

HATE SPEECH AND EUROSCEPTICISM

IN BULGARIA

NATIONAL REPORT

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The research is conducted in the framework of the project “Active European Citizens Against Hate Speech”. The aim of the project is to raise awareness of the new generation of European citizens about the impact of hate speech on democratic participation and European values. The project is implemented by the “Latvian Centre for Human Rights” (project coordinator), “Participation for All” (Latvia), “Estonian Human Rights Centre”, “Human Rights Monitoring Institute” (Lithuania), “Multi Kulti Collective” (Bulgaria), “Human Rights House Zagreb” (Croatia), “Peace Action Training and Research Institute of Romania - PATRIR”. The project is co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia.

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FOREWARD

The following national report presents, in detail, the findings of a research undertaken in six EU member states - Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania.

Hate speech is often used as a tool to target different vulnerable groups, especially minorities, immigrants and refugees. It causes their alienation and exclusion which leads to marginalisation. Such narratives weaken democracy and strengthen the positions of far right and radical right populists and Eurosceptics. Each national report aims to analyse the hate speech phenomenon in the six participating countries and looks at the links between Euroscepticism and hate speech. The authors of the reports map the levels of intolerance and hate speech among the general population and young people in particular. The reports analyse the policies and law that address hate speech, outline trends, targets, and the actors of hate speech. The reports map the presence of Euroscepticism in each country, its forms, public attitudes and actors, and outline parallels between Eurosceptic discourse and incitement to hatred. The reports also map different initiatives which can be seen as constructive practice in the fight against hate speech and different forms of intolerance. Each report ends with conclusions and recommendations on measures for combating hate speech.

All reports are based on desk research of existing data, reports and research about intolerance, hate speech and Euroscepticism, analysis of relevant political documents, programmes of political parties, and media sources. The desk research is complemented by semi-structured interviews with representatives of NGOs working with youth and vulnerable groups and a survey of young people aged 16-25 on their experiences of hate speech.

The research “Hate Speech and Euroscepticism” was conducted in the framework of the project “Active European Citizens Against Hate Speech”, co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia. The aim of the project is to raise awareness among the new generation of European citizens, about the impact of hate speech on democratic participation and European values. The project consortium comprises the following organisations:

- [Latvian Centre for Human Rights](#) (Project Coordinator, Latvia),
- [Network “Participation for All”](#) (Latvia),
- [Estonian Human Rights Centre](#) (Estonia)
- [Human Rights Monitoring Institute](#) (Lithuania),
- [Multi Kulti Collective](#) (Bulgaria),
- [Human Rights House Zagreb](#) (Croatia),
- [Peace Action Training and Research Institute of Romania - PATRIR](#) (Romania).

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Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has faced a rise in Euroscepticism among various groups of citizens in all member states. Even though in Bulgaria the support for the EU remains relatively high, critical voices are heard in the national political debate and some of them have even been part of the government. At the same time, hate speech has also increased on the EU level. This phenomenon is observed in Bulgaria too. However, the country has not adopted a comprehensive legal framework or policies to provide effective protection and support for the victims. The aim of this report is to present an overview of Bulgaria's current situation, trends related to Euroscepticism and hate speech, and the relation between them in the last decade (2011-2021). In addition, the study provides a number of policy and practice recommendations.

The research methodology envisioned two main stages - desk research and fieldwork. The desk research examined national legislation, policies, various surveys, studies, reports and other relevant documents. The fieldwork included two main activities - taking semi-structured interviews and developing an online survey. The research team conducted six interviews with key national experts in the field of hate speech and discrimination, as well as with young people who have personally been victims of hate speech. The online survey targeted young people between 18 and 25 years old. Eighty-two respondents took part in it in the period April - May 2022.

1. Hate speech in Bulgaria

1.1. Definition

The term “hate speech” does not have a universally agreed definition yet. It is defined in various ways by national laws and regulations. However, the Council of Europe’s Recommendation from 1997 is often used as a reference point - “the term “hate speech” shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin”.¹ In 2016, the Council of Europe’s European Commission against Racism and Intolerance with the Council of Europe (ECRI) gave another definition: “one or more particular forms of expression - namely, the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression - that is based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes “race”, colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation”.² Even if the widely used term is “hate speech” it is important to highlight that it does not only include forms of speech but also images, movies, cartoons, etc.

Hate speech can be a serious threat for human rights and equality while reinforcing tension between different social groups and threatening peaceful co-existence. In some cases, it can lead to hate crime - actions against the individuals or groups which are the target of the hatred. Hate speech is incompatible with common values of democratic society such as equality and non-discrimination. It cannot be justified as “freedom of expression” because it violates the rights of other citizens. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish hate speech from an offensive statement or comment. Offensive speech does not necessarily equal hate speech. Actually, freedom of speech also defends speech which can offend, shock or disturb. In order to distinguish hate speech from legitimate public debate, the following aspects need to be analyzed: content, context, goal of the speaker and the way the audience has

¹Recommendation No. R (97) 20 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on “Hate Speech”. Council of Europe, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680505d5b>.

² ECRI, General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech, 8 December 2015, CRI(2016)15, Strasbourg, 21 March 2016, § 9, available at <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-general-policy-recommendation-no-15-on-combating-hate-speech/16808b5b01>.

perceived the speech. Hate speech is actually a crime in numerous countries and can be legally prosecuted and punished.

In Bulgaria, there is no legal definition of the term “hate speech” yet.

1.2. Legislation

Even though Bulgarian law has no legal definition of the term “hate speech”, several key legal documents mention “a speech which incites discrimination, violence or hatred”.

The national Constitution guarantees that “everyone shall be entitled to express an opinion or to publicise it through words, written or oral, sound or image, or in any other way”.³ However, it also guarantees that “this right shall not be used to the detriment of the rights and reputation of others, or for the incitement of a forcible change of the constitutionally established order, the perpetration of a crime, or the incitement of enmity or violence against anyone”.⁴

Another important legal document countering hate speech based on “race, nationality or ethnicity” is the Criminal Code.⁵ This allows victims to ask the prosecutor's office to initiate criminal proceedings for this act. However, the bases of religion, political beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity are not included, which is a big point of advocacy of human rights organizations. A study from 2016 reveals that in the period 1991-2009, there was no judicial practice regarding this provision in the Penal code.⁶

The Law on Protection from Discrimination regulates the protection against all forms of discrimination and promotes its prevention.⁷ It also prohibits any direct or indirect discrimination based on sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, human genome, nationality, origin, religion or belief, education, opinion, political affiliation, personal or social status, disability, age, sexual orientation, marital status, property status or any other features established by law or international treaty to which Bulgaria is a party.⁸ However, it does not specifically mention hate speech and practice shows that using it can be challenging.⁹

³ Art. 39(1), Constitution of Republic of Bulgaria, available at <https://www.parliament.bg/en/const>.

⁴ Art. 39(2), Constitution of Republic of Bulgaria, available at <https://www.parliament.bg/en/const>.

⁵ Art. 162(1), Penal code, available at <https://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/1589654529>.

⁶ Center for Policy Modernization and the Media Democracy Foundation. Hate speech in Bulgaria: Risk Areas, Vulnerable Objects, available at http://www.fmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/antihate_index.pdf.

⁷ Art. 1, Law on Protection from Discrimination available at <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135472223>.

⁸ Art. 4, Law on Protection from Discrimination, available at <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2135472223>.

⁹ Expert interview, 21 April 2022

The Law on Radio and Television stipulates that media services must not incite hatred based on race, sex, religion or nationality.¹⁰ It also does not allow programmes that incite intolerance among citizens or programmes which [...] incite hatred based on race, gender, religion, or nationality.¹¹ In addition, it outlines the obligation of the providers of media services not to allow the creation or distribution of any programmes suggesting national, political, ethnic, religious and racial intolerance, glorifying or excusing cruelty or violence.¹²

1.3. Policy

There are several key national policies related to hate speech and media. The Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Media was established in 2004 as a voluntary self-regulation act which aims at guaranteeing media freedom. It has a specific article which prohibits “publishing inciting or encouraging hatred, violence or any form of discrimination”.¹³ As this document is only a code of conduct, unethical, radical and, in general, problematic media have not adopted it.

The National Council on Self-Regulation has adopted a National Ethical Standards for Advertising and Commercial Communication in Bulgaria which has a chapter on Social Responsibility. One of the articles states that “Marketing communication should not incite or condone, or tolerate any form of offence, discrimination, including that based upon race, national origin, religion, social status or political affiliation, gender, age, disability or sexual orientation, without the above list being exhaustive”.¹⁴

1.4. Propagators

The most common propagators of hate speech in Bulgaria identified in the literature and expert interviews are politicians, journalists, social media users, as well as colleagues and relatives. According to an NGO expert, many teachers also spread hate speech on social networks.¹⁵

2017 marked a significant increase in hate speech used on the highest political level. In the period 2017-2021 Bulgaria was ruled by a coalition between the right-center pro-European party GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) and

¹⁰ Art. 8(1)1, Law on Radio and Television, available at <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134447616>.

¹¹ Art. 10(5), (6), Law on Radio and Television, available at <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134447616>.

¹² Art. 17(2), Law on Radio and Television, available at <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134447616>.

¹³ Art.2.5.1. Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian media, available at <https://www.economedia.bg/news.php?guid=802558>.

¹⁴ Art 4(2), National Ethical Standards for Advertising and Commercial Communication, available at <https://www.nss-bg.org/en/kodeks>.

