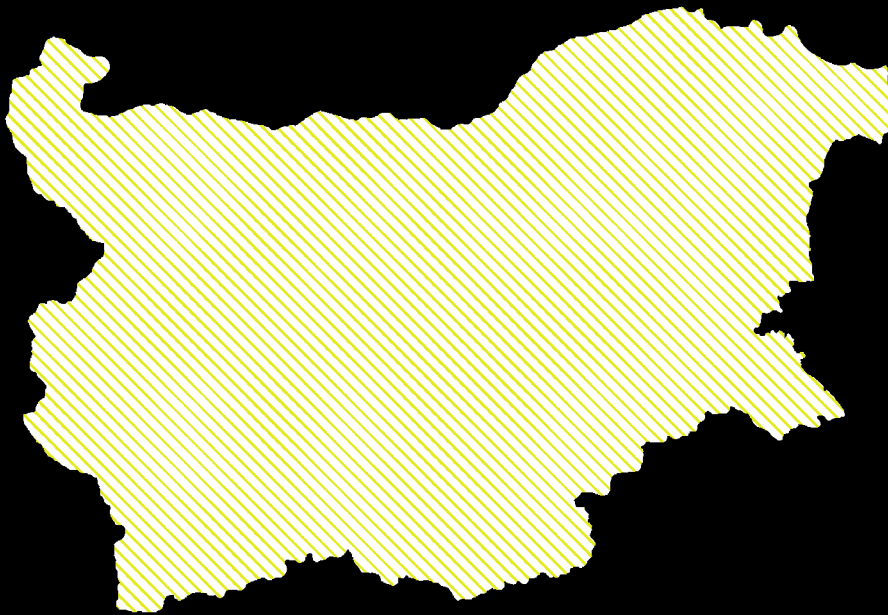


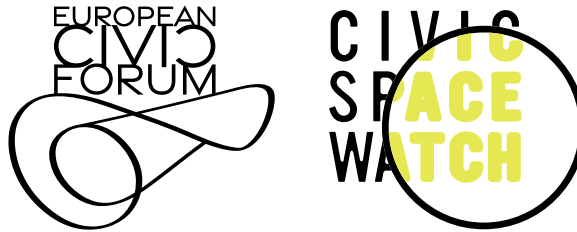
CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025

Bulgaria

By Zahari Iankov,
Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law (BCNL)



BULGARIAN CENTER
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LAW



ABOUT THIS REPORT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law (BCNL) is a public-benefit foundation that provides support for the drafting and implementation of legislation and policies aiming to advance civil society, civic participation and good governance in Bulgaria. We have participated in the development and discussion of a number of laws related to the activities of non-profit organisations, such as the Law on Non-Profit Legal Entities, the Social Assistance Act, the Law on Normative Acts and many others. More about us and our work can be found at www.bcnl.org.



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Key civic space trends

-  Foreign agents registration (FARA) law proposals continue to be promoted.
-  Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and legal harassment of journalists and LGBTQI+ organisations remain a concerning issue.
-  Anti-LGBTQI+ law adopted, banning “LGBTQI+ propaganda” in schools.

Summary

Civic space is rated as narrowed in Bulgaria, according to the CIVICUS Monitor.¹ There were no recommendations on civic space for Bulgaria in the European Commission’s 2024 Rule of Law Report. However, the Commission expressed concern about proposed FARA laws and their stigmatising and negative effects on civic space in the country.

Bulgaria has been in continuous political crisis since 2021, with inconclusive elections, an unstable rotational government collapsing in March, record-low voter turnout, a major party split, fraud scandals in the October elections, and a deepening institutional crisis affecting the judiciary and regulatory bodies. Despite small improvements in the realisation of press freedom, the media landscape remains concerning, with SLAPPs and legal harassment of journalists documented.

Additionally, draft FARA laws were submitted three times in 2024 to the different parliaments. The proposals were clearly designed to exclude civil society organisations (CSOs) and dissidents from public life by labelling them as “foreign agents”. The drafting of a Lobbying Law has raised concerns about potential misuse against civil society, as a revised version approved in February 2024 removed key distinctions between lobbying and advocacy without consulting civil society or justifying the changes. New discriminatory amendments were introduced to the Pre-school and School Education Act, violating the rights of children and undermining fundamental freedoms and democratic principles. The law prohibits comprehensive sex education and teaching of LGBTQI+ issues and rights and is similar to anti-LGBTQI+ laws adopted in Hungary, Georgia, and Russia in recent years.

Institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape

Bulgaria has been in a continuous state of political crisis since 2021. In April 2023, the country held its fourth parliamentary election in two years, yet these elections, like the previous ones, failed to produce a decisive majority. Following intense negotiations, a regular government was eventually formed, with an unprecedented rotational arrangement for the roles of prime minister and deputy prime minister every nine months. This agreement allocated these positions to candidates from the runner-up and the winner of the election; however, no formal coalition agreement was reached between those political actors. This left Bulgaria without a clear parliamentary majority, forcing every political or legislative decision to be negotiated

on a case-by-case basis. Despite that, in the last days of 2023 the parliament managed to pass constitutional amendments allowing future parliaments to continue functioning after an appointment of a caretaker government.

The unstable government of 2023 came to an end in March 2024, after the first planned rotation of the prime minister and his deputy failed. This led to the fifth parliamentary elections since 2021 which were held jointly with the European Parliament elections in early June. The elections were marked by the lowest turnout in the post-communist history of Bulgaria — a mere 34.4%,² demonstrating the disappointment

1. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/bulgaria/>

2. <https://results.cik.bg/europe2024/aktivnost/index.html>

of the Bulgarian people and growing distrust in the current political actors. Despite these worrying signs, the new parliament once more failed to produce a regular government.

In the summer of 2024, while new parliamentary elections were expected in the autumn, the Bulgarian political scene was shaken by the split of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), one of the most stable political parties since the fall of the communist regime at the beginning of the 1990s. The MRF was established in the aftermath of the so-called Revival Process — a policy led by the communist regime of Bulgaria to forcefully and in some cases violently change the names of people with Turkish or Arabic origin. This led to the mass exodus of members of the sizable minority of Bulgarian Turks to Türkiye at the end of the 1980s. Since then, the MRF has been known to represent the interests of the Bulgarian Turks and has been a member of every parliament since 1991, including an official member of four coalitional governments. In 2024, however, after multiple scandals including a battle for control of the party's website and headquarters, Delyan Peevski, sanctioned for corruption under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act,³ took control over the MRF. He forced members, including Ahmed Dogan, the MRF founder and de facto leader until 2024, to run in the autumn elections under a new name whilst still contesting the takeover of the party. Following these scandals, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) party bureau expelled the MRF in late December 2024.⁴

The elections took place in October 2024 and were shrouded with fraud scandals. The new parliament was composed of eight parties including both factions of the MRF, a new populist party narrowly passing the threshold, and the most recognisable far-right and pro-Russian Revival Party maintaining its high results, securing third place in the election. Meanwhile, another populist party, which was briefly represented in parliament after the elections in June 2024, failed to pass the threshold by an unprecedented 21 votes. Consequently, the election results were challenged in the Constitutional Court where the case was still pending as of January 2025, leaving open the possibility that the party will become the ninth to enter the parliament.

Meanwhile, the parliamentary crisis reached multiple other public sectors as the mandates of many regulatory and supervisory bodies expired and the position of an ombudsperson remained vacant after the previous ombudswoman was elected as the Bulgarian judge in the European Court of Human Rights. Despite that, the Supreme Judicial Council — also running with an expired mandate, began a controversial procedure for the election of prosecutor general. The only candidate has been the acting prosecutor general. The council has twice unsuccessfully attempted to launch a procedure for the election of a president of the Supreme Administrative Court, which failed due to a lack of candidates, indicating the deepening crisis in the judiciary.

3. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/fy1264>

4. <https://www.aldeparty.eu/blog/news-11/alde-party-bureau-recommends-expulsion-of-the-movement-for-rights-and-freedoms-mrf-87>

The regulatory environment for civic freedoms

Freedom of association

The 2000 Non-profit Legal Persons Act regulates the establishment and operation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bulgaria. The Act created a relatively simple procedure for the registration of NGOs with limited powers of the administration (previously the court) to refuse registration based on organisations goals and its means of achieving them.

