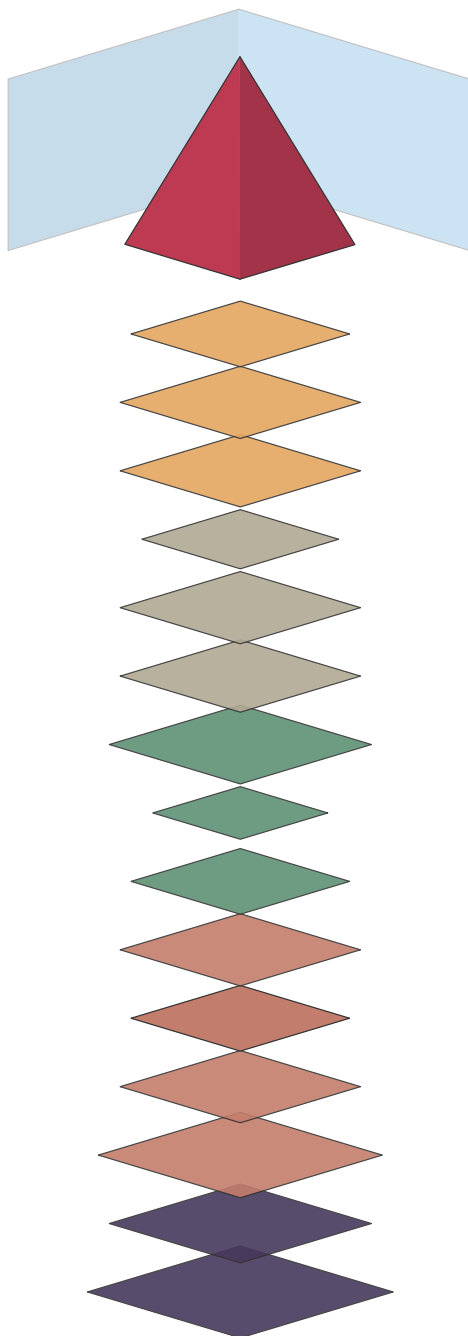




BULGARIA



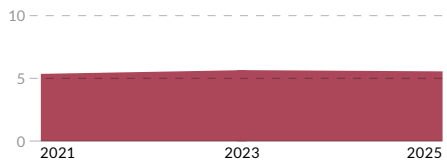
5.58 ↘0.07

CRIMINALITY SCORE

72nd of 193 countries ↘4

11th of 44 European countries -

7th of 17 Central and Eastern European countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS

5.47 ↗0.07

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	5.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	5.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	5.50	↗0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	4.50	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	5.50	↗0.50
ILLCIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	5.50	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	6.00	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	4.00	↘0.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	5.00	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	5.50	↘0.50
COCAINE TRADE	5.00	↗0.50
CANNABIS TRADE	5.50	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	6.50	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	6.00	0.00
FINANCIAL CRIMES	7.00	0.00



CRIMINAL ACTORS

5.70 ↘0.20

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	4.50	↘0.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6.00	↘1.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	7.50	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	5.00	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	5.50	↗0.50



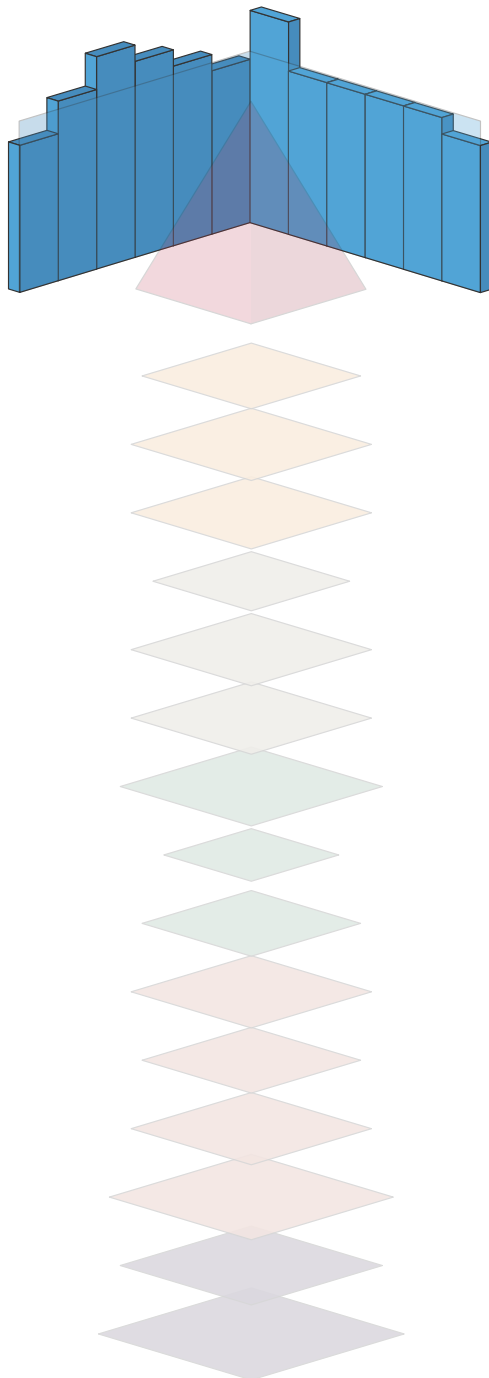
This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.



