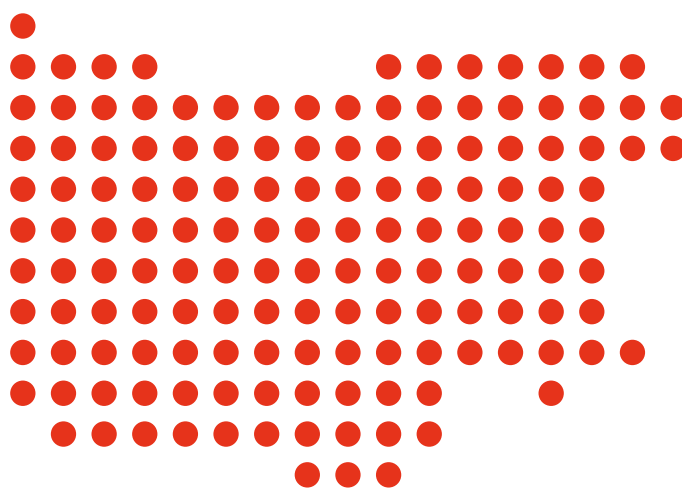


# Social Rights Monitor

2021

Country Monitor:  
**Bulgaria**



**solidar**



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SOCIAL EUROPE

	2018	2019	2020	EU-27 2020
<b>GINI index<sup>1</sup></b>	39.6	40.8	40.0	30.1
<b>Unemployment<sup>2</sup></b>	5.2%	4.2%	5.2%	6.3%
<b>Gender Equality Index<sup>3</sup></b>	58.8 (2019)	59.6 (2020)	59.9 (2021)	67.9 (2020)
<b>In-work poverty<sup>4</sup></b>	10.1%	9.0%	9.7%	9.2%
<b>Housing Overcrowding<sup>5</sup></b>	41.6%	41.1%	39.5%	15.6%
<b>CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor<sup>6</sup></b>	NARROWED	NARROWED	NARROWED	N/A

### Selected indicators on the state of social rights in Europe

Missing data for 2020 are not available at the time of publication of the Social Rights Monitor 2021.

# Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

The outbreak of the pandemic caused an economic downturn in Bulgaria, and the measures adopted to limit the spread of the virus had severe negative effects on different sectors and on employment. In 2019, the employment rate was 71.4%, but it decreased to 68.1% in the first quarter of 2020, reaching a low of 67.8% at the beginning of 2021.<sup>7</sup> The unemployment rate started increasing at the beginning of 2020 and reached more than 6% in the first quarter of 2021. It has not yet returned to its pre-pandemic level of 3.7%.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, unemployment disproportionately affects young

people, among whom the rate is almost 9%.<sup>9</sup> Employment levels of young people are lower than those for the older population, and the youth employment rate has lost 2 percentage points since 2019.

**Some major changes were adopted in 2020 to amend the national Кодекс на труда<sup>10</sup> – Kodyeks na trooda (Labour Code).** As in many other European countries, provisions for working from home were introduced, together with amendments for more-flexible working hours. Worryingly however, the threshold for

1 Eurostat (2021). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc\\_di12](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc_di12)

2 Eurostat (2021). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une\\_rt\\_a&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en)

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/BG>

4 Eurostat (2021). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

5 Eurostat (2021). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en)

6 CIVICUS (2021). Civic space monitor - Bulgaria: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/bulgaria/>

7 National Statistical Institute NSI Bulgaria (2021) Employment rate for population aged 15-64: <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6481/en/node/18942>

8 National Statistical Institute NSI Bulgaria (2021) Unemployment rate for population aged 15-64: <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/6481/en/node/en/node/18942>

9 Eurofund (2021) Living and working conditions in Bulgaria: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/country/bulgaria#key-figures>

10 КОДЕКС НА ТРУДА (Bulgarian labour code): <https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/1594373121>

overtime was also increased, and the annual limit on overtime was doubled, from 150 to 300 hours.<sup>11</sup> However, **a rise in the minimum wage was welcomed by trade unions and CSOs**, and it led to an increase in minimum monthly pay from BGN 560 in 2019 (€286,94), to BGN 650 in 2021 (€332).<sup>12</sup>