A positive trend was observed regarding the administrative procedure of registration of newly established CSOs. According to information provided by the State Registration Agency,⁵ the amount of registration refusals remains low: the issued refusals for initial registration were 1,055 in 2012 in contrast to only 608 refusals in 2022 and 632 in 2023. A slight increase in the number of active CSOs is also observed as 15,624 annual financial and/or narrative reports were submitted to the State Registration Agency by CSOs in 2023 compared to 13,847 in 2022.

In 2024 the Committee of Ministers to the Council of Europe (COE) issued yet another decision⁶ urging Bulgaria to resolve the issue with the routine refusal of registration of associations aiming to “achieve the recognition of the Macedonian minority.” The group of cases known as *the United Macedonian Organisation Ilinden and others v. Bulgaria*, dates from the 1990s and demonstrates the violation of the freedom of association by Bulgaria.⁷ More than 17 years after the first of multiple decisions by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) against Bulgaria, it has not been resolved. As of February 2024, there are 24 applications concerning the repetition of this breach pending a decision by the ECtHR.⁸

In January 2024 a Foreign Agents Registration (FARA) Bill was included in the plenary agenda of the 49th parliament without being passed or even discussed by

the necessary parliamentary commissions. The bill did not pass but during the plenary, it was falsely presented by a member of parliament from the Revival Party as “absolutely one-to-one with the Democracy Protection Package,” — a reference to the European Commission’s Defence of Democracy package.⁹

The FARA Bill was again submitted by the Revival Party in September 2024 — in the last working weeks of the 50th parliament.¹⁰ The week following the submission, the bill was discussed for the first time in a parliamentary commission. Even though the commission did not pass the bill, the discussions were utilised by members of parliament for a smear campaign against civil society.

Shortly after the parliamentary elections in late October 2024 the Revival Party, that publicly claims to be in favour of transparency measures, once more submitted the FARA Bill in the newly formed 51st parliament.¹¹ This marked the submission of the bill in a fourth consecutive parliament. The bill proposes to introduce prohibitions and restrictions. According to the bill, “foreign agents” and persons associated with them are prohibited from exercising activities in public institutions, such as schools, kindergartens, public and private universities, the interior ministry, the defence ministry, and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. It imposes restrictions on political rights and freedom of expression, prohibiting state-labelled “agents” from participating in political activities or actions and from carrying out any kind of activities which might influence the domestic or foreign policy of the country. It is also envisaged that once a person (legal or physical) is designated as an “agent,” they are considered as such for five years after the cessation of receiving foreign assistance. The Bulgarian version of the FARA law is clearly designed to close and end the activities of CSOs and to exclude people labelled as “agents” from public life.¹²

5. Data provided to BCNL by the State Registration Agency. Data for 2024 would be available in 2025.

6. CM Decisions, 1492nd meeting (12-14 March 2024) (DH) - H46-7 United Macedonian Organisation Ilinden and Others group v. Bulgaria (Application No. 59491/00), [https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=CM/Del/Dec\(2024\)1492/H46-07E](https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=CM/Del/Dec(2024)1492/H46-07E)

7. For more information see: Two decades of violation of the right of association – the case of United Macedonian Organisation: Ilinden and others against Bulgaria, <https://bcnl.org/en/two-decades-of-violation-of-the-right-of-association-the-case-of-united-macedonian-organisation-ilinden-and-others-against-bulgaria>

8. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-231511>, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-231509>, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-231510>

9. <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/plenaryst/ns/55/ID/10847>

10. <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/bills/ID/165772>

11. <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/bills/ID/165804>

12. See details about the latest version of the FARA law proposed in Bulgaria in September 2024: <https://bcnl.org/news/zakonat-sreshtu-grazhdanskite-svobod-i-nova-ataka-sreshtu-grazhdanskite-prava.html>

