
Racist Violence in Bulgaria

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An assessment of overall trends and patterns

During the reporting period – June 2009 – June 2010, the incidents of racist violence concerned mostly members of the Roma community and representatives of the LGBT groups. As in previous years, the violent incidents are mostly perpetrated by youngsters' gangs. Recently Bulgaria witnessed a case of racist violence where four teenagers were severely beaten by a group of 20 gang members who were on their way to attend a peaceful demonstration against the illegal detention of immigrants¹.

The level of violent racist incidents has remained constant. However, many media reports describe racist violence in a biased way for example, – 'Roma youngsters beat a Bulgarian', 'Roma representatives clash with skin-heads'. Most popular media – TV stations with national coverage and daily newspapers – report in ways which go against well-established standards for professional coverage of racist violence incidents. There is a proliferation of internet sites and blogs that openly promote racist views and even urge commitment of violent acts against members of certain communities – Roma minority, gay and lesbian, immigrants and others. There are a couple of TV stations, which consistently promote nationalism and often make biased and even racist statements².

There is no obvious relationship between general political or social and economic situation and acts of violence. Living standards for the majority of Bulgarian citizens decreased since the end of 2007 – beginning of 2008. Starting from around 7% in the autumn of 2007 the registered unemployment peaked at more than 10% by the end of 2009³. With the beginning of the crisis some analysts predicted an increase in street crime but data from 2008 and 2009 do not prove this hypothesis. In general, the population of Bulgaria feels insecure about the future with employment and purchasing power being among the top three concerns. However, there is no visible tendency to blame certain group, except maybe the 'politicians and the oligarchs,' about the economic problems and thus instigate ethnic or racist tensions.

In general, there are four groups who are victims of racial violence in Bulgaria: representatives of Roma community; homosexuals, those who are in a relationship with other nationalities – third country nationals, and those seeking legal residence. On the surface, the first group is most often a victim of racial violence. Furthermore, homosexuals often avoid reporting incidents to police, which is true also of foreigners.

The Roma community has been present in Bulgaria for centuries and always had a 'special status'. The majority of Bulgarians tend to describe Roma people in negative

¹ Dnevnik Daily, 07 June 2010 'Арестуваните за побоя в трамвая вече са осмина'
http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2010/06/07/913126_arestuvanite_za_poboia_v_tramvaia_veche_sa_osmina/
accessed 10 August 2010.

² E.g. SKAT TV – "Diskusionno studio" show.

³ National Statistics Institute - <http://www.nsi.bg/index.php>; The Sofia Echo, 01 April 2010, 'Unemployment in Bulgaria dropped slightly in March 2010' http://sofiaecho.com/2010/04/01/881814_unemployment-in-bulgaria-dropped-slightly-in-march-2010 accessed 10 August 2010.

terms and blame them for not being 'according to the standard'. In the last 18 years foreign donor agencies, local NGOs and state institutions implemented a number of programs for ethnic tolerance and integration of the Roma community members into mainstream society. Still, the results are not obvious for the majority of the Bulgarians, who tend to resort to prejudices and stereotypes when talking about Roma community, especially when acts of violence take place against members of the Roma community. Often the victims are blamed for 'provoking the violence'.

In recent years, there has been a lot of media coverage on homosexuality. There are a number of popular TV programs, which exploited aspects of the topic and openly gay and lesbian individuals participated in very popular reality shows. The younger generation, particularly the educated, urban population are more tolerant of the LGBT community and lifestyle. However, the majority of the Bulgarian citizens are conservative. Moreover, there are some minority but very aggressive groups – skinheads, nationalist groups and others – who not only criticise homosexuality but also commit acts of aggression against them. Every couple of months there are reports in media that somebody was beaten just because he was, or at least 'looked like he was gay'. So far we have registered only incidents concerning men. Unfortunately, there has been no decisive response of condemnation from the popular media, or from the state institutions. Only representatives of civil society – e.g., Bulgarian Helsinki Committee - and certain media outlets⁴ consistently criticise racist violence accidents against gay, lesbians and transsexuals.

There are two disturbing trends seen in Bulgaria: interpreting racist incidents by the police as 'ideological clashes' and an increase in ultra-right open demonstrations.

