



Industrial relations and social dialogue  
**Bulgaria: Developments in  
working life 2023**

**Authors:** Ekaterina Markova and Mina Kostova (IPS-BAS)

**Research manager:** Maria Sedlakova

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**European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions**

**Telephone:** (+353 1) 204 31 00

**Email:** [information@eurofound.europa.eu](mailto:information@eurofound.europa.eu)

**Web:** [www.eurofound.europa.eu](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu)

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## Introduction

In its forecast, the European Commission (EC) predicted that Bulgaria's GDP would grow by 2% in 2023, 0.5 percentage points over the institution's previous expectations. The prospects for 2024, however, seem to be deteriorating — this year's expected growth has been cut from 2.4% to only 1.8%. In retrospect, the Bulgarian state debt amounted to 22.9% of gross domestic product (GDP) at the end of 2022, according to the Ministry of Finance (Stoyanova & Popova, 2023). GDP grew by 2.1% year-on-year in the fourth quarter of 2022. Final consumption expenditure accelerated by 4.7%, investments in fixed capital decreased by 3.3%, and exports increased by 7.2%, referring to National Statistical Institute estimates using the current data as of February 15, 2023 (Stoyanova & Popova, 2023).

In spite of this growth throughout 2022, the economy has slowly been declining in part due to the fallout from the war in Ukraine: the National Statistical Institute registered this increase against the background of the complex political situation gripping the country during this period, as well as signs of deterioration in the external economic environment (NSI, 2023).

Headline inflation in 2023 was well below its peak of 10.6% from October 2022. It fell to 2.4% in November 2023, Eurostat's preliminary data showed, after a sharp drop from October's 2.9%; economists had forecasted a reading of 2.7%. Core inflation, which excludes energy, food, and tobacco, also fell to 3.6% in November 2023 from the seen 4.2% in October 2023 (Shishkov, 2023).

The European Central Bank (ECB) has said that the underlying dynamics are more persistent than they appear, and inflation will indeed return to above 3% in 2024. According to the bank, the 2% target will not be reached until the end of 2025, partly because of the rapid growth of nominal wages. The data also shows unemployment at a sustained record low of 6.5% despite the economic contraction (Shishkov, 2023).

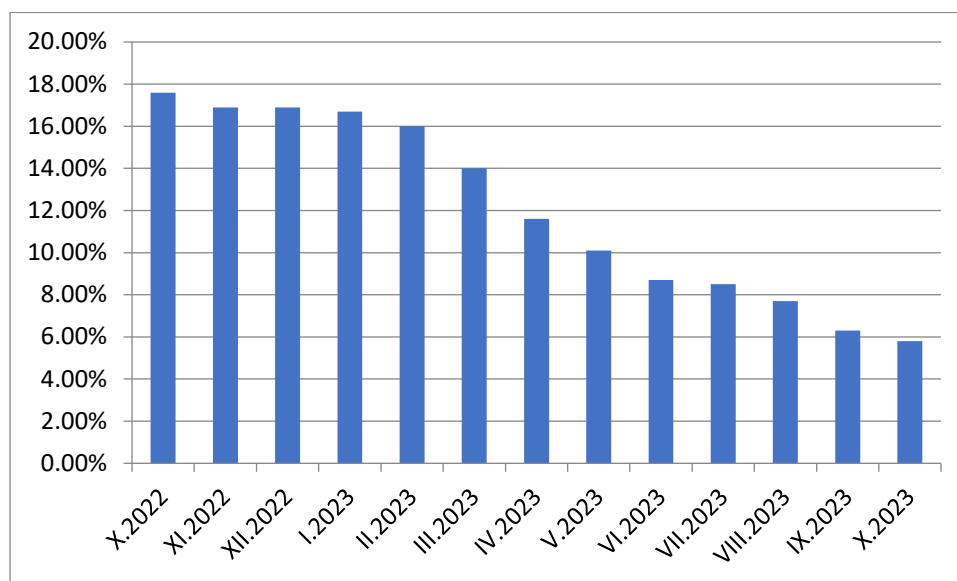
## Political context

Bulgaria managed to elect and constitute the 49<sup>th</sup> National Assembly and held local elections in April 2023, after almost three years of political instability and several caretaker governments. The current government is formed by the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and a coalition between We Continue the Change (PP) and Democratic Bulgaria (DB). The parties reached an agreement to elect a GERB chairperson of the National Assembly and to rotate their candidates for prime minister after nine months.

Moreover, after very close results, a ballotage for the capital Sofia's mayorship was held between Vasil Terziev, nominated by PP–DB, and Vanya Grigorova, nominated by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) (CIK, 2023). Vasil Terziev overtook by a narrow margin, while PP–DB won more solid positions in power at the national level.