Funded by the European Union

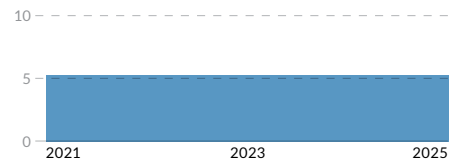
ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

 **BULGARIA**



 **5.33**_{0.00}
RESILIENCE SCORE

66th of 193 countries \nearrow 3
29th of 44 European countries -
6th of 17 Central and Eastern European countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	4.50	\searrow 0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	5.50	\searrow 0.50
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	6.50	\nearrow 0.50
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	6.00	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	5.50	\nearrow 0.50
LAW ENFORCEMENT	5.00	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	6.50	\nearrow 0.50
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	5.00	\searrow 0.50
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	5.00	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	5.00	0.00
PREVENTION	5.00	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	4.50	0.00



This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.



Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Human trafficking remains a major issue in Bulgaria, as the country serves both as a source and a destination for victims. Bulgarians are frequently trafficked abroad to countries such as Germany, Italy, the UK, Austria, France, Sweden, Russia, West Asia and the US, making Bulgaria one of the EU's primary sources for trafficking victims. Women and girls from marginalized communities, particularly the Roma population, are often trafficked abroad for sexual exploitation. Recent trends indicate a rise in child trafficking cases, with Roma children being forced into labour and street begging in Austria, France and Sweden. Labour trafficking is also increasing, affecting both men and women, with forced labour commonly occurring in agriculture, construction and domestic service. Traffickers exploit legitimate businesses to conceal these activities, employing coercive tactics such as document confiscation and threats.

Bulgaria plays a significant role in human smuggling due to its strategic location along the Balkan migration route. The country's land border crossings serve as crucial transit points for individuals being smuggled from West Asia, Africa and Central Asia en route to Western Europe. Despite heightened security measures, human smuggling remains prevalent, often involving organized criminal networks that utilize social media to advertise their services and recruit clients. Corruption within border security and law enforcement exacerbates the problem, with reports indicating that border police accept bribes to facilitate smuggling operations. Smugglers frequently employ various transportation methods, including buses, trucks and private vehicles. There have also been reports of violent encounters with law enforcement.

Extortion and protection racketeering in Bulgaria remain deeply embedded in the business culture, despite a decline in overt mafia activity. Small extortionist criminal networks operate nationwide, employing coercion and violence to control various sectors, including high-interest loans. Investigations have revealed enduring connections between organized crime and local governance, the judiciary and private enterprise, allowing these groups to operate with relative impunity. The recent dismantling of networks and high-profile murders have highlighted the deep integration of illicit operations. Extortion schemes often involve fabricated debts and threats, affecting thousands of individuals. While some prominent figures are no longer active, the market remains structurally intact, with evidence of transnational connections and ongoing overlap with drug trafficking and money laundering.

TRADE

Arms trafficking is a significant issue in Bulgaria, which serves primarily as a transit and to some extent a destination country. Blank firearms and signal weapons from Türkiye are frequently modified and sold on the black market, while weapons produced in Bulgaria are diverted from legal stockpiles and trafficked to conflict zones. Criminal groups are involved in the illicit modification of firearms, frequently collaborating with corrupt officials. Bulgaria's reputation as a regional hub for the transformation of blank firearms, along with the involvement of certain gun shops in these illicit activities, highlights the complexity and scale of the problem.

