

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

IN BULGARIA: OUR FIVE-YEAR

REPORT, 2017-2021

And our five lessons for the
future of human rights

10 December 2021

Sofia, Bulgaria



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Amnesty International in Bulgaria: Our Five-Year Report, 2017-2021

And our five lessons for the future of human rights

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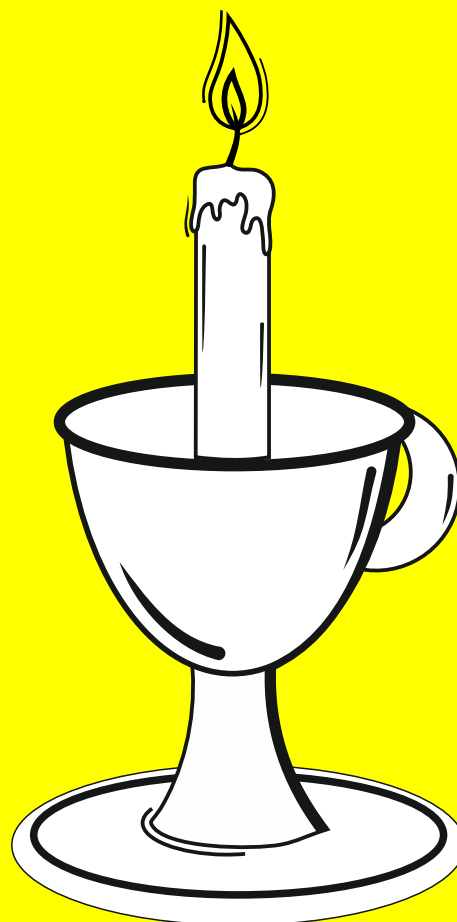
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OUR FIVE-YEAR REPORT, 2017-2021

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Our Five-Year Report, 2017-2021

This is our five-year report. We examine how the human rights issues in Bulgaria have evolved and how our Group has evolved alongside to be able to address them. Our review starts with 2017, when we only aspired to become a Group, and ends in 2021, when we started planning our application to become a Structure. We mainly focus on what we have learnt by drawing five key lessons, which we will carry to the future as we continue to mature in our defence of human rights.

Acknowledgments

We thank all people in our community: those who are part of it from Bulgaria and beyond, those who support it with their time and partnership, and those who guide it from the International Secretariat and the local entities of Amnesty International. The lesson of how increasingly important the defence of human rights is would not have been as clear without each and every one of you.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2017-2021: Human rights in Bulgaria

In 2021, we mark five years since our collective action started in Bulgaria. All of us had been activists for a while, including as international members of Amnesty International (AI), but 2017 was a turning point. During the refugee and migrant crisis, which showcased the politics of division in our country, we realised that we need to bring our activism to the next level and challenge the status quo in a more sophisticated way. Unfortunately, in the last five years, this division and other human rights issues in Bulgaria have not only persisted, but have also been exacerbated. For example, journalists have lost their job just for asking questions; the COVID-19 lockdowns have intensified the domestic violence; new “migrant hunters” have emerged. All of this makes our action more required than ever and so it is the time to take stock of what we have learnt in order to be ready for the next five years.

2017: Tell the basic story of human rights

In 2017, already at the start, we realized that the key challenge in Bulgaria is that the society does not understand human rights. Our country has been no exception to today's rollback of rights, but there was no strong human rights movement to counter the ill narratives by offering an educated view on what human rights are. No other organisation in Bulgaria was trying to fulfil this gap, which is why we decided to focus on human rights education. Overall, the first lesson for our team was that it was critically important to (re)tell the basic story of human rights to the broader society.

2018: Be a part of a human rights movement

In 2018, the key question was how to develop engaging educational tools and AI's Academy immediately stood out. Having a Bulgarian version of it would provide accessible, free and quality courses to the local community. Besides, an AI presence in the country would be a unique tool to challenge injustices via campaigning and advocacy. We were privileged to receive a first green light from AI and under their guidance, we devised an initial platform to test our ideas and gather supporters. Then, we organized events on press freedom, wrote articles on domestic violence and joined initiatives on refugee rights. The word about us spread quickly and we got support from many, who recognised the significance of AI's global community of activists. This community is a force multiplier and, therefore, the second lesson for us was that being part of an international movement, which shares ideas and provides support, is necessary for successfully advocating for human rights.

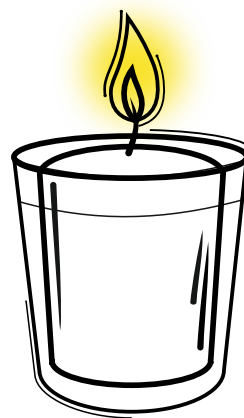
2019: Have a mature approach to human rights

In 2019, we felt we had already felt the pulse of the society, but we were also honest that we did not yet have a long-term winning strategy, because there is no decisive battle for human rights. Hence, already in 2019 we started to invest time and energy into ensuring the continuity of our project, beyond its reliance on a single individual. Our vision has always been to grow a sustainable movement, but in 2019 we started to really tackle the challenges of this goal. Firstly, we started prioritizing our substantive work more rigorously, so that our time was invested where it counted the most. Secondly, we made major steps towards a resilient organizational framework, optimizing our existing procedures and adding new ones, where needed. All of this culminated in October, when we signed a Memorandum with the International Secretariat and became an AI Group. These efforts marked our coming of age: Our thinking of how to grow a sustainable, people-centred movement significantly matured and we focused our resources more carefully. This would prove extremely provident just a few months ahead, when we had to move all our operations online, due to COVID-19. Hence, in retrospect, the key lesson was that while it is attractive to tackle injustices as they come, human rights activists should have a mature approach in their substance and organisation.



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2020: Foster various human rights partnerships

In 2020, our first year as a Group, we achieved a lot. We had prepared an ambitious plan with many activities, which due to COVID-19 suddenly had to go digital. Yet, we stood up to the challenge and even exceeded our initial planning. We held educational workshops and leveraged AI's Academy to publish the first-ever online course on human rights in the Bulgarian language, a true milestone for local activism. We also interviewed Ms. Iveta Cherneva, a nominee for the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression as well as Ms. Katya Krastanova, a renowned psychologist regarding domestic violence. We created campaigns to inspire people, but also to advocate decision-makers. Yet, we published the online course only thanks to a partnership with AI's Global Human Rights Education team and we managed to interview the psychologist, because of our partners at the Bulgarian Fund for Women. Looking back to 2020, the fourth lesson for us was that fostering various partnerships is not just an enabler, but in fact the only way to defend human rights.

2021: Take personal responsibility for human rights

In 2021, we noticed many tangible results from our previous efforts. More organisations approached us to collaborate, including schools that would like to teach human rights classes. In addition, more TV and radio stations reached out to us on topics such as the Pegasus Project. Also, we were one of only five civic platforms in the country to be invited for a dialogue by the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs during their visit to Bulgaria. All of this also led to a weighty increase of 17 per cent in AI's international members from Bulgaria. Naturally, this also gave life to a coalition of AI stakeholders in favour of us receiving an AI Structure status. The six newcomers, who joined our core team this year, demonstrated enthusiasm and an incredible personal responsibility by taking on initiatives right from the start. This motivated the whole Group to take responsibility and follow up on our commitment to human rights in Bulgaria by accepting the challenge of applying for a Structure. This would not only realize our growth potential, but also create many new substantive and organizational opportunities. So, the next lesson we learnt was that to fulfil our commitments to human rights, we must be ready to take personal responsibility.

