

REPORT ON ANTI-LGBTI HATE CRIMES IN BULGARIA

FOR THE PERIOD FROM
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**RAINBOW
NETWORK**

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INTRODUCTION

The present report describes crimes committed with motives related to the sexual orientation of the victim; their reporting, investigation, and punishment in Bulgaria. It concerns the period after August 2023, since substantial legislative changes regarding this type of crimes were carried out then. Alongside the analysis of practice, the report also includes specific recommendations for improving the legal framework, the institutional response, and the prevention of hate crimes.

The report was prepared within the framework of the project “Rainbow Network” (CERV-2023-CHAR-LITI), which is implemented with the support of the European Commission. The project aims to address the lack of sustainable infrastructure for protecting the rights of the LGBTI community outside the capital by creating a network of local activists and allies across Bulgaria. Its main objectives include strengthening community capacity, improving mechanisms for reporting hate crimes and hate speech against LGBTI persons, and encouraging the creation of safe and supportive spaces. The data collected through these activities contribute to national and international monitoring systems and serve as a basis for advocacy for changes in the regulatory framework and legislation.

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THE CRIMES

Briefly recalling, the Criminal Code of Bulgaria was adopted in 1968 and it has never contained special protection for LGBTI persons. In 2023, the National Assembly changed this for the first time. At that time, the Members of Parliament recognised the high social danger of homophobia and explicitly provided for it as an aggravating circumstance. Currently, some of the most serious crimes in the country are punished with a more severe penalty if the victim is targeted due to their sexual orientation. In 2023, the right of victims to appeal before a judge was also introduced for the first time, in cases where the prosecutor refuses to initiate an investigation. For example, assault motivated by homophobic motives or incitement to hatred on the ground of sexual orientation are now recognised in such a way as violations of fundamental human rights that a refusal to be officially investigated is subject to review and possible overturning by a judicial authority.

THE REPORTS

Since the criminalisation of homophobic motives became a fact, reports of committed crimes have not increased. Victims continue to treat investigative authorities with distrust and fear secondary victimisation, that is, additional humiliating treatment toward them by the officials to whom they would give statements. In order to count how many incidents involving LGBTI people were reported to investigative authorities after August 2023, we used a request to the Ministry of Interior under the Access to Public Information Act; annual reports of the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria; a review of judicial practice; a review of news published on the official websites of the largest district and regional prosecutor's offices in the country; and reports received through Bilitis channels from victims. The overall information from all these sources is extremely scarce.

It may begin with the fact that the Ministry of Interior sent a response indicating zero checks of hate crimes. In the central police statistics, there was no data on such reports during the period August 2023 - May 2025.

Despite this, several cases from the same period became known. The incidents described below give an idea of the nature of hate crimes against LGBTI people that have reached publicity and judicial decisions.

RAZGRAD

At the end of 2023, the minor B.S. carried out an attack against a boy whom he had previously targeted. B.S., who felt hatred toward men with homosexual orientation, came across on Instagram a profile of a boy with hair tied in a ponytail, tight jeans, and an appearance resembling a girl – the victim I.H. After I.H. rejected B.S.'s follow request on Instagram, the latter wrote him a message: "Accept the request, you gay, just come to Tsar Kaloyan and I will kill you!". On 15 November 2023, I.H. was at school in Razgrad. After his classes, B.S., together with his friends, waited for him in front of the school. They began to follow him, whistle at him, and shout at him. B.S. approached him and asked: "Why are you like that, why are you gay?" After that, B.S. struck the victim on the neck with his hand. He again said to him: "Why are you gay, why are you like that!?" and swore at him. B.S. and his friends continued to follow I.H. for several more minutes, after which B.S. caught up with him again and kicked him in the leg. I.H. called 112, police officers arrived, and criminal proceedings were initiated. On 17 December 2024, the District Court of Razgrad found B.S. guilty of causing minor bodily injury motivated by reasons related to the sexual orientation of I.H. – a crime under Art. 131, para. 1, item 12 of the Criminal Code. In 2023, a consortium coordinated by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee conducted a national study dedicated to counteracting discrimination, intolerance, hate speech, and hate crimes. Among the interviews conducted in Razgrad was one with a high school teacher, who shared: "Prejudices nowadays are accepted as normal. Children grow up with such thinking; there have been moments when I have been told how a certain group of people should not be tolerated. When you grow up with such an attitude, you are already aggressive, prejudiced toward a certain circle of people. I would also note that discrimination is a factor that is ineradicable. Planted for years, it remains in our daily life. Here I do not refer only to students – even older people openly display it."¹

