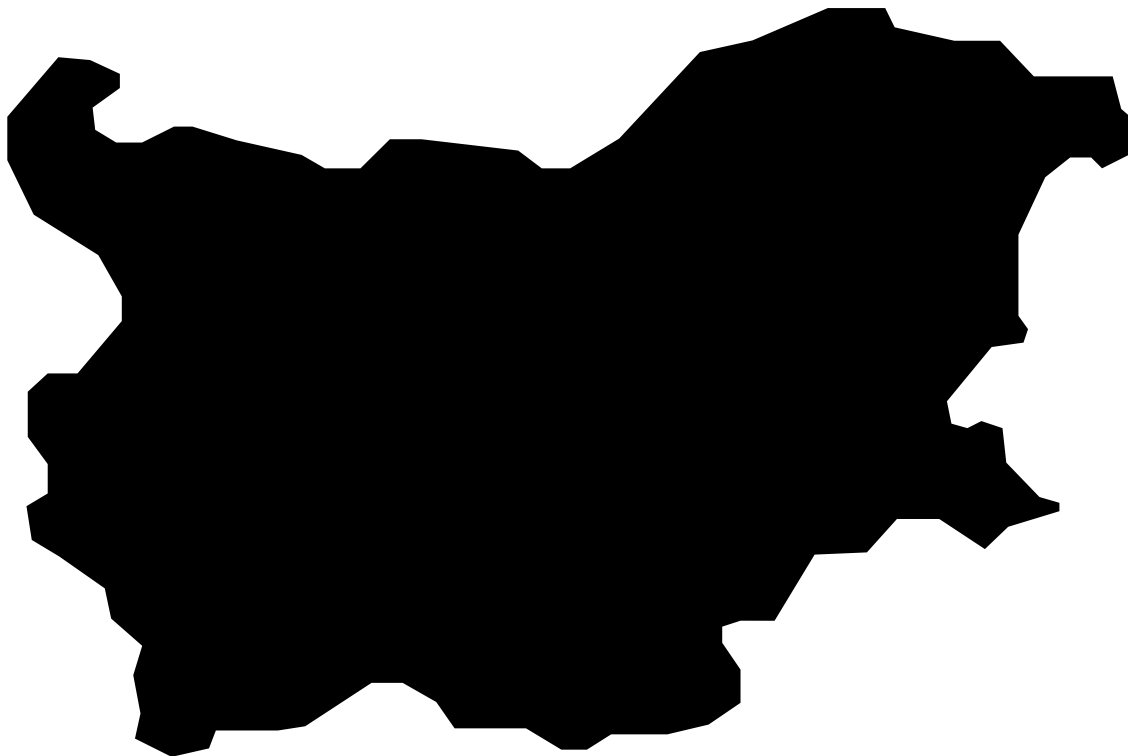


Social Rights Monitor 2025 - Country Report - Bulgaria



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About SOLIDAR

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

The network is brought together by its shared values of solidarity, equality and participation.

SOLIDAR voices the concerns of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions by carrying out advocacy actions, project management and coordination, policy monitoring and awareness-raising across its different policy areas.

What is the Social Rights Monitor (SRM)?

The Social Rights Monitor assesses the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) at national level from a civil society perspective. The EPSR – also known as the Social Pillar – is a set of 20 principles that guide the action of the European Union in the realm of social affairs and policies. In other words, it is intended to be a compass guiding the EU towards a more social Europe. For too many people, however, the implementation of these principles at national and EU level is not yet a reality.

Thanks to the contribution of our members and their networks on the ground (the National Strategy Groups), SOLIDAR monitors the extent to which social rights are respected, upheld and promoted for all people living in the EU. The Social Rights Monitor also investigates the health of civic space and social and civil dialogue in the EU, as well as the extent to which a just transition is being pursued. Therefore, the thematic areas covered by the Monitor are the following: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market; Fair working conditions; Social inclusion and protection; a Just transition; and Civic space. The first three correspond to the three chapters of the EPSR, while the last two have been added to give a fuller picture of social justice in Europe.