2022: A new lesson awaits

In 2022, we might realise our most intense growth to date. This growth would take place if we are successful in applying for a Structure and a legal entity status. Such an organisational upgrade would allow us to reap the fruits of our labour. For example, we would be able to pilot the trainings for public officials, since this has required a formal agreement with ministries. We would also be able to collect more data for the International Secretariat's consumption, since we would be able to make formal requests to the government. Further, we would be in a position to substantially upgrade our communication instruments such as Facebook, where we could verify our page and attract more and more followers. All of this is certainly going to lead to new lessons. Afterwards, we intend to put all of this knowledge base in a Strategic Concept for our 2022-2027 development, which would allow us to really fulfil our long-term vision: That in the future every person in our region, who seeks to fight for their rights and for the rights of others, will find AI's global movement firmly by their side.

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SPECIAL FOCUS: HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

Including five testimonies from participants in our educational workshops

Human rights education has been the main instrument of our collective action and we have achieved a lot in that regard, especially in the last two years as an AI Group. We have been building a portfolio of online and offline educational content and already have a comparative advantage in the sphere vis-à-vis the other human rights organisations in Bulgaria. Firstly, we have delivered the first-ever online courses on human rights in the Bulgarian language. So far, we have translated two courses at AI's Academy, including the foundational „Introduction to Human Rights“, which puts us on par with the courses, available in Norwegian and German. Yet, we intend to do much more! Secondly, Ms. Margarita Spasova and Mr. Cafer Saatçi, the only two human rights trainers in Bulgaria, certified by the Council of Europe, have been a part of our core team since the start. Thirdly, we have delivered tailored workshops and other educational activities, some lasting up to three days, to more than 150 people on topics such as active citizenship, the fight against domestic violence and AI itself.

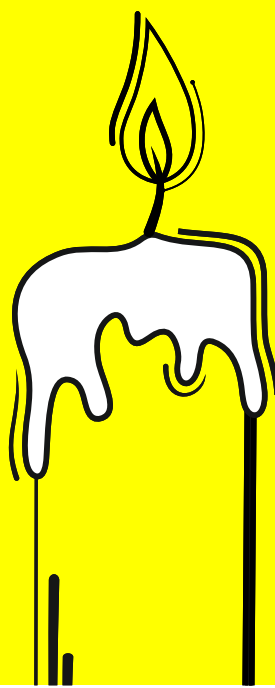
“I loved the discussion on the normative acts. This will help me build my own legal justice arguments in the future.”

„I am inspired! I used to think I was alone in fighting for my rights, but I am not.”

“Excellent organisation. The discussions on the case studies were great.”

“I really liked how the material was delivered and the presenters themselves!”

“Everything that I learnt will really help me in the future.”



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HUMAN RIGHTS IN BULGARIA, 2017-2021

2017-2021: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

The situation of human rights in Bulgaria has been on the decline for years: Certain Issues in areas such as freedom of expression, women's rights and migrant and refugee rights have not only persisted, but have also been exacerbated. This has been a result of the long-standing political, economic and social uncertainty in the country and further pushed to the surface by COVID-19.

Bulgaria's position in the Press Freedom Index has continuously dropped to its current 112th place. In 2018, the police arrested two journalists, while they were investigating a corruption scheme with EU funds. During the 2020 anti-government protests, others lost their job just for asking questions.

LGBTI+ people have faced hate speech and discrimination, which has culminated in physical attacks on several occasions. Most recently in October 2021, a far-right presidential candidate stormed the Rainbow hub, a popular LGBTI+ venue, as all other available civil society spaces continue to shrink.

COVID-19 has added to those challenges. For example, the Roma community has been subjected to discriminatory practices under the health measures. The domestic violence reports have also soared during and after the lockdowns. A case in November 2021 with a lethal ending shocked the nation.

Most of those challenges are not unique to Bulgaria, but a part of a global rollback of rights. In fact, the country is an illustration and had a special role in a number of issues of global relevance: Examples are the infamous Bulgarian "migrant hunters" during the refugee and migrant crisis and NSO's Pegasus as the investigation into the spyware revealed a Bulgarian trail in the scandal.

Freedom of expression

Since 2017, media freedom in Bulgaria has been progressively deteriorating. Ranked at 112 in the World Press Freedom Index in 2021, Bulgaria has the lowest score in Europe after Russia, Belarus and Turkey. Lack of media pluralism, self-censorship and intimidation are among the main issues.

In May 2018, journalist Hristo Geshov, who was investigating local corruption, was beaten outside his home in Cherven Bryag. In September of the same year, police handcuffed two investigative reporters and their lawyer near the town of Radomir, and kept them in detention for seven hours.

In September 2019, photojournalist Veselin Borishev spent a night in jail after police arrested him for taking pictures of them during a protest. Exactly a year later, the police physically assaulted several journalists, covering the anti-government protests in Sofia. One was detained for hours.

Women's rights

In 2018, the Constitutional Court ruled that the Istanbul Convention contradicts the Constitution. The authorities further claimed that the national legislation provides sufficient protection, though Bulgaria continues to lack a mechanism for a systematic collection of data on domestic violence.

Women have also remained underrepresented in city councils and as mayors after the 2019 local elections. Women govern only 37 out of 256 municipalities. The country's result in the Global Gender Gap index deteriorated too, placing Bulgaria 49th in the world, while it used to be 18th of 153 states.

In 2020, the figures on domestic violence were aggravated by the COVID-19 lockdowns and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) reported that at least eight women were killed by their partners.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

In February 2018, local authorities in Elin Pelin refused to receive a Syrian family that had been granted humanitarian status in Bulgaria. The mayor publicly warned that Muslims from Syria were not welcome and refused to register them. Others shared this approach, while the central authorities issued an order restricting the freedom of movement for registered asylum-seekers. This imposed territorial limits for asylum-seekers. Bulgaria did not sign the Global Compact for Migration either.

In 2019, detention, including of unaccompanied children, remained a routine. Irregular migrants in detention centres had limited access to legal representation, interpretation or health care, including essential psychological and psychiatric care. Integration measures were mostly non-existent.

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Even though the reception centres remained almost empty in 2020, the country failed to accept people trying to escape the conundrum at the Greek-Turkish border in early spring. The same happened later to those on the street after the fire in Moria. The asylum-seekers, who faced COVID-19 within Bulgaria, experienced job loss, troubles accessing education and psychological distress.

Human rights education

Human rights is only an optional course at the law faculties of Bulgarian universities and is rarely included in the curriculums, provided by other faculties. Since 2020, Bulgaria introduced civic education in schools with the development and the training of teachers still at an early stage. Human rights and human rights education are not part of the draft of the forthcoming Youth Strategy either.

Children's rights

There has been a strong division in Bulgaria on the topic of children's rights in the recent years. When the new Child Strategy (2019-2027) was to be adopted, a number of disinformation campaigns were carried out, suggesting that children were being abducted by third countries. In 2021, Bulgaria still has no strategic document in the field of children's rights. There are also private companies that, for the sake of maintaining their public reputation, refused to partner with UNICEF.

In most cases, when children come into initial contact with the criminal justice system, their rights are not protected. The measures taken (e.g. detention or police interview/interrogation) are not in the best interest of the child either and are not carried out properly. The current legislation is not fully compliant with EU standards and does not clearly indicate when a child has enhanced protection.

Rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people

Bulgaria has made no progress in improving the right to family life of LGBTI people, in adopting legislation against hate crimes and in ensuring a safe space for the LGBTI community. According to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, over 70% of LGBTI people in Bulgaria felt compelled to hide their sexual orientation and 40% avoided certain locations for fear of being assaulted or threatened.