The National Statistical Institute (NSI) reports that inflation in Bulgaria continued to slow down in the last quarter of 2023, representing its lowest level over the previous two years. In October 2023, consumer price growth fell to 5.8% on an average annual basis compared to the 6.3% calculated in the previous month (NSI, 2023). Annual inflation in the healthcare sector was at its highest in October, at 11.8%. Inflation in Bulgaria has been gradually slowing down after reaching a peak of 18.7% in September 2022 (Fig. 1).

**Figure 1: Monthly inflation for 2022–2023**



Source: (Investor.bg, 2023)

Although inflation is decreasing, it's still expected to sustain higher than normal levels in 2024. With the increased forecast for price growth in Bulgaria by the Ministry of the Interior and the World Bank (Minkov, 2023), joining the Eurozone until 1 January 2025 may prove more difficult since price stability is one of the criteria, together with inflation falling below 3% of GDP and integrating both Euro and EU legislation (Denizova, 2023a). Inflation has also been taken into account when increasing the minimum statutory wage and pensions.

After the first refusal to admit Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen Area — with vetoes from Austria and the Netherlands due to high corruption and organised crime — the two candidate members requested an extraordinary vote by the end of 2023 (Mediapool, 2023b). On 30 December 2023, the EU Council confirmed unanimously that the internal air and sea border controls would be abolished in March 2024 (Economy, 2024).

## Actors and institutions

### Social partners

No major changes related to Bulgaria's social partners took place in 2023. The institutional structure of tripartite social partnership remains unchanged, as do the participants in each of the three representative parties in the social dialogue. Following the national representation verification procedure carried out in 2021, two confederations (the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria [CITUB] and Confederation of Labour 'Podkrepa' [CL Podkrepa] remain as legitimate representatives of employees. The employers' organisations also remained unchanged in 2023: the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA), Confederation of Employers and Industrialists in Bulgaria (CEIBG), Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA), Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI), and Union for Private Economic Enterprise (UPEE). The Association of Bulgarian Employers' Organisations (AOBR) was established in 1995, uniting four officially recognized representative organisations of employers in the Republic of Bulgaria (the BIA, BICA, CEIBG, and BCCI). Its activities include official meetings with policymakers and statements on social and economic topics (AOBR activity report, 2022). The participants in the social dialogue at national level (the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation [NCTC]) have received a four-year mandate until the beginning of 2025.

At its Ninth Congress in May 2022, the CITUB re-elected Plamen Dimitrov as president for another 5-year term (Kostova, 2022). The elected CITUB vice presidents are Daniela Alexieva, Ognyan Atanasov, and Todor Kapitanov — replacing Plamen Nankov, Dr. Ivan Kokalov, and Chavdar Hristov. The CL Podkrepa re-elected Engr. Dimitar Manolov as president and Engr. Yoannis Parteniotis as vice-president in its Eleventh Congress, held on 9 February 2023. The delegates elected four Confederal Secretaries — Alexander Zagorov, Veselin Mitov, Neli Hristova, and Valeri Apostolov (CL Podkrepa, 2023a).

In the period from 2019 to 2023, the number of BIA member industry associations and unions increased by 44 new collective members and 138 commercial enterprises. There were 113,022 total employees in the newly admitted organisations and companies (BIA, 2023a). In December 2023 the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association (BICA), representing three quarters of economic activity and over 10,000 companies, celebrated 27 years since its founding (BICA, 2023).

### Social dialogue bodies or frameworks

There were no significant changes related to the social dialogue bodies or frameworks in 2023. The National Council for Tripartite Cooperation (NCTC) was very active as the main tripartite body at national level dealing with labour-related issues, social security, and quality of life. The work programme of the NCTC in 2023 included the adoption of national budget, changes in labour and social security legislation, anti-crisis measures related to territorial development plans, energy prices and energy sector regulation, setting a minimum wage and the poverty line, and other issues of national importance concerning general welfare, such as military conflicts and the energy crisis. Several extraordinary NCTC meetings were held in 2023 which discussed the state budget, amendments, and supplements to the Labour Code related to telework and determining the poverty line and the minimum wage as of 1 January 2024.

The structure of the social dialogue in territorial and professional terms remains underdeveloped and underperforming, as evidenced by the existing collective labour agreements (CLA) following a steady downward trend (1,195 signed CLA in 2021, compared to 970 CLA in 2022), according to the National Institute for Conciliation and Arbitration — NICA (NICA, 2022). The conflict resolution framework has been enriched by the Court of Arbitration at the Bulgarian Industrial Association which now can initiate and develop the entire mediation proceedings in an online environment (BIA, 2023b).