In a number of cases, violence perpetrated against Roma community members was described by police as a 'clash between gangs' even though only the perpetrators were armed and obviously provoking the violence. In a couple of cases, human rights activists were beaten by skinheads; in this instance the Minister of Interior described the accidents as 'based on ideology differences'. The Minister made such statements to the media and refused to acknowledge the racist nature of the violence⁵.

The Head of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Krasimir Kanev stated, 'Bulgarian law treats all beatings in a similar fashion – it does not matter if one gets beaten in a drunken melee, or if one gets beaten because of their skin colour or different sexual orientation'⁶. Furthermore, it is not a priority for the lawmakers to improve legislation in an aim to curb racist violence.

The second tendency concerns open gatherings of neo-Nazis and other ultra-right groups. Sofia municipality allowed official ceremonies of the 'Blood and Honour' organization, attended by representatives of fascist organizations from Germany,

⁴ See for example Meidapool; www.mediapool.bg and Дневник www.dnevnik.bg accessed 10 August 2010.

⁵ Statement of Bulgarian Activist Alliance, distributed to media on 15 June 2010.

⁶ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Annual Report 2009 - <http://humanrightsbulgaria.wordpress.com> accessed 10 August 2010.

Romania, Italy, Switzerland and other countries. A number of attacks on religious temples, cemeteries of Turks and Jews and others coincide with ultra-right gatherings. An openly nationalist party, 'Ataka' is represented in the parliament and provides support to the ruling majority. This would explain the readiness of some mayors, and members of the ruling party to allow public gatherings of extremists groups and thus provide them with certain legitimacy.

'Hate crimes are not punishable in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Internet space is filled with sites of neo-Nazis which freely admit teenagers and train them to hate Turks, Roma, Jews, homosexuals', said Radoslav Stoyanov, an activist of the LGBT organization⁷. Some of these sites are very popular, counting more than 200 000 active members. Many members of such sites openly state their names and promote hatred and violence.

So far, there is no official reaction either from Ministry of Interior, or from the legislature. Nobody has been convicted for promoting hate speech, racism or ethnic intolerance. The only control on internet content comes from established institutions, like Facebook, which administrators react on signals from subscribers. The regulation of offensive and racist statements is present in most of the major internet editions of the daily newspapers. Administrators of official Bulgarian newspapers sites delete racist and offensive statements. However, there is virtually no regulation on private internet sites and networks.

Conclusions:

- There has been no evident increase or decrease in the number of racist violence incidents in Bulgaria in the last years.
- The Bulgarian society in general is tolerant but still lacks the integrity necessary to condemn and prevent acts of racist violence.
- State institutions subscribe to EU and other international human rights standards but often fall below best practices in the area.
- New times – new challenges. Alongside increased opportunities to promote individual opinions and points of view, the proliferation of internet use results in an explosion of hate speech, racist statements and open appeals for racist violence.

Typical case study

Below is a description of a recent incident as described by a Bulgarian online media source⁸.

⁷ Sofia News Agency 13 June 2010, 'Bulgarian Law Doesn't Punish Hate Crimes - Human Rights Experts' www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=117094 accessed 10 August 2010.

⁸ *Mediapool*, 6 June 2010 'Неонацистки побой беляза митинг срещу незаконно задържане на чужденци' (Neo-Nazi beating marks a meeting against illegal detention of foreigners) <http://mediapool.bg/show/?storyid=166138&srcpos=5>. accessed 1à August 2010.

On Sunday Neo-Nazis heavily beat up four youngsters on their way to the meeting against the illegal detention of foreigners in Busmantsi. The attackers wore hoods and used metal rods. The incident happened at about 10:40 a.m. on tram №20 in Sofia. In the early afternoon, MIA reported that two of the attackers were arrested.

A 17-year old boy was most heavily wounded but the parents did not want the name of their son to become public. The boy had fractured his left elbow and collarbone as well as receiving head wounds. He was taken to Pirogov Emergency Centre. The 25-year old Boris Boev, student at Sofia University 'Saint Kliment Ohridski' was taken to the Regional Hospital. That was the second time he was beaten up by representatives of right extremist organizations.

The four injured young men were travelling together with about 20 other students to a civil protest in Busmantsi to protest against the conditions in temporary accommodation centres which are used to house undocumented migrants. It is thought that at one of the stops in the Iskar region, masked people rushed onto the tram, attacked and inflicted heavy blows with metal objects on five young men aged between 17 and 23, got off at the next stop and disappeared in an unknown direction. Some of the seats in the tram were besprinkled with blood and there were broken glass bottles on the floor of the tram.