Since 2020, a surge of physical attacks and violent threats against LGBTI people has been observed. In a homophobic attack in Plovdiv in September 2020, a group of young football fans physically attacked and injured several teenagers, some as young as 14, whom they perceived to be LGBTI.

In May 2021 the first-ever Pride in Bourgas, one of the major cities in Bulgaria, was held. Although the event gathered a small number of people, it was met with a heavy counter-demonstration and hostilities. Later that month, a far-right group violated a screening of a movie on an LGBTI topic.

Freedom of association

Although the existing legal frameworks in Bulgaria are compliant with EU standards, in recent years there were a number of attempts for passing restrictive legislative changes. Meanwhile, Bulgarian NGOs are often subject to smear attacks, led by politicians and politically affiliated media outlets.

NGOs, supporting the interests of North Macedonians in Bulgaria, have been denied registration. Despite decisions by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) that this violates the freedom of association, the judiciary and government are refusing to comply with the ECHR and its own law.

In July 2020, just two weeks after the European Court of Justice announced that the Hungarian Transparency Act is discriminatory, a bill to amend the Non-Profit Legal Entities Act was filed in the Bulgarian National Assembly. The proposal shared similarities with the Hungarian one. Since the start of the COVID-19 restrictions, there has also been a legal uncertainty whether a meeting of a supreme body of an NGO, in which some or all members are participating online, is legal or not.

Discrimination

Discrimination against the Roma community can be seen in many different forms. Telling examples are the education system, where schools are segregated and there is a very low percentage of Roma representatives in the higher education institutions. Right to work, access to housing and healthcare are also very problematic areas. During COVID-19, there have been cases where fences were constructed to isolate Roma neighbourhoods, preventing them from accessing medical care or work.

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With regard to people with disabilities, Bulgaria's legislation is still being transformed in accordance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. People with intellectual disabilities in Bulgaria are still being deprived of their legal capacity in violation of art. 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A sign language law was passed in 2021, but the lack of sign language translators is a huge challenge for the deaf community.

Counter-terrorism measures

Anti-money laundering regulations, meant to stop the financing of terrorism, are still imposing a disproportionate administrative burden on NGOs and the broader civil society space.

Climate and human rights

The continued reliance on fossil fuels emits excessive amounts of carbon dioxide. Many people continue to rely on coal and wood for heating, which increases the level of fine particulate matter.

2021: SPOTLIGHT CASE STUDIES

General Director of the Bulgarian National Radio resigns

In August, Mr. Andon Baltakov, the then General Director of the Bulgarian National Radio, seen by many as one of the few independent media still providing accurate information, unexpectedly announced his resignation stating "personal reasons". Shortly after, he explained the actual reasons behind his resignation, elaborating that in June he found evidence of someone illegally entering his private apartment. Since nothing was stolen, Mr. Baltakov saw this as a clear sign of intimidation.

The authorities did not have any response and did not announce any investigatory actions. The media response was also vague as major media quoted him, but did not trigger any investigations.

Domestic violence and public discourse on women

A recent 2021 case of domestic violence with a lethal end shocked the nation as a husband suffocated his wife to death. The perpetrator's father helped him put the body in a suitcase and tossed it in a river near Pernik. They kept silent for a month complaining about the lack of information from the police, demonstrating their pain and sorrow up until the body was discovered, and the men arrested.

Despite the increased instances of domestic violence and general misogynistic statements, including by politicians, political parties failed to address gender equality and women's rights in the run up to the 2021 elections. In the few instances, when women were mentioned, this was in the context of motherhood and fighting the demographic crisis and, at best, as victims of domestic violence.

"Refugee and migrant hunters" on the rise again

Accommodation standards for asylum seekers remain substandard. The country's Ombudsperson reported in August that the safe zone for unaccompanied minors in Voenna Rampa offers poor and unhygienic conditions and is overcrowded. There have also been increased cases of actions against migrants and asylum seekers executed by the so-called "refugee hunters", who first gained notoriety in 2016. Social media channels are plentiful of videos, where people with guns and ropes boast about their "catch", filming people in helpless condition on the ground with their hands tied on their back.

Bulgaria's role in the Pegasus Project

In July, a ground-breaking collaboration of many investigative journalists, supported by the forensic expertise of AI's experts, uncovered that governments massively targeted many activists, journalists, politicians and officials across the world with the help of the hacking software Pegasus. This software was developed by NSO Group Technologies, an Israeli company, which exports its products from Bulgaria and Cyprus. This placed Bulgaria at the heart of the huge human rights scandal, yet no large-scale government-led investigation was launched to fully uncover the case.

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WITH EACH NEW YEAR, A NEW LESSON

2017: TELL THE BASIC STORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Bulgaria has been no exception to today's politics of demonisation and rollback of rights, but 2017 was a true watershed moment. While we, a growing community of human rights activists, had long put our hearts and minds into confronting these injustices, that year we witnessed a vicious and continued assault on the rights of refugees and migrants, including unaccompanied children. The refugees and migrants were met with division and ethnic-based agendas and there was no strong human rights movement in Bulgaria and possibly the surrounding Balkans to counter these ill narratives. Previously such issues were equated only to the Global South, but had now firmly occupied our every day too. We took this injustice personally, gathered a few of our fellow activists, and started brainstorming on the best way to start a collective and more sophisticated action to help the refugees and migrants, whose rights were being violated at the borders and within Bulgaria.

Asking the right questions

In this process, we first needed to ask the right questions. The most thought-provoking among them was also perhaps the most obvious: Why has there been no strong human rights movement in Bulgaria? It was quite puzzling why the broader society had not stood up for an agenda, which would irrefutably help every individual as it would promote their right to work, access to healthcare, freedom of expression and other critical issues in Bulgaria, besides the refugee and migrant crisis.

Our answer was that society is simply unaware of the basic story of human rights. For some time, human rights organisations in Bulgaria have focused only on minority issues. These tasks are most vital, but they will not be successful if one forgets to also speak to the broader community on the overall value of human rights and solicit their active support. In other words, a strong human rights movement of people requires a lot of people. All people. And along the way the organisations in Bulgaria forgot to speak to the broader society and educate it on how an individual can defend their own rights and those of others. This is how everyone could start taking injustice personally.

The first lesson we learnt

This is also how it became clear that we need to go beyond the refugee and migrant topic and start engaging the public on society-wide issues such as women's rights and freedom of expression. The common denominator of all those efforts were the basic principles of human rights. In other words, already in the first couple of months since the start of our collective thinking, we realized that human rights education is going to be our main instrument, since we have to start reminding and telling people the basic story of human rights and how everyone fits into it as its main protagonist. No other organisation had taken such an approach in the country, so there was a niche in what can only be described as the best way to make a sustainable, generational change in the human rights agenda in Bulgaria. This was the first lesson we learnt since our initial gathering and brainstorming in 2017.

With this understanding in mind, we assembled the first team. We combined expertise of refugee and migrant issues with experience in programme management, so that we can gradually expand to other society-wide topics. We then further brainstormed why it is strategically important to reinforce the human rights agenda in Bulgaria, including the European Union's attention on the Western Balkans, the growing Russian propaganda in the region, the aftermath of the coup d'état attempt in Turkey, etc. The next question was the platform, upon which we can build our approach.

2018: BE A PART OF A HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The next key question was how to develop engaging educational content. AI immediately stood out with its expertise and tools on its online Academy. If we had a Bulgarian translation of it, this would provide easily accessible, free-of-charge and high quality courses to the local community. Besides, we figured that an AI grassroots was also a unique way to challenge any injustice via campaigning. So, it became clear that we could truly shine a light on the challenges in Bulgaria only as a collective part of AI's global movement. Supported by millions of people worldwide, we would grow a grassroots movement that broadens societal support and understanding of human rights.