¹⁵ Expert interview, 26 April 2022

United Patriots (an alliance of three small extreme nationalist parties of the neo-totalitarian type - National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, MRO and Ataka which later left the coalition). Reflecting on this government, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee described the coalition in their 2018 Human Rights in Bulgaria report as follows: “for the first time since the beginning of the democratic transition, openly anti-democratic formations entered the government, using anti-Roma, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic and homophobic rhetoric”.¹⁶ The latest Freedom in the World 2020 report, published by the Freedom House, highlighted that “Members of far-right nationalist parties, including the United Patriots, engage in hate speech against Roma, ethnic Turks, Jews, Muslims, migrants, and refugees, among other groups, particularly during election periods, raising concerns about the normalization of xenophobia and discrimination”.¹⁷

Following her Visit to Bulgaria from 25 to 29 November 2019, the Commissioner for Human Rights of The Council of Europe Dunja Mijatović regretted the “lack of reaction to some very serious incidents of hate speech perpetrated by high-level politicians” and calls on “the authorities to take a strong stance against hate speech and impose sanctions when necessary”.¹⁸

However, the 2018 Open Society Institute - Sofia (OSI) study found that politicians’ share as leading propagators was reduced from 68% in 2013 to only 34% in 2018.¹⁹ Compared to 2013, the share of colleagues in hate speech has increased from 18% in 2013 to 30% in 2018.²⁰ The share of relatives remained stable around 30-35%.²¹ The authors of the study explained these trends with the reduced significance of political speech in everyday life, compared with other sources of information and opinions found on social media.²²

The online survey developed as part of this research, gathered the opinion of 82 young people (16-25 years old) in the period April - May 2022. According to the respondents, the biggest perpetrators are anonymous online profiles (81.3%), followed by public figures (62.5%), politicians (60%) and relatives and friends (56.3%).

¹⁶ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2017, available at <https://bghelsinki.org/bg/reports/human-rights-in-bulgaria-in-2017-bg>.

¹⁷ Freedom House. Freedom in the World. Bulgaria 2020, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2020>.

¹⁸ Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe Dunja Mijatović. Report Following Her Visit to Bulgaria from 25 to 29 November 2019, available at <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-bulgaria-from-25-to-29-november-2019-by-dunja-m/16809cde16>.

¹⁹ Open Society Institute - Sofia. Public attitudes to hate speech in Bulgaria in 2018, available at <https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

1.5. Targets

The target of hate speech in the last decade are Roma, Turks, the LGBT+ community, and Muslims. The hate speech studies published by the OSI between 2013 and 2018 using the same methodology show that Roma remain steadily the main target of hate speech.²³ In 2018, this share dropped to 81% off the registered peak of 92% in 2016.²⁴ In 2018 the LGBT+ community, however, was the second most affected minority group with 42%, which means its share doubled since 2016, when it was 21%.²⁵ The third target group, observed by the OSI, is the Turkish minority (26% in 2018).²⁶ The fourth target group are Muslims with 21%.²⁷ This category was introduced in the survey in 2014 following the European migrant crisis. It represents the traditional Turkish minority as well as asylum seekers, refugees and irregular migrants from the Middle East.

Another national representative study, conducted by the sociological agency Alpha Research in 2019-2020, confirmed that among the religious and ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, Roma people are the most “hated” ones with 21.6% of respondents reporting that they “hate them” compared to 3.4% hate for Muslims, 4.9% hate for Turks, 2.9% hate for Pomaks, 2% hate for Jewish people, etc.²⁸

According to the online survey launched as part of this report, the biggest victims of hate speech were the LGBT+ community (87.8%), followed by the Roma (82.9%) and black people (62.2%). Interestingly, 50.6% of the respondents indicate they have personally been a victim of hate speech and for 47.6% of them it happened because of their sexual orientation, for 35.7% because of their gender and for 26.2% because of their ethnicity/nationality. These results could be because people from these communities shared the survey in their own groups. When being asked if members of their family, classmates or colleagues have been victims of hate speech, 68.3% of the young people say yes.

²³ Open Society Institute - Sofia. Public attitudes to hate speech in Bulgaria in 2018, available at <https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Alpha Research. Majority and minorities. Attitudes to the different ones, available at <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/965-mnozinstvo-i-malcinstva.html>.

1.6. Public Attitudes

The 2020 Alpha Research national representative study confirmed a structural pattern of very high levels of hatred towards certain groups such as Turkish, Roma, Jewish people among nationalistic parties, such as the far-right party Ataka.²⁹ A more surprising finding, however, was that unacceptance towards Roma was also very high among business owners (36%) and the intelligentsia (25%).³⁰ The results showed that among the intelligentsia both the highest levels of acceptance were found (12% to Roma, compared to the average 4%) but also high radicalization.³¹ This demonstrated a polarisation in the Bulgarian intelligentsia. As a result, different public figures from both sides became highly visible public voices of different groups in society.³² In addition, the study highlighted that hate is stronger among atheists compared to religious people.³³ This paradox is explained by higher levels of respect towards other religions among religious people in general.³⁴

A positive finding of the 2018 OSI study on hate speech was that “a considerable majority of the citizens (77% in 2018) disapprove of the use of public statements expressing disapproval, hatred or aggression towards representatives of ethnic, religious or sexual minorities”. Only 14% of the respondents approve these statements. The majority of citizens (63%) also believes that the prosecutor’s office should initiate criminal proceedings against politicians and journalists who propagate aggressive nationalism as well as those who publicly express disapproval, hatred or aggression against minorities (57%)”.³⁵

One of the recommendations given to Bulgaria by the ECRI in 2015 was to “withdraw all financial and other forms of support by public bodies from political parties and other organisations that use hate speech”.³⁶ It was tested by the OSI report and in 2018, just as in 2016, the majority of the respondents agreed that public funding should be withdrawn from political parties and media which use hate speech.³⁷

Among the young respondents of the online survey developed for this report, 85.4% stated that hate speech is a big or a very big problem in Bulgaria. 41.5% of them

²⁹ Alpha Research. Majority and minorities. Attitudes to the different ones, available at <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/965-mnozinstvo-i-malcinstva.html>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ ECRI, General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech, 8 December 2015, CRI(2016)15, Strasbourg, 21 March 2016, § 9, available at <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-general-policy-recommendation-no-15-on-combating-hate-speech/16808b5b01>.

³⁷ Open Society Institute - Sofia. Public attitudes to hate speech in Bulgaria in 2018, available at <https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en>.

shared that they see hate speech every week and 28% reported seeing it a few times per month. The places where hate speech was witnessed in the last year, were the internet (92.7%), public spaces - streets, shops, public transport (86.6%) and educational institutions - schools, universities, colleges (63.4%). The lowest percentage of hate speech was found in the traditional media - TV (41.5%), printed media (26.8%), and radio (11%). However, it is not clear whether these media are better regulated and do not allow hate, or young people do not follow them. When being asked about social networks where hate speech has been observed, the young people pointed to Facebook (83.3%), followed by Instagram (50%) and TikTok (46.2%). When being asked about the underlying reasons for hate speech, the young people share that there is too much prejudice in society (84%), there are not enough reactions/sanctions for the perpetrators (64.2%) and many people do not accept the European and democratic values (48.1%).

1.7. Trends

One of the main research institutions on the general topic of hate speech in the last decade has been the OSI.³⁸ In 2013 it developed a methodology which includes a national representative study, which has already been used in 4 rounds in 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2018 to monitor the latest trends and changes in public attitudes. This series of studies explores various aspects related to hate speech such as context, incidents (including incidents of hate speech encouraging hate crimes), targets, media, users, propagators, attitudes towards criminalization of hate speech, among others. Its main findings are that hate speech is a common and permanently established phenomenon in the Bulgarian political and media landscape³⁹.

In 2018 about half of the respondents (51%) reported they had heard in the last 12 months public statements expressing disapproval, hatred or aggression towards ethnical, religious or sexual minority groups.⁴⁰ Using its own data from 2013, the report noted that these results remained almost unchanged in the last five years.⁴¹

When it comes to the victims of hate speech, the OSI studies observed a correlation between the spread of hate speech and particular public and political events which, in different periods, have affected different minorities while feeding a permanent sense of anxiety and tension in the public.⁴² The aforementioned doubling of reported hate speech against the LGBT+-community, coincided with the heated public

³⁸ Open Society Institute - Sofia. Hate speech, available at <https://osis.bg/?tag=hate-speech&lang=en>.

³⁹ Open Society Institute - Sofia. Public attitudes to hate speech in Bulgaria in 2018, available at <https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

debates about the failed ratification of the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (The Istanbul Convention⁴³).⁴⁴ Another example from the same year is the decrease of hate speech towards Turks, Muslims and foreigners. This can be attributed to the fact that the general public attention for these groups has decreased. A UNHCR national representative public opinion survey conducted in 2018, confirms that “due to the lack of an intensive refugee flow into the country, there is a transition from extreme to more moderate attitudes and a reduction of fears in 2018”.⁴⁵ Election campaigns are also a moment when hate speech intensifies, especially among political leaders from the far-right spectrum.⁴⁶ This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 - Euroscepticism.