Additionally, the drafting process of a law on lobbying raises concerns as such legislation could be potentially weaponised against civil society.¹³ In December 2023, a concept for a lobbying regulation drafted by a working group to the justice ministry with the participation of CSOs, was subject to public consultations, during which it received positive feedback as it envisaged exceptions for advocacy.¹⁴ However, in March 2024 a substantially edited concept was sent for an opinion to the Council for Civil Society Development.¹⁵ In the edited concept, the distinction between lobbying and advocacy was removed alongside the exceptions for CSOs. None of the civil society representative members of the working group were informed about the editing. Furthermore, no report from the public consultation justifying the changes was published. The edited concept was approved by the justice minister on 12 February 2024. The information about the concept published in the chapter for Bulgaria in the 2024 European Commission's Rule of Law Report¹⁶ is misleading — the concept was neither adopted by the Council of Ministers nor were CSOs consulted on the revised final version.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Bulgarian legislation ensures the enjoyment of the freedom of peaceful assembly and is largely in line with international standards.¹⁸ The law does not require permission from the authorities for a public assembly to take place and does not introduce other unreasonable restrictive conditions. Furthermore, the rules and regulations for policing protests have improved in recent years. For instance, after lengthy anti-government protests in 2021, new rules were introduced to ensure that police officers visibly wear their personal identification numbers. Two provisions of the law regulating peaceful assembly could be improved: the ban on the participation of masked people in assemblies and the ban on assemblies during the hours between 22:00 and 8:00. However, there is no information that these provisions have been strictly applied or abused for restrictions on peaceful assembly.

In December 2024 a working group on drafting a lobbying law was formed in the justice ministry.¹⁷ After the first meeting of the working group, the ministry sent a draft structure of the law containing proposals for concrete legal provisions to the members. According to this document, there is no distinction between advocacy and lobbying. Furthermore, CSOs are not excluded from the scope but some other entities which are well known for engaging in lobbying, such as law firms and business associations, are explicitly excluded. There is a proposal to regulate grassroots lobbying (indirect lobbying), and to ban lobbying activities targeted at the Constitutional Court and the judiciary. These developments raise considerable concerns about the transparency of the drafting process of the lobbying law. As expected, the end result could be another version of a FARA law with similar effects such as narrowing the civic space, smear campaigns against already transparent CSOs and providing legal tools for censorship while failing to ensure transparency.

A major breach of the freedom of peaceful assembly took place in November 2024 in Sofia when far-right groups, together with political figures from several far-rights parties, organised a protest in front of the National Theatre. The groups claimed that a play by Bernard Shaw and directed by John Malkovich contains insulting comments about the Bulgarian army.¹⁹ Despite an abundance of information online hinting that this protest could be a security issue, and that the organising groups have in the past been involved in several incidents of harassment at LGBTQI+ cultural events,²⁰ no adequate policing of the protest was provided. The protest swiftly turned violent, after several people who attempted to enter the theatre were attacked by the mob. This forced the theatre to close the play to the general public, with only journalists allowed to attend.

13. https://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2025/01/07/4724521_krivorazbrana_ideia_zakona_zalobizma_zaplashva/

14. The draft concept available here: <https://www.strategy.bg/PublicConsultations/View.aspx?@lang=bg-BG&id=7969>

15. Information obtained by BCNL as a member of the Council for Civil Society Development.

16. P. 23 of the Report on Bulgaria available here: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2024-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en

17. Information obtained by BCNL as a member of the working group

18. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g20/232/15/pdf/g2023215.pdf>

19. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/11/08/bulgarian-nationalists-disrupt-premiere-of-john-malkovich-directed-play/>

20. For information about disruption of cultural events of the LGBTQI+ community in the past see last year's report: <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-BULGARIA.pdf>

Freedom of expression and the right to privacy

According to the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, Bulgarian media freedom has been in constant decline since 2006, when the country was ranked 36th.²¹ In 2021²² it was ranked 112th — the lowest among all EU member states and second-lowest (after Türkiye) in the Balkans. In 2021, however, a power shift ensued, ending a lengthy period during which the political landscape was dominated by the GERB party (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria). Since then, its ranking has improved, reaching 59th place in 2024.²³ However, the condition of the media landscape remains concerning. According to an inquiry by the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria, 81.1% of the journalists think that interference in the work of journalists is either a practice or a widely applied practice.²⁴

In April 2024, the caretaker interior minister, Kalin Stoyanov, launched a SLAPP case against two investigative journalists.²⁵ Later the same month, the interior ministry published selective and misleading extracts of a surveillance video aimed at portraying one of the journalists sued by Minister Stoyanov as an aggressive individual.²⁶ In August, during the ongoing internal

power struggle the Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party,²⁷ the Directorate General for Combating Organised Crime of the interior ministry, ordered a hosting company to shut down a website that used satire to cover the sanctioning of the leader of one of the two rival MRF factions, Delyan Peevski, under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.²⁸ After the elections in October, Stoyanov, who was caretaker minister during these violations, became an MP for Peevski's MRF faction. These incidents showcase the vulnerability of the interior minister's office, which can be abused for smear campaigns and censorship.