The counterfeit goods market in Bulgaria is well established, with the country serving as both a transit hub and a destination. Counterfeit products, including fashion items, electronics, pharmaceuticals and detergents, primarily originate from Türkiye, China and Hong Kong. Seizures of counterfeit goods have increased significantly in recent years, particularly at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint. Weak online trade regulations have contributed to the growth of this market, with illicit goods frequently sold through e-commerce platforms and social media. The local demand for counterfeit goods is deeply entrenched in Bulgaria, with a considerable level of acceptance among the population. The rise of online sales and social media advertisements has further facilitated the distribution of these products.

The illicit trade in excisable consumer goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, remains a lucrative market in Bulgaria. Cigarette smuggling significantly surpasses that of alcohol, with Bulgaria serving as a crucial transit hub for contraband cigarettes entering Western Europe. Turkish suppliers play a dominant role in this trade, exploiting vulnerabilities in Bulgaria's border security. Although law enforcement operations have resulted in substantial seizures, corruption among customs officials and border police continues to facilitate the smuggling of excisable goods.

ENVIRONMENT

Illegal timber harvesting represents a significant aspect of environmental crimes in Bulgaria, with a considerable portion of timber production occurring outside legal frameworks. Driven by the demand for winter firewood and facilitated by organized criminal groups, corrupt officials and complicit private-sector actors, the illicit trade thrives particularly in border regions, especially along the border with Serbia. The market includes high-demand species such as acacia and oak. Although legal provisions are in place, enforcement is compromised by systemic corruption and challenges in detecting illegal timber. The social acceptance

of this practice, particularly in rural areas, exacerbates the problem. Certain initiatives have helped reduce the visibility of rigged auctions; however, allegations of institutional protection continue to persist. Forest tourism suffers significant repercussions as a result. Fauna crimes, particularly poaching, continue on a small scale, primarily targeting deer and brown bears. Nevertheless, Bulgaria remains a player in sturgeon poaching and the trafficking of black caviar. While legal sturgeon farms have contributed to a decline in illicit activities, enforcement gaps still permit the ongoing smuggling of caviar.

The illicit trade in non-renewable resources, particularly fuel smuggling, is a significant concern in Bulgaria. The country has become a hub for smuggled fuels originating from Russia, which are transported through ports such as Burgas. Additionally, the illegal smuggling of gold and silver has increased, as evidenced by recent seizures of undeclared precious metals at border crossings. These markets function through well-established criminal networks that often benefit from political protection and inadequate regulatory oversight.

DRUGS

Bulgaria plays a crucial role in the heroin trade as both a transit and destination country along the Balkan route. The majority of the heroin enters Bulgaria through Türkiye, with significant shipments passing through the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint. However, recent seizures have shown that some heroin is being transported through the Black Sea route, arriving from Georgia. Although seizures have decreased in recent years due to increased border controls, heroin consumption remains a concern, particularly within certain communities in urban areas. Law enforcement efforts have disrupted major trafficking networks, but heroin trafficking continues to pose a challenge.

The country has emerged as a hub in the cocaine trade, with increased trafficking activities following the closure of Ukrainian ports. Cocaine shipments from Latin America now transit through Bulgaria en route to Western Europe, often concealed within legitimate cargo. The Black Sea ports have also witnessed substantial cocaine seizures, highlighting Bulgaria's expanding role in international drug smuggling networks.

Cannabis continues to be the most widely consumed illicit drug in Bulgaria, supported by both domestic production and foreign supply, sustaining the market. North Macedonia and Albania are the primary sources of this drug, while Bulgaria also functions as a transit country for shipments destined for Türkiye and Romania. Recent law enforcement efforts have resulted in significant seizures; however, demand remains high, especially among younger demographics.

Synthetic drugs, including amphetamines and methamphetamines, are widely produced and consumed

