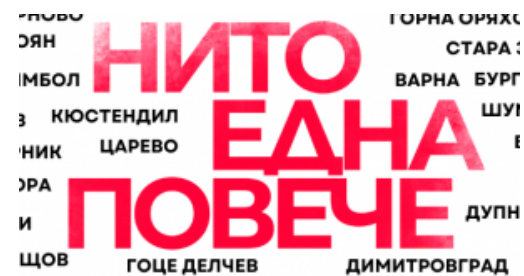


Bulgaria: the 'Débora' case and the campaign against violence against women

Description

In mid-summer 2023, several thousand Bulgarian citizens demonstrated across the country, expressing their unease at the authorities' handling of the 'Débora' case. Beyond the specific point of this young woman, the aim was to protest against violence against women and the authorities' handling of these crimes.

Until then, Bulgarian civil society had seemed almost indifferent to the issue of violence against women, but the media coverage in July 2023 of the case of "Débora," a young woman brutalized by her ex-boyfriend, sparked an unexpectedly large-scale mobilization of a section of the population. This popular pressure prompted the authorities, particularly Parliament, to pass legislation quickly.



An environment conducive to violence against women

Although domestic violence is a long-standing phenomenon in Bulgaria, the brutal end of the socialist regime (1989), ideologically intended to be more egalitarian, resulted in increased domestic violence by men against women in a society where macho practices are entrenched. In fact, at the beginning of the 21st century, forms of sexist violence are still tolerated, with the relationship of moral and physical domination within couples often perceived as "normal." Many men under 35 have a selfish attitude that makes them feel legitimate in using violence against their partner to make them accept their decisions or points of view. They do not feel guilty about their brutality, which is often carried out under the influence of alcohol. According to a survey conducted in 2021 by the National Statistics Institute (INS) on a panel of 5,580 women, 36.3% of women aged between 18 and 29 have experienced violence at the hands of their previous or current partner during their adult life, compared with 'only' 12% of women aged between 18 and 74(1). Although it is difficult to quantify this phenomenon, NGOs working on this issue estimate that this physical violence, which can even result in the victim's death, has affected several thousand women in recent years. Between 2017 and 2021, there were 141 convictions for femicide and attempted femicide(2). Between 2018 and June 2023, according to associations working to protect women's rights, at least 132 women lost their lives, including 26 in 2022 and 13 between January and July 2023(3). One death is recorded every fortnight. For example, on 13 October 2021, Evgenia Chorbanova (33), the niece of MP Andrei Chorbanov (ITN), was murdered before her body was found in a suitcase near Pernik. Her husband, Orlin Vladimirov, had strangled her and placed her in the bag with the help of her father(4).

Rape and domestic violence are still perceived as taboo subjects in Bulgaria, which arouse deep unease when discussed publicly. Until 2023, this context made it impossible to discuss this sensitive issue calmly. The government of Kiril Petkov (December 2021 - August 2022) wanted to pass a bill on protection against domestic violence, creating a national register of domestic violence cases. Still, a motion of censure defeated it without being able to bring this reform to fruition.

Civil society response to the "Débora" affair

On 26 June 2023, after receiving several death threats from a man described as her ex-boyfriend Georgi Georgiev, Débora Mihaylova, a 26-year-old woman from Stara Zagora, was beaten and raped with a dummy knife on her legs, arms, and chest before she was able to notify her family(5). Four hundred stitches were needed to close her wounds. The perpetrator was arrested but released on 5 July after 72 hours in police custody; he was prosecuted only for inflicting

“minor injuries” on the young woman, a legal description that offended the victim and her family.

Alerted by the family, the local and national press quickly revealed the affair, which led to a large-scale feminist and public mobilization. As a result, on 30 July, in the face of growing public discontent, G. Georgiev was again arrested, placed in police custody, and remanded. A call for rallies outside courthouses in every town in the country was posted on the web for 31 July: from 6 pm, many Bulgarians gathered in front of the courts. Ten thousand people took part in a demonstration organized in Sofia, stretching from the courthouse to Orlov most, while several thousand gathered or marched in the principal provincial towns (Stara Zagora, Kazanlak, Veliko Tarnovo, Lovech, Burgas, Sliven, Ruse, Silistra, Vidin, Vrach, Blagoevgrad, Gabrovo, Dobrich, Razgrad, Kyustedil, Smolyan, Pernik, Targovishte, Svishtov, Haskovo, Dimitrovgrad, Svilengrad, Kardzhali, Yambol, Petrich...). Alongside the young demonstrators, older working people, often parents of children from Débora's generation, took to the streets to show their anger and call for the authorities and society to become more aware and for stricter legislation on domestic violence. After a symbolic feminist action called *“Nito edna povetche”* (Not one more) in front of the National Assembly on 3 August, a second nationwide event was organized in Sofia and the provinces on 8 August. The participants carried several messages: “No to violence! We will not be silent! Not one more! Judicial reform now”. The day before, on her Facebook page, D. Mihaylova thanked all those who had come out to support her: *“Hello, good people! Thank you for supporting me, thinking of me, praying for me, and fighting with me at this frightening time!”*

The political world is being called to account.

