

REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA
MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

WRITTEN CONTRIBUTION TO THE
2026 RULE OF LAW REPORT

Country chapter on the rule of law situation in Bulgaria

Reporting period: 19 February 2026 – 5 May 2026

Introduction

This written contribution is submitted by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Bulgaria as input to the European Commission's 2026 Rule of Law Report. It covers the term of office of the caretaker Government of Prime Minister Andrey Gyurov, appointed by Decree No. 57 of the Vice President of the Republic, Ms Iliyana Yotova, in the exercise of the powers of the President, of 19 February 2026, that is, the period from 19 February 2026 to 5 May 2026, the date of submission of the present contribution. The Minister of Justice in the caretaker Government and Deputy Prime Minister is Mr Andrey Yankulov. The contribution is structured along the four pillars of the Commission's annual report – the justice system, the anti-corruption framework, media pluralism and freedom, and other institutional issues related to checks and balances – and includes a dedicated section tracking the follow-up to the recommendations addressed to Bulgaria in the 2025 Rule of Law Report.

As of the date of submission of the present contribution, the caretaker Government continues to perform its functions until the swearing-in of the new regular government. Where reform initiatives originated before 19 February 2026, the contribution distinguishes between earlier preparatory work and measures advanced or finalised during the reporting period; where measures have been prepared by the caretaker Government but require parliamentary action that has not yet taken place, this is stated explicitly.

The contribution describes both legislative and operational measures advanced by the Ministry of Justice during the reporting period and contemporaneous developments in the institutional environment of the rule of law that fall within the scope of the Rule of Law Report but outside the competence of the Government.

I. Justice system

A. Independence

Resolution of the situation surrounding the de facto acting Prosecutor General

The 2025 Rule of Law Report identified concerns about the prolonged exercise of the functions of Prosecutor General by an interim incumbent appointed in 2023 with mandate extending well beyond the six-month statutory limit introduced by the January 2025 amendments to the Judiciary Act (Article 173, section 15). The reporting period saw both the resolution of this individual case and the constitutional confirmation of the underlying legislative framework.

On 26 February 2026, the Plenary of the Supreme Judicial Council held a session with a single agenda item, proposed by the Minister of Justice, concerning the appointment of a new acting Prosecutor General. The Ministry's position was that the continued term-of-office of Mr Borislav Sarafov beyond 21 July 2025 was not compatible with Article 173, paragraph 15, of the Judiciary Act, in line with the ruling of the Supreme Court of Cassation according to which following 21 July 2025 his powers cease *ex lege* and he cannot exercise them. The Plenary of the Supreme Judicial Council forwarded the Minister's proposal to the Prosecutors Chamber claiming it is the body competent to make such a decision. After the Prosecutors' Chamber refused on 11 March 2026 to consider the proposal, the Minister of Justice lodged an appeal before the Supreme Administrative Court. The Minister made an explicit request to the Supreme Administrative Court to refer the matter for a preliminary ruling to the Court of Justice in Luxembourg, regarding its compliance with EU law.

On 7 April 2026, the Constitutional Court, in Judgement No. 6/2026 (constitutional case No. 2/2026), unanimously declared Article 173, paragraph 15, of the Judiciary Act constitutional, holding that the figure of "acting head" of the Prosecutor's Office and of the supreme courts is not a constitutional mandate, that the Constitution does not regulate it, and that the legislator is therefore free to subject the temporary performance of those functions to a time limit of six months. The Court emphasised that the purpose of the limit is to prevent the indefinite performance of those functions by the same person and to safeguard the rule-of-law principle. Five judges (Court President Pavlina Panova, Atanas Semov, Yanaki Stoilov, Sonya Yankulova and Borislav Belazelkov) issued a joint separate opinion expressing the view that the contested provision is also consistent with the Constitution as applied to legal relationships predating its entry into force. On 8 April 2026, the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation opened Interpretative Case No. 1/2026 of the Criminal Chamber on whether, after 21 July 2025, the acting Prosecutor General was actively legitimised to file applications for the reopening of criminal proceedings.

On 22 April 2026, Mr Sarafov withdrew his consent to act as a Prosecutor General in writing to the Prosecutors' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council. The Chamber elected by unanimous decision Ms Vanya Stefanova, Deputy Prosecutor General following her election by the Prosecutors' Chamber in January 2025, as acting Prosecutor General. Her acting tenure is, by virtue of Article 173q paragraph 15, of the Judiciary Act, limited to a maximum of six months. Mr Sarafov returned to the leadership of the National Investigation Service (NSIS), in which capacity he is, by operation of law, also Deputy Prosecutor General responsible for investigation.

The Judges' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council, by contrast with the Prosecutors' Chamber, has during the reporting period applied Article 173, paragraph 15, of the Judiciary Act in strict accordance with its terms. By decision of 31 March 2026, on the proposal of the senior list of the Supreme Administrative Court and in line with the previous practice applied to Ms Marinika Cherneva (who, on 14 October 2025, succeeded Mr Georgi Cholakov as acting administrative head of the Supreme Administrative Court following the expiry of the latter's six-month interim mandate), the Judges' Chamber designated Mr Lyubomir Gaydov, Deputy President of the Supreme Administrative Court, as acting administrative head of the Supreme Administrative Court for a term of six months commencing on 15 April 2026, the date of expiry of Ms Cherneva's six-month interim mandate. The Ministry considers that the consistent application of the six-month limit in respect of two successive interim mandates at the head of the Supreme Administrative Court, together with the resignation of Mr Sarafov on 22 April 2026 and the election of Ms Stefanova as acting Prosecutor General on the same day, has restored the framework of legality in the temporary exercise of the functions of the heads of the supreme judicial bodies, addressing the principal concern raised in the rulings of the Supreme Court of Cassation of 2 October 2025 and confirmed by the Constitutional Court in Judgement No. 6/2026 of 7 April 2026.

A related institutional development concerns the funding of the Supreme Administrative Court. By Decision of 28 January 2026, the previous (Zhelyazkov) Government had allocated additional EUR 2,098,877 to enable the establishment of a third chamber at the Supreme Administrative Court, in anticipation of a substantial increase in caseload arising from amendments to the State Property Act on the expropriation of private property for national infrastructure projects. The caretaker Government, having reviewed the operational data showing that the projected increase in caseload had not materialised, revoked that allocation by decision of 8 April 2026. On 23 April 2026, the Plenary of the Supreme Judicial Council instructed its legal directorate to analyse the grounds for the revocation and, where appropriate, to challenge it before the Supreme Administrative Court. The challenge was lodged the same day. This development raises concerns regarding institutional impartiality, as the decision to revoke the additional funding allocated to the Supreme Administrative

Court is to be challenged before the very same court that stood to benefit from those funds. The Ministry of Justice notes the matter for completeness as a development bearing on the institutional dialogue between the executive and the Supreme Judicial Council in respect of the resourcing of the Supreme Administrative Court, in a context in which the leadership of that Court has, as described above, been subject to successive interim mandates and is the subject of the integrity-related developments described in Section II.I; the Ministry will follow the proceedings within its institutional remit and will report on substantive developments in the next reporting cycle.

Mechanism for the investigation of the Prosecutor General

Judgement No. 13/2024 of the Constitutional Court struck down the mechanism for investigation the Prosecutor General declaring Art. 130, paragraph 4, of the Constitution as amended by §15 Law on Amending and Supplementing the Constitution unconstitutional. The very same day, the Constitutional Court issued another judgement (Judgement No. 14/2024), which confirmed the constitutionality of the mechanism for the effective accountability and criminal liability of the Prosecutor General and his deputies but in ordinary legislation. Thus, on the same day, through two separate decisions, the Constitutional Court simultaneously declared unconstitutional the constitutional amendments establishing the mechanism for the investigation of the Prosecutor General, while upholding the constitutionality of the corresponding legislative framework incorporated in the Criminal Procedure Code and the Judiciary Act. Following Judgement No 14/2024, the Government prepared a comprehensive set of statutory amendments to operationalise the mechanism. The draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) and consequential amendments to the Judiciary Act and the Special Surveillance Means Act was published for public consultation on 31 March 2026, with the consultation period closing on 14 April 2026, and was approved by the Council of Ministers on 16 April 2026. It will be tabled in the 52nd National Assembly upon its constitution.