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Eventually, we built up courage and in early 2018 messaged AI. We received a positive reply by Ms. Dáša van der Horst and Mr. Dražen Puljić, and went to Brussels to meet. This was a milestone for us: We were privileged not only to receive their initial commitment and support to the project, but also to glimpse into the machinery of AI, receiving invaluable advice on the complexities of movement building and its common challenges. This steered our thoughts well and we wrote a paper on our initial vision and approach. Under the guidance of AI, we devised the so-called “Initiative for AI in Bulgaria”, a platform to test our ideas and resilience, and to gather an initial mass of supporters.

To that end, we also compared notes with the Human Rights Directorate of the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry. Inspired by our good progress, we then published our thoughts on just a couple of Facebook pages, but received an overwhelming support: 55 people wrote back to us. That empowered us even more and we came up with our first informal „database” of activists. We met everyone individually and invited a few fellow activists to help coordinate the upcoming community: This is how our initial core team grew to 12 coordinators, each of us bringing different knowledge to the table.

This team has been a source of courage and inspiration: The cumulative skillset and many years of experience in Caritas Internationalis, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Plan International, AIESEC, Europol, UNICEF and others constantly drive us forward. In fact, as of now, there are only two human rights trainers in Bulgaria, certified by the Council of Europe – and both of them became part of our core team right from the start. So, the second key lesson could not have been clearer: Having AI’s global movement as the backbone of our work, with its constant exchange of ideas and support between activists, was, has been and will remain a critical inspiration for people and like-minded organisations to join our community. Human rights are about a movement of people and the feeling of belonging to the most prominent and vibrant human rights movement in the world is like standing on the shoulders of giants. And we tried to make the best out of it from the start.

Human rights education

In April our initial ideas started to turn into a reality, but we were still hesitant. We thought that in order to educate others and dive into programmes and outreach, we should first educate ourselves and build our own capacity. So, we organized two internal educational workshops. The first was on the particulars of human rights. This is how we made sure every team member is on the same page regarding human rights. The second workshop was on how to run social initiatives, introducing key project management methods. Both events, delivered by experts, turned out to be crucial for any of our success stories later. The workshops also led to the first draft of our work programme.

Freedom of expression

In May, we felt ready to kick-start the public life of our Initiative by emphasizing what this whole effort is about: raising the awareness of human rights of each and every person. So, our first project was to organize an open debate about press freedom, precisely because the free exchange of ideas is the cornerstone of raising awareness. On 2 May, on the eve of World Press Freedom Day, we held our first larger public discussion. There were around 60 attendees and 3 special guests, who all debated press freedom, a key part of the fight against the shrinking space for activists. The first two guests – a renowned professor in media law and a member of the Association of European Journalists Bulgaria – outlined the press freedom issues, which Bulgaria faces. Then, a representative of a well-known website – “Pod Mosta” – share good practices on how to remain independent and defend the hard-won freedoms. This sparked an interesting debate, which has been reflected in our work later.

Women’s rights

Another topic, which we quickly realized had the potential to unite different groups of the society, is women’s rights. Henceforth that became a priority and we started delving into the subject by writing articles on the forms of domestic violence in collaboration with a fellow civic platform called Academy for Civic Education. Afterwards we wrote a snap report to the International Secretariat on the failure of Bulgaria to ratify the Istanbul Convention. Finally, we joined a march against domestic violence, forming first connections with NGOs and civic groups, who deal with this topic in Bulgaria.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

We knew that the rights of refugees and migrants could sometimes be a polarizing topic, so we tried to be extra creative in this subject and reach out to the community in a more informal and engaging way. So, we first organised a pub quiz on migration and human rights at the end of June to mark

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the World Refugee Day. Later, we capitalized on this by organizing a public discussion on the rights of migrants and refugees to mark the International Human Rights Day and to raise awareness about the Global Compact for Migration that Bulgaria decided not to support. In addition, we supported the promotion of the European Citizens' Initiative "We are a welcoming Europe, let us help!" in Bulgaria. Towards the end of the year, we took part in the so-called Refugee Month, which is a flagship event in Bulgaria regarding refugees with the participation of UNHCR, Caritas and others.

Communications, social media and partnerships

Raising awareness goes hand in hand with compelling communications and partnership efforts. This is why we quickly started building the social media presence of the Initiative by launching a Facebook group and a page. We came up with a regular publishing schedule and ran our first mini social media campaign titled "Human Rights Pioneers in Bulgaria". We followed up with another campaign on how advanced technologies such as bioengineering could be used for the benefit of human rights. Our social media work proved valuable as a word about our existence gradually spread: In mid-year, we were invited to participate in the annual Festival of Tolerance in Bulgaria, together with another 10 organisations and civic groups, working in the field of inclusion, diversity and cultural exchange.

Organisational development and relations with Amnesty

In June, we drafted the organisation's first new member onboarding procedure, which has been continuously updated since then. In the second part of the year, we focused our attention on drafting various internal procedures regarding privacy policy, internal communications and budget workflows.

In July, we hosted an evaluation visit by Mr. Dražen Puljić of the International Secretariat to Bulgaria and received very positive feedback on our development as well as suggestions on what to further focus on. In the meantime we also started exchanging ideas with Ms. Jelena Sesar from the European Regional Office, which was also crucial: She discussed with us AI's substantive agenda, so that we were able to start sending London factsheets of human rights events and issues in Bulgaria, relevant to AI's work. This way we have hoped to be the organisation's eyes and ears in the area.

With more and larger efforts and events came larger exposure, and we started to receive interest from many people and organisations. This could have been best described as the growing pains of our own achievements, because at the time we did not have a streamlined organisational capacity to accommodate that increased interest. This is why we started to put a lot of effort into creating a flexible organizational framework. We really geared up this strand of work during the following year.

2019: HAVE A MATURE APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS

At the start of 2019, we felt we had already felt the pulse of the society and its inflexion points regarding human rights. Yet, we were also aware that we did not have a long-term winning strategy yet. In other words, we were and still are aware that there is no decisive battle for human rights and our fight is an enduring one. Hence, already in 2019 we started investing time and energy into ensuring the continuity of our project, beyond its reliance on a single individual or even a group of individuals. Our vision has always been to grow a sustainable human rights movement of people in Bulgaria, but in 2019 we started to build the foundations to achieve this long-term goal.

Firstly, we knew that we had to start prioritizing our substantive work more rigorously, so that our primary, if not only, resources – our time and skills – were invested where they counted the most. This was yet another valuable lesson, which Mr. Dražen Puljić had shared with us during his previous evaluation visit in July 2018. Indeed, we took course to focus and further align our work priorities to AI's 2018-2019 Operational Planning Strategy Framework. Previously we undertook initiatives without much strategic thought and our workshops and campaigning were a product of spontaneous realization. Sometimes that made us spread too thinly and we were covering a wide range of human rights-related topics, including technology and legal justice. Therefore, the three themes, which had naturally emerged as priorities the previous year, were then formally laid down into an Action Plan. This also fitted well with AI's regional priorities: freedom of expression, women's rights, and refugees' and migrants' rights. The main instrument remained human rights education.