On 28 July 2023 the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted important amendments to the Criminal Code (CC) related to protecting the rights of employees to form trade unions (CITUB, 2023a). The recently adopted changes seek to prevent and punish any acts of violence or intimidation directed against workers seeking to exercise their trade union rights. It ensures that no one will be forced to renounce membership of a trade union or cease attempting to form one, regardless of the circumstances (CC, Art. 174b, par. 1). It encourages the active exercise of trade union rights and provides legal protection to workers who face obstacles and violations in their attempts to participate in trade unions (CC, Art. 174b, par. 2). The last amendment strengthens the legal protection of workers by imposing harsher penalties cases of trade union rights violations (CC, Art. 174b, par. 3).

## Other working life related institutions

There were no changes in working life related institutions – Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and its National Employment Agency, Executive Agency General Labour Inspectorate. They continue their activity as usual.



# Developments in collective bargaining

## Changes to the collective bargaining structures and frameworks

There were no changes in the national, sectoral, or company level thresholds for collective bargaining, nor any extension mechanisms.

The Economic and Social Council (ESC) suggested in a statement (ESC, 2023) that because Bulgaria is among the countries without 80% coverage through collective labour agreements (CLA), in view of which and in accordance with the Directive on adequate minimum wages (art. 4, §2, Directive [EU] 2022/2041), an action plan should be prepared in order to promote collective bargaining. At the same time, the adoption of legislation which by its own nature and philosophy harms collective bargaining should not be allowed. The ESC considers that the existing legal framework of collective bargaining in the Labour Code has exhausted its stimulating effect and currently has a restraining role. The opinion of the Council is that an expansion of opportunities should be laid down in the system of legal norms governing collective bargaining, and special attention should be paid to illegal and legal disputes related to the conclusion and implementation of CLAs and their settlement, including the institute's definition of a "collective" labour dispute; at this stage, they are not fully in accordance with the developed practice regulated by the Law on the Settlement of Collective Labour Disputes adopted in 1990.

## Data on collective bargaining

National Institute of Conciliation and Arbitrage (NICA) maintains national database of collective bargaining and provides annual and thematic analyses.

**Table 1: Collective labour agreements in force by level of bargaining and employed covered (at the end of the year)**

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Q3**, 2023
	<b>Collective Labour Agreements</b>					
Establishment, including:	1,667	1,682	1,539	1,522	1,424	1,394
<b>Establishment</b>	1,553	1,564	1,418	1,392	1,296	1,272
<b>Public administration</b>	114	118	121	130	128	122
Industry/Branch	19	19	20	19	13	15
Municipalities	52	54	56	55	50	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,738</b>	<b>1,755</b>	<b>1,615</b>	<b>1,596</b>	<b>1,487</b>	<b>1,458</b>
	<b>Employed</b>					
Establishment, including:	377,286	377,919	362,354	362,051	353,745	357,618
<b>Establishment</b>	292,923	293,285	276,585	274,704	267,700	271,791

**Disclaimer:** This working paper has not been subject to the full Eurofound evaluation, editorial and publication process.

<b>Public administration</b>	84,363	84,634	85,769	87,347	86,045	85,827
Industry/Branch	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	832*	288*
Municipalities	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
<b>Total</b>	<b>377,286</b>	<b>377,919</b>	<b>362,354</b>	<b>362,051</b>	<b>354,577</b>	<b>357,906</b>

Note: \* The data are for employees in enterprises from economic activities with NACE2008-NSI code 11.05 and 11.06, in which there is no CLA at the "enterprise" level in connection with the extension of the branch CLA in Brewery Industry. \*\* The data has been revised to 15.12.2023 and concerns the end of third quarter of 2023.

Source: Source: National Institute for Conciliation and Arbitration (NICA 2023a).

**Table 2: Rate of employed (%) covered by CLA in force on enterprise level (at the end of the quarter)**

	<b>IQ</b>	<b>IIQ</b>	<b>IIIQ</b>	<b>IVQ*</b>
	<b>2023</b>			
Total employed (NSI data)	2,307,357	2,332,558	2,298,467	
Employed covered by enterprise level CLA	358,141	353,304	357,618	
Share of <b>enterprise level CLA</b> coverage	15,6%	15,2%	15,6%	
	<b>2022</b>			
Total employed (NSI data)	2,274,010	2,308,390	2,276,349	2,259,847
Employed covered by <b>enterprise level CLA</b>	358,048	363,800	361,508	366,659
Share of <b>enterprise level CLA</b> coverage	15,7%	15,8%	15,9%	16,3%
	<b>2021</b>			
Total employed (NSI data)	2,262,665	2,305,292	2,281,650	2,265,433
Employed covered by <b>enterprise level CLA</b>	364,34	362,839	361,697	362,051
Share of coverage	16,1%	15,7%	15,9%	16,0%
	<b>2020</b>			
<b>Total employed (NSI data)</b>	2,263,469	2,239,910	2,249,110	2,228,280
<b>Employed covered by enterprise level CLA</b>	377,736	372,64	365,27	362,354
<b>Share of coverage</b>	16,7%	16,6%	16,2%	16,3%
	<b>2019</b>			
<b>Total employed (NSI data)</b>	2,396,468	2,441,050	2,418,103	2,402,075
<b>Employed covered by enterprise level CLA</b>	381,527	372,617	372,548	377,919
<b>Share of coverage</b>	15,9%	15,3%	15,4%	15,7%
	<b>2018</b>			
<b>Total employed (NSI data)</b>	2,373,504	2,443,747	2,413,863	2,389,577