in Bulgaria. The country serves as a major source of synthetic drugs for neighbouring states, with criminal networks operating sophisticated production facilities. Bulgarian-produced amphetamines are trafficked to markets in Serbia, North Macedonia and Romania. Although law enforcement has dismantled numerous production sites, the market remains highly profitable, with increasing online sales contributing to its expansion.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Bulgaria has experienced a surge in cyber-dependent crimes, including ransomware attacks, cryptocurrency fraud and data breaches. The country's advanced internet infrastructure has made it a prime target for cybercriminals, who exploit security vulnerabilities in both the public and private sectors. Foreign actors and state-embedded operatives have been implicated in facilitating these cyberattacks, while Bulgarian institutions struggle to combat the escalating threat. Despite increased investments in cybersecurity measures, enforcement remains inadequate, allowing cybercrime networks to operate with relative impunity.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes, such as tax fraud, money laundering and embezzlement, are deeply entrenched in Bulgaria's economy. Corruption within public institutions facilitates large-scale fraud schemes, particularly those involving EU funds. Investigations have revealed extensive misuse of public funds in infrastructure projects, with politically connected individuals profiting from fraudulent contracts. VAT fraud schemes, including the Missing Trader Intra-Community fraud, have also resulted in significant financial losses. Illegal lending practices are another widespread issue, as high-interest quick-loan companies exploit financially vulnerable individuals. These entities operate with minimal regulatory oversight, trapping borrowers in cycles of debt. Consumer protection agencies have attempted to impose fines, but the illicit financial market remains largely unregulated. Cross-border financial crime networks continue to exploit Bulgaria's weak regulatory framework, laundering illicit proceeds through offshore accounts. Although the government has taken steps to strengthen anti-money laundering measures, enforcement gaps and judicial corruption impede progress. Cyber-enabled financial crimes, including phishing scams and investment fraud, have also surged, with elderly populations being primary targets. The persistence of these crimes highlights the need for more robust institutional mechanisms to combat financial fraud and corruption.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Bulgaria's mafia-style groups have evolved from their structured criminal organizations of the 1990s into smaller, more business-oriented factions that maintain a presence

in illicit activities. These groups are deeply intertwined with the state, engaging in large-scale corruption and benefiting from political protection. They remain heavily involved in drug trafficking and financial crimes, often using registered companies to launder proceeds and disguise their criminal operations. In addition to these groups, smaller kin-based Roma gangs play a significant role in criminal activities, particularly in human trafficking and phone scams, with some shifting their operations to neighbouring countries while laundering illicit proceeds in Bulgaria. Certain factions within these groups are also implicated in extortion, targeting drug dealers, debtors and migrants.

Bulgaria's criminal networks are opportunistic and highly adaptable, operating across multiple illicit markets. These groups maintain extensive ties with foreign criminal actors, particularly from Russia, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. They are involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking and contraband activities. While organized criminal activities persist, the levels of direct violence remain lower compared to other regions. Urban centres serve as focal points for extortion, while border areas and ports facilitate trafficking and smuggling. The country's law enforcement agencies continue to face challenges in dismantling these groups due to their adaptability and transnational connections.

State-embedded actors exert considerable influence over Bulgaria's criminal landscape, with corruption infiltrating various levels of government. Political figures and law enforcement officials have been implicated in organized crime, facilitating drug and arms trafficking, human smuggling and financial fraud. Corruption within customs agencies has been particularly pervasive, with high-profile cases revealing institutional complicity in illicit activities. Reports indicate that border police have actively facilitated human smuggling, further illustrating the extent of state corruption. The manipulation of state security agencies for personal and financial gain remains widespread, with EU funds

being misappropriated and state resources funnelled into private interests. The country's judiciary has struggled to effectively prosecute cases of state capture,

Foreign actors play a role in Bulgaria's organized crime landscape, often collaborating with local criminal groups. Diaspora communities, including Russians, Turks and Syrians, as well as Ukrainian refugees displaced by the war, contribute to various illicit markets. Turkish criminal groups maintain a strong presence across multiple sectors, leveraging cross-border connections to expand their operations. Border regions, particularly those near Serbia, Romania, Türkiye and Greece, as well as the Black Sea ports of Varna and Burgas, experience heightened foreign criminal activity. Russian and Ukrainian criminal groups have strengthened their foothold, exploiting Bulgaria's weak border controls to facilitate illicit flows. While Serbian influence in organized crime appears to have declined, Russian-backed networks continue to exert considerable economic and financial power, particularly in arms and drug trafficking.