Thanks to first-hand data gathered by national civil society organisations, the Social Rights Monitor constitutes a direct channel of policy recommendations between the national level and EU policymakers. It thus amplifies the voices and needs of the most marginalised groups. The Monitor dedicates a section to “advocacy messages” which result from the national-level analyses in each thematic area and are addressed to EU policymakers.

Countries are assigned a score for each thematic area out of a maximum of 100 points. This makes immediately visible how each country is performing in each area and enables comparison with other countries. The numerical scores originate from the National Strategy Groups’ (NSGs) assessments of national developments related to social rights, civic space and just transition. Negative developments in an area result in lower scores. NSGs rate these developments for each country by replying to Linkert-scale questions. This means that the score of a country’s thematic area is given by adding up all the rates given to the questions concerning that thematic area and expressing the score out of 100. The overall score of a country is the average of the thematic areas scores. Further details on the questionnaire and data gathering are provided in the section “About: What is the process?”

Since the SRM score reflects the NSG’s assessment of changes—either improvements or deteriorations—in each of the five areas over the past 12 months, it does not represent the overall status of these dimensions in absolute terms. Instead, it highlights recent trends. For example, a country with a historically strong welfare state might receive a low score if recent reforms have significantly weakened social rights or pose a risk of doing so. This does not imply that the overall situation is poor, but rather that recent developments are cause for concern and may undermine social standards over time.

Therefore, the SRM should not be used to compare the overall situation of social rights across countries—official statistics are more appropriate for that purpose. Instead, it serves as a tool to track short-term national trends and to understand the perspectives of civil society organizations (CSOs) on these developments.

What is the process?

The Social Rights Monitor is a tool that amplifies the voice of progressive civil society at national level. Its content is based on the inputs provided by the National Strategy Groups (NSGs) set up by SOLIDAR’s members and partners, which are active in the countries analysed. They consist of NGOs, associations, movements, trade unions, academia and thinktanks, ensuring that the perspective of civil society is mirrored in the Social Rights Monitor’s analysis. The Monitor reflects the experiences of these organisations, which are active on the ground, and the experiences are complemented by scientific data gathered through desk research.

The data elaborated in the Social Rights Monitor are gathered by SOLIDAR’s secretariat through a questionnaire distributed to the National Strategy Group Leaders (our national members) and completed with information produced by each group. From 2023, this questionnaire has been carried out online.

Based on the picture that emerges from the Monitor, SOLIDAR and the NSGs together devise policy recommendations for EU policymakers. These aim to make social rights, a healthy planet and an enabling, free, protected civic space a reality for all in Europe. The key recommendations stemming from the analysis are used as a basis for SOLIDAR's social affairs advocacy work.

The SRM is published every year, around the end of November/beginning of December and its findings cover the period going from June of the previous year to May of the year of the publication. This timeline is due to the fact that the NSGs submit their questionnaire by the end of May of the publication year.

How do we use it?

SOLIDAR's main role as a European-level civil society network is as a bridge between EU institutions and their policies on the one hand and our progressive members working at the national level on the other. The Social Rights Monitor is a valuable tool to gather information from the ground and bring it to policymakers' attention. This ensures that the voices of the most neglected social groups are duly taken into account. For example, the SRM complements the European Semester, by providing a more-complete assessment of Member State policies. Regrettably, the Semester is still too focused on countries' economic and financial performances and does not provide sufficient guidance on upward social convergence in the European Union.

SOLIDAR disseminates the findings of the Social Rights Monitor in various ways, including through the Social Europe Conference, an annual event at which it is presented, and which also explores a topic of priority for social Europe. More generally, the Monitor is one of the main ways through which the SOLIDAR network presents its positions on social affairs, so its findings are mainstreamed throughout our advocacy work.

Social Rights Monitor Overview

SCORE: 58

Bulgaria has continued to make progress in several social areas, but challenges still remain in healthcare, gender equality and civic space. STEM and dual education have received increased policy attention because of their important roles in education, training and lifelong learning. Youth unemployment continues to decrease, thanks to several national and EU initiatives. Employee records are being digitalized, improving the administration of and access to social protection. Access to affordable energy has been safeguarded through the postponement of the liberalization of the household energy market and the creation of energy communities, though the roll-out of these has been relatively slow. However, some structural issues remain unaddressed, and there have been some worrying developments. Public healthcare funding has been increased substantially, but the private cost of healthcare has not been addressed, nor has the ageing healthcare workforce. There has been no progress in gender equality, and gender gaps persist in several areas. Press freedom has been diminished, a new and dangerous restriction of Bulgaria's civic space.