<b>Employed covered by enterprise level CLA</b>	333,175	337,774	350,173	345,565
<b>Share of coverage</b>	14.0%	13.8%	14.5%	14.5%

*Note: Data is revised up to 15.12.2023*

*Source: National Institute for Conciliation and Arbitration (NICA 2023b). The data have been revised to 20.11.2023*

## Collectively agreed pay outcomes and wage-setting mechanism

Since February 2023, the Labour Code has included an updated mechanism for setting the minimum wage. The country's minimum wage for the next calendar year shall be set by 1 September of the current year at 50% of the average gross wage for a period of 12 months, which shall include the last two quarters of the previous year and the first two quarters of the current year (Art. 244).

On average, for the 2017–2022 period and as of 31 December 2022, one third of the existing enterprise-level collective labour agreements (CLAs) and the employees covered by them, respectively, have negotiated an enterprise minimum wage that exceeds the statutory minimum wage (SMW) established for the country, usually as a fixed amount in the national currency. There has been a slight downward trend in the number of CBAs with a higher negotiated minimum wage than the national one, but the percentage of employees covered by these CBAs is increasing (NICA, 2023d).

As of 30 September 2023, 511 active collective bargaining agreements had been concluded at the enterprise level (or 2% of all such agreements) wherein the parties agreed on a minimum wage (MW) higher than the statutory wage (€399 in 2023), used in 35.1% of all collective labour agreements (CLAs) at company level. As of the end of June 2023, the number of active CLAs with a negotiated minimum wage for the enterprise above the statutory minimum wage for the country increased by 1.3%, and the share of persons covered by them increased by 1.1%, compared to the total number of employees covered by the current CLAs (NICA, 2023c).

In more than 90% of the operating CLAs in the enterprises from economic activity group A, "Agriculture, forestry and fishing", a minimum wage higher than the minimum statutory wage has been negotiated, followed by activity group D, "Production and distribution of electric and thermal energy", with 73.9%, and group R, "Education", with 57.3%. In economic activity group I, "Hotel and restaurant businesses", and L, "Real estate operations", there were no operating CLAs as of 30 September 2023 with a higher negotiated minimum wage than the statutory minimum for the country. Over 50% of employees covered by CLAs at the enterprise level from the agriculture and industry sectors (with the exception of CLAs in activity group C, "Manufacturing") have a negotiated minimum wage above the statutory rate. The share of CLAs as of 30 September 2023 with a negotiated minimum wage above the mandated minimum for the country were predominantly in the public sector; private sector CLAs accounted for 9.2%. Within the private sector, the relative share of CLAs with a higher negotiated minimum wage in foreign enterprises was 45.3%, while in domestic enterprises it was 12.2%, amounting to a 28.4% difference in these relative shares for employees covered by CLAs (NICA, 2023c).

## Collective bargaining and inflation

The minimum statutory wage in Bulgaria is set to increase by 19.6% in 2024 (933 BGN, €477). As a response to inflation and the general MSW increase, the newly signed CLA for pre-school and school education (signed 28 December 2023) includes a higher starting basic salary for teachers and non-teaching staff (CITUB, 2023c). Within the National Council for Tripartite Cooperation, trade unions have supported the increase of the statutory minimum wage, while employer organisations have protested, insisting that that minimum wages should be different across economic sectors (Dnevnik, 2023). The total cost to employers per hour worked by their employees in the third quarter of 2023 increased by 15.1% when compared with the third quarter of 2022 (according to preliminary data), reports the National Statistical Institute (NSI, 2023).

Of all the minimum wage negotiations in the CLAs in effect as of 31 December 2022, the most recurrent characteristics were a timeframe and insistence that they be resolved on the basis of an internal regulation, as well as according to the financial capacity of the enterprise. According to employee coverage, the largest relative share was occupied by conditions related to the periodic updating of the minimum wage and the inflation rate, followed by wage increases differentiated by occupation (NICA, 2023d). Raising the enterprise minimum wage on the basis of an internal act (26.5%), financial feasibility (25.2%), and a fixed timeframe (22.4%) were the most important conditions for updating the terms negotiated between both parties (NICA, 2023c).