Secondly, we made significant steps towards a resilient organizational framework, optimizing our existing policies and adding new procedures, where needed. As a rule of thumb, we aimed at having a light administrative footprint on what should be an organic movement. This is why we created a simple two-fold structure: Some of us became "members", whereas others "coordinators". The latter

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have different portfolios and this distribution of responsibility fosters an effective action. All of this culminated in October, when we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the International Secretariat and became an AI Group and so the first-ever formalised presence of AI in our country.

These efforts marked our coming of age: Our thinking of how to grow a sustainable, people-centred movement significantly matured. We focused our resources more carefully, where they created the biggest value and became more resilient organizationally. This would prove extremely provident just a few months ahead, when we had to move all our operations online, due to COVID-19. Hence, in retrospect, the key lesson was that while it is attractive to tackle injustices as they come, human rights activists should have a mature approach in their substance and organisation. And the earlier one starts maturing their approach, the better as the next challenge just might be around the corner to test you. Yet, though we ticked that box very well, that was not our only achievement that year.

Human rights education

As human rights education became the key instrument, the conclusion was that we had to develop various tools and approaches to it. 2019 started with a preparation of a Forum Theatre, addressing women's rights issues. We published an open call for 'actors' and, after the group gathered, we started practicing. The final result was a theatre play focusing on gender-based violence, so we named it "These are not Cinderella's shoes. Step in her shoes". It took place in the Students' Theatre of Sofia University at the very end of February. There were nearly 70 spectators and some of them also took part in the act by improvising. The outreach was strong and helped us establish closer connections with the Bulgarian Fund for Women, whose representative was one of the actors, too.

During the next couple of months we focused on internal activities and synchronizing our general understanding, focusing on the toolkits, publications and manuals of AI about education. We also put emphasis on the need to develop online education opportunities in Bulgarian. This became even more obvious after we participated in one human rights festival, where we ran the Write for Rights campaign: Many people wanted to participate and promote the campaign in their digital networks.

Freedom of expression

To create a ripple effect, we used the annual release of the Freedom of Press Index by Reporters without Borders to create a social media campaign on press freedom. That year Bulgaria ranked 111 out of 180 countries regarding press freedom, downgraded by two since 2017. The report pointed to an increase of physical attacks, collusion between the media, authorities and oligarchs. We put forward a critical discussion and engaged with the audience of why this tendency is alarming as Bulgaria ranked and continues to rank lower than any other EU Member State and lower than any Western Balkans' state. We pointed the fact that the print media is controlled at 80% by groups, connected to the government, and that the allocation of EU funding to certain media outlets is also conducted with little to no transparency. Yet, freedom of expression goes far beyond press freedom, so that year we also took part in the annual Sofia Pride for the very first time as an organised group.

Women's rights

As women's rights were a priority for us right from the start, we were getting traction in this field and were invited to speak at the annual march for the Right of Women on 8 March. Yet, except for recognition by fellow civic groups, we also received such by government officials: We were also invited to participate in a working group, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on devising an implementation plan of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

Meanwhile, we also wanted to have our own effort, beyond traditional advocacy and campaigning. We decide to innovate and produced a theatre play on women's rights, in which amateur actors enacted the life of a couple, who was marred by domestic abuse issues. Most importantly, we also factored in the actions of neighbors and relatives. The audience loved it and this type of set-up engaged more people than more traditional methods, while serving as an education mechanism.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Between November and December, we participated in the flagship Refugee Month event. Yet, that time around our role was a lot more prominent than in 2018: We were not just participating, but co-organising this event, which usually gathers more than 15 organisations, among which the UNHCR, the Red Cross and other influential organisations. Our contribution was well received and we strengthened our positions in the larger activist community. Earlier in the year, we also co-organised

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a pub quiz with CVS-Bulgaria, equivalent to the one we did in 2018. The event was dedicated precisely to refugee rights as this is a creative way to approach an otherwise challenging topic.

Communications, social media and partnerships

In January, we achieved an important social media milestone by welcoming our 1000th follower of our Facebook page. This follower base was achieved only via organic reach. Later, we also expanded our social media presence to LinkedIn. This happened alongside our official recognition as a Group, which led to another achievement: the successful and smooth rebranding of our networks with the AI logo, typeface and all other visual elements in line with the organisation's branding requirements. We are thankful to AI's Design Studio and specifically Ms. Viktoriya Moshkina for their great support.

As communications also have a life of their own, very much beyond their support role, our team also organised our participation in "Dobrofest" (in English: "Fair of Goodness"). This was a gathering of more than 30 non-governmental organizations on the occasion of the International Volunteer Day. We used this opportunity to raise general awareness about the Group's activities and ran the first ever Write for Rights campaign in Bulgaria. With many thanks to Amnesty International Slovenia, we prepared the letter materials and were able to actively participate in the global effort by sending heartfelt letters from many local activists. We finished the campaign with online publications.

Organisational development and relations with Amnesty

Indeed, 2019 was when did the most in terms of organizational development to set the scene for any success stories on substance later. We enhanced our project management workflows, resource guidelines and internal communications and added new frameworks, where needed. As at that point we had no AI budget, so in our efforts we also aimed at having economies of scale. The biggest fruit of our labor came in October, when we signed the Memorandum with the International Secretariat, which formalized our Group and effectively created the first-ever AI presence in Bulgaria. Meanwhile, we also further strengthened our relations with the International Secretariat by trying to be their eyes and ears on the ground and sending snap situational reports on human rights-related issues and events in the country. For example, we wrote a report on the right-wing salutes and racism, which marred a Bulgaria-England football game in Sofia and another one regarding a party in the then-ruling coalition, which requested the termination of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. The year ended with a visit by Mr. Dražen Puljić of the International Secretariat, with whose guidance we wrote our first fully-fledged, annual Operational Plan. Yet, little did we know what 2020 would bring.

2020: FOSTER VARIOUS HUMAN RIGHTS PARTNERSHIPS

As this was our first year as an AI Group, we entered 2020 with a renewed enthusiasm and an ambitious Operational Plan, aligned to AI's Operational Planning Strategy Framework. Little did we know that 2020 would bring various unexpected challenges, due to the severe COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, those challenges were also opportunities, so with a little creativity we even exceeded our initial planning. Inevitably, much happened online, but this is precisely why this had more long-term effects: With the partnership of AI, we delivered the first-ever online course on human rights in Bulgarian, a milestone for local activism. Indeed, education continued to be our key instrument and we organized interactive trainings, which our graduates loved. We also did interviews with the Bulgarian nominee for the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression and, thanks to our partnership with the Bulgarian Fund for Women, with a renowned psychologist to shine a light on domestic violence. We created campaigns to inspire people, but also to advocate decision-makers on key issues such as COVID-19. In those efforts, we approached governmental institutions not as a contestant to human rights, which some in Bulgaria tend to do, but as a needed partner in a collective human rights effort. This was us trying to build bridges in an otherwise fragmented sector.

The pandemic put us to a test, but at the end we proved our organizational resilience, mostly thanks to our efforts from the previous year. This is why we managed to turn our substance and flagship project, Refugee Month, into a success: We organized more than 15 other organisations, each with a different expertise, to raise awareness on refugee issues. Taking the initiative to continue Refugee Month's tradition, despite COVID-19, enhanced our image as a valuable partner. We had previously started a dialogue with many such as UNICEF Bulgaria and Red Cross Bulgaria, but now we put our

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words to action. We also shared ideas across the global AI movement, including with Slovenia, Greece and Czech Republic, learning something new about human rights from each section.

Looking back, we would not had been able to translate the online courses in Bulgarian without the partnership of the Global Human Rights team in Oslo. We would not had been able to continue Refugee Month without the local partnership of dozens of organisations. And certainly, we would not had been able to reach our stage of development without each advice from fellow AI entities across Europe and beyond. So, the next lesson was clear: Human rights are a collective effort and fostering various partnerships with institutions and fellow organizations is a critical enabler for success as no one can cover the full geographical and substantive range of human rights, so partnerships are key.