The private sector in Bulgaria has become a significant facilitator of organized crime, with registered companies frequently serving as fronts for illicit activities. Organized crime groups have largely shifted from violent tactics to more covert operations, integrating into legitimate business sectors such as real estate, retail and trade. Criminal actors exploit legal frameworks to launder illicit proceeds, often with the assistance of legal professionals, including lawyers and accountants. Corrupt business practices extend to the public sector, where officials manipulate public procurement processes to benefit companies with close ties to criminal organizations. For instance, logging companies play a substantial role in illegal timber extraction, aided by complicit state-embedded actors. The awarding of lucrative public contracts without proper competition remains a persistent issue, reflecting the broader entrenchment of corruption within Bulgaria's economic and political structures.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Bulgaria's political leadership has consistently faced persistent challenges in effectively combating organized crime and corruption. The political instability, triggered by the government's collapse after a no-confidence vote, continued to escalate during the reporting period. The June and October 2024 elections failed to produce a stable government, yielding fragmented results, low turnout and widespread allegations of vote-buying, further undermining public trust. This political crisis, combined with widespread allegations of corruption among high-ranking officials,

has weakened governance. Efforts to counter organized crime are often hindered by political interference, as state institutions struggle to maintain their autonomy. Although Bulgaria has implemented legislative reforms to align with EU standards, enforcement remains inconsistent due to weak institutional capacity and political obstruction. The absence of long-term political commitment to reform has further stalled anti-corruption measures, making it difficult to sustain progress against organized crime.

Government transparency and accountability mechanisms are in place; however, they are undermined by systemic corruption. The lack of judicial independence and the selective application of anti-corruption laws have enabled powerful individuals and criminal networks to operate with impunity. Although Bulgaria has established formal structures for public oversight, their effectiveness is often compromised by political influence. Recent legislative efforts to enhance transparency in public procurement and financial reporting have yielded limited success, primarily due to weak enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, public confidence in anti-corruption institutions remains low, as high-profile investigations frequently fail to lead to convictions or meaningful policy changes. While transparency in the work of parliament, cabinet and municipal bodies has improved in recent years, access to information on governmental budgets and expenditures remains inadequate at times.

Bulgaria actively participates in international cooperation to combat organized crime, collaborating with Europol, INTERPOL and regional law enforcement agencies. Joint investigations and cross-border operations have led to significant arrests and disruptions of criminal networks. Cooperation between Bulgaria and Western partners in combating organized crime has strengthened. A US-funded project between Bulgarian and US customs agencies was launched to share expertise and improve border enforcement. Europol also boosted support by deploying an analyst to Sofia in early 2024 for real-time assistance, while other partners, including Germany and the UK, have acknowledged the effective collaboration. However, inconsistent commitment to international legal obligations and weak implementation of agreements hinder more effective cooperation. Despite Bulgaria's integration into various EU mechanisms, its reputation for high levels of corruption and selective law enforcement has undermined its credibility in international forums. Additionally, the country's extradition practices have faced criticism, as some fugitives have managed to evade legal consequences by exploiting procedural loopholes.

National policies and laws addressing organized crime have been developed; however, their implementation remains inconsistent. Bulgaria has enhanced its crime prevention strategy with amendments designed to establish a sustainable framework for national policies through 2030. Additionally, Bulgaria has enhanced its cybersecurity framework through the Cyber Resilient Bulgaria 2023 strategy, aligning national laws with European digital security priorities. Meanwhile, current legislation on human trafficking and wildlife crimes in Bulgaria is considered too weak to effectively deter offenders, with legal ambiguities between administrative and criminal offences undermining consistent enforcement. Although wildlife protection laws have been aligned with EU standards, enforcement remains uneven; endangered species often receive less protection than economically valuable species that are hunted or fished.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The judicial system in Bulgaria faces challenges related to inefficiency, corruption and external influence. Political and economic elites exert considerable influence over judicial processes, leading to selective prosecution and impunity for high-profile offenders. A comprehensive constitutional reform was adopted in Bulgaria to strengthen judicial independence, limit the Prosecutor General's powers, and enhance accountability, including revisions to appointment and dismissal procedures for top judicial positions. A draft Judicial System Act seeks to ensure politically independent appointments, long-term secondments and advance justice digitalization. Electronic communication in the judiciary has also improved, and there are calls to expand judicial review in cases involving victimless crimes. Despite these reforms, their effectiveness has been constrained by entrenched political interests. The backlog of cases and inconsistent sentencing further erode public confidence in the justice system.

Law enforcement agencies in Bulgaria encounter significant structural and operational challenges in their efforts to combat organized crime. Although specialized units have been established to tackle financial crimes, drug trafficking and human smuggling, limitations in resources and instances of corruption within the police force undermine their effectiveness. Reports indicate that some law enforcement officers maintain direct connections to criminal networks, thereby facilitating illicit activities rather than preventing them. Despite ongoing efforts to improve police accountability and enhance investigative capabilities, corruption and political influence persist in obstructing meaningful reform. Additionally, the lack of adequate training and resources for law enforcement personnel adversely affects their ability to combat increasingly sophisticated criminal activities.