The NSG for Bulgaria was led by SOLIDAR's member [Institute for Social Integration](#).



Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market

SCORE: 56

Investment in the Welfare System

The Bulgarian parliament adopted the State Social Insurance budget for 2025 in March 2025, increasing the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) budget significantly by BGN 1.2 billion (Bulgarian lev – €613 million) to BGN 9.4 billion (€4.81 billion). This budget increase will help improve healthcare for children up to seven years old by paying for their medicines for infectious diseases or for home treatment.^[1] While these improvements are welcome, the NSG highlights several unaddressed problems.

Financing the mandatory NHIF insurance places a heavy burden on people in Bulgaria. In spite of a standard contribution rate of 8% of gross salary, Bulgarians often have to make large out-of-pocket payments (OOPs). In 2021, 65% of health expenditure was paid through public funds, 33.7% through OOPs and 1.3% through other private sources, according to the Health System Summary 2024 by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies.^[2] This heavy reliance on OOPs disproportionately affects people with lower incomes and increases their risk of being pushed into poverty.

Another problem identified by the NSG is the low pay of healthcare professionals, in particular doctors. The 2025 budget foresees only a 5% increase in doctors' pay, leading to protests from young doctors. Doctors' trade unions advocate for salaries of resident doctors – those in a specialized traineeship – at least 3.5 times the minimum wage. They also advocate for basic remuneration for medical and health professionals to be at least 1.5 times the average wage. Raising these wages would make healthcare more attractive as a profession, as there is a lack of healthcare personnel in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian healthcare system is currently even relying on pensioners to sustain its operability, highlighting the need for young healthcare personnel.

The Bulgarian government has been working on several proposals to address these issues. It proposes to attract foreign students to Bulgaria by providing free tuition on the condition that they work in Bulgaria for three to five years after graduating.^[3] As a share of GDP, public spending on healthcare in Bulgaria is 5.6% for 2022, while in Europe this share is 8-9% of GDP. The 8% of GDP allocated to healthcare is due to the high private costs of people for examinations, co-payments in hospitals, tests, medicines, etc. The main source of financing in healthcare in Bulgaria remains the National Health Insurance Fund. Experts recommend that total investments in Bulgaria's healthcare be increased to 10% of GDP, thus predicting a reduction in the rate of out-of-pocket payments by patients to 25-30%.^[4] This additional funding could also be used to raise the pay of healthcare professionals.

In addition, this increased budget should be used to reduce OOPPs to less than 20% of healthcare expenditure, the NSG recommends. This would be closer to the EU average of 14.3% in 2022.[5] Discussions are ongoing in the government over the establishment of a special innovation fund to ensure early access to innovative medication and address shortages of medicines and other consumables, the NSG reports.[6] The NSG also highlights the need to increase the efficiency of NHIF allocation.

Gender Equality

Bulgaria has made little to no progress in gender equality and scores lowest in the EU in the field of money, the NSG reports. This is reflected in the country's ranking in the Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).[7] Bulgaria dropped one position in 2024, to 17th out of the 27 EU Member States. Its index score fell 0.6 to 64.5 out of 100, in spite of a rise of 0.9 points in "work" – though its ranking in this category remained 22.

The fall in the overall index was mainly due to a decrease of 3.9 points in "power". The decrease in this category was the second largest among the 27 countries and caused Bulgaria to fall from 11th to 14th place in "power". The greatest factor was economic power, in which Bulgaria fell to 15th place, from 3rd in 2017. The index highlights the need for change in related areas, such as "money", in which Bulgaria has ranked bottom since 2017 with a score that decreases each year. In the sub-category "financial resources", Bulgaria also ranked bottom, while in "economic situation" it ranked 26th. In the area of political power, the NSG highlights the low representation of women in parliament. In recent years, the proportion of female MPs has fluctuated around 24%, significantly below the EU average of 33%. However, the current National Assembly has a chairwoman, and 33% of ministers are women, close to the EU average of 35%.