Human rights education

Our comparative advantage – our evolving human rights education expertise – vis-à-vis other NGOs and groups was already becoming clear in 2020. In other words, all planned activities were implemented in full, after having been adapted to social distancing. Having experienced professionals in the team, we organized two online trainings, each of several days. The first was an introduction to human rights and AI, whereas the second built on it and promoted the Write for Rights. As a follow-up, the participants wrote articles and organized local actions to promote the campaign. The feedback was inspiring. We also developed a curriculum, tailored for public administration staff.

Yet, we felt most thrilled about the one project that had been on the back of our minds since 2017: translating courses from AI's Academy. With the partnership of the Global Human Rights Education team, we signed a Memorandum to start the process and one of our key achievements in 2020 was exactly the translation of the "Write for Rights" online course. This was the first Academy course in Bulgarian and the first human rights online course in the country ever. Six people took part in the efforts over a period of three weeks. We also took measures to later sign the Global Data Passport, so that we would be able to provide statistics on how many people have completed the courses.

2020 was also the year where our representatives started to attend the online meetings, planning sessions, campaign calls and other activities, organised by the Global Human Rights Education Team.

Freedom of expression

In May, we initiated a press freedom campaign on the basis of an educational article. It covered the issues in Bulgaria, underlined in the Press Freedom Index, such as the politicians' narrative, attacking the merits of the Index itself. The article had a very good reach of more than 5000 people and more than 500 engagements on Facebook. Later, we also gave an interview for the Bulgarian National Radio for the World Day against Cyber Censorship and conducted two educational modules.

Yet, we not only gave interviews, but also conducted one with the Bulgarian nominee for UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression: Ms. Iveta Cherneva is a human rights activist with a broad international experience. She reached out to us in June to support her run for the UN job. We conducted an exploratory meeting with her and eventually decided to publish an interview, which highlighted the issues Bulgaria faces in freedom of expression and how the UN could help.

Women's rights

We led a number of campaigns that year to raise awareness to the issues women face and to praise their achievements. In March, our campaign, highlighting prominent women from Bulgaria's history, reached over 5000 people. During the first COVID-19 lockdown in spring, we also published articles, warning about the rise in domestic violence cases and suggesting good governmental practices.

Thanks to a partnership with the Bulgarian Fund for Women, in June we also conducted a live online interview on Facebook with one of the leading psychologists in the field of domestic violence in Bulgaria. The topic drew the attention of more than 18,000 people, while the engagement reached 800 people. Many asked various questions and shared their thoughts after the initial presentation.

In November, we participated in the public consultation about the Bulgarian national strategy for encouragement of equality of men and women for 2021-2030. The position and recommendations of our statement drew the attention of other women's rights organizations in Bulgaria, which offered to partner with us to fight for more proactive commitments by the government for gender equality.

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Refugees' and migrants' rights

Everything in our Plan was implemented, despite the pandemic and we even managed to do more. We conducted two educational modules on refugee rights as part of our educational initiatives and delivered a myth busting campaign to help deal with some of the misconceptions concerning asylum-seekers and refugees. In March, we supported an open letter to the European Commission and the Bulgarian government, expressing concern over the events at the Turkish-Greek border.

Importantly, we were the initiators and chief organizers of 2020's Refugee Month, a series of events each year to promote refugees rights. We did so despite COVID-19, coordinating more than 15 organizations such as the UNHCR and Humans in the Loop. We supported them in adapting their activities to an online environment and we are proud of the achieved. No other organisation was willing to take on this challenge during COVID-19, so this solidified our image as a reliable partner.

Earlier in the year, we also marked World Refugee Day with a street action. We asked passers-by a simple question – "What is home for you?" This was key to engaging them into a conversation that they might have otherwise tried to avoid. The outcome is 50 people, who were involved in a meaningful discussion on the topic of refugee rights and learned more about us and AI in general.

Emergency work strand: COVID-19

In Bulgaria, as elsewhere, COVID-19 opened not only health issues, but also brought to the surface many long-standing problems in regards to the right to housing and sanitation, and workers' rights, just to mention a few. Those were at the top of the public agenda, so while we did not anticipate such efforts in our initial planning, we could not spare any resources to be responsive to the issue of the day: This is how we tested and demonstrated our ability to adapt and our strong connect to the societal problems. We joined the #StayHome campaign and wrote an article on the derogation of rights during a state of emergency. We also translated AI's "Europe at a Crossroads: Dos and Don'ts for Authorities when responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic" and circulated it to authorities.

Communications, social media and partnerships

In 2020, we increased our communication efforts in two main directions: winning over the broader society and positioning our Group as a reliable partner for NGOs, but also decision-makers. We increased our communications, which resulted in a higher reach and increased awareness of human rights topics. We improved our presence on Facebook, expanded to Medium and made important steps towards building a sustainable community of supporters. The Group also stress-tested different types of street actions such as the so-called Yellow Chair and other new online formats.

In 2020, we made first steps towards a fruitful partnership with Bulgarian media, a critical element of raising human rights awareness. On the request of AI, we also developed a media distribution list with over 30 responsive contacts of national and regional TV, radio, print and online outlets. We used it to distribute several press releases and test media sensitivity to human rights.

Yet, the partnerships' aspect goes far beyond media and we have made deliberate efforts to foster a relationship with various likeminded organisations. We were proactive and in the beginning of the year sent letters to many institutions, NGOs and informal platforms to start the process of finding a common ground for action. This led to and supported many projects such as Refugee Month, the interview on domestic violence, but also advocacy efforts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Organisational development and relations with Amnesty

We continued our organisational progress and welcomed more than 30 new volunteers, some of which became core team members whilst others indicated their desire to work on a campaign base. In March, we also finalized our Data Protection Policy in line with the GDPR requirements. We also put in place further procedures, related to expanding the membership of our Facebook group, in which human rights activists can share relevant information, ideas and offer activism opportunities. In July, several members joined AI's Workspace on Facebook to forge new relationships with other sections and Secretariat staff. This has led to us having a better understanding of the way other sections and generally AI work. It has also opened doors for many new collaborations.

However, in 2020 we also realized that none of the efforts above would be sustainable if we do not go forward with having a legal entity in Bulgaria as well. A list of reasons to support our case was

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drafted and sent to AI. Meanwhile, we also continued to monitor human rights events in Bulgaria and sent snap reports to AI. Some of the topics we wrote on included a troublesome Volunteers in Police Programme, which could legitimize vigilante border patrols; the derogation of human rights, due to COVID-19; proposed piecemeal amendments to the Law on Radio and Television in Bulgaria.

2021: TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

This year, five years since the start of our collective action, is when we really started noticing a lot of tangible results from our long-standing efforts. For example, more have looked for us for expertise and partnership, including Bulgarian schools that wish to include human rights in their programmes. More TV and radio stations have reached out to us regarding key topics such as the Pegasus Project and cyber censorship. Furthermore, we were one of only five NGOs and civic platforms in the country to be invited to participate in a visit to Bulgaria by the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) and by the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture. This was an unequivocal recognition for our long-standing efforts and previous successes.

Yet, we did not let past successes prevent our future growth and entered 2021 with an even more ambitious operational plan than last year. Having a much better understanding of where our weak and strong sides are, we devised an implementable plan and were also able to add more to it as we go. We did various campaigns on women's rights, refugees and migrants, freedom of expression and interrelated topics. We continued with our educational workshops and implemented in Bulgarian perhaps the most fundamental course at AI's online Academy: the Introduction to Human Rights.