The principal elements of the draft are: (i) mandatory judicial review of prosecutorial decisions to suspend or terminate pre-trial proceedings for a number of corruption offences committed by high-ranking officials and for offences committed by the Prosecutor General or his deputies, removing the procedural requirement of an explicit referral by a defined group of natural persons in cases without an identified injured party; (ii) the simultaneous appointment, alongside the ad hoc prosecutor investigating the Prosecutor General, of a controlling prosecutor responsible for supervising the ad hoc prosecutor's actions, addressing the procedural gaps identified in the 2025 Rule of Law Report; (iii) the empowerment of the controlling prosecutor to apply for special surveillance means in connection with offences committed by the Prosecutor General or a deputy, an instrument not currently provided for; (iv) consequential amendments to the Judiciary Act providing that the General Assembly of

the Criminal Chamber of the Supreme Court of Cassation approves a list of criminal-law judges of the Supreme Court of Cassation from whom the supervising judge under Article 411a CrPC is to be drawn by a lot; and (v) the possibility for the controlling prosecutor to seek the reopening of proceedings under Chapter Thirty-Three of the CrPC where the conditions of Article 422, paragraph 1, of the CrPC apply.

Reform of the Supreme Judicial Council and the Inspectorate to the Supreme Judicial Council

Both the Supreme Judicial Council and the Inspectorate to the SJC are operating with expired mandates. The constraints on the Inspectorate's competences identified in the judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union of 30 April 2025 in Joined Cases C-313/23, C-316/23 and C-332/23 (*Inspektorat kam Visshia sadeben savet*) – which identified the continued performance of functions by members of a judicial body beyond their constitutional terms of office, in the absence of clear legal rules limiting such extensions, as incompatible with Article 19, paragraph 1 TEU and Article 47 of the Charter – have informed the Ministry's assessment that the renewal of these mandates is an immediate priority for restoring the full functionality and legality of judicial governance bodies and for unblocking the procedures for the election of a new Prosecutor General and a new President of the Supreme Administrative Court.

Against this background, the Ministry of Justice has finalised a draft Act amending the Judiciary Act, the Minister of Justice having publicly announced its readiness on 24 April 2026. In view of the public necessity of constituting new governing and disciplinary bodies of the judiciary in the period immediately following the early parliamentary elections of 19 April 2026, the Minister determined that the most urgent amendments – those concerning the constitution of the Supreme Judicial Council and the Inspectorate to the SJC – should be separated into a self-standing fast-track bill, to be transmitted in ready form to the regular government that will follow the constitution of the 52nd National Assembly. The principal elements of the fast-track bill are:

- a right of the Minister of Justice to challenge before the Supreme Administrative Court all acts of the Supreme Judicial Council;
- the establishment, in the parliamentary procedure for the election of members of the SJC and the IJSC, of two dedicated expert committees: the first being a committee for the verification of asset declarations, composed of three members meeting the requirements for registered auditors, designated by the Management Board of the Institute of Certified Public Accountants; the Management Board of the Chamber of Independent Appraisers; the Governing Council of the Bulgarian National Bank. The mandate of the committee extends not only to the veracity of the declarations but also to the identification of inexplicable transactions, including transactions at suspiciously low prices or transactions in respect of

which the origin of the funds is unclear. The resulting reports are to be considered before the parliamentary hearing of candidates so that the latter are afforded the opportunity to address any discrepancies and to substantiate the absence of grounds for doubt as to their integrity. The second committee is composed of professionals formally independent of political forces, drawn from the general assemblies of the supreme courts, the President of the Republic, the Ombudsman and the Supreme Bar Council, charged with providing a professional assessment of candidates' qualifications, integrity and motivation, the resulting candidate profiles to be presented to the Committee on Legal Affairs of the National Assembly and published, with a view to enabling informed public scrutiny of candidates;

- a one-month extension of the parliamentary procedure for the election of members of the SJC and the IJSC, in order to allow the verifications described above to be carried out with the necessary scope and quality, while also ensuring a higher degree of transparency and public scrutiny in the selection process; and
- the verification of the asset declarations of candidates from the judicial quota by the Inspectorate to the SJC, and exceptionally by the temporary parliamentary commission, where EU law requires limitations on the competences of the Inspectorate as a result of the expiry of its mandate.

Given the dissolution of the 51st National Assembly on 19 February 2026 and the imminent change of government following the early parliamentary elections of 19 April 2026, the fast-track bill has been finalised by the caretaker Government and is to be transmitted in ready form to the regular government that will follow the constitution of the 52nd National Assembly, with a view to ensuring continuity of reform efforts and respect for the principles governing the conduct of caretaker administrations.

The broader package of amendments to the Judiciary Act prepared in earlier years remains available in the Ministry's archives, and the strengths and weaknesses of those earlier drafts, in the assessment of the present team, will be communicated to the new political leadership at handover. The bill responds directly to the recommendations of the 2025 Rule of Law Report concerning the functioning of the Inspectorate (involving judicial bodies in the selection of its members) and re-initiating the process of reform of the Supreme Judicial Council, in particular its composition, taking into account European standards on Councils for the Judiciary.

Mechanism for the institutional protection of magistrates

The Ministry of Justice established a working group composed of representatives of the professional community, civil-society organisations and external experts to develop a Mechanism for the institutional protection of and support for magistrates in cases of threats, pressure or other forms of undue interference with the performance of their functions. Two

working meetings were held on 23 and 27 March 2026, and two sub-groups were formed, addressing respectively (i) amendments to Instruction No. I-1 of 2 October 2025 on the conditions and arrangements for the physical protection of judges, prosecutors and investigators; and (ii) the development of risk-assessment criteria, a response mechanism and a training module to be incorporated into existing curricula.

The Mechanism may be implemented by ministerial instruction or legislative amendment, which will be left to the discretion of the forthcoming Government.

Comparative work has been undertaken with the assistance of the Legicoop online forum of the European Union legislative-cooperation network, the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary (ENCJ), the network of Rule of Law Mechanism contact points, and the Norwegian Judicial Administration. The analysis covers the practices of Germany, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Latvia, Romania and Norway.

Standard for ministerial nominations to senior positions in the judiciary

The Ministry of Justice elaborated a standard governing the exercise by the Minister of Justice of his constitutional power to propose candidates for key senior managerial positions in the judiciary. The standard includes a competency model defining the professional and leadership qualities expected of candidates, an assessment methodology based on objective and measurable indicators, and a competitive procedure ensuring comparability and publicity. The standard supports informed decision-making by the Supreme Judicial Council while preserving its constitutional power to elect the heads of the respective key positions in the judiciary.

A working analysis of the competency model for senior administrative heads in the judiciary - covering the Prosecutor General, the Presidents of the supreme courts, the Director of the National Investigation Service and the administrative heads of the prosecutor's offices at various levels - was published by the Ministry of Justice on 9 April 2026. The analysis distinguishes for the first time between the figures of the Prosecutor General and the Presidents of the supreme courts in view of the character and concentration of power and supervisory competences inherent in each office, and articulates differentiated requirements for each level of management (strategic leadership for the Prosecutor General; institutional leadership for the Presidents of the Supreme Court of Cassation and the Supreme Administrative Court, with a focus on the consistency of judicial practice; systemic and operational management for the appellate, district and regional prosecutors). The analysis also articulates "horizontal" criteria common to all senior judicial positions, including high ethical integrity, resilience to pressure and absence of dependencies, with concrete indicators against which the Supreme Judicial Council and the public can assess the preparation of each candidate.

The publication is intended to ensure transparency and predictability in the exercise of the constitutional prerogative of the Minister and to provide a methodological framework that the regular government that will follow the constitution of the 52nd National Assembly may develop further; in the context of pending procedures for the election of administrative heads before the Supreme Judicial Council, the model is also made available to candidates and to members of the Council as a non-binding reference.

The full strategic framework for nominating senior judicial leaders was published on 4 May on the official website of the Ministry of Justice : <https://justice.government.bg/home/index/452107fc-d1ef-4569-b101-4b3b4d4fe77e> .

