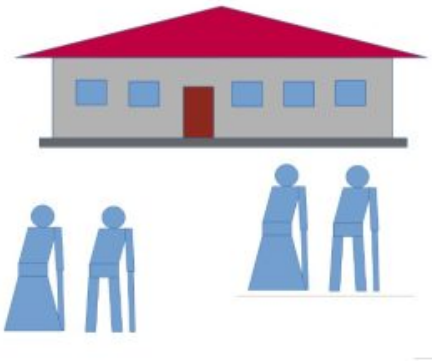
Bulgaria: What the “Houses of Horrors” Scandal Reveals About an Ageing Society

Description

In June 2025, Bulgaria, a country with a rapidly ageing population, was confronted with an unprecedented scandal: the discovery of illegal care homes where dozens of older people were being held against their will in appalling conditions. How can such abuses be prevented in a society short of resources?

Although care homes in various countries have occasionally faced allegations of mistreating their elderly residents, reports of abuse in Bulgaria had never led to major cases. In June 2025, however, an inspection in Yagoda triggered a media scandal that brought the existence of illegal care homes to public attention.



The Authorities Intervene at the Illegal Care Home in Yagoda

The care home in the village of Yagoda (Maglizh municipality, Stara Zagora district), which operated across two separate sites, lost its licence in April 2025. Nevertheless, it continued operating illegally under the guise of a private landlord renting accommodation to older people. Social workers from the Agency for the Quality of Social Services (AKSU) were then tasked with checking whether the home was continuing its activities in another form, but the owner denied them access during their visits. A large-scale inspection, supported by the police, was therefore scheduled for 6 June 2025. The following day, the Stara Zagora district prosecutor held a press conference to report on the operation and announce the opening of a criminal investigation. During the inspection, social workers and emergency services had found 75 older people, most of them suffering from mental illnesses (1). Residents were paying 990 leva (approximately €506) a month for accommodation in buildings whose window handles had been removed to prevent them from being opened from the inside, and where they were kept locked in around the clock. At night, they were even confined to their rooms. Some were found lying in their own blood. Others had been tied up—metal rings and belts used for this purpose were seized—and sedated with drugs, sometimes containing fentanyl, a powerful opioid, without being told what they were being given. To prevent their identification and contact with the outside world, the owner had confiscated their identity cards and phones and had also obtained powers of attorney from some of the older people living there. Enquiries among neighbours established that screams were often heard coming from the buildings where the residents were confined. Six people aged between 36 and 68, including the owner and staff members, among them nurses, were arrested and charged by prosecutors. The Kazanlak district court remanded them in custody over their alleged involvement, between 10 April and 6 June 2025, in the unlawful confinement of vulnerable people, assault, endangering life, concealing other people’s identity documents for personal gain, misuse of personal data and obstructing inspections. They face prison sentences of between three and twelve years. On 9 June, investigators also received a disturbing report about the deaths of a couple who had lived at the home, which had occurred in early 2025. In the days that followed, Yagoda’s municipal authorities announced that 773 older people had died in the village between 2020 and June 2025, mostly in care homes—a figure that may seem high.

The Authorities’ Initial Response to the Scandal

Both sites were evacuated on 6 June. The 56 victims who were not taken into the care of relatives were moved to safety in healthcare or emergency facilities across the region, mobilised according to the severity of their condition: Stara Zagora University Hospital, the psychiatric centre in Radnevo, care homes in Stara Zagora, Kazanlak and Galabovo, and the Sliven Crisis Centre. Twenty people were taken away by their relatives.

Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy Ivan Krastev compared the lives of the Yagoda care home's residents to those of prisoners at Auschwitz. Minister of Justice Georgi Georgiev called the home a "house of horrors". He urged families placing relatives in care homes to "take a greater interest in [their relatives'] situation and check what is happening there". To demonstrate the government's determination to act, Minister of Labour and Social Policy Borislav Gutsanov said his administration would "not stop until the very last unlicensed home in the country has been uncovered" (2).