¹ <https://nohate.bghelsinki.org/biblioteka/balgarski-opit/#reports>

IVO DIMCHEV

In the spring of 2024, the performer Ivo Dimchev received a number of insults and death threats from unknown persons through social media. One specific threat he decided to report to the district police department, requesting that the perpetrator be identified and held criminally liable, namely: "I know more about you than you know about yourself. I know where you live. I have a fetish to kill you and I will do it soon... You will breathe the air of this earth for just a little longer."² On 25 June 2024, the check on this report ended with a refusal by the Sofia District Prosecutor's Office to initiate an official investigation. The reasons for the refusal were that the threat did not cause a justified fear that it would actually be carried out, as well as that the author of the message could not be identified.

KALIN KISYOV

LGBTI ACTIVIST

On 27 September 2024, in tram No. 5 in Sofia, an LGBTI activist became the victim of a homophobic attack. While travelling, an unknown young man of apparent age 16-17 first began to observe him insistently, after which he approached and followed him around the vehicle. The victim addressed other passengers asking for assistance in de-escalating the situation, but received no reaction. This provoked the attacker, who began to hurl insults and homophobic slurs at him, calling him "f*ggot," after which he struck him on the head and blocked his way. Shortly thereafter, the perpetrator left the scene.

The victim filed a report with the authorities. A prosecutorial check was initiated in the case, but it ended with a decree of the Sofia District Prosecutor's Office dated 25.06.2025 for termination of the criminal proceedings due to "insufficient evidence to establish the author of the act."

² <https://nova.bg/news/view/2024/07/09/462520>

BORISLAV SAPUNDZHIEV

On 10 December 2024, around 9 p.m., Borislav Sapundzhiev and his friend were having dinner in a restaurant in the capital. On the air of Nova Television, Sapundzhiev stated that they were attacked by two men - other customers of the restaurant: "They attacked us because of our sexual orientation. Before the physical aggression began, they asked me whether I was the hairdresser Borislav Ursula. That was the reason for everything that happened." The attackers struck the victims with objects from the establishment, including chairs, and also kicked them and beat them with their hands. The owner of the restaurant provided the police with video surveillance recordings from the premises.³ On 16 December 2024, the Sofia District Prosecutor's Office brought criminal charges against the two men, A.A. and B.P., aged 42 and 35, who had beaten Borislav Sapundzhiev and his friend. They were charged with causing bodily injuries motivated by reasons related to the sexual orientation of the victim, namely, that they struck with hands, feet, and chairs the bodies and heads of Borislav Sapundzhiev and his friend – a crime under Art. 131, para. 1, item 12 of the Criminal Code. Separately, A.A. was charged with threatening the two victims with murder, having told each of them that he would kill them. The perpetrators were detained for 72 hours, and the prosecutor requested from the court the preventive measure "detention in custody."⁴

³ https://www.actualno.com/crime/prebiha-dvojka-v-stolichno-zavedenie-zaradi-razlichna-seksualna-orientacija-news_2358604.html

⁴ <https://prb.bg/srp/bg/news/72030-sofiyska-rayonna-prokuratura-zadarzha-dvama-obvinyaemi%2C-nanesli-telesni-povredi->