Withdrawal and re-launch of the selection of Bulgarian candidates for European Prosecutor

Revocation by the Council of Ministers of Decision No. 50 of 21 January 2026

The Council of Ministers acted on the recommendation of the Minister of Justice to re-launch on a sounder procedural basis the selection of the Bulgarian candidates for the office of European Prosecutor under Regulation (EU) 2017/1939. By Decision of 8 April 2026, the Council of Ministers revoked Decision No. 50 of 21 January 2026 of the previous government, which had approved the names of three candidates (Mr Dimitar Belichev, Ms Mihaela Raydovska, Mr Plamen Petkov) for transmission to the Selection Committee of the European Public Prosecutor's Office. The motivation for the revocation set out in the decision related to the constitution of the seven-member national selection commission, in which four members were drawn from the Supreme Judicial Council operating with an expired mandate (in a position to form a majority of votes) and the chairmanship was held by a Deputy Minister of Justice, raising structural concerns about the political neutrality and independence of the selection.

Grounds for revocation

The grounds for revocation encompass three heads of deficiency, the importance of which should be framed against the position of Bulgaria as the fourth-ranked Member State of the European Union by number of investigations conducted by the European Public Prosecutor's Office. As regards the composition of the seven-member national selection committee, four members were drawn from the Supreme Judicial Council whose mandates had expired on 3 October 2022 and were able to form a majority of the committee, an arrangement which sits in tension with the express bar in the Judiciary Act on the participation of expired-mandate members in the election of the most senior domestic judicial figures and which raises legitimacy concerns in the light of the judgment of the Court of Justice of 30 April 2025 in joined cases C-313/23, C-316/23 and C-332/23 (*Inspektorat kam Visshia sadeben savet*); the chairmanship of the committee was held by a Deputy Minister of Justice, with a further ministry official as a member, raising concerns of executive influence in tension with Council

of Europe Recommendation Rec(2000)19 on the role of public prosecution in the criminal justice system. As regards methodology and evaluation criteria, the committee operated without pre-established, publicly announced rules setting out clear and objective criteria, a defined methodology or the relative weight of the assessed benchmarks for candidates' knowledge, professional competence and ethical standing, an absence which on the Ministry's analysis renders the resulting decision legally unverifiable, in tension with the principles of equal treatment and transparency, and incompatible with the principles of proportionality and impartiality under Bulgarian administrative law. As regards the protection of the Republic's international standing and the principle of loyal cooperation, a formal complaint by an unsuccessful candidate and a civil-society alert had raised allegations of conflicts of interest in the procedure; there was a real risk that the Article 14(3) Selection Committee would reject the shortlist on procedural grounds with consequent reputational and operational costs. Hence, the Minister took the view that knowingly submitting candidates selected through a compromised procedure would have been at odds with the Republic's obligations under Article 4, paragraph 3, of the Treaty on European Union. The legal basis for the revocation, as set out in the Council of Ministers' decision, is Article 99, paragraph 1, item 1, of the Administrative Procedure Code concerning material breach of administrative-procedure rules and lawfulness requirements. In this context, the candidates could, at most, have had a legitimate expectation to participate in a lawful procedure rather than a vested right to nomination, given that the national selection constituted only an intermediate, preparatory stage in the EU-level appointment process.

Legal framework

The principal points of the legal framework on which the Council of Ministers' decision rests are: (i) the principle of *actus contrarius*, recognised in both Bulgarian and Union administrative law, under which the authority empowered to issue an administrative act is inherently empowered to revoke it where the conditions for its issuance are no longer met (Articles 99 and 105 of the Administrative Procedure Code), the absence of an explicit withdrawal clause in Regulation (EU) 2017/1939 not constituting a prohibition in the light of the principle of procedural autonomy of the Member States (Case 33/76 *Rewe-Zentralfinanz*); (ii) the composite nature of the appointment procedure, in which the legality of the final Union act depends on the legality of the national preparatory steps (Case C-219/17 *Berlusconi and Fininvest*), with the corollary that the Selection Committee cannot validly deliberate on a shortlist that the nominating Member State no longer recognises as valid, and that the Court of Justice cannot itself review the legality of the national preparatory act; (iii) the duty of sincere cooperation under Article 4, paragraph 3, of the Treaty on European Union, in both its positive and negative dimensions, requiring the Republic to ensure that only candidates selected through an objective, merit-based process are presented to the Selection Committee

and not knowingly to transmit nominations the Member State itself considers tainted; (iv) the requirement under Article 16, paragraph 1, lit. b), of Regulation (EU) 2017/1939 that European Prosecutors be chosen from candidates whose independence is “beyond doubt”, an objective legal standard that, on the Ministry’s analysis, attaches to the integrity of the process producing the candidacy and not only to the person of the candidate; (v) the obligation under Article 325 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to ensure effective protection of the Union’s financial interests, which the Ministry considers reinforces rather than displaces the duty to ensure the legal integrity of the appointment process; and (vi) the risk that, were the shortlist to be maintained, any subsequent appointment would be vulnerable to annulment under Article 263 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union on the Berlusconi and Fininvest logic, with consequent disruption to ongoing investigations and prosecutions.

The revocation constituted the least intrusive measure available, in line with the principle of proportionality under Article 5, paragraph 4, of the Treaty on European Union and with the *Rechtsstaat* principle enshrined in Articles 4, paragraph 1, of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. It also reflected the constitutional responsibility of the Council of Ministers under 105 of the Constitution to ensure that the Republic’s external representation is not founded on an act considered by the executive to be vitiated by procedural illegality.

Procedural powers and limits on precedential reach

As regards the procedural powers allowing the revocation, the Council of Ministers’ decision of 21 January 2026 had already been the subject of judicial proceedings before the Supreme Administrative Court initiated by an unsuccessful candidate. By ruling of 9 March 2026 in administrative case No. 2151/2026, the Supreme Administrative Court refused to take into consideration the claim and terminated the proceedings on the ground that the decision did not constitute a reviewable final administrative act under Bulgarian law, being characterised as a mere proposal to the Union authorities. Under Article 126 of the Administrative Procedure Code, moreover, the body that has issued an administrative act cannot itself initiate judicial review of that act on its own motion. In these circumstances, and given that the interviews of the shortlisted candidates before the Selection Committee were scheduled for April 2026, the Council of Ministers adopted the only measure capable of safeguarding the legality of the procedure and enabling its lawful recommencement before any vested rights could arise at Union level.

With a view to forestalling any reading of the present case as a precedent for arbitrary withdrawal, the cumulative conditions on which the action is grounded are restrictive: a verifiable procedural illegality identified through objective assessment rather than political disagreement; action taken before the creation of any vested rights at Union level; reliance on the *actus contrarius* principle and on Article 99, paragraph 1, item 1, of the Administrative

Procedure Code; and an immediate commitment to the restart of the procedure on a transparent, competitive and politically neutral basis, as described in the following paragraph. Any future invocation of the present case as a precedent in the absence of these elements would be liable to characterisation as an abuse of right (Case C-110/99 *Emsland-Stärke*) and would remain subject to the institutional safeguards available under Articles 7 of the Treaty on European Union and 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, as well as to the standards of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) on judicial and prosecutorial appointments.

The candidates retained the right to challenge the decision of revocation in judicial proceedings, due process being preserved through the shifting of judicial review to the executive's decision to withdraw and restart, in accordance with the settled case-law of the Court of Justice that participants in selection procedures hold a right to fair consideration but not a right to appointment.

Re-launch of the selection procedure on 9 April 2026

On 9 April 2026, the Minister of Justice opened a new selection procedure on the basis of pre-determined, objective rules and a five-member politically neutral selection committee composed of one habilitated academic in criminal-law sciences (drawn at random), two judges from the Criminal Chamber of the Supreme Court of Cassation (designated by the General Assembly of the Chamber), one prosecutor from the Supreme Prosecutor's Office of Cassation (designated by a Deputy Prosecutor General), and one lawyer with at least 12 years of experience in criminal law, criminal procedure or EU law (designated by the Supreme Bar Council). The application period closes on 11 May 2026, that is to say, after the date of submission of the present contribution; the selection committee is to be appointed in advance of the assessment of the admissibility of the applications submitted; and the procedure is calibrated to allow the transmission of the three nominations to the European Public Prosecutor's Office before the end of the mandate of the current European Prosecutors on 28 July 2026.