## GENDER EQUALITY

**Bulgaria still ranks among the worst countries for gender equality in the European Union.** According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, Bulgaria scored 8.3 points below the European average in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Since 2010, some positive developments have taken place, but at a slower pace than in other EU countries. Women's full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate increased by 3 percentage points from 2010, to 45%. But it is still well below the FTE rate for men, which is 56%.<sup>14</sup> This is reflected in the time women dedicate to care and housework activities, which mainly remain tasks for women: **73% of women say they cook and do housework every day, compared to only 13% of men.**<sup>15</sup> There is therefore an urgent need to **increase women's representation at institutional level in order to develop policies and approaches to close this gap and ensure equal access and opportunity for all.** In 2020, only 27% of members of the Bulgarian Parliament were women, as were 26% of members of regional and local assemblies and municipal representatives.<sup>16</sup>

The gender gap in employment is sometimes wider when specific groups are considered.

Among couples with children, 76% of women participate in the labour market, versus 90% of men. Among young people, only 75% of women participate in the labour market compared to 83% of men. The risk of poverty therefore remains higher for women, and it has risen by 1 percentage point since 2010.<sup>17</sup>

In December 2020, Bulgaria's government adopted its National Strategy for Promoting the Equality between Women and Men.<sup>18</sup> Its main priorities are gender equality in the labour market, reducing the pay gap, combating violence and protecting and supporting victims, and overcoming sexism.<sup>19</sup> However, the National Strategy Group is pessimistic about the concrete effects of the strategy and will closely monitor its implementation.

## EDUCATION

2020 and 2021 have been difficult years for students, teachers, and education personnel, due to the pandemic and the measures adopted to limit its spread. These often led to the **temporary full closure of all education and training institutions.** Schools and kindergartens in Bulgaria closed in March 2020, with a huge effect on students and often on their parents as well. Parents had to provide the right learning environment, support, and digital tools. In Bulgaria, 40% of parents need support to care for their children, so that they can go to work.<sup>20</sup> Children from families living in poverty were most severely affected by school closures and a lack of support for their parents. Moreover, **only 63% of the support teachers for children with special needs worked**

11 Eurofund (2021) Living and working conditions in Bulgaria: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/country/bulgaria#background>

12 Ibid.

13 EIGE (2020) Gender Equality Index 2020 – Bulgaria: [file:///C:/Users/socialaffair/Downloads/20203336\\_mhag20002enn\\_002.pdf](file:///C:/Users/socialaffair/Downloads/20203336_mhag20002enn_002.pdf)

14 EIGE (2020) Gender Equality Index – Bulgaria: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/BG>

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ministry of Defence (2020) National Strategy for Promoting the Equality between Women and Men: [https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20210119\\_National\\_strategy\\_2021-2030.pdf](https://www.mod.bg/bg/doc/ravnopostavenost/20210119_National_strategy_2021-2030.pdf)

19 Ministry of Labor and Social Policy MLSP – Government of Bulgaria: <https://www.mlsp.government.bg/politika-za-ravnopostavenost>

20 UNICEF (2021) Rapid Assessment of COVID-19 impact on education in Bulgaria: <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/stories/rapid-assessment-covid-19-impact-education-bulgaria>

during the state of emergency,<sup>21</sup> therefore leaving behind some of the most vulnerable learners. Compared to the academic year 2016/17, the number of enrolled students decreased at every level. The biggest drop was in early childhood education, where 9,000 fewer children were enrolled in 2021.<sup>22</sup> There was also an increase in early leavers from education and training in 2020. The rate reached 12.8%,<sup>23</sup> giving Bulgaria the EU's fifth highest number of early school leavers. Most worrying were gender gap statistics, which show that Bulgaria's early school leaving rate is 3.5 percentage points higher among girls than boys.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, there are also geographical inequalities in education: the proportion of early school leavers is higher in rural areas than in cities.<sup>25</sup>

## GOOD PRACTICE

### Summer school for young children

The Bulgarian Foundation "Together in Class" organises a summer academy<sup>26</sup> to help young students (from the first to the twelfth grades) make progress in core subjects, such as the Bulgarian language, maths, history, and science. The annual summer academy is completely free and lasts three weeks. The National Strategy Group thinks the initiative is very useful during a year in which many students were left behind due to online remote learning without adequate support.