Another trend is related to the media through which hate speech is being spread. The 2018 OSI study points out that “even though the highest share of people who have heard hate speech during the year report that they have heard it on television, the demographic group breakdown shows that access to the Internet is the main precondition for more frequent incidence of hate speech.⁴⁷ The social groups which have easier access to the Internet (young, educated, living in Sofia people), report considerably more frequent encounters with hate speech than the national average and compared to the groups that have low use of the Internet (elderly, less educated, living in villages people). In comparative terms, the importance of television as a channel for dissemination of hate speech is steadily decreasing: if in 2013 75% of those who have heard hate speech have encountered it on television, in 2018 their share fell to 56%.⁴⁸ For the same period, the share of people who say they have encountered hate speech on the Internet increased more than twice: from 18% in 2013 to 40% in 2018.⁴⁹ The importance of public places (restaurants, cafes, public transport) as places for encountering hate speech has also increased”.⁵⁰

When it comes to the ability to recognize hate speech, the trend has been clear: more educated people are more likely to notice it. According to the OSI 2018 report: “while 62% of the best-educated report having heard hate speech and 29% of them deny it, the reverse ratio can be observed among people with primary education: 29% report

⁴³ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Council of Europe, available at <https://rm.coe.int/ic-and-explanatory-report/16808d24c6>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ UNHCR Bulgaria. Public attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers (December 2018), available at <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/bulgaria-public-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-december-2018>.

⁴⁶ Interview with an NGO expert, 26 April 2022

⁴⁷ Open Society Institute - Sofia. Public attitudes to hate speech in Bulgaria in 2018, available at <https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

having heard hate speech while 62% of them deny it.⁵¹ There was a high percentage of people among the less educated respondents who said that they could not decide or preferred to leave the question unanswered. Thus, one in five respondents with primary or lower education refrained from answering the question”.⁵²

When it comes to the punishment related to hate speech, the 2018 OSI study found a worrying trend. It reports that “in 2018 the share of those who know that hate speech and violence motivated by ethnic, racial or religious hatred is a crime decreased and it was at its lowest level for the last 5 years”.⁵³ The explanation can be that “the decreased number is also a sign of the normalisation of hate speech as part of public life: in a situation in the last five years where approximately half and more of the respondents have come across instances of hate speech every year but there was not a visible response of the law enforcement authorities, a growing number of people start perceiving hate speech as acceptable and normal behaviour”.⁵⁴

At the same time the share of the respondents who stated that they would report to the police a case of public use of hate speech, decreased from 26% in 2014 to 17% in 2018.⁵⁵ The report highlights that “approval of prosecution of politicians and journalists who use publicly hate speech also diminished (the number of those who agree that there should be prosecution in such cases fell from 66% in 2013 to 57% in 2018). Similarly, the number of those who agree with conviction and prosecution of aggressive nationalism has declined by the same share - for five years there has been a 10% drop in those who agree that aggressive nationalism should be prosecuted (from 73% in 2013 to 63 % in 2018)”.⁵⁶

However, few hate speech cases reach the courts and conviction rates remain low.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Open Society Institute - Sofia. Public attitudes to hate speech in Bulgaria in 2018, available at <https://osis.bg/?p=3070&lang=en>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance. ECRI report on Bulgaria (fifth monitoring cycle), available at <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-bulgaria/16808b55d8>.

2. Euroscepticism

2.1. The Notion of Euroscepticism

According to Taggart⁵⁸ the term Euroscepticism expresses doubts and opposition to the process of European integration. Euroscepticism should be perceived as a “multidimensional phenomenon”⁵⁹ and “moving target concept”.⁶⁰ Euroscepticism can be directed at the system as a whole, its institutional design, specific policies or the perceived general direction of the EU regulatory system.

There is a nuance between soft and hard scepticism, between voice and exit. The soft form criticises the EU, but does not reject the EU. It aims at prioritising national interests, especially when they seem in clash with the EU policies. The hard version appeals for an exit.

2.2. Forms of Euroscepticism

According to Pirro and Van Kessel (2018), anti EU arguments can be categorised in four groups:

1. **Socioeconomic** Euroscepticism is related to economic and financial arguments, such as fiscal sovereignty, national debts, euro.
2. The argument of **sovereignty** is traditionally a very solid one and it is mainly used when talking about delocalisation, transfer of decision-making and centralisation.
3. The Euroscepticism associated with fear of loss of European and national **cultural** values, is triggered by the topics of immigration, multiculturalism, Christianity, Islam and security.
4. The Euroscepticism of **legitimacy** is the one pointing out arguments of democratic deficit, effectiveness, competence, corruption.⁶¹

Furthermore, Euroscepticism covers a wide range of political forms:

⁵⁸ Taggart, P., A touchstone of dissent: Euroscepticism in contemporary Western European party systems, available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1006853204101>.

⁵⁹ Vasilopoulou, S., Theory, concepts and research design in the study of Euroscepticism, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319314917_Theory_concepts_and_research_design_in_the_study_of_Euroscepticism.

⁶⁰ Nicholas S, Defining Euroscepticism: From a Broad Concept to a Field of Study, available at <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315464015-2/defining-euroscepticism-benjamin-leruth-nicholas-startin-simon-usherwood>.

⁶¹ Pirro, A., Kessel S. Populist Eurosceptic trajectories in Italy and the Netherlands during the European crises, available at <http://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718769511>.

- A form of Euroscepticism expressed by sovereigntists with a nationalist tendency: the national state must not be called into question by the European construction;
- Anti-liberals who believe that European construction is based on a neo-liberal logic, threatening to dismantle national welfare states;
- Certain political currents bring these movements together in a left-wing Euroscepticism. This corresponds to “Voice” (Hirschman): an expression of disapproval, of exasperation with Europe as it is today, but does not question EU membership. However, this synthesis of the first two forms does not challenge the European construction in principle, nor does it call for an exit from the EU. In her study “(Non)Existence of Bulgarian Party-Based Euroscepticism - Why Should We Care?”, Styczynska claims that in Bulgaria Euroscepticism takes a soft form as anti-European attitudes, which are rather marginal and do not constitute an important part of the political discourse (Styczynska, 2015).

Euroscepticism varies from nationalist arguments (European integration is a great danger to the nation state and identity) to socialist ones (fear of a decrease in solidarity and in the risk-regulation system of the EU). Despite the diversity of these protest forces, the different forms all converge towards a populist rhetoric.

2.3. The Case of Bulgaria

In July 1990, after the resignation of Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov on 10 November 1989, and the agreements reached at the National Round Table (held between January and May 1990), the Seventh Grand National Assembly was convened. One of its key results was the decision adopted in December 1991 on Bulgaria's intention to become a full member of the European Union.

French researcher Nadege Ragaru claims that in the Bulgarian context, the opening of accession talks has brought into play re-readings of national history as a perpetually unfulfilled attempt to access Western modernity. In her article “Europeanisation” she provides two examples of Bulgarian intellectual debate. For the philosopher Ivaylo Dichev, the Euro-integration process constitutes only a “new wave of modernization-imitation”. He claims that the process of Europeanisation after 1990 is a third stage of this wave when Bulgarian discourse replaced “developed” and “civilised” countries with “normal countries”.⁶² For the Bulgarian culturologist Aleksandar Kyosev Bulgaria is a country that succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the West without having been invaded and turned into a colony in reality.

⁶² Dichev, I. Evropa kato legitimacija in *Sociologičeski pregled*, 1-2, 2000, available at <http://www.geocities.com/ivayloditchev2001/SOCPROBLEuropa.doc>.

To describe this, Kyosev invented the metaphorical concept of self-colonising countries.⁶³ Based on these intellectual discussions Ragaru states that in the pre-adhesion period Bulgarian intellectual elite proposed a representation of Bulgarian history that combines a thirst for modernity and imitation of foreign models as well as a representation of the European Union as a new avatar of sought protectors, since the end of the 19th century, at the price of renouncing any authentic creativity.⁶⁴ Ragaru's analysis describes the deep-founded Europhilia of the Bulgarian people inclining towards idealisation of the European model and the eternal aspiration to reach it. Extreme Europhilia hides certain dangers because it constantly suppresses the understanding that Bulgarian's political heritage and characteristics are not fully compatible with the European model of government. The through time acquired awareness among Bulgarians of the impossibility to reach the European standard of living, creates fatigue and can be transformed into a rejection of the European model.

Bulgarian political scientist Anna Krasteva distinguishes two forms of scepticism in the pre-adhesion period related to two opposite attitudes towards Europe. The first one projects Europe as the ideal model we compare ourselves to and which seems unachievable. The second one rejects Europe based on the asymmetry between gains and losses and the level of Europeanness among member states. Although the voices of the Eurosceptics were few at that time some of them were constructed over the lack of belief in Bulgaria's capacity to be part of the civilised world because of the high level of corruption, criminality rates, injustice and the very low standard of living.⁶⁵

However, according to the Alpha Research study, conducted in 2005, from its beginning the process of European integration in Bulgaria has been supported by very high levels of public support. The most enthusiastic supporters of Bulgaria's membership in the EU were people with higher social status, who expected that EU accession would bring greater opportunities for their own biographical perspectives. In general the group of euro enthusiasts consisted of highly educated, younger and middle-aged groups, representatives of the liberal professions, students and people with higher-than-average incomes.⁶⁶ The understanding shared by the majority of Bulgarians that accession to the EU is important in view of continuing the unachieved political reform process in a number of areas, is one of the possible hypotheses for maintaining high levels of approval for European integration. In this sense, Bulgaria finds itself in a very different social context from the ten newly acceded countries like the Czech Republic where, at the time of membership, reforms had already been

⁶³ Kiossev, A. The Self-Colonizing Cultures, in: *Bălgarija avangarda*, Sofia: Salon Verlag, 1998 ; Rumen Daskalov, *Между Изтока и Запада : български културни дилеми*, Sofia : Lik, 1998

⁶⁴ Ragaru, N., *La rivière et les petits cailloux. Elargissement européen et européanisation en Europe centrale et orientale*, 2008

⁶⁵ Krasteva, A. The New Europeans, available at <https://bg.mondediplo.com/article233.html>.