Stepping Up Inspections

Against this backdrop, a large-scale inspection was scheduled as early as 8 June 2025 at the care home in Govedartsi, near Samokov (3). Registered as a commercial company, it had no licence to provide care, and social workers tasked with inspecting the facility had also been denied access to the building. Inspectors found 23 older people living in conditions deemed deplorable. They were moved to safety in facilities in Kovachevtsi and Samokov. The Sofia district prosecutor's office nevertheless stated that care there was slightly better than in Yagoda and that no grounds had been found for charging the manager, as there was no evidence that residents had been held against their will.

On 10 June, another operation targeting illegal care homes for older people took place at three sites in the Varna region, resulting in their closure and the relocation of 130 older people to safety. As in Yagoda, rooms were rented individually to residents, who lived in poor conditions in premises infested with lice, fleas and cockroaches. The operators defended themselves by claiming that the premises were merely tourist accommodation. In response to these further inspections, the government made the provision of such services without a licence a criminal offence. The fine for providing unlicensed care services was raised to 30,000 leva, up from 10,000, and operators whose licences are revoked are now barred from obtaining a new one for five years.

How Can Further "Houses of Horrors" Be Prevented?

Placing older relatives in residential care, particularly when they suffer from mental illnesses, has become a necessity for some working people who lack the time or suitably adapted accommodation to care for them themselves. Yet residential care is very expensive, and many Bulgarians cannot afford care home fees. Prosecutor Nikolay Nikolaev sees a clear link between the owners of illegal care homes and the "property mafia".

To address the proliferation of such non-compliant facilities, some observers argue that greater awareness within civil society is now needed. In the short term, however, the government is focusing mainly on enforcement through more frequent inspections: 15 illegal care homes have been closed across Bulgaria in less than a year, and several other facilities have been refused licences. Alongside these enforcement measures, the Bulgarian state has also decided to renovate 81 public care homes. Work has already been completed at 12 facilities in 12 municipalities: Glavinitsa, Elhovo, Troyan, Dolna Mitropolia, Kula, Krumovgrad, Ruzhintsi, Dimovo, Alfatar, Mezdra, Vidin and Galabovo.

But will these reforms be enough? For Professor Nikolay Gabrovski, Deputy Director of N. I. Pirogov University Hospital, the spread of illegal care homes conceals a wider problem: the shortage of healthcare staff (4).

A year after the scandal, on 13 June 2026, Stara Zagora district prosecutor Tanya Dimitrova highlighted the delays in the Bulgarian justice system, reporting that all those accused had been released on bail pending trial, for which no hearing date had yet been set (5). She condemned the slow pace of proceedings and said she felt a sense of injustice.

Sources:

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(2) Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, “Ministar Gutsanov: Nyama da sprem, dokato i posledniyat nezakonen obekt za nastanyavane na vazrastni ne bade nameren” (Minister Gutsanov: We will not stop until the very last illegal care facility for older people has been found), *Ministry of Labour and Social Policy*, 10 June 2025.

(3) “Dramata s nezakonnite starcheski domove: Edin na svoboda, drugi v aresta” (The illegal care home scandal: one person released, others in custody), *Mediapool*, 10 June 2025.

(4) “Ima vrŭzka mezhdu sobstvenitsi s domove za vŭzrastni khora i imotnata mafiya, zayavi prokuror Nikolaĭ Nikolaev” (There is a link between care home owners and the property mafia, prosecutor Nikolay Nikolaev said), *Trud*, 11 June 2025.

(5) Nadya Hamdan, “Godina sled koshmara v selo yagoda: vsichki zadarzhani za doma na uzhasite sa na svoboda” (A year after the nightmare in Yagoda: all those detained over the “house of horrors” are now free), *BG On Air*, 13 June 2026.

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