resources allocated to poverty eradication, Bulgaria greatly depends on the European Programme for Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) with an allocated budget of EUR 104.8 million from this programme, met with EUR 18.5 million from national funds⁵². Despite the government's announcement of a 6.7% rise for pensions, the NSG reports that 800,000 Bulgarians still receive the minimum amount for pensions of EUR 125 following recent data of the Bulgarian Insurance Institute. As pensions are persistently at 70% of the minimum wage, many elderly people rely on income earned through additional work⁵³.

Moreover, the NSG highlights serious concerns regarding access to affordable housing. With rising housing prices in the last years, Bulgaria continues to struggle to reduce housing deprivation, currently 10 times the EU average. Housing costs contribute to overburden low-income households to the extent that 50% of households below the poverty line are unable to shoulder the costs⁵⁴. As housing competences have been transferred away from the national level, the NSG discloses that municipalities are struggling to find the funds to build new affordable housing units or renovating existing units. The National Strategy Group reports that due to the fact that there are no homelessness prevention policies or reintegration frameworks in place; at-risk households

43 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer>

44 Ibid.

45 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Hallaert, Jean-Jacques (2020) IMF Working Paper: Inequality, Poverty and Social Protection in Bulgaria (<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2020/07/31/Poverty-and-Social-Protection-in-Bulgaria-49552>)

49 Ibid.

50

51 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

52 European Commission (2018) FEAD Country Fiche – Bulgaria <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1239&langId=en&intPagelId=3605>

53 Hallaert, Jean-Jacques (2020) IMF Working Paper: Inequality, Poverty and Social Protection in Bulgaria (<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2020/07/31/Poverty-and-Social-Protection-in-Bulgaria-49552>)

54 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

depend on traditional informal practices from mayors and clerks to find affordable housing, which often leave out Roma and migrants as a result of persistent prejudices.

Life expectancy and the extent of self-reported unmet needs for medical care have significantly improved since 2008. Men and women live on average 71,4 and 78,4 years respectively⁵⁵. Only 1.4% of the population self-report unmet medical needs in 2019, compared to 15.3% in 2008⁵⁶. Part of this improvement is due to improvements in availability, affordability and accessibility of the healthcare system since Bulgaria joined the EU. Yet the NSG highlights that these developments have only benefited those in urban areas and with enough disposable income to afford combining both private and public care services. With 14% of the population un-insured⁵⁷, out-of-pocket expenditure on healthcare in Bulgaria through the co-payment method still is amongst the highest in the EU at 46.6%⁵⁸, further overburdening low-income households. Rural residents greatly depend on the infrastructure of the nearest main town for primary care or on Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna for specialized care, as reported by the NSG. This set-up only increased the pressure on the healthcare system, already experiencing difficulties in paying medical staff and more specifically nurses. Plans for a healthcare reform have been announced, yet these will further privatise the healthcare system⁵⁹

Access to healthcare for migrants and asylum seekers is even further restricted due to barriers to obtain insurance and a lack of interpretation services, and show similar issues as

uninsured Bulgarians, according to the NSG. The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment of Punishment⁶⁰ has also raised concerns regarding the medical infrastructure in detention centres, still showing signs of a lack of medical equipment, psychological care and non-emergency services. Through the participation of Bulgaria projects such as UNICEF health programme, the NSG hopes that at least the access to healthcare for children in migrant camps improves.

In the context of the transition towards a green economy, Bulgaria is still dependent on coal, its primary source for energy and electricity⁶¹. The 2021-2030 Energy and Climate Plan intends to address this by committing Bulgaria to reach a minimum of 27.09% of the total energy production to originate from renewable sources by 2030⁶². Nevertheless, the biggest worry of the NSG is the necessary transformation of the economy to reach these goals, with a potential to threaten a considerable number of jobs. In the provinces of Stara Zagora, Pernik and Kyustendi, the mining industry employs around 15,000 people and their economies are poorly diversified. These regions risk a negative socioeconomic impact if the decarbonisation plans are not met just transition strategy. That is why the Parliament approved the Mining Areas in Transition programme, reliant on EU fund, specifically focused on re-skilling the labour force towards the digital economy,⁶³. To combat the high rates of energy poverty, Bulgaria is expected to introduce a social assistance system, yet concrete measures have not been presented⁶⁴.

55 Bulgarian National Statistics Institute

56 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer>

57 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

58 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer>

59 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

60 ANSA (2019) Migrants 'need better healthcare assistance in Bulgaria' <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/18357/migrants-need-better-healthcare-assistance-in-bulgaria>

61 International Energy Agency (2020) Bulgaria <https://www.iea.org/countries/bulgaria>

62 Ministry of Energy, Ministry of the Environment and Water (2020) Integrated Energy and Climate Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/documents/bg_final_necp_main_en.pdf

63 Ibid.

64 European Commission (2020) Country Report Bulgaria 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0501&from=EN>

CIVIC SPACE

The National Strategy Group reports new limitations to civic space in Bulgaria. Even if courts rarely cancel the registration of new organizations, the lack of sustained funding opportunities for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is constraining the freedom of association, disproportionately affecting newer NGOs or those without the human and financial capacity to face a new year of activity. In addition to this, the NSG is concerned about the impact of the threat to forcibly dissolve the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee on the grounds of “anti-Bulgarian” attitudes voiced in September 2019 by the coalition partner party VMRO-BND⁶⁵. Even if no legal grounds for such action were found, the NSG reports this has created a precedent to silence critical voices in Bulgaria.