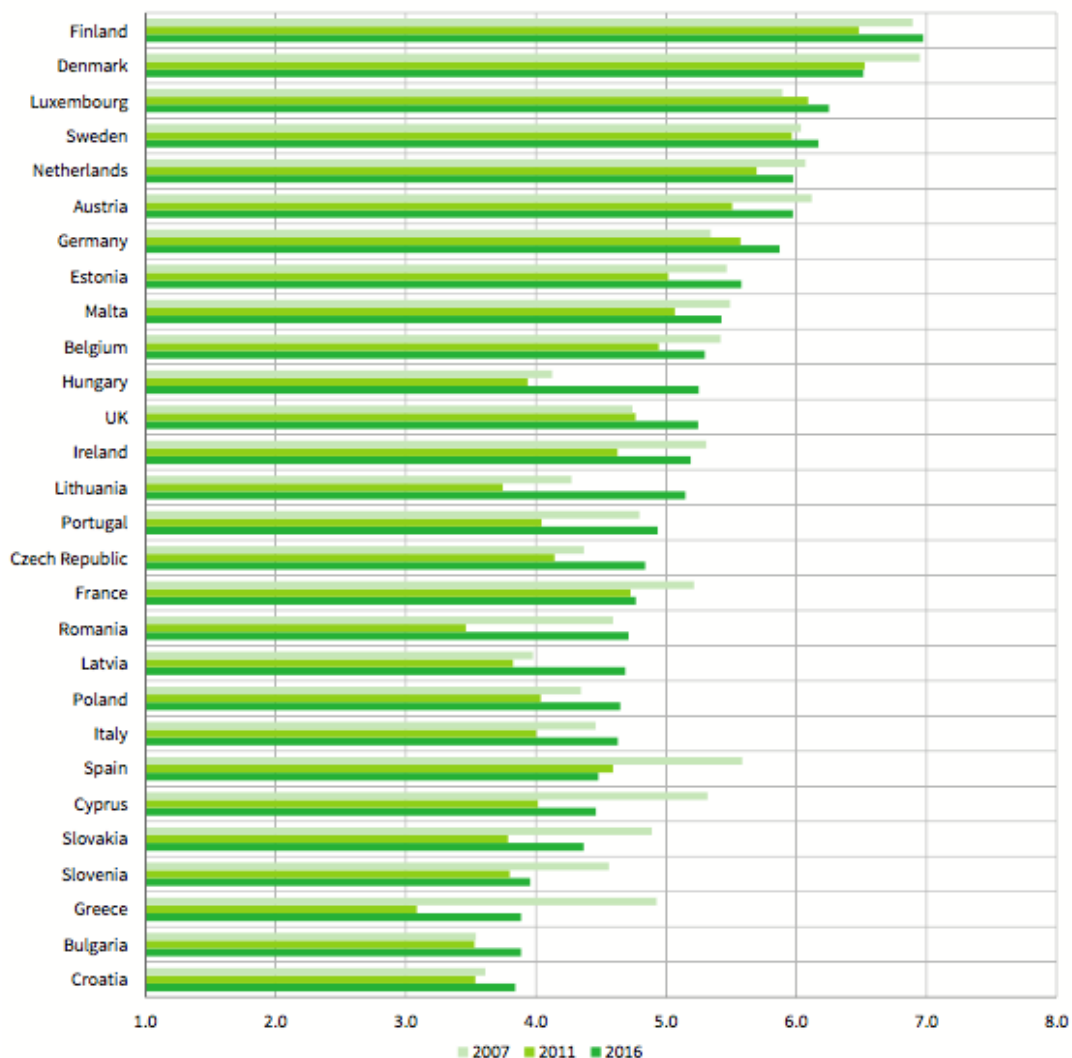
⁶⁶ Alpha Research, 2005, Public opinion

completed. Therefore, direct analogies related to Euroscepticism after accession cannot be made.

2.4. Between Euro Optimism and National Scepticism

The positive attitude towards the EU can also be explained by the fact that Bulgarians usually express a higher display of distrust toward national institutions and dissatisfaction with the political system. This trend is common for Eastern European countries, as it can be seen in other Eastern or Central European countries like Hungary and Poland. The comparative graph below shows that since 2007 Bulgaria consistently marks low levels of trust compared with other European countries.⁶⁷

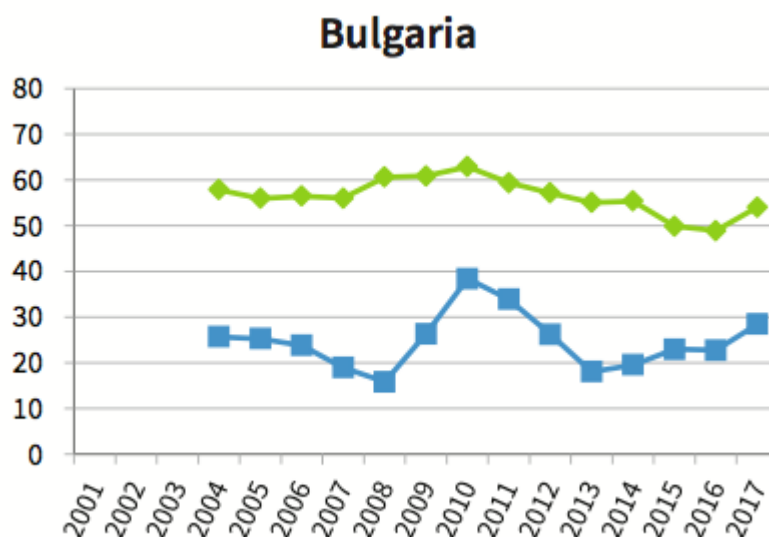
Figure 3: Trust in national institutions, 2007, 2011 and 2016, by country (%)



⁶⁷ Eurofound, Societal change and trust in institutions, available at <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/untitled-191684-ea.pdf>.

Prof. Marin Paunov analyses in his newest research “Bulgarian (dist)trust: values and social trust of Bulgarians in a European context” Bulgarian national specificities and attitudes. The country usually occupies high places in rankings of countries that demonstrate feelings of distrust in national public institutions. Unsurprisingly, Bulgaria is also consistently ranked first in Europe on the “perception of corruption” index.⁶⁸ This indicator does not measure objective levels of corruption, but the population’s perception of its presence. In this sense the EU was seen by many Bulgarians as the only possible stimulator of domestic changes.

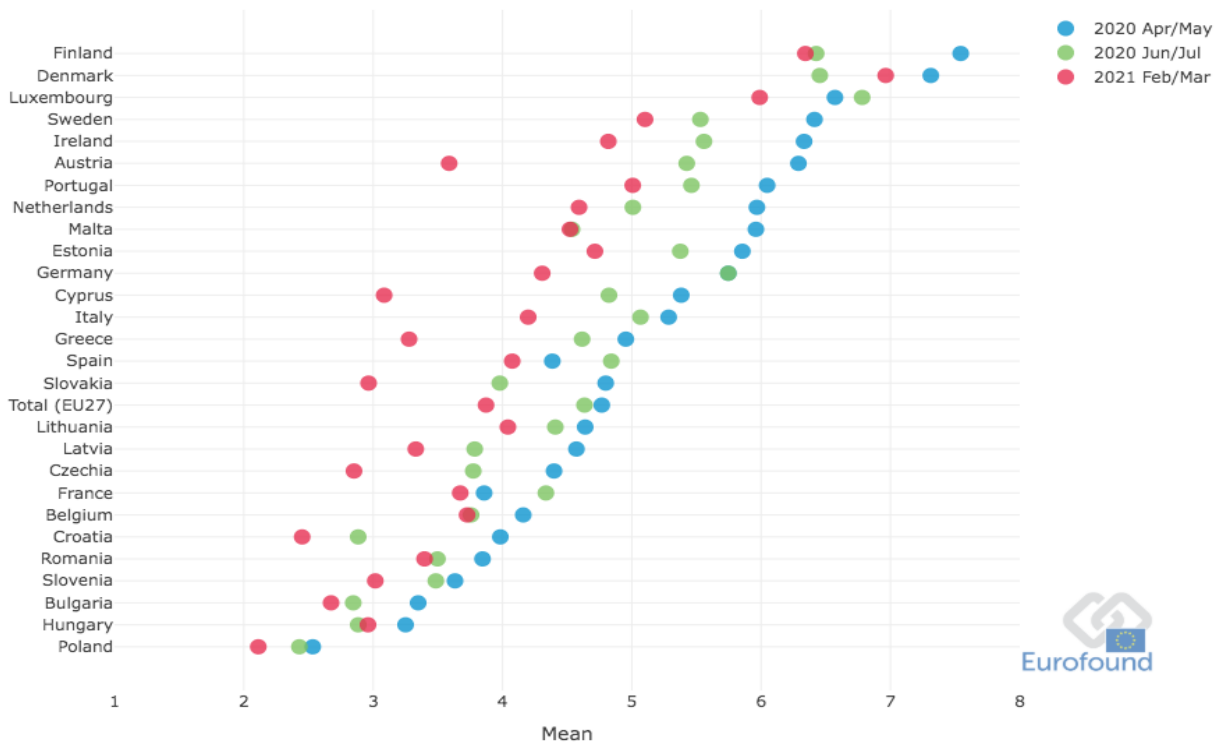
To confirm the above-stated divergence between trust in national institutions and trust in European institutions, the next graph indicates long-term trends and dynamics of trust in Bulgaria towards national and towards European institutions.⁶⁹ The blue line shows trust in national institutions while the green line measures trust in the EU. The level of trust towards EU institutions is significantly higher than the level of trust Bulgarians have in their own national institutions.