Judicial challenge to the revocation by the candidates

Within the reporting period, the three candidates whose nominations were revoked by the decision of the Council of Ministers of 8 April 2026 - Mr Dimitar Belichev, Ms Mihaela Raydovska and Mr Plamen Petkov - each lodged appeals against the revocation decision before the Supreme Administrative Court, as recorded in the electronic case file system of that Court and reported publicly on 27 April 2026. As of the date of submission of the present contribution, the proceedings are pending and no decision on admissibility or on the merits has been rendered. The Ministry of Justice notes for completeness that the availability of judicial review of the revocation decision before the Supreme Administrative Court is

consistent with the position of the Ministry's that due process is preserved through the shifting of judicial review to the executive's decision to withdraw and restart, and that participants in selection procedures hold a right to fair consideration but not a right to appointment.

Selection of Bulgarian candidates for two positions of judge of the General Court of the European Union

On 7 April 2026, the Minister of Justice opened the procedure for the selection of Bulgarian candidates for two positions of judge of the General Court of the European Union, replacing Mr Aleksandar Kornezov (appointed as Judge of the Court of Justice in July 2025) and Ms Mariyana Kancheva (whose mandate expired in 2025). Public criteria and an assessment methodology have been issued; the selection commission is composed of habilitated academics in legal sciences, two sitting judges, and members designated by the supreme courts and the Supreme Bar Council, with parity-of-treatment guarantees for candidates. The application period closed on 24 April 2026; the procedure includes a written test and an interview in Bulgarian and French; the procedure is to be concluded by 5 June 2026.

Notification to Eurojust concerning the national procedure for the secondment of a Seconded National Expert

In a related matter concerning Bulgarian appointments to the criminal-justice agencies of the European Union, by letter of 23 April 2026 to the Administrative Director of Eurojust, Mr Vincent Jamin, the Minister of Justice notified Eurojust of serious irregularities in the national selection procedure that led, on 15 April 2026, to the decision of the Prosecutors' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council to second Ms Lilia Kariyeva as Seconded National Expert to the Bulgarian National Desk at Eurojust, and requested that Eurojust refrain from finalising the administrative acceptance and onboarding of the secondment pending clarification of the facts.

The substantive concerns set out in the notification are: (i) that the formal proposal of 2 April 2026 for the secondment was submitted by Mr Borislav Sarafov in his de facto capacity as Acting Prosecutor General, after the expiry on 21 July 2025 of the six-month statutory cap under Article 173, paragraph 15, of the Judiciary Act, as upheld in the order of the Supreme Court of Cassation of 2 October 2025 and confirmed in Decision No. 6/2026 of the Constitutional Court of 7 April 2026; (ii) that the Prosecutors' Chamber endorsed the single pre-selected name without sight of any alternatives, on the basis of a dossier containing only the candidate's ad personam application of 16 March 2026, an HR data sheet, the endorsement of her immediate superior, Eurojust's letter of 6 March 2026, and a copy of the relevant Eurojust College decision, and containing no vacancy announcement, register of applications received, pre-established evaluation criteria, minutes of a selection panel or

reasoned comparative assessment; (iii) that, on information from public prosecutors received by the Ministry, although the request had been published on the intranet of the Prosecutor's Office on 23 March 2026 with a four-day application deadline expiring on 27 March 2026 and five qualified candidates submitted applications in response, the Prosecutors' Chamber was officially informed that only Karieva's application had been received and evaluated; and (iv) that the same pattern of defects had, in April 2026, already been formally recognised by the Government of Bulgaria as warranting the annulment of the analogous selection procedure for Bulgarian candidates for European Prosecutor (described above), there being no principled reason for a different outcome in the present procedure.

The Minister's notification accordingly requested Eurojust to (i) suspend the administrative acceptance and onboarding of the secondment pending full clarification; (ii) formally request from the Prosecutors' Chamber a complete dossier of the selection procedure, including any call published, the register of applications received, the evaluation criteria applied, the composition of any selection panel and the reasoned evaluations of all candidates, together with a statement of the legal basis on which Mr Sarafov acted in submitting the proposal; (iii) inform the College of Eurojust of the circumstances pursuant to its duty of information under the Rules of Procedure; and (iv) should the dossier confirm the irregularities, decline the secondment and invite the Bulgarian authorities to relaunch the national procedure under transparent conditions, on the same logic as the revocation of the European Prosecutor national procedure by the Council of Ministers in April 2026.

Long-term secondment of judges

The 2025 Rule of Law Report recommended that Bulgaria adapt the legislative framework to avoid the long-term secondment of judges to fill vacant positions. The body responsible for renewing the staffing of vacant positions through ordinary competitions is the Supreme Judicial Council. Resolving the underlying institutional bottleneck through the Judiciary Act amendments described above is a precondition for substantive progress on this recommendation.

B. Quality of justice

Procedural rights of suspects and accused persons (CPC amendments)

A draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code, ensuring the complete and correct transposition of six EU procedural-rights directives – Directives 2010/64/EU, 2012/13/EU, 2013/48/EU, (EU) 2016/343, (EU) 2016/800 and (EU) 2016/1919 – has been prepared by the Ministry of Justice, has gone through public consultation and inter-ministerial coordination, and was adopted by the Council of Ministers on 29 April 2026, and is to be tabled in the 52nd National Assembly following the formation of its standing parliamentary groups and committees.

The Commission has opened infringement proceedings against Bulgaria for incomplete transposition of all six directives, and the Court of Justice has held that the partial application of certain procedural rights only to detained persons does not satisfy the directives' requirements. The amendments introduce, among other elements, a duty for law-enforcement authorities to inform persons under suspicion of their procedural rights – including the right to a lawyer, the right to legal aid, the right to interpretation and translation, and the right to remain silent - at a stage prior to the formal lodging of charges.

The practical relevance of the legislative response described above is illustrated by judicial developments during the reporting period. On 20 February 2026, the Sofia Regional Court, ruling on an appeal filed by the defence, overturned the order for the initial 24-hour police detention of Mr Blagomir Kotsev, declaring it unlawful. The latter is a Mayor of Varna and was detained on 8 July 2025. The order was overturned on the ground that it failed to identify the factual basis for the suspicion of a specific criminal offence and merely referred to a “special police operation”, in breach of the procedural rules and of the detainee’s right of defence. The Ministry recalls that, as set out in the introduction, the broader Kotsev case predates the reporting period and that lead competence for the criminal proceedings rests with the Prosecutor’s Office; the Ministry confines itself in the present contribution to the procedural development that occurred within the reporting period. The Ministry observes that the ruling is consistent with the standards of Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights and of Article 6 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and constitutes an instance of judicial control over executive action of the kind that the rule of law requires; and that, on the data publicly cited in the National Assembly on 27 February 2026 by reference to information from the Ministry of the Interior, approximately 640 orders for 24-hour police detention have been declared unlawful by Bulgarian courts over the past four years, raising a systemic concern as regards the use of short-term police detention and its compatibility with the presumption of innocence.

The Ministry of Justice considers that the legislative response described above - in particular, the duty to inform persons under suspicion of their procedural rights at the earliest stage and prior to the formal pressing of charges - addresses part of the underlying concern, and that the Ministry will keep the operation of the framework on short-term police detention under review, in coordination with the Ministry of the Interior, with a view to identifying any further legislative or operational measures that may be required. The Ministry further notes that, by a written question of 29 March 2026 to the European Commission, Members of the European Parliament drew attention to the Sofia Regional Court’s ruling and to the systemic dimension of unlawful short-term police detention in Bulgaria, with particular reference to the presumption of innocence; the Ministry will follow the Commission’s response and stands ready to engage with the Commission services on this point.

Electronic evidence and the implementation of EU instruments

A draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code ensuring the application of Regulation (EU) 2023/1543 on European Production Orders and European Preservation Orders for electronic evidence in criminal proceedings, and transposing Directive (EU) 2023/1544 on harmonised rules on the designation of designated establishments and the appointment of legal representatives for the purposes of gathering electronic evidence in criminal proceedings, has been prepared and submitted for inter-ministerial coordination at the Council of Ministers.

Alignment of substantive criminal law with the EU and international frameworks

Two further Criminal Code amendments have been prepared. The first addresses inconsistencies between Bulgarian criminal law and Directive (EU) 2017/1371 on the fight against fraud to the Union's financial interests, identified in the legal opinion of the European Public Prosecutor's Office; the bill is awaiting publication for public consultation. The second aligns Bulgarian criminal law with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, in particular as regards the crime of aggression and the offences associated with the use of new types of weapons and methods of warfare causing mass destruction or having a dehumanising impact on victims; finalisation of the bill is in progress.