The constraints on the freedom of peaceful assembly, imposed in the light of Covid-19, have not been applied consistently by authorities. This has led the NSG to think that it has been used to silence certain unions and CSOs, whilst allowing anti-vaccine, ultranationalist, and anti-lockdown protests to go ahead.

Both the NSG and Reporters without Borders

are concerned about the developments in freedom of press and speech. Bulgaria continues to be 111th position in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index⁶⁶ as a result of media management interference with investigative journalism, media ownership oligopoly embodied by the member of parliament Delyan Peevski and the Bulgarian National Television abandoning its neutrality policy. This is exacerbated by a lack of transparency in EU and national funding allocation for media, favouring pro-government reporting, and a lack of protection for independent corruption reporting⁶⁷.

Since 2013, CSOs have received more clarity regarding their participation in social dialogue at national, sectoral, regional and enterprise-level⁶⁸. The NSG reports on a newfound possibility for NGO experts to take part in parliamentary committees to contribute to decision-making, but indicates a need for regulations on lobbying to maintain a level of fairness and transparency. Following this regulatory improvement, the NGS would like to see a change in decision-making culture and the political understanding of the role of CSOs to build a foundation for a stronger social dialogue model.

65 Council of Europe (2019) Concern over legal proceedings for de-registration of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/-/concern-over-legal-proceedings-for-de-registration-of-the-bulgarian-helsinki-committee>

66 Reporters Without Borders (2020) 2020 World Press Freedom Index Ranking <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

67 Reporters Without Borders (2020) Bulgarian authorities ignore death threats against anti-corruption reporter <https://rsf.org/en/news/bulgarian-authorities-ignore-death-threats-against-anti-corruption-reporter>

68 Voss, Eckhard (2019) Social services and their representation in social dialogue in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta and Romania <https://www.ceep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/767-Study-draft4.pdf>

COMPARISON WITH THE COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the extraordinary situation of the socio-economic crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Commission's recommendations for 2020 for Bulgaria acknowledge the extent of territorial and social inequalities and the need to address systemic AROPE rates. These also closely resemble the picture painted by the National Strategy Group and their worries on the distancing between the capital and the remaining regions, as well as between urban and rural areas.

Both the Commission and the NSG reflect upon a need to strengthen the welfare state to be able to combat the crisis and pre-existing shortcomings. Amongst the recommendations, the targeted services with ample room for improvement are healthcare, education, the minimum income scheme, and active employment and poverty alleviation programmes. Increasing access to healthcare regardless of insurance coverage and geographical location, designing targeted measures for informal workers' precarious situation, ensuring income support,

food and adequate social services for the most vulnerable and providing emergency housing for homeless closely resemble the requests provided by the NSG's analysis of Bulgaria.

Nevertheless, more connection between the recommendations and other recurring issues can be made. When proposing the transitions to e-governance to reach all the territory equally, the Commission fails to acknowledge the positive impact it can have on facilitating asylum claims and guarantee asylum seekers and migrants' access to other essential health and legal services, especially during confinement when mandatory in-person are unavailable. The recommendations on active employment measures adapt to digitalization, such as re- and up-skilling, fail to consider how these can contribute to the transition to a greener economy. Furthermore, no clearance is given on provisions for employment and social assistance through Just Transition programmes, despite concerns on Bulgaria's ongoing high dependency on fossil fuels for its energy.

SOLIDAR's Social Rights Monitor 2020 has been developed in the framework of the Together for Social Europe programme co-funded by the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI). It provides an insight into the state of social rights in 17 European countries. The Monitor assesses the state of social Europe in terms of equality of opportunities, fair working conditions, social protection, inclusion and civic space based on the observations of Civil Society Organisations working on the ground in combination with statistical data and scientific findings. It does so on the basis of observations of National Strategy Groups set up in each of these countries by a SOLIDAR member or partner. The 2020 Monitor also analyses to what extent these aspects are reflected in the Country Specific Recommendations of the European Semester process towards a socially sustainable recovery after the Covid-19 crisis.

RESPONSIBLE EDITOR:

Mikael Leyi

AUTHOR:

Miguel Hernandez Littlewood

COORDINATION OF PUBLICATION:

Carlos Roldán Mejías, Violeta Meotto,
Jedde Hollewijn, Julie Martinaud

COPY EDITING:

Sebastian Moffett

GRAPHIC DESIGN:

Maximilian Fischer

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:

Institute for Social Integration (ISI)



**Institute for
Social
Integration**

solidar



**TOGETHER FOR
SOCIAL EUROPE**

SOLIDAR is a European Network of more than 50 Civil Society organisations who gather several millions of citizens throughout Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR voices the values of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions across the three main policy sectors: social affairs, international cooperation and lifelong learning.

For more info www.solidar.org

Avenue des Arts, 50
1000 Brussels - Belgium
+32 2 500 10 20
www.solidar.org
@SOLIDAR_EU



This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Union. The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