The process of drafting legislative amendments introducing safeguards against SLAPPs has been underway at justice ministry since 2023. However, following the dissolution of the government in March 2024, the work on the amendments has been at a standstill. Meanwhile, in June 2024, Bulgaria was found to have violated the freedom of expression of Bulgarian journalist Rosen Bosev by the European Court of Human Rights, after a Bulgarian court ruled against the journalist in a SLAPP defamation case brought against him.²⁹

Safe space

In August 2024, parliament passed amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act after two readings in a single day. The amendments banned “any propaganda, promotion, or any other direct or indirect inducement to ideas and views related to non-traditional sexual orientation and/or designating a gender identity other than the biological one.”³⁰ The homophobic and transphobic legal amendments bear similarities³¹ to restrictions adopted in Georgia in 2024,³² Russia in 2022,³³ and Hungary in 2021.³⁴

Similarly to the countries mentioned above, the anti-LGBTQI+ legislation was utilised for an attack against the civil society sector and for the promotion of a FARA law. Days after the adoption of the amendments, a representative of the far-right and pro-Russian Revival Party justified the need for a FARA law as a necessary continuation:

“The 50th National Assembly will go down in Bulgarian history with the adoption by a large majority of the law banning LGBT propaganda in Bulgarian schools. This is one of the few laws that is overwhelmingly approved by our society

21. <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2006>

22. <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2021>

23. <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2024>

24. <https://aej-bulgaria.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Jurnalistika-pod-stres.pdf>

25. <https://aej-bulgaria.org/slapp-kstoyanov/>

26. <https://aej-bulgaria.org/23042024/>

27. see more in the “Institutional landscape, political and socio-economic” section of this article

28. <https://aej-bulgaria.org/%d1%81%bd%b2%bd%b0%bd%bb%bd1%8f%bd%bd%bd%b5%bd1%82%bd%be-%bd%bd%bd%b0-%bd1%81%bd%b0%bd1%82%bd%b8%bd1%80%bd%b8%bd1%87%bd%b5%bd%bd-%bd1%81%bd%b0%bd%b9%bd1%82-%bd%be%bd1%82-%bd%bc%bd%b2%bd1%80-%bd%b5-%bd%be%bd%bf/>

29. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-238048>

30. See also: <https://www.amnesty.eu/news/bulgaria-ban-of-lgbti-propaganda-in-schools-is-attack-on-the-entire-lgbti-community/>

31. See also: <https://www.context.news/money-power-people/new-russian-style-anti-lgbtq-law-in-bulgaria-censors-teachers>

32. <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-signs-sweeping-anti-lgbtq-bill-into-law/>

33. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-parliament-passes-law-banning-lgbt-propaganda-among-adults-2022-11-24/>

34. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/hungary-propaganda-law-has-created-cloud-of-fear-pushing-lgbti-community-into-the-shadows>

and only small groups, financially dependent NGOs that are funded by foreign foundations, stood against the desire of Bulgarian citizens for their children to remain protected from harmful LGBT propaganda. In order to curb this malign influence in Bulgarian society of so-called “non-traditional sexual groups” alien to our mores and traditions, we at Revival will also propose a Foreign Agents Registration Act”.³⁵

Shortly after the adoption of the legislation, LGBTQI+ CSOs were summoned to a joint hearing of the Youth and Sports Parliamentary Commission and the Commission on Demographics, Children and Family.³⁶ The subject of the hearing was announced as a “Discussion of issues related to the distribution of materials and organisation of events that promote LGBTI activities that pose a threat to minors over the age of 14” and was utilised for a smear campaign against the CSOs and their human rights activism and work. Following the hearing, some of the CSOs were subject to an investigation by the National Data Protection Authority (the authority is one of the many supervisory bodies functioning with an expired mandate) about an online inquiry on the safe space of LGBTQI+ pupils in schools, although it was obvious that the inquiry in question did not require any personal information.³⁷ In late September one of the targeted CSOs announced that the National Data Protection Authority had not found any violations.³⁸

In response to the anti-LGBTQI+ legislation, teachers launched an online petition opposing it. In late August, one of the online groups of the far-right and pro-Russian Revival Party published a “blacklist” of teachers from the city of Varna who have signed the petition, with a call

for parents to seek explanations from the principals of the school where those teachers “parasitise.”³⁹ Despite the initial announcement that both the Prosecution and the National Data Protection Authority are investigating the “blacklist”, no information about sanctions has followed.