The graph below shows the rate of trust in national institutions in 2021. It should be noted that Bulgaria ranks third after Poland and Ukraine on the scale of countries least trustful in their own national institutions.

⁶⁸ Corruption Perception Index 2021, Transparency International, available at <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>.

⁶⁹ Eurofound, Societal change and trust in institutions, available at <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/untitled-191684-ea.pdf>.



In Bulgaria this result can be explained by the fact that Bulgarian people had to face three big crises in the last two years: the political, the health crisis and the economic one. In Bulgaria the bad management of the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting economic concerns, remained an important issue. The crisis impacted citizen's level of optimism concerning their personal financial situation. For instance, in April 2021 at least half of the Bulgarians participating in the Eurofound survey felt their financial situation would get worse. The country ranks as the most pessimistic one about its future among all EU member states.⁷⁰

In fact, Bulgaria was heavily hit by COVID-19 and had the EU's lowest vaccination rate⁷¹ and highest per capita death rate in the EU.⁷² The national health system was on the edge of collapsing, especially during the second wave of the coronavirus.

In general, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the following sanitary crisis played a crucial role in levels of Euroscepticism. Eurofound's e-survey "Living, working and COVID-19" found that some EU member states saw a drop in trust in the EU. However, trust in EU institutions remained higher than trust in national governments. For the short period between April 2020 and March 2021, marked by

⁷⁰ Eurofound (2020), Living, working and COVID-19, COVID-19 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/living-working-and-covid-19>.

⁷¹ Data on COVID-19 vaccination in the EU/EEA, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, available at <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/data-covid-19-vaccination-eu-eea>.

⁷² Incidence of coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths in Europe, Statista, available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1111779/coronavirus-death-rate-europe-by-country/>.

the arrival of COVID-19, public trust in Bulgaria towards the EU declined by 0.6 points on a scale of 1 to 10.⁷³ Reduced trust was also linked to striking increases in expectations of EU power to minimise the effects of the pandemic. In Bulgaria, the level of expectations had risen by 17%. In other words, 63% was the share of Bulgarians who were hopeful of receiving support to deal with the negative effects of the pandemic from other EU countries or institutions.⁷⁴

As stated above, trust in the EU has increased in general. However, when asked about the management of the COVID-19 crisis, Europeans share quite critical views on how the pandemic was handled in Europe. For instance, the Pew Research Center survey “People in Advanced Economies Say Their Society Is More Divided Than Before Pandemic” shows that 62% of Europeans are critical towards the EU because of the pandemic.⁷⁵ In 2020, 34% of Europeans shared these attitudes. Therefore, the new result marks almost a double rise of the argument that EU efforts have not gone far enough. Interestingly, the question of vaccination and vaccine choice has become another parameter of trust. The confidence expressed in certain vaccines, is indicative of the level of trust in the producing country when it comes to health. For instance, according to a survey released in June 2021 67% of Italians are confident in receiving a US-produced vaccine, while this share is only 34% in Bulgaria. About half of respondents in Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria say they do not mind receiving Russian vaccines. Overall, not many Europeans express confidence in receiving Chinese or Indian vaccines.⁷⁶

On top of the critical health care situation, Bulgaria faced an ongoing unstable political context. Since the summer of 2020 massive anti-government and anti-general prosecutor protests have erupted, which resulted in a political crisis. Due to sharp disagreements, the political parties elected in parliamentary elections in April 2021 were unable to form a government. New parliamentary elections followed in July 2021, but again no government was formed. Therefore, Bulgarians had to vote again for political parties in November 2021. This time parliamentary elections coincided with the presidential election.

⁷³ Incidence of coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths in Europe, Statista, available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1111779/coronavirus-death-rate-europe-by-country/>.

⁷⁴ Dennison, S., Puglierin, J. Crisis of Confidence. How Europeans see their place in the world?, June 2021, available at <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Crisis-of-confidence-How-Europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Pew Research Center, People in Advanced Economies Say Their Society Is More Divided Than Before Pandemic, 2021, available at https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/06/PG_2021.06.23_Global-COVID_FINAL.pdf.

⁷⁶ Dennison, S., Puglierin, J. Crisis of Confidence. How Europeans see their place in the world?, June 2021, available at <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Crisis-of-confidence-How-Europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world.pdf>.

Research shows that Euroscepticism tends to grow with the effect of the crisis. Euroscepticism not only grows in countries that are experiencing the full impact of the economic crisis, but also in countries where the economic situation is good.⁷⁷ Despite the high level of tension due to the crisis, the EU approval rate in Bulgaria is among the highest in the whole region.

When it comes to young people, a nationally representative study published by the Center for Study of Democracy in 2019 explores how and which far-right messages reach young people in Bulgaria.⁷⁸ 31.9% of the Bulgarian youth between 14 and 19 support the statement “NATO and EU seriously undermine the Bulgarian national interest” which points to significant Euroscepticism in the new generation.⁷⁹

2.5. Political Actors of Euroscepticism in Bulgaria

Support for the “radical” Eurosceptic parties is traditionally low and major Eurosceptic movements or actions have not been observed in Bulgaria. Eight political parties with nationalist and Eurosceptic characteristics ran in the last parliamentary election.⁸⁰ Altogether, 180,323 people voted for these parties and Vazhrazhdane (Revival) gained one third of this vote. Supporters of nationalist or Eurosceptic parties made up 6.78% of the electorate.⁸¹ This result renders them marginal political forces. Euroscepticism in Bulgaria is the sphere of influence of populist parties, especially the populist radical right, which perceives the EU as a threat to the national economy and sovereignty. The most important political actors creating the rise of Euroscepticism are highlighted below.

- **ATAKA**

For a long time, almost two decades, Ataka (Attack) was the main Eurosceptic political party in Bulgaria. Currently, it could be characterised as politically dead with only 0.45 % of the vote gathered in the last parliamentary elections in November 2021. However, it is worth pointing out main aspects of its genesis and political existence. Ataka was created in 2005 and shortly after this it entered the parliament

⁷⁷ Wasowicz-Dunin, R. Understanding populism: What role do crises play in the growth of Euroscepticism?, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/06/12/understanding-populism-what-role-do-crises-play-in-the-growth-of-euroscepticism/>.

⁷⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy. How the far-right messages on the internet reach and affect Bulgarian youth, available at https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/events_library/files/2020_07/Propaganda_-_Article_V4_.pdf.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Including Petar Nazimov - leader of an informal group called Civil groups for protection of the border, the women and the faith

⁸¹ Elections for President and Vice President and Members of Parliament, 14 November 2021, Central Election Commission, available at <https://results.cik.bg/pvrns2021/tur1/rezultati/index.html>.

with 21 seats. The party developed a clearly radical political narrative, focussed on national sovereignty, antimigration sentiments, xenophobic attitudes, extreme “otherization” of Roma and the Turkish minority, economic and ethnic nationalism, welfare chauvinism, monoculturalism and a rejection of multicultural diversity.

Ataka used to mobilise its supporters via a TV channel which still exists, but lost its popularity. Ataka pictured itself as an outsider on the Bulgarian political scene and this strategy proved to be successful, as it gained three seats in the European Parliament in 2007.⁸² In 2009, Ataka sent two representatives to the European Parliament. In 2016, Ataka formed together with two other nationalist movements - National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria and the IMRO, the coalition United Patriots which gained 573,016 votes and came in third at the parliamentary elections. As a result of numerous scandals and the weakened position of the coalition, in 2019 the leader of Ataka Volen Siderov was expelled. It is hard to imagine that Ataka will return to political life as it lost its influence and new nationalist actors are stronger. However, the case of ATAKA offers explanations of how nationalism, and more concretely its ethnic version, is antagonistic to European integration and unification and its capacity to consolidate very rapidly anti-systemic sentiment in Bulgaria.⁸³

- **United Patriots**

The above-mentioned nationalistic coalition United Patriots or Patriotic Front united radical right parties in the parliament between 2016 and 2019. In the last elections in November 2021 the different partners of the coalition ran independently, but gained very low votes which hindered them from entering the parliament. Former minister of defence in GERB's government and leader of the IMRO Krasimir Karakachanov used to enjoy great popularity in the country as a historian and specialist on the Macedonian issue. His participation in the previously discredited government and the revelation of numerous scandals by the caretaker government, closed the door for him to any possible future political career. Karakachanov's discourse was articulated around the defence of traditional family values, which he felt were threatened by overly liberal policies prevalent in the western world. Apart from the scandals of corruption, vote-buying and trading with Bulgarian passports IMRO was involved in, Karakachanov's qualifications of protesters in 2020 as “Sorosoid NGOs” did not contribute to raising his political image.