# Developments in governmental responses to inflation

At the beginning of 2023, the caretaker government prepared a new package of anti-inflationary measures worth 172 million BGN (approximately €88 million) (Mediapool, 2023a), but Asen Vasilev, Minister of Finance, stated that by the middle of the year the majority of inflation in our country was linked to marketable goods — food and energy. For a small and open economy like ours, a low budget deficit does not affect inflation precisely because most of it is externalized through the prices of tradable goods (Iliev, 2023).

Bulgaria introduced general measures for inflation such as decreased VAT on bread, heating, and gas<sup>1</sup>, financial support for citizens' public transport costs<sup>2</sup>, and SME recovery through energy efficiency<sup>3</sup>.

No new organisations or systems of work were put together in the continued fight against inflation. The government has been focused on:

1. Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area by the end of 2023.
2. Joining the Eurozone from 1 January 2025.
3. Controlling inflation.
4. Implementation of reforms and projects from the National Recovery and Sustainability Plan (NRSP).
5. Improving the efficiency and transparency of municipal project management.

As the government took the necessary measures and reforms to stabilize the prices of goods and services and create a favourable economic environment for businesses and citizens, the Council of Ministers supported and encouraged the development of innovation and industry as well as agriculture. It strengthened control over the appropriate use of subsidies and bolstered protections against the potential abuse of financial resources (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2023).

Economists have commented that the budget prepared by the Minister of Finance for 2024 is too optimistic, carrying a real risk that revenue targets will not be fulfilled and possibly leading to a deficit above the allowed 3% of GDP. They conclude that the project does not involve reforms nor cut tax privileges but rather foresees the accumulation of more debt (Denizova, 2023b).

After the EU required Bulgaria increase its low corporate tax rate, it was proposed that a 15% flat rate would be taxed on profits in order to avoid competitiveness among Member States. The decision is still under discussion (Marinov, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup>More information on the VAT decrease for bread, heating and gas is available at [https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/BG-2022-28\\_2762.html](https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/BG-2022-28_2762.html)

<sup>2</sup>More information on the Minimum wages in 2023: Annual review, Minimum wages in the EU series is available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2023/minimum-wages-2023-annual-review>

<sup>3</sup> See Eurofound (2023)

In 2023 the Ministry of Finance released draft legislation for public discussion which would amend the Tax-Insurance Procedural Code. Measures have been proposed in the field of fiscal control of high-risk goods, aiming at more effective prevention and countermeasures against tax fraud, tax evasion, and non-payment of taxes (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

The National Assembly also adopted at first reading amendments to the respective legislative acts on Value Added Tax, Corporate Income Taxation, Personal Income Taxes, and Local Taxes and Fees. These provisions would allow an extension of the deadline for applying a zero rate of tax to the supply of bread and flour until 30 June 2024, as well as an extension of the deadline for applying a reduced VAT to restaurant and catering services until 31 December 2024. Multinationals and large national groups of enterprises will be taxed with an additional tax and/or a national tax of 15%, according to a measure Parliament adopted at first reading (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2023).

As a temporary and one-off measure, the transitional and final provisions of the drafted legislation amended the Corporate Income Tax Act (CIT) and, from 1 July 2023, introduced the payment of a solidarity contribution for excess profits generated in the period from 1 July 2023 to 31 December 2023 (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

## Labour disputes and industrial action

Several large labour disputes and protests among the state workers, protesting for wage increases, took place during 2023. The cultural and state sector employees continue to protest. More information can be found below.

### Changes to the right to strike

There have been no changes to the right to strike or legislation on the right to strike since 2018 in Bulgaria. The right to strike also is not directly linked to the right to representation and or/ representativeness.

### Data on industrial action

The National Institute for Conciliation and Arbitration (NICA) collects some integrated information on the topic, including data on collective labour disputes<sup>4</sup> (CLD) for the period 2010–2022. A total of 152 CLD were established during that period, of which 148 were in enterprises and 4 CTS at the municipal level. In total, 401,110 workers were employed in the enterprises with CLDs at the time of the dispute. There were 13 CLDs in 2022 with 24,570 employees (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022).

### Collective labour disputes in 2023

At the beginning of the year, the Trade Union Federation of Communications under the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) and the Communications Federation under the Confederation of Labour 'Podkrepa' (CL Podkrepa) launched a nationwide strike among workers and employees at Bulgarian Posts with indefinite effect and the following requests:

- A 25% increase in the salaries for employees of Bulgarian Posts EAD, starting from 1 January 2023.
- Raising the value of meal vouchers for employees from 60 BGN (€30.7) to 100 BGN (€51), starting from 1 January 2023.
- Improvement of working conditions at Bulgarian Posts EAD and the material and technical base, including the provision of air conditioners, modern computer, office equipment etc (Lazarov, 2023).