A student from the Sofia University Alexander Nikolov, a friend of the victims, thinks that they were attacked because they are civil rights activists. He says that the attackers were masked and armed with knuckledusters, knives and metal rods. He believes that they are known to the police because that was not their first attack. MIA confirmed the information and it was reported that one of the arrested - M. M. (27) has a criminal record, was registered for illegal possession of a gun and for two hooligan actions. Another was also arrested in the Ljulin quarter. Their participation in the crime will be ascertained during the coming interrogations.

The Minister of Internal Affairs, Tsvetan Tsvetanov stated before the arrests, 'we have clear clues and we have established that certain people took part in the brutal beating. The incident came about due to clashes between the extreme left and right anarchist movements over their position on the detention centre in Busmantsi'. He hoped and believed that within several hours SDIA will arrest the perpetrators of the beating and they will bear their penalty and responsibility'.

Recommendations

The Bulgarian society in general is tolerant and peaceful but not very decisive in the condemnation and persecution of incidents of racist violence. The measures that would reduce racist violence include:

- Further promotion of media standards on covering racist violence – at editorial level;

- Further work with Ministry of Internal Affairs on their readiness to prevent and fight racist violence;
- Official recording of racist violence;
- State supported civic education, which covers the topics of human rights and racist violence.
- Encouraging citizens to identify and report hate speech and racist appeals and urge state institutions to prevent and persecute racist violence.

All good ideas and best practices would do little to change the overall situation if Bulgarian society as a whole does not acknowledge the existence and gravity of the problem. There are active representatives of civil society and media, who work towards the prevention of racist violence. However, they need the support of the majority of the citizens, the professional media and the state institutions in order to move Bulgarian society towards a racist violence free society.

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ANNEX 1

1. Recording incidents of racist violence

1.1 Are records kept of incidents of racist violence reported to your NGO?

Yes

1.2 What is recorded about incidents reported to your NGO?

Number of incidents and descriptions of incidents for individual cases

1.3 Are records kept of the characteristics of victims, such as their:

Age: Yes; Sex: Yes; Ethnic identity: Yes; Language: No; Religion: No; National origins: No.

1.4 Are records kept of any other characteristics of victims not mentioned above?

No

1.5 Are records kept of the types of incidents reported, such as whether they involve physical violence, verbal abuse and threats, and damage to property, for instance?

Yes

1.6 Are records kept of the locations of incidents reported?

Yes, the name of the administrative unit, where the incidents took place.

1.7 Are any records kept about the perpetrators of incidents reported?

Yes, when available.

1.8 Are records kept of the characteristics of the perpetrators of incidents reported, such as their:

Age: Yes/; Sex: Yes/; Ethnic identity: No; Language No; Religion No; National origins: No; Affiliation with any extreme group: Yes;

1.9 Has your NGO carried out or commissioned any victim surveys of racist violence?

No

1.10 Are any records kept of incidents of racist violence reported to your NGO used by any national or international bodies for their monitoring of racist violence?

No, there are no representative for Bulgaria records kept on racist violence. Only a couple of active NGOs – e.g., Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Open Society Institute, etc. – develop annual reports, which include sections on the subject. Members of the ENAR network Bulgaria has registered and documented about 20 cases of racist violence for the reporting period – June 2009 – June 2010.

2. Reviewing incidents of racist violence

2.1 Does your NGO periodically review any records it keeps of incidents of reported racist violence?

YES

2.2 How often are they reviewed?

Once a year.

2.3 How are the reviews carried out?

Within the organization.

2.4 Are reports written based on the reviews?

No.

2.5 Have any reviews been used to plan any responses by your NGO to racist violence – such as support for victims or any other responses?

No

2.6 Have any reviews been used to plan the resources of your NGO?

No

2.7 Have any reviews been used by your NGO to make claims for additional resources?

No

Unfortunately, programme planning of the ENAR Bulgaria members does not currently consider reviews on racist violence while preparing annual organizational budgets. For the last three years – 2007 – 2010 – the ENAR Bulgaria National Co-ordination developed Annual Reports on racist violence.