- **Vazrazhdane**

⁸² In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU and this is why they had separate elections for the EU parliament, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/presse/pr_fiche/2007/EN/03A-DV-PRESSE_TMN\(2007\)12-17\(15631\)_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/presse/pr_fiche/2007/EN/03A-DV-PRESSE_TMN(2007)12-17(15631)_EN.pdf).

⁸³ Sygkelos, Y. Nationalism versus European Integration: The Case of Ataka, available at https://politicalscience.ceu.edu/sites/politicalscience.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1095/yannis.sygkelos_0.pdf.

In the discussion on Euroscepticism, special attention must be given to a new actor on the Bulgarian political stage, namely the political party Vazrazhdane (Revival). The political group was founded in 2014 by former supporters of the conservative and patriotic party IMRO. Vazrazhdane is positioned as a rather radical nationalist party. It gained popularity in the anti-government protests in 2020. Since then, the party mobilised its supporters while taking to the streets and organising many protests demanding the resignation of the general prosecutor Ivan Geshev and rallying against COVID-19 restrictions.

The fact that the far-right parties in Bulgaria have been participating in the government during the peaks of the pandemic, hindered them from taking clearly oppositional stances before elections. In this context, Vazrazhdane was the only far-right party that had the chance to instrumentalise to a great extent the topic of COVID-19 criticising economic and social measures taken by the government in order to extract electoral dividends. A considerable number of people voted for Vazrazhdane in the last parliamentary elections - 127,568 (4.86%).⁸⁴

Since November 2021, Vazrazhdane is the new political actor that gathers all far right and nationalist attitudes among Bulgarians. As the only consolidator of all nationalistic sentiments, the party has the capacity to grow and expand its network of sympathizers.

Media reported that the Vazrazhdane party has been financed by Russia and serves the Russian interest.⁸⁵ The party leader Kostadin Kostadinov called for a referendum on the question whether Bulgaria should leave NATO and the EU.⁸⁶ He also called for a referendum to reverse the decision of Bulgaria to adopt the euro as the currency.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Elections for President and Vice President and Members of Parliament, 14 November 2021, Central Election Commission, available at <https://results.cik.bg/pvrns2021/tur1/rezultati/index.html>.

⁸⁵ From Kopeikin to Rublev - the path of the political "homunculus", Capital.bg, available at https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2022/06/24/4360907_ot_kopeikin_do_rublyov_putiat_na_politicheskiiat/, "Revival" on Putin's model, Capital.bg, available at https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/redakcioni_komentari/2022/06/24/4360916_vuzrajidane_po_moda_na_putin/, They deny COVID-19 and believe that everything is orchestrated by the US. How "Vazrazhdane" reached the parliament, Free Europe, available at <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31564645.html>.

⁸⁶ Interview with Kostadin Kostadinov, Studio Epicenter, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHm5XBYuhUo>.

⁸⁷ The presidential candidate of the "Vazrazhdane" party Kostadin Kostadinov insists on holding a national referendum on whether to introduce the euro in Bulgaria, Bulgarian National TV, available at <https://bnt.bg/news/kandidatat-za-prezident-na-partiya-vazrazhdane-kostadin-kostadinov-nastoyava-da-se-provede-nacionalen-referendum-dali-da-se-v306618-299898news.html>.

2.6. From Eurosceptic Rhetoric to Actions in Reality

The examples below address cases of discrimination and injustice, based on criticism towards EU narratives. They show how Eurosceptic attitudes of political leaders articulated around a few key topics and covered by the media, generate into common actions or support of violent antidemocratic measures.

- **The Eurosceptic reading of migration and asylum seekers as existential threat to cultural values and identity.**

Interestingly, only Bulgaria and Hungary identify European projects the most with its role of “defender of European traditions and values”.⁸⁸ This points to the strong attachment among Bulgarians to traditional and conservative values. Hence, anti-migration rhetoric picturing refugees as threats to European and national culture, turns out to be a successful political move in Bulgaria. A few examples below demonstrate this.

Bulgaria has not been faced with a strong migration pressure compared to other countries in Western Europe. However, the topic of migration was instrumentalized by the previous government of GERB and the previous prime minister Boyko Borissov who often represented himself as the one who was saving the nation from migrants and refugee flows.⁸⁹ In this sense, the GERB government constructed a bigger crisis in people’s minds through mechanisms of fear mongering in order to stimulate policies of emergency. Borissov defended the position that the EU should immediately close its borders to refugees because neither the Dublin agreement nor the quota distribution system work.⁹⁰

Evidence of Borissov’s populist manner of dealing with the migration crisis is his support for Bulgaria’s notorious “vigilante migrants’ hunter”.⁹¹ This nickname was given to a figure named Dinko Valev. Together with his group, which included Petar Nazimov, Dinko, as the media called him, chased down immigrants on the border in a violent and illegal way. He justified his actions by stating that “these are disgusting and bad people and they should stay where they are”.⁹² His acts of violence seemed

⁸⁸ Dennison, S., Puglierin, J. Crisis of Confidence. How Europeans see their place in the world?, available at <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Crisis-of-confidence-How-Europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world.pdf>.

⁸⁹ I saved the Bulgarians from migration, it remains to save them from the coronavirus, Boyko Borisov speech, available at <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/borisov-spasih-bylgarite-ot-migraciata-ostava-da-gi-spasia-i-ot-koronavirusa-videosnimki-2221430>.

⁹⁰ Borisov: Borisov: The EU should close its borders to refugees, Bulgarian National Radio, available at <https://bnr.bg/hrisobotev/post/100646842/boiko-borisov-es-trabva-da-zatvori-granicite-si-za-bejanci>.

⁹¹ Vigilante Keeps Hunting Migrants In Bulgaria And The Authorities Seem To Be Turning A Blind Eye, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-migrant-hunter-impunity/31601663.html>.

⁹² Bulgaria's vigilante migrant 'hunter', BBC, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35919068>.

to be supported by the government. The prime minister Borissov shared with journalists that he had personally instructed the Border Police Chief to be aware of these “patrols” and even called Dinko’s group himself to thank them for helping state authorities.⁹³ Because of these statements of the prime minister, in which he supported the voluntary units for hunting refugees, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee sent a signal to the general prosecutor.⁹⁴ Having the support of the government, the image of Dinko was widely spread by the media. Thus, the media and the government legitimised this vigilante group and transformed their leader into a media star.

- **Protests against the Eurozone as a demonstration of Socioeconomic Euroscepticism**

As described above, Euroscepticism is related to economic and financial arguments such as fiscal sovereignty and the euro. This Euroscepticism is quite present in Bulgaria nowadays with the launch of negotiations regarding Bulgaria’s membership of the eurozone. In July 2020, Bulgaria entered ERM II and since then it has been in the eurozone’s “waiting room”.

Vazrazhdane organised a protest against the introduction of the euro. The argument is that by joining the eurozone, the country will lose its last bit of national sovereignty and the 140-year history of one of the oldest national currencies on the continent will be erased. Actions against the eurozone based on anti-European rhetoric will probably intensify as the processes of joining the eurozone develop.

- **The Euroscepticism and the defence of national sovereignty**

Focal for Vazrazhdane is the anti-imperialistic narrative under the thesis that globalisation processes brought more negative than positive results for Bulgaria. The official programme of Vazrazhdane states that the role of Bulgaria is reduced to “a geopolitical periphery of the European globalisation project called the European Union.”⁹⁵ One can see here the defence of national territorial identity based on the fear of being “absorbed” by a supranational institution.

⁹³ Borisov thanked the possess for refugees, any help was welcome, Offnews, available at https://m.offnews.bg/news/Obshtestvo_4/Borisov-blagodari-na-hajkite-za-bezhantci-vsiaka-pomosht-bila-dobre-d_627393.html.

⁹⁴ BHC submitted a report to the prosecutor’s office in connection with the person Dinko Valev, organising squads to catch “illegal immigrants”, Press release, available at <https://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/news/20160307-signal-dinko-valev/>.

⁹⁵ Vazrazhdane, who we are and what we want, available at https://vazrazhdane.bg/img/myPlatforma_Vazrazhdane.pdf.

This anti-globalisation approach suggests that Bulgaria can become a strong and independent nation by freeing itself from European oppression. In addition, Vazrazhdane defends an anti-NATO position criticising membership of the alliance as a “lack of clear ideas and goals, except the reorientation from “pro-Soviet” to “pro-Atlantic” “allegiance” that has led to chaos, low efficiency, and futility”.⁹⁶ Pro-Russian attitudes are very present in Vazrazhdane’s political narrative. Demographically, the age group which demonstrates most sympathy for anti-Euro-Atlantic parties like Vazrazhdane, is the 50-59 years old group. In addition, according to 15.5% in this group, the EU should be dissolved because member states would be better off without it. This opinion is shared by 8.2% of 60-69-year-old Bulgarians and 6.9% of the 40-49-year-olds.⁹⁷

Unification with North Macedonia, which would make “Bulgaria the largest and most powerful country in Southeast Europe” is another point in the political agenda of Vazrazhdane.⁹⁸

It should be noted that Vazrazhdane pays special attention to the question of securing national borders and resisting “the attempts of the Brussels administration to introduce pointless regulations”.⁹⁹ Far right parties like Vazrazhdane project the EU as a useless, technocratic union that is incapable of taking decisive action and solving current problems.

2.7. EU optimism or EU indifference?

Bulgarian public opinion is traditionally one of the most pro-European among the member states. However, events such as elections indicate that the European question is not so salient for the Bulgarian society and political elite.