VARNA

In the early hours of 3 March 2025, at the market in Varna, the 18-year-old E.G. and three other boys under 18 met an unknown boy and beat him. In addition, E.G. inflicted 6 knife strikes on the boy, penetrating the chest cavity. Each one of them could have caused death. The four accused had not attacked persons with apparent homosexual orientation for the first time. The prosecution charged E.G. with attempted murder motivated by reasons related to sexual orientation – a crime under Art. 116, para. 1, item 11 of the Criminal Code. Attempted murder is punishable by between 15 years of imprisonment and life imprisonment. The other three boys were charged by the prosecution with causing minor bodily injuries motivated by reasons related to sexual orientation – a crime under Art. 131, para. 1, item 12 of the Criminal Code. With regard to E.G., the prosecution requested the most severe preventive measure “detention in custody.” Two judicial instances in Varna granted this request, as they considered that under a lighter measure it was possible that E.G. would commit a crime. The latest judicial act is of the Varna Court of Appeal⁵ from 11 March 2025. A decision in the case is forthcoming.

DESPINA

In the early hours of 21 April 2025, while waiting for public transport in the centre of Sofia, a transgender woman was noticed by an unknown man who lives in the nearby entrance. He approached her and said: “Freaks like you should not live. I will kill you all!” Shortly afterward he returned with a sharp cold weapon. He attacked the woman with it and inflicted cut wounds on her head and legs, knocked her to the ground and kicked her. On 24 April 2025, the injured woman gave an interview to Nova Television⁶ and based on the information from it, the authorities of the Ministry of Interior initiated proceedings on their own initiative and detained the attacker. The deputy head of the 06 Regional Department of the Sofia Directorate of Interior, Commissioner Anton Dermendzhiev, clarified to Nova Television that the detained person is 42 years old and has a criminal record for hooligan manifestations.⁷

⁵ <https://varna-as.justice.bg/bg/news1/32992>

⁶ <https://nova.bg/news/view/2025/04/24/495391>

⁷ <https://nova.bg/news/view/2025/04/25/495519>

THE OFFICIAL STATISTICS

The annual report of the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2024 identifies several priorities in its work for the following year 2025, among which is the "effective conduct of criminal proceedings especially for crimes resulting in death, including specifically ... hate crimes." In the annual reports of the Prosecutor's Office, "crimes with a discriminatory element, including hate crimes" are examined collectively, that is, the provided information and statistics relate to all discriminatory elements provided in the Criminal Code – race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, sexual orientation. The report does not specifically examine crimes committed against LGBTI persons, and it cannot be concluded from it how many these crimes are. The most current aggregated information is that in 2024⁸ the Prosecutor's Office initiated 65 criminal cases "for crimes with a discriminatory element, including hate crimes" – three times more compared to the previous year. Of these, the victims were 26 persons – 20 men and 6 women. An important feature of the annual reports of the Prosecutor's Office is that very recently hate crimes have found a special place in them, as a subtype of the so-called cases of particular public interest. They are presented separately in the reports, alongside serious crimes such as corruption, misuse of EU funds, trafficking in human beings, money laundering, and others. Because this importance has been recognised, they have officially begun to be processed and analysed by the Prosecutor's Office starting from 1 January 2022.

In 2022⁹ the Prosecutor's Office initiated 19 criminal cases "for crimes with a discriminatory element, including hate crimes." Of these, the victims were 13 persons – 9 men and 4 women, including 1 minor girl. In 2023¹⁰ the Prosecutor's Office initiated 12 criminal cases "for crimes with a discriminatory element, including hate crimes." Of these, the victims were 10 persons – 4 men and 6 women. As noted, before 1 January 2022, separate data for this type of crimes were not collected.