Protection of children — extension of the statute of limitation periods

On 19 March 2026, the National Assembly adopted the Act amending the Criminal Code that extends the statute of limitation periods for the institution of criminal proceedings for offences against children under Chapters Two and Four of the Special Part of the Criminal Code, with the aim of allowing victims sufficient time after attaining majority to assess whether an offence has been committed against them and to report it. The Act completes the transposition of the Directive on combating sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse material. The Act was promulgated in State Gazette No. 32 of 1 April 2026.

Bureau of Convictions and the implementation of the ECtHR judgment in Tonchev v. Bulgaria

A draft Ordinance amending Ordinance No. 8 of 26 February 2008 on the functions and the organisation of the activity of the Bureaux of Convictions has been prepared. Among other elements, it addresses (i) the exchange of data between the Centralised Automated Information System *Sadeben Status* and the European Information System for Criminal Records (ECRIS) by official channels; (ii) the issuance of an AFIS number through the Unified Information System on Counteracting Crime to third-country nationals, in compliance with Regulation (EU) 2019/816 establishing ECRIS-TCN; (iii) the retention periods for criminal-record bulletins and bulletins on administrative penalties imposed under Article 78a of the Criminal Code, in implementation of the ECtHR judgment of 16 April 2024 in *Borislav Tonchev*

v. *Bulgaria* (App. No. 40519/15); (iv) mandatory elements of bulletins; and (v) the alignment of the European classification of offences and penalties with the national classification.

C. Efficiency of the justice system

Acceleration of criminal proceedings

A separate draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code, dedicated to the acceleration of criminal proceedings, was published for public consultation on 24 April 2026. The proposed amendments are limited to the technical aspects of the acceleration of the criminal process and do not extend to questions of a politically sensitive character, which should not be resolved in the closing days of the caretaker mandate but should be left to the next regular government and to the 52nd National Assembly. The principal elements of the bill are: (i) electronic service of summons/subpoenas, notices and documents during the pre-trial phase; (ii) simplification of the procedure for the correction of obvious factual errors in indictments, allowing the prosecutor to make the correction orally during the disposition hearing or the first-instance trial without remitting the case to the pre-trial phase; (iii) the remedying by the appellate court of incomplete, unclear or contradictory grounds in first-instance judgments, removing this as a ground for remittal; (iv) a new ground for an application to expedite proceedings in the trial phase, namely the failure of the court to take procedural steps in a reasonable time without justification; and (v) limiting the cases in which a case may be returned to the prosecutor to those in which newly established facts exclude the application of Article 78a of the Criminal Code.

Acceleration of civil proceedings

A draft Act amending the Civil Procedure Code in advanced preparation aims at the acceleration of civil proceedings through the optimisation of the distribution of cases between courts, the reduction of the number of court proceedings instituted in respect of related claims and where there is no dispute as to the debt, the reduction of the number of enforcement proceedings between the same parties for monetary claims, the introduction of the possibility of hearing experts by video-conference or accepting their conclusion without a hearing, the limitation of the number of postponements due to the non-appearance of parties or their representatives, the digitalisation of the lodging of statements of claim and of enforcement proceedings, and the reduction of court costs for parties. The draft also envisages further amendments regarding expedited proceedings without open trials if the parties consent and several measures to combat the practices of *mala fide* applicants in civil cases.

Digitalisation, training and operational support to the judicial profession

During the reporting period, the Directorate for Cooperation with the Judicial Authority of the Ministry of Justice organised and conducted: two examinations for the recognition of

professional qualification of forensic experts in court motor-vehicle technical examinations under Ordinance No. H-1 of 2023, as amended in State Gazette No. 89 of 2025 (held on 22–23 February and 7–8 March 2026); one examination for assistant notaries on substitution under Ordinance No. 2 of 2003 (held on 1 April 2026); and one examination for the acquisition of legal practical training under Ordinance No. 1 of 2019 (held on 4 and 18 April 2026). Successful candidates were issued the corresponding certificates and orders by the Minister of Justice and were proposed for inclusion in the lists of forensic experts of the relevant district and administrative courts. The annual training programme of the National Institute of Justice for forensic experts in court motor-vehicle technical examinations has been approved.

Supplementary agreements were signed with approximately 430 state bailiffs and registry judges in respect of base-salary increases as of 1 January 2026 and increases of monthly allowances for length of service. A draft annual programme of thematic courses for the training of insolvency trustees in 2026 was prepared and is to be approved jointly by the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Economy and Industry by 30 April 2026; an updated list of insolvency trustees is to be sent for promulgation in the State Gazette by the same date.

International child protection

During the reporting period, the Directorate for International Legal Protection of Children and International Adoptions of the Ministry of Justice continued to perform the functions of the Bulgarian central authority under the Hague Convention of 29 May 1993, the Hague Convention of 25 October 1980, the Hague Convention of 19 October 1996, Council Regulation (EU) 2019/1111 and Council Regulation (EC) No 4/2009. As regards inter-country adoption: 25 children were entered on the register of children eligible for inter-country adoption; 27 children's files and 511 documents were processed; 24 prospective adopters' applications were processed; 16 adopters were entered on the register; and the Minister of Justice issued 14 consents covering 19 children. Four sessions of the Council on Inter-country Adoption were held. As regards cross-border parental abduction and the protection of children: 17 cases were handled under the 1980 Hague Convention; 11 cases under the 1996 Hague Convention; 23 cases under Regulation (EU) 2019/1111. As regards maintenance obligations: 81 active cases under Article 56 of Regulation (EC) No 4/2009 and Article 10 of the 2007 Hague Convention; 28 information exchanges under Article 53 of the Regulation and Article 7 of the Convention; 7 general inquiries.

Inspectorate of the Minister of Justice – quantitative indicators

During the reporting period, the Inspectorate of the Minister of Justice opened 135 new files on complaints and signals from natural and legal persons. Sixty inspection orders were issued in respect of private bailiffs, notaries and insolvency trustees. Four proposals for the institution of disciplinary proceedings against private bailiffs and notaries, and one

recommendation to a state bailiff, were signed by the Minister. Inspectors of the Inspectorate participated in over ten sittings of the Disciplinary Committees of the Chamber of Private Enforcement Agents and of the Notarial Chamber. Inspectors chaired the examination commissions for the two examinations for legal practical training and the one examination for assistant notaries on substitution.

II. Anti-corruption framework

A. Reform of the institutional framework

Following the Audit Office Act amendments promulgated in State Gazette No. 16 of 2026, in force from 14 February 2026, which repealed the Anti-Corruption Act of 2023 (State Gazette No. 84 of 2023, as amended in 2024 and 2025) and discontinued the previous Commission for Counteracting of Corruption (with its functions on conflict-of-interest verification, asset-declaration verification and corruption-prevention transferred to the National Audit Office, and detection and counter-corruption functions returned to the specialised "Combating Organised Crime" Directorate-General of the Ministry of the Interior), the Ministry of Justice prepared a new draft Act on Counteracting Corruption among Persons Holding Public Office. The bill was published for public consultation on 31 March 2026, the consultation period closing on 14 April 2026; it was approved by the Council of Ministers on 16 April 2026 and is to be tabled in the 52nd National Assembly upon its constitution.

The bill provides for a politically independent State body of five members responsible both for the prevention of corruption – through the verification of the asset and interest declarations of persons holding public office and the establishment of conflicts of interest - and for the investigation of corruption offences. Members are nominated as follows: one by the National Assembly, one by the President of the Republic, one by the Supreme Court of Cassation, one by the Supreme Administrative Court, and one by the Supreme Bar Council. This composition guarantees a structural majority of members originating from politically independent State bodies and institutions.

A differentiated election procedure is provided, with judicial review over the acts of nomination of members; the Chair of the Commission rotates annually by lottery among the members; and members serve a single, non-renewable five-year term. The Commission is competent in respect of 52 categories of senior public officials and is endowed with operational, investigative and prosecutorial powers, in accordance with Bulgaria's commitments under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. The bill provides for the Commission to challenge before the courts a refusal of the prosecutor to open pre-trial proceedings, and for mandatory judicial review of decisions to suspend or terminate pre-trial proceedings investigated by the Commission's officers. It also regulates the consequences of

the constitution of the Commission and the transfer of anti-corruption functions from the National Audit Office to the Commission.