## INCLUSION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

The outbreak of the pandemic had a huge impact on the reception of newcomers to Bulgaria. After the declaration of the state of emergency in March 2020, the country's borders were closed, reducing the flow of migrants to the country. The most controversial measure was **the government's suspension of the treatment of asylum requests**, which stopped national courts from proceeding with their activities.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, despite the state of emergency and the lifting of major restrictions in May 2020, the registration of asylum seekers only resumed again in June. This seems to confirm the National Strategy Group's view that the Bulgarian government is not interested in developing better inclusion policies. Instead, it is trying to depict the country as a transit country that allows people to pass through, but which is not willing to make efforts to receive, support, and include migrants. **Throughout 2020, Bulgaria was accused of violating the non-refoulement principle: its rejection rate of asylum seekers reached 100% for applicants from Afghanistan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, and was very high (96%) for those from Pakistan and Iran.**<sup>28</sup> Along with this policy, while Bulgaria had a National Strategy for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection for the period 2014 to 2020,<sup>29</sup> no action plan has ever been adopted for its implementation, and no funding has ever been allocated to it.<sup>30</sup> There has been no discussion of such a national strategy in 2021, and Bulgaria currently lacks civic education,

21 UNICEF (2021) Rapid Assessment of COVID-19 impact on education in Bulgaria: <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/stories/rapid-assessment-covid-19-impact-education-bulgaria>

22 National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria (2021) Education in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021: <https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/publications/education2021.pdf>

23 Eurostat (2021) Early leavers from education and training: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early\\_leavers\\_from\\_education\\_and\\_training#Overview](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training#Overview)

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Together in class Summer Academy: [https://zaednovchas.bg/summer\\_academy/](https://zaednovchas.bg/summer_academy/)

27 Supreme Judicial Council (2020) Preventive measures against COVID-19, 15 March 2020: <https://bit.ly/3s1t0tk>

28 Asylum Information Database AIDA (2021) Country Report Bulgaria 2020: [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/AIDA-BG\\_2020update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/AIDA-BG_2020update.pdf)

29 Национална стратегия за интеграцията на лицата, получили международна закрила в Република България (2014-2020) [National Strategy for the Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection in Bulgaria (2014-2020)] <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/national-strategy-for-the-integration-of-beneficiaries-of-international-protection-in-bulgaria-2014-2020>

30 European Commission (2019) Governance of Migrant Integration in Bulgaria: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/governance/bulgaria>

language classes, and vocational training opportunities – all of which are considered basic steps for migrant inclusion.<sup>31</sup> According to the UNHCR office in Bulgaria, the national

authorities are currently dedicating too low a budget to inclusion and reception policies, and it covers only 7% of actual needs.<sup>32</sup>

## Social protection and inclusion

**Bulgarian income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, stands out as the highest in the European Union and is higher than that of almost all OECD countries.**<sup>33</sup>

Increasing inequality and high poverty rates are negatively impacting living conditions and leading young people to move permanently to other European countries. Inclusivity is also falling in Bulgarian society, as the GDP growth of recent years has most benefitted high-income people: the top 20% of incomes grew twice as fast as the rest.<sup>34</sup> To foster a more inclusive society, better education policies and an increased minimum wage are necessary.