The results achieved were that the salaries of nearly 9,000 "working poor" Bulgarian Posts employees will be increased by 19% throughout 2024. As agreed the increase will be a two steps process, firstly with 11% increase in wages from 1 January 2023 and a further 8% from June . In addition to the increase in basic salaries, the agreement also covers the desired increase in vouchers for employees and a program of comprehensive measures to optimize costs and increase revenues for the state postal operator (News.bg, 2023).

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<sup>4</sup>More information on the Collective labour disputes in the EU is available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/ef21026en.pdf>

Two protests in Sofia were announced for the same day (19 September 2023) that were later combined as one. One of them was organized by the coal mining and energy sector, which is currently the main sector influenced by the establishing of a green economy, although stability in the country largely depends on the fair restructuring of the mines (Mancheva, 2023). Miners blocked highways and key roads in southern Bulgaria in a protest against the government and its submitted territorial Just Transition Plans (Nikolov, 2023). After the protests the deputies approved additional financial support for state-owned mines and also accepted the postponement of the liberalization of the energy market by one year. So it will start in the summer of 2025.

They agreed to allocate 250 million BGN per year to the Maritsa East coal mines from the state budget, and the payments will continue until 2028. Thus, the complex will receive a total of 1 billion BGN from the state (Free Europe, 2024).

The other protest was organised by farmers and agriculturists, who remained dissatisfied with the import of oil and other products from Ukraine despite their position as one of the most subsidized sectors. The government satisfied the requests of the grain producers to stop the import of sunflower oil and has committed to offering a just transition agreement for the regions around the coal plants (Gelovska, 2023).

Workers at the National Statistical Institute protested in front of the institute's building in the capital, as well as in front of its territorial divisions across the country. Employees far and wide have been demanding a pay rise, specifically a minimum 50% increase in the "personnel costs" category (BNR, 2023).

The protests were organised by the trade union CL Podkrepa at the National Social Security Institute (NSSI) and National Statistical Institute (NSI) and were caused by the fact that no funds had been provided for salary increases in either administration in the state budget legislation or that of the Independent Education and Training Institute, as discussed by the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2023 (CL Podkrepa, 2023b).

Employees in the cultural sphere, musicians, artists, museum workers and librarians also went on a national protest twice within the same month. They demanded a tangible increase in the budget for culture and the adoption of legislative changes to ensure the necessary funds to increase all salaries and remunerations in the field. The respective unions reported that the Minister of Finance promised a 50% increase in the culture budget after the last protests on November 1, but this did not happen (BNT, 2023).



# Developments in working time

## Changes to legislation

In November 2023 the government approved draft legislation with amendments to the Labour Code improving the legal framework for telework and regulating contractors' liability for payment of wages to employees in subcontracting chains. The amendments will provide greater flexibility and certainty for workers and employers, including with regard to the organisation of health and safety at work, the reporting of work, and the control of working time. The preparation and adoption of the draft amendments to the Labour Code align with the measure foreseen in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Where teleworking is carried out, in addition to the minimum requirements concerning the content of the employment contract, an explicit agreement about the place of telework is intended to be included. This builds more trust in the relationship between worker and employer, as neither party will have the right to change it unilaterally. For its part, employers will be able to take measures to ensure safe and healthy working conditions and to monitor work performance. Where algorithmic control systems and artificial intelligence are used, they will have an obligation to inform workers about the data collected and processed in connection with their work. Employees will have the right to request a review by their employer or a designated authority on automated decisions taken by the algorithmic management system that affect their rights. The proposed amendments are to be debated by the National Assembly in 2024 (MLSP, 2023b).

## Bargaining outcomes

There were no particular bargaining outcomes during 2023. According to the database of the National Institute of Conciliation and Arbitration (NICA), there were 667 collective labour agreements, covering 46.8% of employees with collectively negotiated procedures and conditions about working time in 2022 (NICA, 2022b). The cumulative share of CLAs with provisions about working were the following for 2022: 40.9% part-time work, 39.6% reduced working hours, 27.1% extended working hours, 56.7% summarized calculation of working time, 9.7% remote work.

## Debates on duration and organisation

Bulgaria is among the countries where most overtime work is not paid as such. The reason for this lies in the system of aggregated working time, allowing employers to circumvent the payment of overtime. The plan negotiated between partners in the National Tripartite Agreement that the regulation of working time should be permissible only in industries with a continuous work mode remained unfulfilled. The CITUB started a campaign in 2022 insisting that summarized working time should be applied only in enterprises with a continuous working process, but the issue remains unresolved. According to the 8<sup>th</sup> CITUB annual report on labour rights violations in Bulgaria, most labour right violations are in the area of healthy and safe working conditions, wages (as already mentioned), working time, and breaks. For example, lunch breaks are not included in working time, nor paid, nor included in the length of service (CITUB, 2023e).