B. Strengthening of judicial review over proceedings for corruption offences

The draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code described in Section I.A above introduces, in addition to the strengthened mechanism for the investigation of the Prosecutor General, a mandatory judicial review over prosecutorial decisions to suspend or terminate criminal proceedings for corruption offences. The instrument is designed to safeguard a fair criminal procedure in cases that are typically without an identified injured party, which under the current legal framework leaves no defined group of natural persons entitled to challenge such prosecutorial acts. This element of the bill addresses Milestone 222 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

C. Lobbying transparency

The Lobbying Transparency Act (*Закон за прозрачност при представителство на интереси*) was adopted by the National Assembly at second reading on 19 March 2026 and was promulgated in State Gazette No. 30 of 27 March 2026. The Act fulfils the commitment undertaken in the context of Bulgaria's accession process to the OECD on alignment with the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Transparency and Integrity in Lobbying and Influence (OECD/LEGAL/0379, originally adopted on 18 February 2010 and revised on 3 May 2024), as well as Milestone 223 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Pillar "Fair Bulgaria", Component "Business Environment"). The Act establishes a Transparency Register and clear rules of accountability with a view to ensuring transparency in contacts with the representatives of public authority and equal access for all interested natural and legal persons engaging in interest representation. By Order No. LS-13-39 of 25 March 2026 of the Minister of Justice, a working group was established to draft the implementing ordinance under Article 19(3) of the Act; the working group is meeting weekly.

D. Fight against transnational money laundering and the FATF action plan

All measures within the remit of the Ministry of Justice under the FATF action plan have been completed. The 24 measures of the action plan falling within the Ministry of Justice's remit have all been completed as of the date of the present contribution; one further measure of the action plan - concerning the increase in the number of investigations and prosecutions for various forms of money laundering connected to large-scale corruption and organised crime - falls within the lead competence of the Prosecutor's Office and will be reported by the Bulgarian delegation in Helsinki on 11 May 2026.

In parallel, the joint project of the European Commission and the Council of Europe under the Technical Support Instrument, "Improving the Anti-Money Laundering/Counter-Financing of Terrorism Framework in Bulgaria" (16 October 2025 – 15 October 2026), with the Ministry of

Justice as beneficiary, is being implemented by the Council of Europe (Department for Economic Crime and Cooperation, Directorate General I — Human Rights and Rule of Law). The Project Advisory Group has held two meetings; an inception report has been adopted; a comparative analysis of good practices in selected FATF/MONEYVAL jurisdictions, with particular reference to the implementation of FATF Recommendation 5, has been prepared and circulated to stakeholders for comment by 22 April 2026; a roundtable with the competent authorities is scheduled for 12 May 2026; a seminar on the impact of legislative changes on the non-profit sector for 13 May 2026; two awareness-raising seminars in early June 2026; and a peer-exchange visit with the Spanish authorities at the end of June 2026.

E. OECD Working Group on Bribery — accession assessment

On 19 March 2026, at its plenary in Paris, the OECD Working Group on Bribery in International Business Transactions gave a positive assessment of Bulgaria's compliance with the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention and related instruments for the purposes of Bulgaria's accession to the OECD, with two outstanding issues remaining under ongoing monitoring. The positive assessment was reached in part as a result of legislative measures advanced by the Ministry of Justice during the reporting period and constitutes a significant step in Bulgaria's process of accession to the OECD.

F. Disciplinary proceedings before the Prosecutors' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council

On 31 March 2026 and 7 April 2026 respectively, the Minister of Justice submitted to the Prosecutors' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council two proposals for the institution of disciplinary proceedings under the Judiciary Act for the imposition of the most severe disciplinary sanction (dismissal from office). The first concerned Mr Borislav Sarafov and was based on publicly known acts and statements considered by the Minister as capable of undermining the prestige of the judiciary, an absence of effective oversight of the legality of prosecutorial acts. The second, in respect of Ms Emiliya Rusinova (acting Sofia City Prosecutor), was based on official records received from the Ministry of the Interior concerning international travel undertaken in the company of the notorious Mr Petyo Petrov ("Evroto") and other persons named in the so-called "Eight Dwarfs" criminal-influence network. The Ethics Commission of the Prosecutors' Chamber self-referred the Rusinova file at an extraordinary sitting on 1 April 2026.

Following Mr Sarafov's withdrawal of consent to act as Prosecutor General on 22 April 2026, the Prosecutors' Chamber clarified - citing the opinion of the Chair of the Disciplinary Activity Commission, Mr Evgeni Ivanov - that the Minister's disciplinary proposal remains procedurally admissible regardless of Mr Sarafov's current institutional status, on the basis that the proposal is made by the Minister and concerns a magistrate. The Prosecutors' Chamber included the proposal as the second item on its session on 29 April 2026, to be reported by

the Disciplinary Activity Commission. The Rusinova file remains pending before the Prosecutors' Chamber.

At its session on 29 April 2026, the Prosecutors' Chamber did not rule on the substance of the Minister's proposal. The Chamber instead adopted a decision instructing the Minister of Justice to amend and supplement the proposal within one week, by specifying the current institutional position of Mr Sarafov (now Deputy Prosecutor General responsible for investigation and Director of the National Investigation Service following his withdrawal of consent as acting Prosecutor General on 22 April 2026) and by submitting additional information in respect of one of the five points of the proposal. The Chamber stated that, in the event of non-compliance with the instructions, the proposal would be left without consideration. The Minister of Justice indicated publicly that he did not consider the points raised by the Chamber to constitute irregularities. . The disciplinary proceedings remain pending and the underlying allegations against Mr Sarafov, in his capacity as a magistrate, are unaffected by the change of his institutional position. However the Minister of Justice has amended and supplemented the proposal according to the instruction of the Prosecutors' Chamber.

At the date of submission of the present contribution, the principal internal accountability mechanism in respect of the leadership of the prosecution service has therefore not produced a substantive decision on the Minister's proposal, and that the procedural posture adopted on 29 April 2026 by the Prosecutors' Chamber is itself relevant to the assessment, under Recommendation 4 of the 2025 Rule of Law Report, of the effectiveness of the existing arrangements for disciplinary accountability of the senior prosecutorial leadership.

G. EPPO disciplinary proceedings concerning the Bulgarian European Prosecutor and treatment of materials concerning the "Eight Dwarves" network

On 25 February 2026, at the very beginning of the reporting period, the College of the European Public Prosecutor's Office, on the basis of the opinion of its Disciplinary Board, found the Bulgarian European Prosecutor, Ms Teodora Georgieva, guilty of serious misconduct, and deferred its decision on the appropriate sanction, indicating that, given the seriousness of the established breaches and the high degree of responsibility of the function of European Prosecutor, dismissal could not be excluded; the European Chief Prosecutor informed the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission of the College's position. Ms Georgieva, who had been temporarily suspended from her functions in March 2025, remains suspended pending a final decision by the competent institutions, with remuneration withheld in accordance with the Staff Regulations; her term of office expires on 29 July 2026 and Mr Dimitar Belichev continues to perform her functions in the capacity of deputy.

The Ministry of Justice considers the College's finding as a further blow to the institutional standing of Bulgarian justice and notes its bearing on the broader question of so-called networks of parallel justice that allegedly continue to operate at full capacity in Bulgaria. The Ministry observes that the College's finding is directly relevant to Bulgaria's compliance with Regulation (EU) 2017/1939 and to the integrity of investigations conducted by the European Public Prosecutor's Office in Bulgaria, and that it underlines the importance of conducting the new selection procedure for Bulgarian candidates for the office of European Prosecutor described in Section I.A on a politically neutral and procedurally robust basis.

The Ministry of Justice set up a working group to receive, systematise and conduct a legal analysis of materials submitted by the BOEC civil-society association and other sources concerning the "Eight Dwarfs" network of criminal influence in the judicial system. The materials have been transmitted to the Ministry of the Interior for inspection and to the Chair of the Criminal Chamber of the Supreme Court of Cassation for possible action under the mechanism for the investigation of the Prosecutor General. The Ministry has also processed a formal signal received from the suspended European Prosecutor for Bulgaria, Ms Teodora Georgieva, alleging pressure, threats and influence-peddling by senior officials of the prosecution service and a person sanctioned under the Magnitsky framework. The Ministry notes for the avoidance of doubt that the establishment of the working group and the transmission of the materials to the competent authorities are organisational and procedural steps; they do not, of themselves, address the substance of the allegations, on which the lead competence rests with the Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of the Interior, and (in respect of magistrates) the Supreme Judicial Council. The Ministry will report on substantive developments in the next reporting cycle.