In December 2024, the National Data Protection Authority also issued a disappointing decision after it found that the Revival Party violated the privacy rights of CSOs’ representatives but refused to impose sanctions. The case in concern dates from 2022 when the Revival Party published a document called a “signal to the prosecution” on its website; together with the announcement that they are proposing a FARA law containing a blacklist of names of more than 800 civil society representatives and their state-issued PIN codes — a practice explicitly forbidden by the Bulgarian Data Protection Act. Despite clear legal norms, it took the National Data Protection Authority nearly two years to reach a decision which failed to provide effective or meaningful protection of the rights of the CSO representatives.⁴⁰

In 2024 the authorities continued to harass Mission Wings, an organisation helping refugees in dire situations in the regions close to the Bulgarian–Turkish border. In late December, Mission Wings publicised information about three refugee children who were found by their volunteers in a mountainous region next to the border. Despite multiple calls, the authorities had failed to provide help leading to the death of the children. Instead of taking responsibility, the interior ministry publicly accused Mission Wings of hindering their work and started an investigation against the CSO for false calls for help.⁴¹

Funding for civil society

None of the major issues regarding access to funding of CSOs were addressed in 2024. Challenges related to the lack of diversification of funding opportunities, development of public funding schemes, improvement of the access to funding provided by the EU and the promotion of the culture of donating remained.

In 2024, Bulgaria sustained its low ranking in the World Giving Index⁴² which measures the money donated to charities and time volunteered with organisations. According to the Index, Bulgaria is ranked 133rd out of 142 countries in 2023 and 2024, compared to 54th of 119 countries in 2022. Additionally, the country has

35. <https://vazrazhdane.bg/%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BB-%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B4-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B-%D0%B3%D0%B1%D1%82-%D0%BF/>

36. <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/parliamentarycommittees/3395/sitting/12706>

37. See also: <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/lgbt-uchenitsi-prouchvane/33072544.html>

38. https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=837878818555314&id=100069996106701&_rdr

39. <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/prokuratura-varna-vazrazhdane-proverka-uchiteli/33088809.html>

40. <https://offnews.bg/politika/kzld-ne-vidia-problem-v-zloupotreba-s-lichni-danni-ot-vazrazhdane-836035.html>

41. <https://www.segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/mvr-razsledva-aktivisti-za-neverni-signali-za-bedstvashti-migranti>

42. https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/inside-giving/wgi/wgi_2024_report.pdf

yet to adopt a law which regulates volunteering and supports organisations working with volunteers. The idea for the adoption of a law to support volunteering has been promoted by CSOs, however, despite the nine draft bills in multiple parliaments in the last 12 years, a law has not yet been adopted. Shortly after the formation of the parliament, two parties proposed bills on volunteering. On 5 December, all parties who have proposed bills on volunteering in recent years joined a roundtable organised by CSOs pledging unity on the topic. However, the event was not followed by any immediate actions leading to the adoption of a law.⁴³

A long-standing problem for Bulgarian CSOs to access EU funding is the false interpretation of the local authorities of the *de minimis* rule stipulated in the EU regulation 651/2014, declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market.⁴⁴ As noted in the 2024 European Commission Rule of Law report, it is difficult for “CSOs to receive EU funding (through state agencies dealing with EU funds) caused by the fact that they are considered as commercial entities and as the state applies the same state aid restrictions as for private companies receiving EU funding.”⁴⁵

Additionally, the public funding scheme for civil society projects envisaged in the Not-for-Profit Legal Persons Act was not launched in 2024, even though the body responsible for it, the Council for Civil Society Development, was established in 2022. The Council for Civil Society Development had no official meetings in 2024.⁴⁶

The advocacy efforts of CSOs for a major reform of the social entrepreneurship legal framework, which would have enabled the access of CSOs to subsidies for entrepreneurship, were also undermined by the political crisis. The bill to amend the dysfunctional 2019 Companies of the Social and Solidarity Economy Act was adopted in its first reading in February 2024⁴⁷ but was never put to a final vote afterwards.