When discussing Euro optimism, one should pay attention to levels of interest and knowledge about the EU and its functioning. In line with other Post-Soviet nations, Bulgaria does not demonstrate high interest in European elections. For instance, in 2014 the turnout was only 35.84%, which was below the already low average turnout rate of all EU countries - 42,61%.¹⁰⁰ For the 2019 EU elections, Bulgaria’s turnover

⁹⁶ Vazrazhdane, who we are and what we want, available at https://vazrazhdane.bg/img/myPlatforma_Vazrazhdane.pdf.

⁹⁷ Dennison, S., Puglierin, J. Crisis of Confidence. How Europeans see their place in the world?, June 2021, available at <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Crisis-of-confidence-How-Europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Vazrazhdane, who we are and what we want, available at https://vazrazhdane.bg/img/myPlatforma_Vazrazhdane.pdf.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Results of the 2014 European elections, Bulgaria, European Parliament, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-bg-2014.html>.

was among the lowest in the EU with 32.64% against an EU-average of 50.66 %.¹⁰¹ The general lack of interest toward EU elections and therefore EU political future was accompanied by a lack of discussion on current EU issues and politics. As claimed by Anthony Georgieff,¹⁰² the majority of parties running for a place in the European parliament had serious positions on the important issues Europe was facing. The general deficit of public involvement in the political debate may be determined by the assumption that European issues are not of great importance for the Bulgarian public.¹⁰³ However, a positive result of the 2019 European Parliament elections in Bulgaria, is the fact that the nation's far-right and anti-European rhetoric was not supported and such candidates were not elected.

2.8. The Victory of Bulgarian Euro-optimism

Since 2007, the image of the Bulgarian population has changed and new generations appeared. Bulgarians were given free opportunities to travel, study and work in the EU and became for the first time in Bulgarian history citizens of the world. Bulgarian people became one of the most mobile in Europe. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, data showed that around 900,000 Bulgarians lived in other EU countries.¹⁰⁴ In 2018 about 13.3% of Bulgarians in working age (20-64 years) were mobile.¹⁰⁵ The openness of Bulgaria to Europe reinforced the fascination about the European model and the eternal aspiration to incarnate Europe in Bulgaria.

During the anti-corruption protests in the summer of 2020,¹⁰⁶ many young Bulgarians went down the streets to express loudly that they were running out of patience with the corrupt political elite in the country. One of the protesters' slogans "EU, are you blind?" became famous as it signalled the seriousness of the issue, which was bigger than an ordinary domestic political crisis. Bulgarians had the feeling that the EU ignored the fight against widespread corruption in the poorest EU country. Moreover, one of the main sources of public resentment was the lack of transparency and accountability in the way EU funds are spent. These aspects of the protests were to some extent indicative of the unachieved national self-confidence and the lack of

¹⁰¹ 2019 European election results, European Parliament, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>.

¹⁰² Georgieff, A, Dark Cloud Tiny Silver Lining, Vagabond, Issue 92, available at <https://vagabond.bg/dark-cloud-tiny-silver-lining-1275>.

¹⁰³ Styczynska, N. (Non)Existence of Bulgarian Party-Based Euroscepticism - Why Should We Care?, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324063147_NonExistence_of_Bulgarian_Party-Based_Euroscepticism_-_Why_Should_We_Care.

¹⁰⁴ Mobility within EU increased in 2019, labour mobility report shows, European Commission, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=457&newsId=9877&furtherNews=yes>.

¹⁰⁵ Capital, How many Bulgarians live in Europe?, 2019, available at https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2019/08/09/3949227_kolko_bulgari_jiveiat_v_evropa/.

¹⁰⁶ 2020-2021 Bulgarian protests, Wikipedia, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020%E2%80%932021_Bulgarian_protests.

belief in the people's combined strength when it comes to solving domestic political problems.

The thirst for democracy and justice became apparent in the parliamentary elections of November 2021. The new political force Prodalzhavame promyanata (We Continue the Change) won the election on a strong pro-European and anti-corruption campaign. The party stands for anchoring Bulgaria in the EU and NATO and democratic renewal in Bulgaria. The party is led by the so-called “Harvard boys” Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev, who are perceived as educated entrepreneurs.¹⁰⁷ As minister of economy and minister of finance they were part of the previous caretaker government appointed by president Rumen Radev.

Bulgarians are rather pro-European, and the level of trust towards the EU institutions is much higher than towards the national ones. The country remains a place where Euro-positivism is in the air. The most recent surveys confirm that more than 60% of Bulgarians say that membership in the EU is something good for the country. Even more so, the majority of Bulgarians aspire for further European integration and want more cooperation with and in European institutions as Europe is still perceived as a guarantor of stability and democracy.¹⁰⁸ It is highly unlikely that this will change in the future. Moreover, Bulgaria is among the states which share the most optimistic hopes about the future of the EU.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Harvard Boys’ Take On EU Graft Spot Bulgaria in Cabinet Try, Bloomberg, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-26/-harvard-boys-take-on-eu-trouble-spot-bulgaria-in-cabinet-push>.

¹⁰⁸ Dennison, S., Puglierin, J. Crisis of Confidence. How Europeans see their place in the world?, June 2021, available at <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Crisis-of-confidence-How-Europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world.pdf>.

3. Civic Activism Countering Hate Speech and Enhancing European Values

3.1 Allies for countering hate speech

The last decade has seen significant efforts to raise awareness, limit and punish hate speech on European, national and local level through various campaigns, initiatives, advocacy activities, studies, etc. A multi-stakeholder approach is required in order to strengthen the efforts and achieve better results.

The most important EU-level initiative is the “Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online”, initiated by the European Commission in 2016.¹⁰⁹ In the period 2016-2021, all big IT/social media joined the Commission’s effort to prevent and counter the spread of illegal hate speech online. These are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Microsoft, Instagram, Google+, Dailymotion, Snapchat, Jeuxvideo.com, LinkedIn, TikTok, among others. With this, all these companies agreed to:

- have rules and community standards that prohibit hate speech and put in place systems and teams to review content that is reported to violate these standards;
- review the majority of the content flagged within 24 hours and remove or disable access to hate speech content, if necessary;
- provide regular training to their staff;
- engage in partnerships and training activities with civil society in order to enlarge their network of trusted reporters;
- work with “trusted flaggers” on promoting independent counter-narratives and educational programmes;
- designate national contact points for receiving notices, in particular by national authorities;
- promote transparency towards users as well as to the general public.

The Code and its implementation have a crucial importance since the biggest share of hate speech is spread online on social media. The 2019 European Commission’s Assessment report informs that the Code already covers 96% of the EU market share of online platforms that may be affected by hateful content.¹¹⁰ These are also the

¹⁰⁹ The EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en.

¹¹⁰ European Commission. Information note - Progress on combating hate speech online through the EU Code of conduct 2016-2019, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/assessment_of_the_code_of_conduct_on_hate_speech_on_line_-_state_of_play_0.pdf.

most popular online platforms in Bulgaria, which means that Bulgarian users are also significantly protected from hate speech posts and comments.

There have also been some national-level initiatives aimed at limiting hate speech in Bulgaria. In 2015, an informal coalition of about 10 media associations, councils and unions, including Association of Bulgarian Radio and Television Operators, Council for Electronic Media, Union of Bulgarian Journalists, Association of European Journalists, among others, signed the “Agreement on non-use of hate and discriminatory speech” in the run-up to and during the 2015 official local election campaign.¹¹¹ This was a positive effort. However, the media outlets which are notorious for their hate speech, and often fake news content, did not sign it and continued to operate as usual.

In 2018, “A Memorandum Together for Bulgaria. Together for Europe” was signed by the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria Shalom and the LGBT+ NGO GLAS Bulgaria together with 10 other NGOs as their commitment against hate speech and discrimination on ethnic, religious, religious, racial, national or other grounds in Bulgarian society.¹¹² It was followed by a procession of tolerance and a memorial ceremony on the occasion of the 76th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews organised by Sofia Municipality and the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria Shalom.¹¹³

In 2019, “A Manifest: Together Against Hate Speech”, which has mostly an awareness-raising and declarative nature, was launched by the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria Shalom and supported by many politicians, religious leaders, business leaders, artists, journalists, university professors and influencers. They committed to act decisively and in a timely manner when and where hate speech is used, in a public or political context, in a personal conversation, on social networks, at the stadium, on the walls of buildings or on the streets of the country, whether in writing or orally.¹¹⁴ These public figures published short supportive video messages online and were able to reach a very diverse audience and raise awareness about the problem.

¹¹¹ Council of Electronic Media. Agreement on non-use of hate and discriminatory speech, available at <https://www.cem.bg/actbg/5140>.

¹¹² Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. BHC signed a memorandum of cooperation with the organization of Jews in Bulgaria “Shalom”, available at <https://bghelsinki.org/bg/news/bhk-podpisa-memorandum-za-sytrudnichestvo-s-organizacijata-na-evreite-v-bylgarija-shalom>.

¹¹³ Free Europe, A procession of tolerance marked the anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews, available at <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/29813194.html>.

¹¹⁴ A Manifest: Together Against Hate Speech, available at <https://www.facebook.com/NoHateSpeechManifesto/>.

3.2. Local Authorities

Compared to the national government, local authorities traditionally are closer to the citizens. This is why they have the power to communicate directly with them and address certain questions. The Mayor of Sofia Yordanka Fandakova, who has been mayor since 2009 up until the present moment (2022), has been engaged on the topic of hate speech through supportive declarations and grass-root activities.