Recognizing our actions, the AI's international members, registered from Bulgaria, have increased with the significant 17 percent. The word about us has further spread across the AI movement and there is a growing coalition of AI stakeholders, who support us in moving from an AI Group to an AI Structure. The legal and financial aspects of this would enable us to do so much more and realize our growth potential. It is also a natural step in our development and fulfills the commitments we laid down to human rights in Bulgaria, when we were only at the beginning of our collective action.

While we have been very inspired by these developments, our biggest positive story in 2021 unfolded due to the six newcomers in our core team. They all carried loads of new passion and creativity into our Group and, most importantly, quickly took personal responsibility for many initiatives. This has been truly moving to witness as perhaps one of the biggest enemies to human rights is apathy. Seeing our newcomers' readiness to take personal responsibility pinpointed the next lesson: Human rights defence is dependent on more and more people taking personal responsibility for human rights injustices. This realization further motivated us to follow up on our own previous commitments to the human rights in Bulgaria and accept the challenge of starting the Structure recognition process.

Human rights education

Human rights education continued to be the cornerstone of our efforts. We concluded a series of online educational workshops, which highlighted the interplay of human rights with active citizenship and with democracy. When the COVID-19 circumstances allowed, we also visited schools physically. Notably, this year we also went outside Sofia – to the city of Pazardzhik – on an invite by a local school. This was inspirational as we were able to deliver lesson to five classes of motivated pupils. Meanwhile, we further developed our training methodology for public officials. This would be used in future joint initiatives with institutions, because not having a legal entity currently prevents us from entering into the required partnership agreement with ministries and other government agencies.

We also translated in Bulgarian the foundational course at the AI's online Academy, the Introduction to Human Rights. The 3-hour long course took months to implement, but the result is nothing short of a landmark for Bulgarian activism: The course provides the basics, on which any activist could build up their human rights understanding. But we are not stopping there and thanks to a budget, provided by AI Portugal, we are purchasing an Articulate Rise account – the software, which is used to implement courses into AI's Academy. In effect, this would allow us to do most of the Academy work on our own and would spare many resources of the involved AI teams. Finally, we exchanged lessons learnt with AI Czech Republic and are planning a study visit to Prague in early 2022.

Freedom of expression

While new ideas are necessary, establishing traditions also has a distinct value. Our work on freedom of expression mostly followed the latter pathway in 2021. For instance, for a second year in a row

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we gave an interview to the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) regarding online censorship and dissemination of fake news. This marked the World Day Against Cyber Censorship. We also sent AI a snap report on the alleged harassment and subsequent resignation of the Director of the BNR, which outlet is considered by many as one of the few lasting independent media in the country.

For yet another year, we also carried out an elaborative online campaign to raise awareness about the issues of the freedom of media in Bulgaria against the background of the latest Freedom of Press Index, on which Bulgaria again scored poorly. This campaign has become an annual activity for us, so we are really raising our profile in this key human rights area among other NGOs and civic groups.

This is precisely why the freedom of expression, together with freedom of association, were among the key points we raised during the visit of the European Parliament's LIBE. There was a natural distribution of labour amongst the five civil sector representatives, who joined the discussions with the MEPs, and our Group gladly took the responsibility to cover this important topic for Bulgaria.

Women's rights

We achieved a lot on the women's rights advocacy front. We formed committees with a number of feminist organizations in order to synchronize statements on draft government strategies regarding gender equality. On behalf of the Group, we also prepared feedback, in line with AI's positions, on a draft amendment of the law on protection from domestic violence. We were also invited to participate in the policy discussions on the forthcoming Protection against Domestic Violence Act.

We reinforced our advocacy efforts with various information campaigns. For example, we created a poll on and after International Equal Pay Day to investigate how many of our followers know about the gender pay gap in Bulgaria. Yet, our key campaign started on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women: In the span of the 16 days that followed, we published stories of women, victims of sexual violence and discrimination in the workplace, taken from publicly available court decisions. An artist from Russia reinforced the content with visuals.

During the year, we explored how to tackle additional issues on women's rights, but also new venues, which can help us do that. We met a diversity and inclusion specialist, as we have been planning to launch a new specific work strand under women's rights, beyond the fight against domestic violence. We also participated in webinars by partner organisations such as the Bulgarian Fund for Women and conceptualized an Ambassador programme that we may start in 2022, depending on resources.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Afghanistan was naturally in the spotlight of our efforts this year. After the issue climbed on the international agenda, we met an Afghan activist, living in Bulgaria, and in August joined a peaceful demonstration with the slogan "Solidarity with Afghanistan". Such events took place simultaneously across Europe. We also supported an open letter to the Bulgarian institutions regarding the situation in Afghanistan and calling for the acceptance of asylum seekers, escaping the Taliban regime.

Yet, we also wanted to take a personal responsibility, and later co-organized a Human Library event called "A Thousand Splendid Suns from Afghanistan". This also marked the International Day of Peace. The event attracted media and many visitors, who gave positive feedback and some joined our Facebook community. The Representative of UNHCR in Bulgaria was one of the "books" that people could read. He expressed gratitude for the invite and confirmed we will continue to cooperate.

Earlier in the year, as a part of our broader educational efforts, we also included the refugee topic in our online workshops. Then in June, we held an online and offline information campaign for the World Refugee Day under the slogan #FirstWeAreHuman. The authors of the 3 most voted for photos with messages in support of refugees received AI merchandise, thanks to AI Czech Republic.

Finally yet importantly, we also joined the discussions on the new National Migration Strategy 2021-2025 and participated in the 22nd Working Group on Integration, which is a gathering of NGOs and civic platforms in the field of refugees and asylum seekers to exchange ideas and work collectively.

Communications, social media and partnerships

Already at the start of our collective action, we realized communications go far beyond a supporting function, but are a portfolio in their own right. In fact, sometimes communications is all one has at

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their disposal to pursue their human rights goals. Hence, we had put much effort into mustering a collection of verbal and technology tools, with which to communicate successfully. This year it was time to synthesize those resources, see where they reinforce each other and evaluate how to further develop them. We have put all of this in a first draft of a long-term Communications Strategy. To feed in those discussions, we also exchanged lessons with AI Czech Republic on how communications should enable partnerships and fundraising, so we become financially sustainable in the long run.

In line with the upcoming Strategy and with the help of the two newcomers to the Communications team, we further developed our specific tools to reach the younger audience: We further developed our Medium page and created an account on Instagram at time of our fifth-year anniversary.

Yet, this year it was not just our anniversary, but also AI's global 60th anniversary. For the occasion, we created an outdoor event, inviting tens of passers-by to light a candle and learn more about AI. A video drone captured the event and we are producing a short clip to use at different occasions. In the same vein, we also made sure we are an extension to AI's global efforts beyond the anniversary activities. For example, we prepared a hybrid Write for Rights campaign, which took place online, but also physically at a Winter Market in Sofia. We also translated AI's press releases and disseminated them to various Bulgarian media. For example, national and private media in Bulgaria very quickly picked up AI's statement on the attack of the LGBTI centre by a presidential candidate.

Due to our efforts, we have been recognized as the point of contact of AI in Bulgaria. This year we received media requests linked to Pegasus, including by one of the biggest national TV channels. Unfortunately, the lack of Structure and the need to rely on AI's Secretariat resources to satisfy such requests prevented us from being able to fully capitalize on this achievement. Another such case was linked to the invite we got from UN's Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture. Being recognized as a Structure would solve such issues and give us both a strategic advantage in our communications and would also solve a number of technical challenges such as having our Facebook page verified.

