



Dear Ambassador,

We are writing on behalf of Moscow Helsinki Group and Public Verdict to express concern regarding the threat of de-registration facing the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), a leading Bulgarian human rights NGO and a respected and trusted partner of IPHR and other members of the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP).^[1] We call on the Bulgarian government to immediately put an end to this threat and ensure that the BHC and its team can carry out their legitimate and important human rights work without interference, intimidation and harassment.

We have learned that representatives of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), part of Bulgaria's ruling government coalition, have requested the country's Prosecutor General to initiate proceedings aiming at the depriving the BHC of its legal status. The VMRO representatives are claiming that the BHC's activities, in particular its submissions to domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights, its representation of clients before these courts and its organization of educational events for prosecutors and judges constitute "interference with the judiciary", contrary to Article 117 of the Bulgarian Constitution.

With its absurd but alarming request the VMRO is taking aim at the BHC because of the organization's committed and principled defense of the rights of victims of human rights violations in Bulgaria, including minorities and migrants and the BHC's efforts to promote the realization of Bulgaria's international human rights obligations within the country's judicial system. The party's actions represent a clear attempt to stigmatize, intimidate and obstruct the activities of the BHC, contrary to the right to freedom of association guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights and other international treaties to which Bulgaria is a party.

The fact that VMRO forms part of the current government renders its initiative particularly deplorable. At the same time, we recall that this is not the first time that the party has used requests for action to national authorities to put pressure on the BHC. In 2017, party representatives requested the Prosecutor General to prosecute Mr. Kanev for "sabotage", with reference to a letter he wrote to the European Commission concerning the lack of respect for LGBTI rights in Bulgaria. Earlier in 2014, the party requested the National Revenue Agency to investigate the BHC's finances after the organization condemned the racist rhetoric used by VMRO representatives against migrants. Although the Prosecutor General did not act upon the first request and the National Revenue Agency did not find any irregularities in the BHC's finances, these requests nevertheless served to intimidate and harass the BHC and its director.

The new initiative by the VMRO reinforces concerns about the safety of the BHC team members, as it may contribute to mistrust and suspicion against them and, at worst, provoke other hostile actions. As you may know, previously, in 2016, Mr. Kanev was physically attacked in Sofia by unknown perpetrators who were never found and prosecuted.

In view of the recent developments, we wish to express our support and solidarity with the BHC and urge the Bulgarian government to abide by its international obligations with respect to freedom of association and other fundamental freedoms by guaranteeing the BHC's legal status, operating freedom as well as the safety of its team members.

We thank you for your attention to the issues raised in this letter.

Sincerely,



Svetlana Astrakhantseva,
MHG Executive Director



Natalia Taubina,
Public Verdict Director

^[1] See also joint statement by more than 40 CSP members denouncing the attack on the BHC, at <http://www.civicsolidarity.org/article/1625/civil-society-coalition-denounces-attack-bulgarian-helsinki-committee>