In 2024, the limitations of the project funding schemes on which the majority of Bulgarian CSOs depend became evident. CSOs struggled to develop their capacity to respond to the unpredictable legislative and policy developments typical for a political crisis as well as to participate in consultative bodies. A prime example was the lack of a proper response and participation in the discussions in the parliamentary commissions to oppose the anti-LGBTQI+ legislation adopted surprisingly in only one week at the beginning of August.

Civil dialogue and right to participation

The functioning of key civic participation mechanisms continued to deteriorate in 2024. Most notably, the Council for Civil Society Development (CCSD) is blocked due to the political situation.⁴⁸ In 2024 the CCSD did not have a single official meeting. It only managed to produce opinions on legislative proposals by relying on a procedure for unanimous decisions that did not require a meeting. Thus, no progress was made on developing a national mechanism for funding civil society nor on drafting a strategy for supporting the development of the sector. Furthermore, no procedure for the election of new members of the CCSD has started. The mandate of the current CCSD expires in February 2025 and according to the rules the elections process needs to start no later than three months before that.

In February 2024, the first National Council for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence within the Council (NCPDV) of Ministers was established. Five CSOs applied for four seats designated for civil society in the Council. It's worth noting that by law the CSOs who are members of the Council are not allowed to receive public funding from the state's domestic violence prevention programs. This overly broad, conflict of interest rule in effect prevents CSOs who have the most experience and knowledge in the field from applying to the Council. Additionally, the Council of Ministers' administration tried to bar the CSO members of the Council from participating in the discussions on the financial mechanism for the funding of prevention programs due to alleged potential conflicts of interest in the future. After successful advocacy efforts, this

⁴³. <https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/bulgaria/794536-nuzhddata-ot-priemane-na-zakon-za-nasarchavane-na-dobrovolchestvoto-beshe-obsaden>

⁴⁴. Available here: http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/651/oj; p36 of the report: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/fd6bb85d-4aaa-4c79-88a2-8709edfb2002_en?filename=10_1_58051_coun_chap_bulgaria_en.pdf

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⁴⁶. Information available to BCNL due to its capacity of a member of the Council for Civil Society Development.

⁴⁷. <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/bills/ID/165316>

⁴⁸. See also p36 of the 2024 Rule of Law report on Bulgaria: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/fd6bb85d-4aaa-4c79-88a2-8709edfb2002_en?filename=10_1_58051_coun_chap_bulgaria_en.pdf

issue was resolved. The election procedure of new CSO members of the NCPPDV had to start no later than three months before the expiration of the mandate (November 2024). However, the procedure was opened on Thursday 2 January 2025 with no proper prior communication and was closed on Tuesday the following week. This led to a mere two applications for joining the Council.⁴⁹

Participatory mechanisms for civil society in the work of the parliament are also at a stalemate. After several short-lived parliaments in recent years, the Parliamentary Commission on Direct Citizen Participation and Interaction with Civil Society started

a procedure to establish the Civil Council in May 2023. However, the procedure had to be prolonged due to the lack of civil society candidates in certain fields such as charity and volunteerism, justice, internal security, public order and defence, and agriculture.⁵⁰ The Civil Council was established in September 2023.⁵¹ However, by the dissolution of the government in March 2024, it had only held one joint session with the Commission on Direct Citizen Participation and Interaction with civil society, as stipulated in the Rules and Regulations of the Parliament, and no major activity altogether.⁵² No procedure for the formation of the Civil Council was launched in the parliament following the elections in June and October 2024.