The government adopted the Report on Equality between Women and Men in Bulgaria for 2023 on 15 October 2024. This reviewed the National Action Plan for Promoting Equality between Women and Men for the period 2023-2024.[8] The Plan included daycare services to facilitate women's access to employment and other social services for women. It also featured measures to combat female unemployment, raise awareness of gender stereotypes and prevent gender-based violence.

However, gender gaps still persist in several areas, the report shows. The employment rate of women in 2024 was 67.4%, compared to 73.9% for men. Women draw pensions for an average of 27.6 years, seven years longer than men, but their average monthly pension was BGN 1 445.55 (€739) in 2023, lower than the BGN 1 488.15 (€760) for men. The unemployment rate for women is higher than for men, according to the Bulgarian Employment Agency.[9] The group of women with the highest unemployment is those with higher education, at 64.5%. For men with higher education, the rate is only 35.5%.

The proposal for Amendments to the Law on Equality between Women and Men was adopted at first reading in February 2025 and is intended to improve the gender balance among company directors.[10]

The proposed Amendments are meant to implement Directive (EU) 2022/2381, which needed to be transposed on December 28th 2024. The amendments follow the Directive's target of at least 33% of director positions being filled by the less-represented gender. The amendments also require corporate governance declarations of progress towards the target. However, despite the amendments' relatively fast adoption, they have still not been finally approved June 2025. The NSG points out that positive changes are not likely in the short term.

Good practice:

In 2023, within the framework of the procedure for awarding the Distinguished Mark for significant achievements in the policy of equality between women and men, a number of organizations and initiatives that demonstrate sustainable and innovative practices were recognised.

Among the leading examples is Kamenitsa AD, which achieves gender balance in its leadership teams and relies on diversity and inclusion programs. The company implements flexible working time policies, additional paid parental leave and incentives for combining personal and professional life. Through an annual well-being calendar, training and internal initiatives, the company promotes inclusive leadership and equal opportunities.

VMware Bulgaria EOOD also stands out with its programs for women in technology, including support for Women Who Code and the internal mentoring initiative Women Connecting Women.[11] The company invests in internship and volunteer programs, as well as in the professional and personal well-being of employees through sports initiatives, psychological support and extended paid paternity leave.

At Eurobank Bulgaria AD, a number of social benefits – additional pension insurance, health packages, hybrid work, relaxation zones and cultural initiatives – as well as leadership programmes are indicated as good practices.[12]

The Council of Women in Business in Bulgaria also makes a significant contribution, promoting successful leadership models, organizing national forums and mentoring programs, as well as initiatives for inclusion and equality in the context of the green transition and digitalization.[13]

Education, training and lifelong learning

The development of Bulgaria's STEM centres and National STEM Centre are highlighted by the NSG as important positive developments. The centres seek to improve Bulgarian students' results in maths and natural sciences and to encourage them to take these courses. They use learning through experience to enable students to learn specific skills and competences. Bulgaria currently has around 400 STEM centres and plans to increase the number to 2 000 by May 2026.^[14] The National STEM Centre is currently being established.^[15] It will play an important role in aiding Bulgarian schools to create STEM infrastructure and will support their shift to learning through experience. The National STEM Centre is aiming to create an innovative, high-tech school environment, and it will include state-of-the-art laboratories in areas such as "Green Technologies and Sustainable Development".

Dual education has been receiving increased attention in recent years. By September 2024, nearly 700 companies in Bulgaria had conducted dual training for students with over 1 600 mentors. Most of these students are enrolled in technical courses.^[16] A third are studying to be electrical technicians, and nearly two thirds to be mechanical technicians. Despite the popularity of dual learning in these two specialities, other specialities have no dual learning option despite being well suited to the method, the NSG points out. These range from crafts such as locksmith and welder to social professions such as assistant educator and social assistant. Dual education offers should be better matched to the needs of employers, according to the NSG. This could possibly take the form of informational campaigns on professional orientation aimed at young students.

Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment fell to 10.1% in April 2025 3 percentage points below its level in April 2024 and significantly lower than the EU average of 14.8%.^[17] The NSG highlights several measures in recent years that have reduced youth unemployment.

The Human Resources Development Programme implements funds from the European Social Funds Plus to help young people who have completed their education enter the labour market. The Programme finances the development of skills, professional qualifications and key competences, for example through the Youth Employment Plus programme. This supports the acquisition of work experience through internships, dual education training and even subsidised employment.

Another EU-funded project, "From Higher Education to Employment", seeks to provide over 46 000 students with skills for professional development over its implementation period going from 2024 to 2029. Within the project framework, the Ministry of Education and Science provides practical training in enterprises and organisations and approve dual-training opportunities in higher-education institutions. The project is also planning activities to assist students in developing entrepreneurial skills and financial literacy and teachers in teaching them.

An initiative seeking to provide start-up entrepreneurs from Northern Bulgaria with public financial assistance of up to BGN 50 000 and consultations and training on business creation and development is currently under discussion.

Lastly, the NSG highlights the launch of the online platform edujobs.mon.bg, which plays an important role in coordination. The platform is managed by a partnership of 44 higher education institutions in Bulgaria, which are also involved in its organisation. Employers publish their positions on the platform, and students apply for them. The platform guarantees that every student who studies at one of the 44 partner institutions will have the opportunity to participate in practical training.



Fair Working Conditions

SCORE: 61

Job Security

Thanks to changes to the Labour Code, Bulgaria is transitioning from paper employee records to a single electronic work record in the employment register.^[18] The change became effective on 1 June 2025, and employers have one year to complete employees' employment records. The work records detail the employee's length of service in a company as well as other information. They are

thus important both from a social security perspective – for instance, to calculate benefits – and when the employee tries to find a new job. The changes to the labour code also expand the list of information that needs to be included in employee records, and they increase the frequency of notifications to the National Revenue Agency. As such, the changes could help reduce the administrative burden for employees. However, both employers and human resources specialists have expressed concerns over possible ambiguity in the application of the new rules. Even though the new system should make the old employee records obsolete, the National Social Security Institute advises employees to hold on to their paper versions, as they might be needed to verify length of service for pension benefits, which may defeat the simplification purpose of the measure itself.



Social Inclusion and Protection

SCORE: 57

Housing

Bulgaria has the highest housing stock per capita in the EU in 2024 according to the Deloitte Property Index, with 672 homes per 1 000 people.^[19] The property Index further points out that Bulgaria's mortgage interest rate of 2.6% is one of the lowest in the EU. Wages have increased in Bulgaria, with workers from rapidly developing sectors, such as the IT industry, buying houses in large cities such as Sofia. Additionally, others see buying a house as a safe investment, as they expect Bulgaria's accession to the Eurozone to further increase prices. This has led to significant increases in both housing transactions and housing prices, with Eurostat's housing price index climbing to 224.5 points in Q1 of 2025.^[20] Housing prices in Bulgaria have been consistently increasing over the past years. However, there are high regional disparities in prices, with some areas having prices around €1 000 per square meter and others, like the city of Sofia, going as high as €2 500 per square meter.

The National Recovery and Sustainability Plan foresees the renovation of about 64% of a selection of residential blocks by May 2026, with the remaining residential blocks renovated by 2027.^[21] In total, this will mean the renovation of the homes of around 150 000 families, entirely through public funds. This renovation is direly needed, as pointed out by the OECD.^[22] Moreover, it should help improve the energy efficiency and heating of the buildings, which is equally needed, as evidenced by 19% of the Bulgarian population not being able to keep their homes adequately warm.^[23]

The government has also introduced measures to improve the accessibility of housing. The National Program for Accessible Housing and Personal Mobility has financed 54 projects throughout 2025, which seek to ensure an accessible environment for people with disabilities, through the installation of – for example – stair platforms and vertical lifts. In 2024 already, projects created an accessible environment for 73 people across 54 residential buildings.^[24]



Civic Space

SCORE: 50

The CIVICUS monitor continues to classify civic space in Bulgaria as "Narrowed", a status that has not changed since 2018.[25] This classification indicates that, while individuals and civil society organizations can exercise their rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression, these rights are often violated through harassment, arrests or assaults of critics of those in power, as well as through excessive force during protests and political pressure on the media.