Noting the public outcry, many elected representatives (including Zhivko Todorov, mayor of Stara Zagora) also took part in the national protests on 31 July and 8 August. As one of the main demands of the demonstrators was the adoption of legislative amendments, on 1 August, the deputies interrupted the parliamentary recess to adopt the legislative amendments requested by the people and supported by the PP-DB (Continuing Change-Democratic Bulgaria), GERB (center-right) and DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) parties. On 3 August, Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee was convened for an extraordinary meeting and accepted at first reading the proposed amendments to the law on protection against domestic violence: 8 years imprisonment for severe injuries and two years imprisonment plus a fine for minor injuries.

On 7 August, Parliament met in a special session to vote on the law against domestic violence amendment, extending the increase in spousal sanctions to all heterosexual couples in “intimate relationships.” Homosexual couples were, therefore, excluded from this protection at the request of the Vazrazhdane, ITN, and Socialist Party political parties. According to them, part of Bulgarian civil society is not yet ready to accept this change.

The second national event denouncing violence against women also led to the resignation of MP Vejdi Rachidov (GERB), who had reacted to the mobilization by making insulting remarks about women victims of domestic violence, blaming them for their situation because they had chosen to couple up with *“bad boys.”*

The beginnings of a reflection

Following the media coverage of the “Débora” affair, many women decided to report domestic violence (by handing in reports or lodging complaints), and the word seems to have gotten out, prompting Zornitsa Choumanova, head of the new structure for combating domestic violence at the National Police Headquarters, to highlight this behavior change. For Dr. Veselin Guerev, a psychiatrist, the significant increase in reports indicates that civil society is *“getting rid of fear”* and making violent acts committed in the privacy of couples more public⁽⁶⁾.

MP A. Tchorbanov (ITN), who has given a great deal of thought to the murder of his niece by her husband, believes that the critical issue is the formation of the psyche of young men, during which *“the role of the father is vital,”* as the men concerned will behave as *“their fathers brought them up.”* Fathers must, therefore, invest in teaching their offspring *“to be gentlemen, honest and correct”* and to accept the separation of the couple if the relationship degenerates. In other words, the MP wants civil society to stop imposing on its children the model of *“the strong man with tattoos, who has power and cars...”* a figure admired by young boys of the post-socialist generation. Psychologist Lilia Stefanova stresses

the importance of children having “*healthy parental models*” that will help them to know how to behave with their partners when they grow up⁽⁷⁾.

Notes:

- (1) National Institute of Statistics, *Izsledvane na nasiliето, osnovano na pol* (Investigating gender-based violence) EU-GBV, Sofia, 2021, pp. 1-3.
- (2) “[#NitoEdnaPovetche: Vreme e za zadalbotchen razgovor za domaschoto nasilie](#)” (#NotOneMore: it’s time for an in-depth conversation on domestic violence), *Toest*, 27 November 2021.
- (3) Ina Drumeva, “Naï-mnogo zapovedi za zachtita na jertvi na domaschno nasilie ima v Pernik” (Pernik has the highest number of protection orders for victims of domestic violence), *Dnevnik*, 24 July 2023.
- (4) Vessela Bacheva, “[Andreï Tchorbanov : Detsata ni se vachichtavat na silniya s tatousite, koïto ima vlast i koli. Predi pak da vdigame nakazaniyata, da sprem da im zadavame tozi model](#)” (Andreï Tchorbanov: Our children admire the robust and tattooed man with the power and the cars. Before we increase the penalties again, let’s stop imposing this pattern on them.), *24 chasa*, 8 March 2023; “[Oudouchenata i otkrita v koufar Evgeniya e bila plemennitsa na depoutata Tchorbanov](#)” (Evgenia, strangled and found in a suitcase, was the niece of MP Chorbanov.), *24 chasa*, 1st August 2023.
- (5) Monitoring the *Kapital*, *Mediapool*, *24 chasa*, and *Darik Info media* feeds during the “Débora” mobilization period.
- (6) “Psihiatar za nasiliето: kato obshtestvo si otgledahme zavarcheni psihopati” (A psychiatrist on violence: as a society, we have bred perfect psychopaths), *24 chasa*, 4 August 2023; “[D-r Veselin Guerev, psihiatar: jertvite na domachno nasilie da se obrashtat direktno kam prokuraturata](#)” (Dr. Veselin Gerev, psychiatrist: victims of domestic violence should contact the public prosecutor’s office directly), *Trud*, 28 November 2022.
- (7) Ivaïlo Ioltchev, “[Psihologat liliya Stefanova napousnete go sled parviya chamar nyama chans da se promeni](#)” (Psychologist Lilia Stefanova: Leave him after the first slap, there’s no chance he’ll change), *Marica*, 7 August 2023.

Thumbnail: “Not one more” banner on the FB page of [the Bulgarian Women’s Fund](#).

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