**Urgent measures are also needed to fight the poverty rate,** which is rising as a result of the growing inequality and recently reached 16% of the population. Social segregation is particularly visible in the overrepresentation of the young and the elderly among people currently living in poverty. In addition, Roma, people with disabilities, and residents of rural areas have elevated risks of poverty.<sup>35</sup> Already in 2017, Eurofund reported that social mobility in

Bulgaria is extremely low.<sup>36</sup> The pandemic has probably worsened the situation.

**Bulgaria's housing market is characterised by low affordability, as well as overcrowding, which at 41.1% is more than 24 percentage points higher than the European average.**<sup>37</sup> Investment in infrastructure and housing would help the population live in decent conditions and let them focus on other aspects of their lives. Material deprivation is reflected in housing conditions, which are reported to be of poor quality and with very low energy efficiency.<sup>38</sup> More than 11% of residents live in a house with a leaking roof; more than 7% do not have a bathroom or shower facilities; and, most worryingly, more than 30% are unable to keep their home adequately warm, three times the European average.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, with house prices and rents rising, housing often represents a burden on households' incomes. The European indicator "housing cost overburden" measures the percentage of the population spending more than 40% of their net disposable income

31 European Commission (2019) Governance of Migrant Integration in Bulgaria: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/governance/bulgaria>

32 UNHCR Bulgaria (2021) Bulgaria Fact Sheet 2021: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Bi-annual%20fact%20sheet%202021%2002%20Bulgaria.pdf>

33 OECD (2021) Economic Assessment – Bulgaria: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/bulgaria-2021-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Eurofund (2017) Social mobility in the EU: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2017/social-mobility-in-the-eu>

37 European Commission (2020) Quality of Housing: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/housing/bloc-1c.html?lang=en>

38 OECD (2021) Economic Assessment – Bulgaria: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/bulgaria-2021-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>

39 European Commission (2020) Quality of Housing: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/housing/bloc-1c.html?lang=en>

on housing, and Bulgaria has one of the highest rates, reaching 18.5% in rural areas.<sup>40</sup> Housing is therefore neither affordable nor decent for a high percentage of the Bulgarian population. The National Strategy Group reports that a very decentralised system leaves housing under the competence of municipalities, which are very different in terms of means and disposable funds. This does not favour the adoption of an overarching approach to housing. According to the National Strategy Group, the only positive housing policy of 2021 has been the amendments to the Personal Income Tax Act, Article 17 of which allows a reduction in the interest paid on mortgage loans used for the purchase of housing. However, the conditions are incredibly strict, and only young (under 35) married people are entitled to benefit. This amendment can therefore be considered as discriminatory, as many Bulgarian couples – notably LGBTQI+ – are not allowed to marry or enter a similar kind of civil partnership.

Ensuring access to healthcare should be a priority for Bulgaria, not only because of the pandemic, but also because it is the European country in which patients have to pay the most for health insurance.<sup>41</sup> The National Strategy Group reports that, since citizens receive healthcare services only when they have paid social security and are insured, **about half of total healthcare costs are paid by the patients. In 2020, 15% of the population reported not being able to access healthcare, and 28% lacked necessary medicines.**<sup>42</sup> The National Strategy Group said that geographical discrepancies are still evident in 2021, as small towns and villages often lack the funding they need to develop hospital and medical-care facilities and infrastructure. One reason is the high degree of decentralisation

of the healthcare system, which means that different wages are paid for the same job in different parts of the country. As a result, medical professionals and staff often prefer working in big cities, causing a lack of doctors, nurses, and staff in rural and poorer areas of the country. In addition, the NSG fears that access to healthcare could be limited for LGBTQI+ people due to the constant discrimination they face in Bulgaria. However, the NSG reported that no official data on this topic have been collected by authorities.