Civil Dialogue

Bulgaria had been improving in the area of press freedom, rising from 71st place in 2023 to 59th in 2024 in the Reporters Without Borders ranking.[26] However, conditions worsened in 2025, and the country dropped to 70th place. Journalists in Bulgaria face several kinds of attack. Media owners are often powerful and close to politicians and businessmen, and they increasingly use conditional funding to limit editorial independence. Police agents used violence against journalists covering a protest during the Euro 2024 football qualifying games and also detained a journalist, even though all journalists showed their accreditation.[27] Journalists have also been the target of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). The best-known case is Rosen Bosev, who published revelations over Stoyan Mavrodiev, the former head of the Financial Supervision Commission, and Petya Kruncheva, a judge. Bosev was prosecuted and fined BGN 1,000 (€511). The European Court of Human Rights ruled this a violation of Articles 6 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights – respectively, the right to a fair trial and the right to freedom of expression.[28] The Court ordered Bulgaria to refund the fine to Bosev and to pay him €3 000 in moral damages.

A draft law introduced in September 2024 designates individuals or organizations that receive more than BGN 1 000 (€511) from abroad as "foreign agents".[29] Under the law, these individuals or organizations would be listed in a public registry and would be obliged to indicate their status as a foreign agent on communications such as emails, publications and social media posts. The status would prohibit them from activities in schools, kindergartens and other educational facilities and from engaging in so-called "political activities". This bill, if it were to pass, would worryingly jeopardize the freedom of association.



Just Transition

SCORE: 61

Access to energy and energy Poverty

Energy poverty continues to be a substantial problem in Bulgaria, the NSG reports. Around 30% of the Bulgarian population live in energy-poor households without access to energy for adequate heating, cooling, lighting and running water.[30] The Bulgarian Economic and Social Council highlighted that 20.7% of Bulgarian households were unable to heat their houses adequately in 2023, which is the highest rate among EU Member States and almost twice the EU average of 10.6%.

The Bulgarian Parliament adopted amendments to the Energy Law on 7 May 2025, postponing the liberalization of the energy market for households by another two years. The liberalization is a requirement set by the European Commission for Bulgaria to receive EU funds under the Recovery and Resilience Plan.[31] The current system allows direct compensation of household consumers by the state to protect them against inflated energy prices. However, a partial liberalization will take place for energy distributors, which will be compensated through the Electricity System Security Fund if they are confronted with high prices. The amendments also seek to enhance transparency for household consumers, by requiring energy bills to show both the market price and the amount to be paid by the household. The NSG calls for this postponement to be used to develop a comprehensive national strategy against energy poverty with clearly defined measures for household consumers.

One such measure could be the roll-out of energy communities.[32] These are part of Bulgaria's efforts to attain the targets set out by the EU's new Renewable Energy Directive, which foresees 42.5% of the EU's energy consumption coming from renewables by 2030. The Directive also sets an indicative target of at least 49% of renewables by that year in the energy used to heat and cool of buildings.

Bulgaria's Renewable Energy Sources Act, adopted in October 2023, enables private actors such as citizens, municipalities and SME's to join energy communities, in which energy users produce and consume energy locally and store and share surplus

production. The decentralization of energy production and transmission improves the quality of life in local communities and aids regional development.

These communities have been slow to develop in Bulgaria. Currently, only two are operational – in Gabrovo and Burgas – while a third is getting underway in Sofia. But the Gabrovo community is an example of the benefits the communities can provide, according to the NSG. Only two months after it was established, the participants collected the BGN 160,000 (€81,809) needed to fund the construction of a solar installation on the roof of the Regional Non-Hazardous Waste Landfill, which has been operational in providing energy for the landfill since September 2024. The energy generated is mainly used to run the landfill and reduces its energy costs by 20%. The surplus is distributed to municipal buildings and sport halls. Participants in the community have already been able to recuperate 10% of their initial investments through dividends.

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