



Prime Minister Boyko Borisov
National Assembly of Bulgaria
1169 Sofia
Bulgaria

Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov
Room 79
Vitosha Blvd. №2
1061 Sofia
Bulgaria

October 1st, 2019

Dear Prime Minister Borisov and Prosecutor General Tsatsarov,

We are writing following the request of the Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO/BMPO – Българско Национално Движение), one of the parties in the ruling coalition in Bulgaria, seeking the de-registration of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) as a non-profit organisation. *JUSTICIA* strongly condemns this move as an extremely worrying attempt to silence civil society in Bulgaria. The BHC is an invaluable resource and a champion of human rights, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society.

According to its own press release from 30 September 2019, VMRO has requested BHC's de-registration for no reason other than the fact that it has engaged in activities that could only be described as legitimate human rights advocacy. These include criticising the government for human rights violations before the European Court of Human Rights, and campaigning to ensure that a convicted prisoner's rights are respected. We were also concerned to learn that the complaint includes an allegation that BHC's work training judges and magistrates amounts to an interference with the impartiality of the judiciary.

Sadly, this is not the first time that BHC has come under attack. The organisation and its staff have been subject to threats and intimidation for several years, and in 2016, its chairperson, Krassimir Kanev was physically assaulted in Sofia by unidentified men. We are deeply concerned that this could be part of a wider trend that is making Bulgaria an increasingly hostile environment for human rights defenders.

Civil society cannot play its essential role of building safer, fairer societies if it is prevented from holding governments accountable for their actions. It cannot advocate for better human rights if it cannot call on governments to abide by international human rights obligations; it cannot make societies fairer unless it speaks out for the marginalised and stigmatised; and it cannot achieve meaningful positive change if it is barred from influencing key decision makers.

- We call on VMRO to desist from its continued intimidation and harassment of BHC.

- We expect the Prosecutor General of Bulgaria to handle the complaint against BHC impartially and free from political interference, recognising the essential role of human rights defenders, and Bulgaria's international human rights obligations.
- We call on the Government of Bulgaria to ensure that human rights defenders are protected from harassment and intimidation, and to take steps to ensure that civil society organisations are able to operate freely.

JUSTICIA stands in solidarity with our member organisation BHC, and we strongly oppose the unjustified attacks on the organisation that further narrows the space for civil society in Bulgaria.

Members of the *JUSTICIA* European Rights Network