### GOOD PRACTICE Open Doors

Two Bulgarian LGBTQI+ organisations – Bilitis<sup>43</sup> and GLAS<sup>44</sup> – together with other CSOs and universities from Hungary, Spain, Poland, and Italy, are implementing the Open Doors project.<sup>45</sup> This aims to carry out research activities and give training opportunities to healthcare professionals with the aim of providing inclusive and competent healthcare to LGBTQI+ people. Open Doors' national report for Bulgaria will soon be ready and will examine the healthcare settings for LGBTQI+ people. It will provide an overview of the legal and policy environment, as well as data on the attitudes of doctors and medical personnel. The project also prepared a Guide for Health Care Professionals, including an introduction to LGBTQI+ terminologies and practical recommendations to avoid discrimination and create inclusive medical spaces.<sup>46</sup>

40 European Commission (2020) Is housing affordable? : <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/housing/bloc-2b.html?lang=en>

41 OECD (2019) Bulgaria Country Health Profile 2019 : <https://www.oecd.org/publications/bulgaria-country-health-profile-2019-34781ac1-en.htm>

42 EAPN (2020) Bulgaria Poverty Watch 2020: [https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/EAPN-EAPN-Bulgaria-Poverty-Watch-2020\\_ENG-4747.pdf](https://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/EAPN-EAPN-Bulgaria-Poverty-Watch-2020_ENG-4747.pdf)

43 Bilitis Bulgaria: <https://bilitis.org/2019/05/10/en-sofia-pride-sports/>

44 GLAS Foundation (Gays and Lesbians Accepted in Society): <https://glasfoundation.bg/en/>

45 OPEN DOORS Project: <https://opendoorshhealth.eu/en/who-we-are>

46 Open Doors (2020) An LGBTI guide for healthcare professionals – Open up the doors: [https://opendoorshhealth.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/opendoors\\_guide\\_en.pdf](https://opendoorshhealth.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/opendoors_guide_en.pdf)

## JUST TRANSITION TO A GREENER ECONOMY

A just transition remains a very controversial topic in Bulgaria. The country still depends on coal for around 40% of its electricity, and the coal industry provides jobs for around 15,000 people – 50,000 if we consider indirect jobs through activities related to coal and the energy it produces.<sup>47</sup> It is reported, and confirmed by the National Strategy Group, that uncertainty over just transition strategies makes workers and local populations reluctant to move away from

coal and towards more-sustainable forms of energy production. However, the perception of the population is slowly changing. In 2008, only 10% of people knew about climate change, but today nearly 50% are really concerned about it.<sup>48</sup> However, **the majority of respondents to the same survey said that poverty and low income were their main fears for the future, and that these impeded them from focusing on the climate emergency.** One of the main obstacles is a lack of expertise and strategies for reallocating workers and industries, the National Strategy Group reported.

## Civic space

The National Strategy Group reports narrowing opportunities for civic space, an observation confirmed by CIVICUS' monitoring activities.<sup>49</sup> Even though the right to peaceful assembly is protected by law, **hundreds of people were injured or arrested<sup>50</sup> in 2020 during months of demonstrations in Sofia against the government.** The NSG denounced the use of violence by police officers and reported the use of pepper spray, tear gas, and water cannon against protestors. The right to peaceful assembly was threatened even more when the government targeted individuals identified in the protests and took them to court under politically-motivated accusations.<sup>51</sup> In addition, **serious concerns were raised over amendments to the Legal Non-Profit Entities Act,** which would have imposed several restrictions on civil society organisations. The amendments introduced an obligation for CSOs to report all their forms

of income over €500 within seven days of receiving of them. Any violation would let the government terminate the CSO's activity or its ability to receive funds.<sup>52</sup> As a result, the regulation of civil society activities has become even stricter and less encouraging.

Freedom of expression is also deteriorating. In 2021, some journalists investigating corruption by authorities received threats and other forms of intimidation.<sup>53</sup> The National Strategy Group also reports serious concerns over the **lack of transparency of ownership of the media,** which are subject to systematic political control. Reporters Without Borders denounced the government's allocation of national and European funding to media outlets without transparent procedures or budgets.<sup>54</sup> Media are therefore encouraged to publish or share government-friendly material, the National Strategy Group reported.