Remote work was introduced into the Labour Code in 2011 after the first bilateral agreement concluded in the history of Bulgarian social dialogue between all nationally representative organisations of workers and employers in Bulgaria. This agreement and its provisions in the Labour

Code introduced the requirements of the 2002 European Autonomous Framework Agreement on teleworking. Amendments to the Labour Code proposed in 2023 aimed at greater flexibility and security in remote work, including in relation to the organisation of healthy and safe working conditions, reporting of work and control of working hours. In addition, when organising work, requirements for informing employees about algorithmic management systems (so-called "artificial intelligence") were regulated, as well as the possibility to request a human review of automated decisions when they affect workers' rights (Public consultations, 2023). This proposal underwent public consultations until September 2023, and the new changes are expected to be adopted by the National Assembly in 2024. The Bulgarian Industrial Association supported the proposal and suggested developing legislative changes that would take into account remote places of work that have not been preliminary defined (BIA, 2023c). The CITUB has agreed in principle with the proposed changes and considers them appropriate, considering the identified need to improve the legislative framework (CITUB, 2023d).

## Other important policy developments

### Regulations on employment status and contracts

Employers in Bulgaria reported that they faced labour shortages in 2023, only managing to find employees for 30% of vacancies. The struggle for staff is fierce, and this problem will continue in 2024. There has also been a restructuring of business operations and turbulence in the IT, outsourcing, and mining sectors, where there have been layoffs. There is an imbalance between supply and demand, especially for skilled personnel. According to Nadia Vassileva, the chairperson of the Bulgarian Employment Confederation, one of the options for sourcing labour is to import staff from abroad (Investor, 2023). The labour force deficit was among the biggest obstacles facing businesses this past year, according to data from the traditional annual survey of the BIA (2023d): 75% of respondents agreed this was a problem. After a momentary decline in 2020, the trend in subsequent years has been towards a renewed increase in demand for workers, mainly executives and narrow specialists and to a lesser extent administrative and managerial staff. Demand for general workers also grew strongly in 2023.

### Policies to reduce the gender pay-gap

There were no specific developments related to the gender pay gap in 2023. However, Bulgaria managed to climb from 25<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> place in the category of activities related to gender equality concerns in the European Union. This is shown by the results of the 2023 Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality. For example, Bulgaria lags significantly behind in terms of equality in management and supervisory boards; the ratio of women to men in these bodies is 19% to 81%. By comparison, the European average is 33% to 67%, again in favour of men (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2023a). The CITUB has insisted on faster transposition of the Pay Transparency Directive, with a view to accelerating the process of matching European pay levels and achieving equal pay for equal work or work of the same value (CITUB, 2023b).

### Health and safety regulations and policies

For the 2023–2025 period, the National Campaign Healthy Workplaces is focused on digitalisation and new risks and challenges to ensuring healthy and safe working conditions. Its launch in Bulgaria was marked by a national conference organised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy under the title "Safe and Healthy Workplaces in the Digital Age", which took place on 23 October 2023. The campaign aims to increase knowledge about the safe and productive use of digital technologies in all sectors, to raise awareness of healthy and safe working conditions associated with the digital transformation, to provide information about emerging risks, and to promote risk assessment and safe management of digital technologies in the workplace (CITUB, 2023f).

### Work-life balance related policies

The proposed 2023 amendments of the Labour Code, for the first time, envisioned some new rights for remote workers, such as the so-called "right to disconnect", i.e., a worker's right not to carry out electronic communication with their employer during regulated breaks, in order to avoid violation of

the statutory breaks and to improve work-life balance. The proposal is expected to be adopted by the National Assembly in 2024.

A new Ordinance on the payment of compensation for children who are not admitted to municipal or state kindergartens and nurseries due to lack of available places was published in the State Gazette (2023b). Reimbursement of expenses directly related to child care, education, and learning shall be paid to the parent in the amount of the expenses actually incurred for the relevant month, but these funds may not exceed the average monthly amount allocated in the State budget for the maintenance of a child in pre-school education in municipal or state kindergartens and schools for the relevant calendar year, as determined by order of the Minister of Education and Science.

Another work-life balance related project is "Parents in Employment", organised by the Employment agency and funded under the Human Resources Development Programme 2021–2027 (Employment Agency, 2023). The main objective of the project is to ensure a better work-life balance for single parents, parents with multiple children, and those with young children by providing child care opportunities and services to facilitate access to employment. Women and men should have equal opportunities and be able to participate fully in the labour market, to grow professionally and career-wise, to have quality employment, to be economically independent, and to reconcile their work and personal lives.