H. Council for Criminological Research

On 1 April 2026, the Council for Criminological Research, the expert advisory body to the Minister of Justice on State criminal policy, held a meeting. Four research studies are in the closing phase, having been submitted by 23 April 2026, on the following topics: (i) prevention of and protection from domestic violence; (ii) drug-related crime; (iii) cybercrime; and (iv) corruption offences.

I. Developments in high-level corruption case-law

On 26 March 2026, the Sofia City Court approved a plea agreement between the Prosecutor's Office and Mr Nikola Nikolov ("Paskal") in the so-called customs criminal case. Mr Nikolov pleaded guilty to three counts, including participation in an organised criminal group, and accepted a suspended custodial sentence of two years and eight months and a fine of 25,000 BGN. By operation of law, an approved plea agreement has the force of a final conviction. Proceedings against the remaining co-accused, including former senior public officials, are

continuing before the competent courts under the lead competence of the Prosecutor's Office. The Ministry of Justice notes the relevance of this development for the track-record dimension of Recommendation 4 of the 2025 Rule of Law Report on investigations, prosecutions and final judgments in high-level corruption cases.

A second development of significance for the track-record dimension of Recommendation 4 occurred at the very end of the reporting period and concerns allegations of corruption at the level of the recent leadership of the Supreme Administrative Court. On 24 April 2026, the investigative outlet Bird.bg published an investigation entitled "Cholakov-gate: Justice for Money in Bags", presenting three audio recordings of conversations alleged to be between Mr Georgi Cholakov, former President of the Supreme Administrative Court (and currently a sitting judge of that court) and a person identified as a previously convicted attorney, in which the speakers discuss the procurement of favourable outcomes in pending administrative cases in exchange for sums in the order of hundreds of thousands of euros. Mr Cholakov publicly denied that the recordings reflect any conversation in which he participated and has indicated that the audio may have been generated by digital means. On the same day, the co-chairs of the political party "Yes, Bulgaria" lodged a signal with the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office and with the new acting Prosecutor General. By order of 27 April 2026, the supervising prosecutor of the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office opened pre-trial proceedings under Article 283 of the Criminal Code (offence in office) for trading in influence in connection with cases pending before the Supreme Administrative Court. The proceedings have been assigned to an investigator at the Sofia City Investigation Service, in conformity with Article 194(1)(2a) of the Criminal Procedure Code (which reserves to investigators the conduct of investigations against magistrates), and a complex audio-technical expert examination has been ordered to verify the authenticity of the recordings and the attribution of the voices.

Another recent development is that on 28 April 2026, the Sofia City Court terminated the judicial proceedings and returned the indictment to the prosecution for correction of errors in the case against the co-chair of "Yes, Bulgaria" Bozhidar Bozhanov and the former chair of "We Continue the Change" Kiril Petkov. The ruling is subject to appeal and protest.

Petkov is charged with coercion against the former Minister of e-Government Aleksandar Yolovski, while Bozhanov is accused of an offence related to public procurement.

In its ruling, the court states that the construction of the indictment is so complex and hypothetical that it leads to the conclusion that the prosecution itself is unclear about the exact charges brought against Bozhanov.

III. Media pluralism and media freedom

Transposition of the Anti-SLAPP Directive (Directive (EU) 2024/1069)

The principal development during the reporting period directly relevant to media pluralism and media freedom is the preparation of the legislative framework transposing Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on the protection of persons engaged in public participation against manifestly unfounded or abusive court proceedings (the Anti-SLAPP Directive). A draft Act amending the Civil Procedure Code transposing the Directive in full was prepared by the Ministry of Justice. A partial preliminary impact assessment was approved by the Directorate for Coordination and Modernisation of the Administration of the Council of Ministers; the bill was published for public consultation on 16 April 2026, with the consultation period closing on 18 May 2026, and is scheduled for approval by the Council of Ministers in the second half of May 2026.

The Ministry of Justice has informed the European Commission that the bill is in public consultation and that, owing to the constraints of the caretaker mandate and the timing of the parliamentary process, the transposition cannot be completed by the deadline of 7 May 2026, but the bill is at an advanced stage of preparation and the parliamentary procedure that will follow the Council of Ministers' approval will fall to the 52nd National Assembly, with which adoption will be pursued as a matter of priority.

Scope of the bill and additional safeguards beyond the Directive minimum

The bill goes beyond the minimum requirements of the Directive in important respects. It applies not only to cross-border cases but also to purely domestic proceedings; it introduces a new chapter in the Civil Procedure Code on "Proceedings on account of public participation by the defendant"; it sets out an exhaustive definition of "public participation" (covering the exercise of freedom of expression and information, freedom of the arts and sciences, and freedom of assembly and association in matters of public interest) and of "matters of public interest" (covering inter alia fundamental rights, public health and safety, the environment, the activity of public figures, signals or public information about corruption, and matters before legislative, executive, judicial and local-government authorities); and it provides for: (i) early termination of the proceedings on the merits at the request of the defendant (typically a journalist or civic activist); (ii) the listing of indicators for the qualification of a case as one directed against public participation; (iii) the possibility for the submission of evidence by non-profit legal entities active in the public interest in the field of fundamental rights and freedoms, with the consent of the defendant and up to the close of the first-instance hearing; (iv) limitations on injunctive relief in such proceedings unless convincing written evidence is produced; (v) the possibility for the court to require the plaintiff to put up security for the defendant's expected costs; and (vi) the publication, in the Single Portal for Electronic Justice and with the full identifying details of the plaintiff, of final judgments dismissing the claim and expressly finding that the case was brought on account of the defendant's public participation.

A concrete illustration: the Bird.bg case in Burgas

The need for the aforementioned legislative response is illustrated by developments during the reporting period. On 7 April 2026, the outlet for investigative journalism Bird.bg reported that the Burgas District Court had imposed attachments freezing the bank accounts of one of its staff reporters, Mr Dimitar Stoyanov, up to a value of approximately EUR 25,000, in connection with five new civil defamation actions filed against him within the span of two working days in February 2026 by a businessman and former customs officer who had been the subject of the journalist's investigations into alleged corruption with connections to law enforcement and the judiciary, and into fuel smuggling. According to the public statement of 9 April 2026 by the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria and the Access to Information Programme, the journalist faces a total of thirteen actions filed by the same plaintiff (eleven civil and two criminal), with attachments imposed by orders of five Burgas District Court judges in five of the civil cases for an aggregate quantum of approximately EUR 25,000; the journalist's situation has been reported by the Association to the Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalism and the Safety of Journalists. Reporters Without Borders, in a public statement of 17 April 2026 addressed to candidates contesting the early parliamentary elections of 19 April 2026, identified the case as illustrative of the systemic exposure of investigative journalists in Bulgaria to abusive litigation and called for the prompt transposition of the Anti-SLAPP Directive together with the adoption of comprehensive national legislation.

The Ministry of Justice observes that the case presents the structural features that the aforementioned bill is designed to address – multiple parallel claims of significant aggregate quantum brought against a single investigative journalist by a person who is the subject of his reporting on matters of public interest, accompanied by ancillary measures producing immediate financial pressure - and that, until the entry into force of the transposing legislation, defendants in cases of this kind continue to rely on the general procedural framework of the Civil Procedure Code without the benefit of the specific safeguards introduced by the Directive. The Ministry will continue to follow this and analogous cases, and considers that they reinforce the Ministry's analysis that the bill should apply to purely domestic proceedings and should provide for the early termination of proceedings on the merits at the request of the defendant.

Interpretative request on attachment orders under Article 391(1) of the Civil Procedure Code

In a connected initiative, the Minister of Justice referred to the Supreme Court of Cassation a request for an interpretative ruling on the application of Article 391(1) of the Civil Procedure Code regarding the imposition of attachments and freezing orders in monetary claims, with a view to identifying any judicial practice that may aggravate the financial pressure on defendants in cases directed against public participation or the use of such measures to

coerce commercial partners to accept the legal arguments of the plaintiffs, even if they still contest their claims, in order to avoid serious disruption of their business.