⁸ https://prb.bg/bg/pub_info/dokladi-i-analizi/1430-doklad-za-prilagane-na-zakona-i-za-deynostta-na-prokuraturata-i-na-razsledvashti

⁹ https://prb.bg/bg/pub_info/dokladi-i-analizi/1241-doklad-za-prilaganeto-na-zakona-i-za-deynostta-na-prokuraturata-i-na-razsledvash

¹⁰ https://prb.bg/bg/pub_info/dokladi-i-analizi/1356-d-o-k-l-a-d-za-prilaganeto-na-zakona-i-za-deynostta-na-prokuraturata-i-na-razsle

FAIR PUNISHMENTS

At the end of 2023, the case concerning the murder of Mihail Stoyanov in Borisova Garden in Sofia was finally concluded. It had been reopened following a case won at the European Court of Human Rights by Stoyanov's mother. In the new decision of the Supreme Court of Cassation from 16 November 2023, the judges explicitly stated: "The conviction of the defendants that they could determine the circle of persons who have the right to visit a public place /one of the largest parks in the capital/ solely on the basis of their personal assessment of the actual or presumed sexual orientation of the visitors illustrates a deep defect in their formed views on the equality of people, on the rejection of all forms of discrimination as a manifestation of democratic society, on respect for personal freedom and the right to life as a supreme good."¹¹ Ultimately, the defendant A.I.G. /aged 18 years and 6 months at the time of the commission of the crime/ was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment. His accomplice, R.L.K. /a minor at the time of the commission of the crime/ was ultimately sentenced to 6 years of imprisonment. An aggravating circumstance of their guilt is the fact that the crime in the specific case was the result of systematically carried out attacks by a group in which the defendants participated, against persons whom they suspected of homosexual orientation. It was precisely the case won by Ms. Stoyanova at the European Court of Human Rights that triggered the adopted amendments to the Criminal Code mentioned at the beginning of this report.

In the criminal case from Razgrad, cited above, the perpetrator was punished with an administrative penalty – public reprimand. The judge ordered that it be carried out through "reading of the sentence over the Razgrad Radio Network."

¹¹ <https://www.vks.bg/pregled-akt.jsp?type=ot-delo&id=9340B51907B3861EC2258A6E00269B9D>

ENCOURAGING THE REPORTING OF CRIMES

On 25 April 2025, Deputy Prime Minister Atanas Zafirov participated in a discussion “Look Beyond Fear: Together Against Violence,” organised by a political party. He expressed concern that a large part of the cases do not reach the institutions. The reason – fear, shame, or social stereotypes that cause victims to remain silent. This is especially severe in small settlements, where concern about public opinion often leads to concealment of violence. “We have cases in which even the police do not take reports from victims seriously, especially if they are young girls or people with a different sexual orientation,” emphasised the Deputy Prime Minister¹². The fear of those who have suffered violence is not only from the expected insulting treatment by police officers, but from the very disclosure of their sexual orientation. In the study cited above from 2023, coordinated by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, an interviewed police officer from the Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Interior – Burgas shared: “People are worried about saying what they are. For example, sometimes I have suspicions – about orientation, about ethnicity, but if people do not say it themselves, there is nothing I can do.”¹³

¹² <https://www.bta.bg/bg/videos/27163>

¹³ <https://nohate.bghelsinki.org/biblioteka/balgarski-opit/#reports>

STOP HATE

PLATFORM FOR REPORTING AND MONITORING

Within the framework of the project, Bilitis and GLAS use an online platform for reporting and monitoring hate crimes against LGBTI persons – stophate.bg. The platform is based on a questionnaire that was previously available on wearetolerant.bg and is improved and adapted to the local context. The platform is built with the support of the European Commission and is based on tested models from ILGA Europe and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and is enhanced with different questionnaires for different types of anti-LGBTI violence. The data for each incident are collected anonymously and include age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, type of incident, and, where applicable, the information and guidance provided to the victim.

The reported cases remain few, which is due both to the lack of regular publicity and promotion of the reporting mechanisms, and to the unwillingness of victims to seek institutional support. Other studies of the Bilitis Foundation show that incidents are rarely reported, especially when the perpetrators are relatives, family members, or partners. As also noted in the Bilitis Analytical Report “Violence based on sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, sex characteristics and gender expression in Bulgaria”:

“WHEN VIOLENCE OCCURS WITHIN
THE FAMILY OR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS,
THE LIKELIHOOD OF REPORTING IS MINIMAL,
AS VICTIMS FEAR DISCLOSURE,
ADDITIONAL STIGMATIZATION AND LACK OF ADEQUATE
RESPONSE FROM THE INSTITUTIONS.”