## Life-long learning and skills development

The level of digital skills in Bulgaria lags behind labour market requirements. In 2022, Bulgaria ranked 26<sup>th</sup> of the 27 EU Member States in the European Commission Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). There are significant differences (digital inequality) in the level of digital competence between economic sectors, as well as between enterprises within sectors. The Bulgarian Industry Association, in cooperation with the e-learning system Contipso, has created an e-learning platform for digital skills training. The activity was implemented within the framework of the project "Ready for Digital Transformation", implemented by the BIA in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) and the CITUB. The e-platform offers 36 courses divided into two categories, Specific Digital Skills and Sectoral Basic Skills in 16 economic sectors. Courses on the e-platform are completely free of charge and freely accessible after registration (BIA, 2023e). The project also developed 87 standards for digital skills and competences in key positions for enterprises in 16 sectors of the economy. The development of the competency profiles was preceded by analyses of digital skills needs in the 16 sectors covered by the project. The analyses showed that only 19% of employees had attained the required level of digital competence for the key position they held (BIA, 2023f).

## Other topics

In August 2023 the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works developed urgently prepared updated versions of the Territorial Just Transition Plans for the districts of Stara Zagora, Pernik and Kyustendil. The main measures set out in the Territorial Fair Transition Plans are related to land reclamation, support for the creation of a hydrogen value chain, support for clean technology industrial parks, photovoltaic parks, use of green hydrogen, and the production and distribution of biomethane and energy from wind turbines. On 21 December 2023, the European Commission approved a grant under the Fair Transition Fund of the Development of

Regions 2021–2027 Programme in the amount of 2.3 billion BGN (€1.176 billion) for the three districts, as well as municipalities adjacent to Stara Zagora. The government's priority is the preservation and creation of over 15,000 jobs. The approved funds over the next six years will finance activities to improve mining sites for industrial use, support workers following skills mapping, finance energy efficiency with a focus on vulnerable households, develop industrial parks and zones, develop component manufacturing and renewable electricity, and support the diversification of the economy through new businesses (Ministry of Energy, 2023).

## Commentary and outlook

Bulgaria held elections in April 2023 and managed to constitute its 49th parliament after almost three years of political instability and several caretaker governments. The current government is formed by the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and a coalition between We Continue the Change (PP) and Democratic Bulgaria (DB). The parties reached an agreement to elect a GERB chairman of the National Assembly and to rotate their candidates for prime minister after nine months.

In the last quarter of 2023, inflation continued to slow and fell to 4.7%, its lowest level over the last two years. On 1 July, pensions were increased by 12%; the number of pensioners with a monthly income from pensions and supplements below the poverty line subsequently decreased by almost 50%, and the figure is now around 665,000. The statutory minimum wage has also been increasing; from January 2023, it went up by 20%. In 2024, it will be raised by another 20% approximately following the introduction of a new setting mechanism.

In addition to fighting inflation, the government is focused on Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area as of March 2024 and joining the euro zone from 1 January 2025, as well as the implementation of reforms and projects from the national recovery and resilience plan (NRRP).

There were no significant changes to Bulgarian social dialogue structures in 2023. The institutional structure of the tripartite social partnership remains unchanged, with stable national representative participants in social dialogue. Social dialogue was supported by important amendments to the Criminal Code related to the protection of employees' rights to form trade unions. These changes seek to prevent and punish any acts of violence or intimidation directed against workers seeking to exercise their trade union rights. The trade union confederations have received signals of employers obstructing the establishment of trade unions but expressed hopes that with the changes in legislation such practices will be stopped. The conflict resolution framework in 2023 includes the Court of Arbitration at the Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA); all mediation proceedings were introduced and developed in an online environment.

Several collective actions and protests were organised by trade union confederations. Workers at the Bulgarian Posts company demanded a 25% wage increase and improved working conditions starting from 1 January 2023. In the end, they settled for an increase of 19%, which will apply to more than 9,000 workers. One of the biggest protests in the country was organised jointly by the trade union confederations of workers in the coal mining and energy sectors and by farmers and agriculturists. The miners protested against the expected restructuring of the industry, involving mass dismissals from coal mines and thermal power plant closures. The farmers and agriculturists were objecting to the import of oil and other products from Ukraine. The government satisfied the requests of the grain producers to stop the import of sunflower oil and is committed to offering a just transition agreement for the regions around the coal plants. Cultural figures, musicians, artists and employees of museums and libraries also walked out in a national protest. They demanded a tangible increase in the budget for culture and the adoption of legal changes to ensure the necessary funds to increase all incomes and remunerations. However, the promised 50% increase was not included in the state budget for 2024.

Amendments to the Labour Code were proposed in 2023 that aim to increase flexibility and security in remote work. In reference to the organisation of work, a requirement to provide employees with information about algorithmic management systems (involving artificial intelligence) is proposed, along with the option to request a human review of automated decisions when they affect workers' rights. The proposal is expected to be adopted by parliament in 2024.

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