Civil society resilience

Following the adoption of the anti-LGBTQI+ law in 2024 and the proposal of a FARA law in September, Bulgarian civil society took steps to self-organise and push back against restrictive and legislative acts violating human rights. As a result, a legal opinion against the proposed FARA law gathered more than 2,500 signatures within days.⁵³ Furthermore, a conference was organised in Sofia in October, attended by both CSOs and business association representatives. The conference was the biggest event in recent years, gathering as many as 300 people and addressed restrictive legislative acts, such as the FARA and the collaboration between CSOs and business to jointly take action.⁵⁴

In 2024, a biannual sociological survey on the public perception of the civil society sector was published.⁵⁵ According to the survey, there is a slow but steady growth in civic activism. The wider public also feels more represented by CSOs, although the rates remain low. In 2018 only 4.4% of the respondents said that they felt represented by a CSO in contrast to 15% in 2024. Similarly, in 2024, 61.1% of the respondents shared that they have never had contact with a CSO, in contrast to 90.8% in 2018.

⁴⁹. https://www.strategy.bg/News/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&categoryId&id=10697&y&m&d&fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAR2e28pGC4eelJBkP3zDds-fveHqR0_7YbmtqFLio6B4bpLniArgPClePHM_aem_YVQPuripiv5n_-voQ69QaQ

⁵⁰. See decision for prolonging the process in the minutes from a Commission meeting on 25/07/2023 <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/parliamentarycommittees/3220/steno/7479>

⁵¹. Decision available here: https://www.parliament.bg/pub/cw/20230925120846_%D0%A0%D0%B5%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5%14.09.2023%20%D0%B3..pdf

⁵². The joint session took place on the 25 January 2024 to discuss the priorities of the Civic Council: <https://www.parliament.bg/bg/parliamentarycommittees/3220/steno/7788>

⁵³. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QXx-H7luYmL1b2pshTg4PCAX43YQWavq-4q-jw8IW7w/edit?tab=t.0>

⁵⁴. See the website of the conference here: <https://civicspacebg.com/en/>

⁵⁵. https://bcnl.org/uploadfiles/documents/analyses/Obshtestveni%20naglasni_NGO_2024.pdf

Recommendations

TARGETED RECOMMENDATION:

- ➔ **Repeal the amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act banning comprehensive sex education, as it restricts freedom of expression and violates children's rights, such as the right to access to information and the right to non-discrimination. This should be done before the end of 2025.**
- ➔ Reject the Foreign Agents Registration bill and similar FARA legislative proposals that stigmatise and attack civil society and contradict national and EU law and international standards and refrain from proposing new FARA laws in the future.
- ➔ Commit to civic engagement and state support for civil society by adopting and implementing the Civil Society Strategy to replace the expired one.
- ➔ Ensure that the lobbying law is drafted in an open and transparent procedure and envisages exceptions for advocacy CSOs.
- ➔ Ensure that civic actors, human rights defenders, and journalists are protected from SLAPPs by transposing Directive (EU) 2024/1069 (the ant-SLAPP Directive) introducing legal safeguards for both cases with cross-border element and purely domestic cases and by applying the Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/758.
- ➔ Implement additional and mandatory trainings to police officers and members of the administration for the correct safeguarding of the freedom of peaceful assembly.
- ➔ Guarantee the uninterrupted work of the Council for the Development of the Civil Society by providing it with administrative resources and a budget to ensure that it can carry out its lawful tasks in a timely manner.
- ➔ Take steps to popularise and increase the Parliament's collaboration with the Civil Council to the Commission on Direct Citizen Participation and Interaction with Civil Society.
- ➔ Ensure a continuous and meaningful participation of CSOs within the National Council for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence within the Council.
- ➔ Revise the implementation practices of the de minimus rule (EU 651/2014) so that civil society organisations are not discriminated against in the allocation of EU funding.
- ➔ Adopt the law on volunteering to support civil society organisations working with volunteers.

CIVIC SPACE REPORT 2025



About European Civic Forum

European Civic Forum (ECF) is a pan-European network of nearly 100 associations and NGOs across 29 European countries. Founded in 2005 by our member organisations, we have spent nearly two decades working to protect civic space, enable civic participation and build civil dialogue for more equality, solidarity and democracy in Europe.

civic-forum.eu



About Civic Space Watch

CivicSpace Watch is an online platform that gathers data and reports on developments in civic space at the national and EU level and analyses national and European trends in civic space. Powered by the European Civic Forum, it collects findings through regular contact and interviews with a strong network of members and partners on the ground, as well as ongoing media and social media monitoring.

civicspacewatch.eu



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