Organisational development and relations with Amnesty

Taking responsibility and deciding to formally request that we start the Structure recognition process meant we really had to shape up organisationally. We had already laid down the foundations for a strong and resilient administrative structure, but now we started to formalize those processes according to the established practice of AI. For this reason, we initially participated in two workshops by Mr. Dražen Puljic, who delved into AI's structure, decision-making and organisational culture. This training enabled us to draft a Statute, which both satisfies Bulgarian national law, but also follows AI's administrative ethos. After the text is scrutinized by AI's legal experts, it would give life to AI's Bulgaria Structure, given our application is successful. We also started drafting a complete package of internal rules, which outline the methods for the day-to-day operations of the Structure.

In the meantime, we started to also intensify our relationship with various AI entities such as the ones in Greece, Slovenia, Czech Republic and many others. We sent snap reports to the International Secretariat on issues such as the resignation of the director of the Bulgarian National Radio. We have also defended and disseminated AI's positions and stances on issues such as the attack of the LGBTI centre in Sofia by a presidential candidate in the run-up to the elections in November.

In this endeavours, we are particularly thankful to Ms. Hilde Stals, the Chair of Amnesty International Vlaanderen, for standing behind our initiative as well as many other from the International Secretariat. The support we receive from such seasoned professionals and activists in human rights makes us proud of our achievements, but also humbled before the reality that we are only at the start of a long and challenging journey to defend human rights in Bulgaria and beyond.

The journey continues next year, so our organisational team also coordinated our annual end-of-year gathering to brainstorm and conclude our 2022 operational plan. Some of the events we have in mind would not have been possible without the generous financial support of AI Portugal and AI Czech Republic. Those events would not have been possible also without the six newcomers we welcomed into our team during this year, who have already given our workforce a significant boost.

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INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

2022: A NEW LESSON AWAITS

A key objective for 2022 is to translate more courses at AI's Academy. We have the experience and the tools to do it, having an Articulate Rise account. So, with the help of the Global Human Rights Education team, we are becoming self-sustainable in the education work. If we get the Structure status, we are also going to pilot the trainings for public officials, as this has required entering into a legal agreement with ministries. The legal entity would also make us eligible for funding on education and make us more financially sustainable. This would intensify our high-level engagement and participation of experts in our work, who often feel more contented joining a defined legal entity.

In 2022, we will also make any necessary corrections in our substantive priorities. Currently, our work strands remain freedom of expression, women's rights and refugees' and migrants' rights. While this has been a mixture of issues, which link various groups of our society, we are ready to reprioritize where our efforts would count the most. Having a Structure would further boost those processes: While we have been successful in getting our feet in the door of many working groups, the recognition and resources that come with a Structure, would enable us to truly take a leadership position in such discussions. We sense that others already expect this from us. Having a legal status would also help us collect data by making official requests to the government. Having a Structure would also be a symbolic move due to the deteriorating human rights situation in Bulgaria.

Such developments would also boost our communications and partnerships efforts. We feel that now we are starting to exhaust the instruments, available to us under the current Group status. However, having a legal entity would open many doors for us: For example, we would be able to 'verify' our Facebook page, which is a powerful tool to attract new followers. We would also be able to run ads by having a proper disclaimer. We would further become part of AI's media distribution lists and be able to distribute statements rapidly, which would improve our media relations. Except for media, pending partnerships with organisations such as UNHCR, who are more insistent on a formal, legal approach, would also come to fruition. We already have the contacts and the only missing part of the puzzle has been our legal status. Yet, having a legal entity would not serve only as an enabling factor, but also in our risk management: It would protect us better from any hate speech and disinformation campaigns, which are not rare against the non-governmental sector in Bulgaria.

Having a legal recognition would also move us from the administrative grey area, in which we are currently, towards an entity, which is safeguarded by the legal system. Not having a legal entity exposes us to a great deal of administrative, financial and reputational risk. So far, we have managed that risk well, but there are certain limitations. For example, we currently cannot have a fully-fledged GDPR framework, so that we can store and use personal data of volunteers. We have manoeuvred around this, but at the expense of an artificial ceiling in our volunteer base. Having a legal entity would empower us to attract and grow our activist base substantially. Finally, this would also allow us to be fully transparent, since legal requirements such as auditing would kick in. In sum, having a Structure and a legal entity would fully realize the vast growth potential we have amassed so far.

2022-2027: THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

While receiving a Structure and a legal entity status would be a giant substantive and organisational leap, this would not be enough on its own to fulfil the long-term vision that we have regarding the human rights situation in Bulgaria. In fact, this would be just one step of many more to come: We believe that after our possible organisational upgrade, we would need to write – under the guidance of the International Secretariat – a Strategic Concept for our development in Bulgaria for the next five years. This would put an edge to our efforts and ensure that we think and act strategically. For example, we would need to set-up long-term goals in the human rights education area on how to approach universities and schools to streamline human rights courses in their curriculums. Other objectives would include the coverage of international human rights issues; creating local groups outside the capital of Sofia; growing our volunteer base, so that we become financially sustainable; etc. This is how we hope that in the future every person in our region, who seeks to fight for their rights and for the rights of others, will find AI's global movement firmly by their side.

OUR FIVE-YEAR REPORT, 2017-2021

And our five lessons for the future of human rights

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND GROUP REFERENCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

These resources, together with our own experience and knowledge, were used to describe the human rights situation in Bulgaria between 2017 and 2021. Click on any link to access the document.

Amnesty International, International Secretariat

[Annual Report \(2020\)](#)

[Human Rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia \(2019\)](#)

[Annual Report \(2018\)](#)

US State Department Reports

[Bulgaria Human Rights Report \(2020\)](#)

[Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bulgaria \(2019\)](#)

[Bulgaria Human Rights Report \(2018\)](#)

Miscellaneous sources

[Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Annual Reports](#)

[European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: A long way to go for LGBTI equality \(2020\)](#)

[Reporters Without Borders, Press Freedom Index: Bulgaria \(2018-2021\)](#)

[Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Bulgaria National Report \(2010\)](#)

GROUP REFERENCES

You can click on any of the links below to access the respective document, produced by the Group, regarding our substantive and organisational work.

Key documents

[Operational plan \(2021\)](#)

[Financial report \(2021\)](#)

[Additional budget proposal \(2021\)](#)

[Budget request \(2021\)](#)

[Draft Statue \(2021\)](#)

[Annual Report \(2020\)](#)

[Operational plan \(2020\)](#)

[Budget planning \(2020\)](#)

[Financial report \(2020\)](#)

[Memorandum of understanding with the European Regional Office \(2019\)](#)

[Action plan \(2019\)](#)

[Group Recognition Request \(2018\)](#)

[First booklet of the initiative \(2018\)](#)

Examples of substance work

[An example of a monthly activity report to the International Secretariat \(2021\)](#)

[Bulgarian page on the Amnesty International Academy \(2021\)](#)

[An example of a situational report to the International Secretariat \(2020\)](#)

[Translated dos and don'ts for authorities when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic \(2020\)](#)

[An example of a communications campaign on women's rights \(2020\)](#)

Examples of organisational work

[Communications Strategy Outline \(2021\)](#)

[Case for having a legal entity in Bulgaria \(2020\)](#)

[Group GDPR framework \(2020\)](#)

[Sign-up form for new Group members \(2020\)](#)

[Selection of Group photos and visual elements \(2018-2021\)](#)

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