Bulgaria's territorial integrity is compromised by weaker border security, despite progress in the country's efforts to join the Schengen Area. The country serves as a crucial transit point for illicit goods entering the EU. Although Bulgaria has received EU funding to improve its border control infrastructure, the effectiveness of these measures is yet to be seen. Furthermore, corruption within border management agencies has undermined enforcement efforts. Criminal organizations exploit these vulnerabilities, using Bulgaria as a hub for organized crime activities, particularly along its borders with Türkiye, Serbia and Romania. Strategic agreements and interdepartmental initiatives have been established to enhance crime prevention, focusing on border security and combating corruption related to EU funds.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Bulgaria faces significant challenges in combating money laundering, despite having adopted legislative measures that align with international standards. The country has struggled with large-scale financial crimes involving both state-embedded actors and private-sector entities. Weak

enforcement mechanisms, coupled with ineffective regulatory oversight, enable money laundering operations to persist. Although financial institutions have been encouraged to enhance their due diligence procedures, gaps in compliance monitoring continue to facilitate illicit financial flows. Due to these shortcomings, Bulgaria was placed on the the Financial Action Task Force's grey list as of October 2024, underscoring ongoing strategic deficiencies in its anti-money laundering regime, reflecting challenges that require continued implementation of corrective measures to improve compliance and mitigate financial risks.

The economic regulatory environment in Bulgaria remains susceptible to corruption and criminal infiltration. This systemic corruption, particularly within the tax and customs sectors, indirectly increases the risk of criminal markets. The country's economic regulatory capacity is particularly affected by concerns regarding government integrity, judicial opacity and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Insufficient information exchange between regulators and partners further complicates efforts to combat corruption and criminal activities. Although Bulgaria experienced substantial economic growth following the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining macroeconomic stability and advancing social safety net reforms, inconsistent government priorities and political instability have impeded the effective implementation of key EU strategic objectives.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victim and witness support mechanisms in Bulgaria are underdeveloped, with limited resources allocated to protecting individuals affected by organized crime. While shelters and support services exist for victims of human trafficking, their capacity is insufficient to meet the demand. Witness protection programs are weak, with individuals involved in high-profile cases often facing threats and intimidation. The lack of adequate funding and coordination among state institutions further diminishes the effectiveness of victim support programs. In recent years, Bulgaria has made significant strides in victim support, including prosecuting more traffickers, increasing anti-trafficking funding, adopting a National Action Plan and creating new victim services. However, challenges persist in victim identification, funding for NGOs, the penalization of victims by police, as well as corruption in law enforcement and

the judiciary. To enhance transparency and accountability across sectors, Bulgaria enacted the Whistleblowing Act, which expands reporting mechanisms to encompass a wide range of criminal offences, including organized crime and human trafficking, in a bid to improve transparency and accountability throughout various sectors.

Bulgaria has updated its crime prevention strategy to guide national policies through 2030, reflecting efforts to align with international initiatives aimed at combating organized crime and terrorism. Despite progress, structural challenges persist, particularly in addressing corruption and white-collar crime. Anti-trafficking measures have advanced through increased prosecutions, enhanced victim services and improved interagency coordination; however, gaps remain in victim identification, support from NGOs and judicial integrity. Youth-focused prevention programs and drug education centres operate nationwide, but the rising incidence of drug use among students raises concerns about their effectiveness. Longstanding integration challenges for the Roma population continue, despite targeted initiatives.

Non-state actors, including civil society organizations and independent media, play a crucial role in exposing corruption and organized crime in Bulgaria. However, journalists and activists investigating these issues frequently face harassment, legal threats and violence. Press freedom has declined, with government influence over media outlets restricting the ability to report on organized crime and corruption. While some civil society organizations continue to advocate for reforms, restrictive laws and financial constraints impede their effectiveness. Furthermore, Bulgaria has long struggled to integrate its Roma population, who continue to face discrimination in employment, healthcare, education and housing. Despite various government and NGO-led programs aimed at improving their social integration, progress remains slow. These challenges, along with broader issues in crime prevention, underscore the need for stronger measures and better implementation of existing initiatives to foster a safer and more inclusive society.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.