In 2018, Sofia Municipality launched the campaign Sofia - City of Tolerance and Wisdom together with the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria Shalom and Sofia Development Association.¹¹⁵ It included various activities on education, sport, etc. One of the campaigns was **Let Us Clean the Hatred** organised with the Embassy of Israel in Bulgaria and Sofia Municipality which aimed to clean swastikas from the streets in Sofia.¹¹⁶

3.3. Innovative Practices

Civil society organisations have been active in various ways in order to prevent and counter hate speech, as well as to raise awareness about the phenomenon and show the negative social effects it can have. Organisations which traditionally defend human rights have been particularly active. This is the case for organisations who work on human rights in general, as well as those with a more specific focus like Roma, LGBT+, migrants and other minorities. Some of the activities have been related to awareness-raising, education, research, advocacy, among others. In all cases, they promote European values as human rights, diversity, anti-discrimination and solidarity. Such projects are considered vital by experts because they show society another point of view.¹¹⁷ They use a proactive human right rhetoric which pays attention to the harmful effects of hate speech, which has been “normalised” in recent years in Bulgaria.¹¹⁸ According to experts, if there are three groups in society - liberal pro-human rights citizens, complete anti-human rights citizens (ranging from “haters” to “violent extremists”) and the vast majority - people who are “in the grey area” and do not have a strong opinion, such campaigns should address the latter group.¹¹⁹ This will not allow anti-human right attitudes to become mainstream.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ The Sofia Globe. “Sofia - City of Tolerance and Wisdom” campaign launched, available at <https://sofiaglobe.com/2018/09/11/sofia-city-of-tolerance-and-wisdom-campaign-launched/>.

¹¹⁶ Embassy of Israel in Bulgaria. Let us clean the hatred from the streets of Sofia, available at <https://embassies.gov.il/sofia/NewsAndEvents/Pages/Clean-the-hatred-from-the-streets-of-Sofia.aspx>.

¹¹⁷ Interview with an NGO expert, 26 April 2022

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Below follows a selection of good practices from Bulgaria which target hate speech using various tools and approaches.

In 2013, Fotofabrika addressed the tension and clashes between the host society and refugees, which occurred in Bulgaria soon after the beginning of the refugee influx in 2013 through an emotional photo project. **The Strange Other** consisted of an exhibition and a series of movies and stories.¹²¹ The stories were also published in a photo book representing the dialogue between refugees and Bulgarians, compelled to confront each other. A workshop with journalists addressing the role of media in conflict, also took place at the end.

In 2014, Multi Kulti Collective ran a national-wide media campaign **Diversity is Tasty**, that put the culinary added-value of migrants and refugees in Bulgarian culture under the spotlight.¹²² It aimed at fighting discrimination, xenophobia and hate speech, by celebrating diversity.

In 2015, Free Speech International and Multi Kulti Collective created **UnBulgarians** - a photo project of the faces behind immigration statistics.¹²³ Using storytelling, the stories of migrants and refugees living in Bulgaria were shared. The materials were published in the media, in a catalogue and were presented through a travelling photo exhibition, which was organised in 5 Bulgarian cities, as well as in Strasbourg, France.

In 2014, Infinite Opportunities Association developed **PI@tform for Tolerance**, a youth online game for human rights which addressed hate speech.¹²⁴ It used gamification to engage the young users and promote tolerance, diversity and anti-discrimination.

In 2014, Integro Association invited 10 Roma students from various Bulgarian universities who were doing a monitoring on hate speech in electronic media, to conduct an online experiment.¹²⁵ They all posted hate speech comments targeted at the Roma population on social media in order to analyse their effect. As a result, all

¹²¹ The Strange Other, European Website on Integration, available at https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/integration-practice/strange-other_en.

¹²² Diversity is Tasty, Multi Kulti Collective, available at <http://multikulti.bg/tasty/>.

¹²³ UnBulgarians, Free Speech International, Multi Kulti Collective, available at <http://multikulti.bg/unbulgarians/indexen.html>.

¹²⁴ PI@tform for Tolerance, Infinite Opportunities Association, available at <https://ontolerance.eu/%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0/>.

¹²⁵ Integro Association. Roma students conducted a social experiment on Facebook on hate speech, available at <https://integrobg.org/%d1%80%d0%be%d0%bc%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8-%d1%81%d1%82%d1%83%d0%b4%d0%b5%d0%bd%d1%82%d0%b8-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%b5%d0%b4%d0%be%d1%85%d0%b0-%d1%81%d0%be%d1%86%d0%b8%d0%b0%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%bd-%d0%b5-2/>.

of the statuses received many likes and a lot of supportive comments. There were only a few anti-hate speech comments. In addition, some of the Roma students got unfriended by their friends as a sign of disapproval of their nasty statuses.

In 2018, GLAS Foundation launched a public campaign which included huge posters on the streets as well as print and online dissemination of people hugging, photographed from behind, with a simple message: **“Don’t worry. It’s only love. Different people, equal rights”**.¹²⁶ These were real-life gay couples who participated. Some of these posters were vandalised on the streets.

In 2019, GLAS Foundation created a very moving video as part of the campaign **100% Different**.¹²⁷ It included people with disabilities, Roma, LGBT+ people, Jewish people, influencers, journalists, etc. who showed that everyone is a minority in one way or another and we are all different but should respect each other.

In 2020, Fine Acts launched the **Love Speech** project which was aimed at raising awareness about hate speech using emotions and empathy.¹²⁸ The organisation engaged 35 Bulgarian artists in a vast campaign, featuring a series of urban art interventions, a participatory installation, an online video, and a large free-to-use collection of illustrations.

In 2021, Integro Association prepared 93 young Roma from 28 different cities and villages on how to recognize and react to hate speech.¹²⁹ The young people were trained on identifying and reporting hate speech in social media and online media.

¹²⁶ Don’t worry. It’s only love campaign, GLAS Foundation, available at <https://glasfoundation.bg/nyama-strashno-tova-e-prosto-lyubov-bilbord-2018/>

¹²⁷ 100% Different, GLAS Foundation, available at <https://glasfoundation.bg/100-razlichni-tv-i-print-2019/>

¹²⁸ Love Speech Campaign, Fine Acts, available at <https://fineacts.co/love-speech-campaign>.

¹²⁹ Integro Association. Promising beginning of an internship program for countering hate speech distributed online, available at

<https://integrobg.org/%d0%be%d0%b1%d0%b5%d1%89%d0%b0%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%89%d0%be-%d0%bd%d0%b0%d1%87%d0%b0%d0%bb%d0%be%d1%82%d0%be-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%81%d1%82%d0%b0%d0%b6%d0%b0%d0%bd%d1%82%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be/>

Conclusion and Recommendations

Hate speech is a phenomenon which has been permanently present in Bulgarian society in the last decade. Studies show that it even has been normalised and became an integral part of both private and public life. Roma people remain the leading victim of hate speech, currently followed by LGBT+ people, Turkish people and Muslims. The dynamics change due to national and international events, including election campaigns, and current public debates. The roles of different types of media are changing in the last few years. Television is still the biggest source of hate speech but its role, together with newspapers and radio, is decreasing. However, the role of the Internet has doubled between 2013 and 2018. Hate speech found in shops, café, restaurants, public transport and the workplace has also increased slightly. A considerable majority of citizens (77% in 2018) disapprove the use of public statements expressing disapproval, hatred or aggression towards representatives of ethnic, religious or sexual minorities. The more educated people are, the more likely they are to recognize hate speech.

In the last decade, Bulgaria has seen the rise of several political movements who make use of hate speech to garner Eurosceptic views. To some extent, they had electoral success, gaining seats in the European parliament and even making it to government. However, political scandals have diminished their success in recent years. Nevertheless, support for the EU remains strong in Bulgarian public opinion. Trust in EU institutions is systematically higher than trust in national institutions and the EU is seen as a guarantor of democracy and stability. Combating hate speech is therefore crucial to maintain public support for European values and institutions.

Based on the research, some recommendations are made:

- The term “hate speech” should be defined in the national legislation.
- The groups which are protected against hate speech by the Penal code should be expanded beyond “race, nationality and ethnicity” and include religion, political beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identity.
- A national anti-hate speech strategy should be developed, financed, implemented and regularly monitored.
- Enforcement of legal prohibitions of hate speech by investigation and prosecution of infringements of this legislation. A more efficient judiciary can strengthen the feeling of trust by affected minority groups, so that they would more easily report cases.
- The appointment of members of the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination should be based on their professional competencies, and not on political quotas. This would make them more independent from the executive power.

- The capacity of the responsible national institutions has to be strengthened through training, in order for them to more effectively recognize and combat hate speech.
- Political leaders and media should particularly be held accountable for their use of hate speech.
- Large-scale awareness-raising campaigns have to be realised, both on national and local level in order to increase the information about the phenomenon and build social resilience.
- Education efforts need to be put, both formal and informal, to increase the knowledge about hate speech among teachers, students, journalists, and other professionals.
- A multi-stakeholder approach including policy makers, police, schools, civil society, media needs to be adopted to create more synergies.
- Political parties, institutions and media which use hate speech should be deprived from national and local-level funding.
- State-funded legal and psychological support should be offered to the victims of hate speech.
- Investment in further research should be made in order to monitor the judicial practice; dynamics of hate speech use among various groups in society and media; and highlight best practices, including from other EU countries.