



BULGARIA

BIAS-MOTIVATED SPEECH

Hate speech by politicians continued to be a serious issue. For instance, a member of the Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO) called the upcoming Sofia Pride, “a manifestation of group mental disorders”.

Due to the inability to form a government, three consecutive parliamentary elections and one presidential election were held during the year. During each parliamentary election, ultra-nationalist/fascist parties made anti-LGBTI election promises that if elected they would ban Pride, and that they would fight so-called ‘gender ideology’. They also made links between the LGBTI movement and paedophilia.

BIAS-MOTIVATED VIOLENCE

Several anti-LGBT incidents took place again this year, many in the lead-up to the month-long Sofia Pride in the summer. They included the posting of anti-LGBT stickers, distribution of anti-LGBT leaflets in the capital, burning of rainbow flags, attempts to intimidate participants at LGBTI-themed events, vandalism, and harassment and threats against LGBTI individuals. On 11 June, a day before Sofia Pride, activists projected rainbow colours on the parliament’s building to call for targeted action against anti-LGBT hate crimes.

The first-ever Bourgas Pride was held on 15 May, marking the first Pride march to take place outside the capital. The 40 participants were attacked by hundreds of extremists who threw eggs, stones, and smoke bombs at them and burnt a rainbow flag. The police were present and cordoned off the march, but allowed counter-demonstrators to deviate from their planned route and failed to protect the Pride participants. On the day of the march, the Orthodox Church held a special prayer service in Bourgas “in defence and support of the traditional Bulgarian family and Orthodox values”.

Both the LGBTI community centre, Rainbow Hub, and the LGBTI-inclusive space, The Steps were vandalised several times. The attacks culminated on 30 October when the presidential candidate and neo-fascist party leader, Boyan Rasate stormed into Rainbow Hub with ten others, punched a staff member in the face, and destroyed furniture and electronics. The EU LGBTI Intergroup condemned the attack. Bilitis launched a fundraiser to repair the centre. Several politicians in

Bulgaria and Bulgarian MEPs condemned the attack and called for investigation and prosecution. Civil society held a protest on 1 November demanding criminal sanctions for anti-LGBTI hate crimes and the lifting of Rasate’s legal immunity. Over 15.000 people signed a petition calling for his prosecution. Rasate’s immunity was lifted, and he was arrested on 3 November.

Civil society has long advocated for the criminalisation of anti-LGBT hate crimes, including by filing a petition with over 8,000 signatures ten days before the attack, but neither the former regular, nor the current interim government took any steps.

Bilitis translated and published resources and strategies on restorative justice in cases of anti-LGBTI crimes and trained justice practitioners on restorative justice practises.

DATA COLLECTION

GLAS Foundation launched a campaign to encourage cohabiting same-sex couples to register this information in the National Census.

EDUCATION

In 2020, Bilitis launched the Live Without Bullying Platform, offering psychological support to youth, their parents, and teachers. Over 350 people have registered on the platform and over 40 teachers were trained.

Bilitis published a handbook on using theatre to combat hate among youth.

EQUALITY AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

Deystvie launched a platform where victims of anti-LGBTI discrimination or violence get free legal aid and can submit complaints.

Bilitis and GLAS published e-learning modules for employers on non-discrimination (see here, here, and here).

Bilitis, GLAS and Deystvie launched the first LGBTI Strategic Framework and Action Plan in Bulgaria, outlining five priorities for the LGBTI movement for 2021-2026.



FAMILY

On 14 December, the CJEU ruled in the case of V.M.A. v Stolichna obshtina that Bulgaria must immediately provide identity documents to baby Sara, the child of a Bulgarian-British married same-sex couple. The child has a Spanish birth certificate featuring two mothers. As neither of them were Spanish citizens, the child was not granted Spanish citizenship and was also denied a Bulgarian birth certificate, thus rendered stateless. The judgement obliges EU Member States to recognise parenthood across borders.

Bulgaria's travel restrictions have affected rainbow families disproportionately, as the authorities routinely refuse to recognise them as a family unit. Deystvie requested and obtained an official statement from the Ministry of Interior and the Border Police, with which partners of LGBTI people can legally enter the country.

Koilova and Babulkova v. Bulgaria on the recognition of same-sex marriage formed abroad, and Dimitrova v. Bulgaria, on protection from domestic violence, were communicated to the government by the European Court of Human Rights. Both are litigated by Deystvie.

Bilitis published a comparative report on the daily changes of rainbow families in six EU countries (Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland and Romania) where rainbow families are not formally recognised.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Sofia Pride was held in person once more, following last year's cancellation due to pandemic restrictions. Civil society launched a petition a few days before Pride Month, calling on the authorities to protect the events and the march in particular. The petition, with 17,000 signatures, was handed over to the authorities on 11 June. On 12 June, Sofia Pride was attended by over 10,000 participants and no hostile incidents were recorded.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

On May 27, Deystvie presented 'Courage to be' and 'Courage to be a parent', two books for rainbow families. About 20 extremists appeared outside the building of Radio Plovdiv, where the book event was held. Deystvie held events in other towns, for instance in Bourgas in May and Varna in June.

HEALTH

Bilitis organised and conducted training for medical professionals and students on health provision for LGBTI people.

Bilitis developed a resource guide on intersex issues and participated in a comparative study on intersex rights in Bulgaria, Greece and the UK.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rainbow Hub, Bulgaria's only LGBTI+ community centre had to close in 2020, in what seemed like a permanent closure. This year, the Hub relocated and reopened in June.

Denitsa Lyubenova of Deystvie received the European Civic Forum's Civic Pride award.

Bilitis and GLAS foundations received the Shofar Award of the Organisation of the Bulgarian Jews "Shalom" for their work in combating hate speech.

Gloriya Filipova, Manuela Popova from Bilitis Foundation and the Rainbow Hub, and Deystvie received the runner-up awards in the Human of the Year 2021 Awards of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee for their outstanding contributions to the development of the LGBTI community in Bulgaria and the protection of human rights.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

On 11 November, Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev hosted representatives of Bilitis and GLAS foundations, following his invitation to discuss possible collaboration regarding amendments to the Criminal Code for the inclusion of SOGI motivated hate crimes in light of the attack on Rainbow Hub on October 30.

LEGAL GENDER RECOGNITION

Following inconsistent interpretations of the law by national courts, the Constitutional Court ruled in October that the term 'sex' in the equality clause of the Constitution is to be understood only as 'biological sex'. Nevertheless, the Court also recognised that the Constitution protects trans people's right to self-identification and that civil courts must establish whether current legislation allows for this, and if not, the parliament must fill this gap.





PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL LIFE

GLAS Foundation published a book this year, featuring stories of 37 public figures who support LGBTI rights in Bulgaria.

PUBLIC OPINION

A new study found that more than 40% of voters would support a party with a positive attitude towards LGBTI people.



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