47 WWF (2021) Bulgaria at coal crossroads as mayors prepare to seize 'just transition' opportunity: <https://www.wwf.eu/?4750941/Bulgaria-at-coal-crossroads-as-mayors-prepare-to-seize-just-transition-opportunity>

48 WWF (2021) WWF survey: <https://www.wwf.bg/?4161466/wwf-prouchvane-blizo-polovinata-bulgari-znyat-za-klimatich-nite-promeni>

49 CIVICUS (2021) Bulgaria Country Monitor: <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/08/26/protests-resume-ahead-snap-elections/>

50 Amnesty International (2021) Bulgaria country report: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/bulgaria/report-bulgaria/>

51 Ibid.

52 BCNL (2020) News – November 2020: <http://bcnl.org/en/news/when-will-the-controversial-proposal-to-amend-the-non-profit-legal-entities-act-be-withdrawn.html>

53 Ibid.

54 Reporters Without Borders (2021) Bulgaria – Press freedom trapped: <https://rsf.org/en/bulgaria>

# Civil and social dialogue on the national recovery and resilience plans

Last year's European Commission Country Recommendations for Bulgaria<sup>55</sup> (in the framework of the European Semester), acknowledged the extent of geographical and social inequalities in the country and the need to strengthen the welfare state to overcome the socio-economic crisis caused by the pandemic. This should have been done through open and inclusive processes with input from representatives of civil society and organised labour. However, the Bulgarian National Strategy Group reports that during 2020 and 2021, the Covid-19 crisis was too often seen as a pretext for avoiding open and transparent decision-making procedures. **Neither local nor national authorities consulted with either**

**social partners or civil society on the measures taken during the pandemic. In addition, civil society organisations had no official involvement in the development of Bulgaria's national Recovery and Resilience Plan (nRRP).** Moreover, the government did not take into consideration suggestions made through online open consultations: it is reported not to have given feedback on these, including those contributed by national experts.<sup>56</sup> The nRRP was nevertheless submitted to the European Commission in October 2021,<sup>57</sup> and was structured in four sections: Innovative Bulgaria, Green Bulgaria, Connected Bulgaria, and Fair Bulgaria.<sup>58</sup>

55 European Commission (2020) Country Specific Recommendation for Bulgaria: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TX-/?qid=1591720629495&uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0502>

56 CEE Bankwatch Network (2021): Assessment of Bulgaria's recovery and resilience plan: <https://euagenda.eu/publications/assessment-of-bulgaria-s-recovery-and-resilience-plan>

57 European Commission (2021) NextGenerationEU: Bulgaria submits official recovery and resilience plan: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_5264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5264)

58 Bulgarian Government (2021) Bulgaria Recovery and Resilience Plan: [https://www.nextgeneration.bg/upload/36/Bulgaria\\_Recovery\\_and\\_Resilience\\_Plan\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.nextgeneration.bg/upload/36/Bulgaria_Recovery_and_Resilience_Plan_ENG.pdf)



**SOLIDAR's Social Rights Monitor 2021** 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 16 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. This information is provided by National Strategy Groups that are set up in each of the 16 countries by a SOLIDAR member or partner. The 2021 Monitor also analyses to which extent civil society and social partners have been involved in the design of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans, integrated in the 2021 European Semester cycle.

**RESPONSIBLE EDITOR:**

Mikael Leyi

**AUTHOR:**

Beatrice di Padua

**COORDINATION OF PUBLICATION:**

Carlos Roldán Mejías, Giorgia Gusciglio, Martina Corti

**COPY EDITING:**

Sebastian Moffett

**GRAPHIC DESIGN:**

Maximilian Fischer

**CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:**

Institute for Social Integration



**Institute for  
Social  
Integration**

**PAPER PUBLISHED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:**

**solidar**



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SOLIDAR is a European and worldwide network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working to advance social justice through a just transition in Europe and worldwide. With over 50 member organisations based in 26 countries (19 of which are EU countries), member organisations are national CSOs in Europe, as well as some non-EU and EU-wide organisations, working in one or more of our fields of activity.

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.

**SOLIDAR**

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