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RECOMMENDATIONS

IMPROVEMENT OF THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

In order to demonstrate a categorical commitment of the authorities to the protection of LGBTI people and the fight against discrimination, it is recommended:

- In the provision of Article 6 of the Constitution, which lists the protected grounds of discrimination, to explicitly include “sexual orientation and gender identity.” At present, this article contains the ground “personal status,” from which judicial practice derives protection also for sexual orientation, but the explicit inclusion of the two grounds will strengthen the clarity of protection and will prevent interpretative disputes.
- Amendment of the Criminal Code (CC), by which gender identity and gender expression are explicitly added as protected grounds.

These measures will guarantee real protection of LGBTI people and will place the Bulgarian legal framework in compliance with international standards, including the practice of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

PREVENTION THROUGH EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES

The prevention of hate crimes requires systematic efforts beyond criminal law. It is necessary:

- Repeal of the amendments adopted in August 2024 to the Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA), which introduce a prohibition on propaganda of “non-traditional sexual orientation and/or determination of gender identity different from the biological one” in school.
- Inclusion of topics on equality, human rights and anti-discrimination in the educational content in civic education and other related disciplines;
- Within the Academy of the Ministry of Interior, it is necessary to introduce mandatory modules on the topic of hate crimes and work with vulnerable groups.
- Training of state and municipal officials, including social and health workers.
- Sustainable funding by the state and municipalities of LGBTI community centres (for example Rainbow Hub), which function as safe spaces, provide access to services, and encourage active civic participation.

FAIR AND DISSUASIVE PUNISHMENTS

The sanctions currently applied often do not achieve their preventive effect. It is recommended:

- Creation of a special fund for the prevention of discrimination, into which the collected fines are deposited. The funds can be managed by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) and used for campaigns, educational programmes and initiatives for equality.

EXPANSION OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The role of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria should be strengthened through an active campaign to promote the possibility of submitting complaints and reports in cases of discrimination and hate crimes. It is necessary:

- To Increase the capacity of the institution, including through regional offices or mobile reception offices in smaller settlements.

ENCOURAGING REPORTING

Specialised mechanisms for reporting hate crimes should be developed, accessible also to people who fear disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity. We recommend:

- Increasing awareness among the LGBTI community regarding the witness protection measures that are legally provided – personal physical protection by a police officer or concealment of the identity of the witness.
- The appointment of specialised hate crime coordinators in each regional directorate of the Ministry of Interior.

CONTROL OVER PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND HATE SPEECH

Changing attitudes in society also requires control over the statements of public figures, especially members of parliament, who have a broad platform and serve as an example for citizens. The Rules for the Organisation and Activity of the National Assembly (Art. 153) prohibit personal attacks, offensive words, gestures or threats, as well as the dissemination of personal data or damaging the good name of citizens, and provide for disciplinary measures – from remark and reprimand, to removal from a session or participation in international forums for a period of up to three months, and those removed do not receive remuneration for the affected sessions. In this context, we recommend:

- Encouraging the submission of reports by citizens for violations of ethical norms of conduct by members of parliament;
- Obligation for a reasoned decision – In the case of imposing disciplinary measures, to require a written, reasoned decision from the respective body of the National Assembly, which clearly states the grounds for removal or punishment.

CONCLUSION

The report outlines the new legislative changes and the first cases of their application, while at the same time revealing serious deficits in the reporting, investigation, and punishment of hate crimes against LGBTI people in Bulgaria. The presented examples and official data show that despite the progress achieved with the adoption of the amendments to the Criminal Code in 2023, the system continues to be incomplete and often ineffective. Therefore, the recommendations in the report should be considered as urgent steps toward building stronger protection, greater institutional accountability, and more sustainable mechanisms for prevention and support of victims.



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