IV. Other institutional issues related to checks and balances

A. The legislative process and the rule-of-law coordination architecture

Legislative output of the Ministry of Justice during the reporting period

During the reporting period, the Ministry of Justice prepared a total of 17 normative-act drafts, organised around four principal axes: (i) the implementation of Bulgaria's commitments under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the safeguarding of the corresponding payments; (ii) amendments to the Judiciary Act improving the procedures for the election of members of the Supreme Judicial Council and the Inspectorate to the SJC; (iii) the transposition of European Union directives on which transposition is significantly delayed and infringement risks have materialised; and (iv) the acceleration of judicial proceedings through targeted amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code. All Government bills were subject to public consultation under Article 26 of the Normative Acts Law and to inter-ministerial coordination under Articles 32 and 35 of the Council of Ministers' Rules of Procedure and Organisation of Work, with publication on the Public Consultations Portal of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Annual report on the state of the administration: judicial losses by State institutions

The annual report on the state of the administration for 2025, approved by the caretaker Government during the reporting period, records that State institutions lost a total of 14,807 judicial proceedings during 2025 with an aggregate financial interest of approximately BGN 828.5 million, against 24,659 cases won with an aggregate financial interest of approximately BGN 569 million. The National Revenue Agency accounted for the largest share of losses by financial interest (approximately BGN 375.6 million), followed by the Customs Agency (approximately BGN 10.3 million) and the Road Infrastructure Agency (approximately BGN 8.8 million); the report further records that 299 of the 581 administrations covered have outstanding contracts for external procedural representation, with a total annual value of approximately BGN 20.3 million.

The Ministry of Justice notes the matter for completeness as a quantitative indicator bearing on the lawfulness of administrative action and on the operation of judicial review of administrative acts, both of which fall within the scope of the rule-of-law assessment, and observes that the marked increase in litigation volume by comparison with 2024 (when 11,307 cases were lost with an aggregate financial interest of approximately BGN 282.2

million) warrants close monitoring in coordination with the line ministries and the Council of Ministers' Administration.

Amendment of Decree No. 240 of 2019 on the National Coordination Mechanism for the Rule of Law

A draft Act of the Council of Ministers amending Decree No. 240 of 2019 on the establishment of the National Coordination Mechanism for the Rule of Law and of the Council for its application was prepared. The draft reflects the institutional change brought about by the Audit Office Act amendments (State Gazette No. 16 of 2026), which repealed the Anti-Corruption Act of 2023 and discontinued the previous Anti-Corruption Commission, transferring its prevention functions to the National Audit Office. The President of the National Audit Office is added to the composition of the Council, in view of the transferred competences. The draft also brings the Decree into line with the powers of the Ministry of the Interior following the return of corruption-related detection functions to the specialised Directorate-General "Combating Organised Crime". Adjustments are made to ensure compliance with Decision No. 13 of 2024 of the Constitutional Court (constitutional case No. 1 of 2024, State Gazette No. 66 of 2024), which struck down the constitutional amendments providing for the division of the Supreme Judicial Council into two separate councils, and consequently the discontinued reform terminating the existence of the Supreme Prosecutorial Council. The partial preliminary impact assessment was approved by the Council of Ministers on 15 April 2026; public consultation under Article 26 of the Normative Acts Act and the consultation procedure under Article 32 of the Council of Ministers' Rules of Procedure are to follow.

B. Civil Council to the Council on the Rule of Law Coordination Mechanism

The Ministry of Justice launched a procedure for the selection of members of the Civil Council to the Council for the implementation of the National Coordination Mechanism for the Rule of Law. The Council is composed of up to 13 members, including seven representatives of the professional organisations of judges, prosecutors, investigators, lawyers and journalists; at least one representative of an organisation with proven experience in the field of corruption prevention and counteraction; at least one representative of an organisation with expertise in the area of judicial reform; at least one representative of an organisation active in the field of media pluralism; and one representative of an employers' organisation recognised at national level. The deadline for applications by non-profit legal entities was 15 April 2026; processing of applications is ongoing.

C. Constitutional and institutional matters

Early parliamentary elections held on 19 April 2026 and convening of the 52nd National Assembly

On 19 April 2026, early parliamentary elections were held for the 52nd National Assembly. According to the official results announced by the Central Election Commission, five political formations cleared the four-percent threshold: the "Progressive Bulgaria" coalition (131 seats), GERB-SDS (39 seats), the "We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria" coalition (37 seats), the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (21 seats) and "Vazrazhdane" (12 seats). The Constitutional Court will not be required to rule on the election results, save in respect of any specific challenge that may be lodged. The Central Election Commission decisions announcing the elected Members of Parliament and the distribution of seats in the 52nd National Assembly were promulgated in the State Gazette on 28 April 2026. The inaugural sitting of the 52nd National Assembly took place on 30 April 2026. The caretaker Government remains in office until the swearing-in of the new regular government.

Pre-election operations against vote-buying

Throughout the period preceding the early parliamentary elections of 19 April 2026, the caretaker Government of Prime Minister Andrey Gyurov, through the Ministry of the Interior, conducted a sustained operation against vote-buying and controlled voting, the integrity of the electoral process having been identified as the principal task of the caretaker administration. By 14 April 2026, more than EUR 1 million had been seized by the police in operations against vote-buying. On 26 March 2026, the caretaker Minister of the Interior, Mr Emil Dechev, publicly stated that breaches of electoral law identified by the police were between 500 and 600 per cent higher than the level recorded in the equivalent period before the October 2024 parliamentary elections.

In a briefing delivered after the close of polls on 19 April 2026, Mr Dechev presented the consolidated results of the campaign-period operations. The Ministry of the Interior has received a total of 2,974 reports of breaches of electoral law during the campaign – an increase of 204 per cent over the equivalent period before the October 2024 elections – and has opened 614 pre-trial proceedings concerning violations of citizens' political rights, nearly five times the number opened in 2024. A total of 425 persons have been detained, as compared with 72 in 2024; 6,728 warning protocols have been issued; and 270 dedicated police operations have been carried out across the country. Of the reports identifying a specific beneficiary, the largest number – 631 – concerned alleged vote-buying in favour of DPS/New Beginning, led by Mr Delyan Peevski; followed by 318 reports concerning GERB/SDS, 18 concerning Vazrazhdane, 16 concerning Progressive Bulgaria, 13 concerning the BSP/United Left coalition, 11 concerning PP/DB, 7 concerning Velichie, 4 concerning ITN, and 2 concerning MECH.

Notwithstanding the scale of the police operation, the judicial response has been markedly more circumscribed. On 15 April 2026, the caretaker Prime Minister, Mr Gyurov, the caretaker Minister of Justice, Mr Andrey Yankulov, and the caretaker Minister of Interior, Mr Dechev

publicly stated that the Prosecutor's Office was failing to act upon the evidentiary record transmitted by law enforcement; by that date, thirty prosecutorial case files had been opened against parliamentary candidates for election-related offences, none of which had resulted in an indictment or in a motion to lift parliamentary immunity.

The pattern persisted after polling. According to data published by the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria, by 09:00 on 20 April 2026 a total of 3,021 case files had been opened in connection with offences against the political rights of citizens. Available reporting indicates, however, that the great majority of those preliminary checks were closed by the prosecution at an early stage, with the caretaker Government attributing the outcome to political protection and the prosecution service citing insufficient evidence in particular cases.

As at the end of April 2026, only a handful of final convictions had been secured. In each instance the convicted defendant was a low-level vote-seller; no organiser, intermediary or politically connected figure has yet been brought to court. The scale of the caretaker Government's operation in 2026 - measured in cash seized, persons detained, pre-trial proceedings opened and dedicated police actions conducted - accordingly stands in marked contrast to the prosecutorial and judicial follow-through that it has so far elicited, and has revived long-standing concerns as to the independence and effectiveness of the Bulgarian prosecution service.

The Ministry of Justice notes the relevance of these developments for the track-record dimension of Recommendation 4 of the 2025 Rule of Law Report, while observing that lead competence for the criminal prosecution of vote-buying offences rests with the Prosecutor's Office and that the conversion of investigations into final convictions in vote-buying cases has, on long-standing data, remained low; the strengthened mandatory judicial review of prosecutorial suspension and termination decisions introduced by the draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code described in Section I.B is expected to address part of this concern as far as high-ranking officials are involved.

Findings of the OSCE/ODIHR and PACE international election observation mission

On 20 April 2026, the international election observation mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), headed by Ms Dunja Mijatović, jointly with the delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, headed by Mr Chris Said, presented in Sofia its statement of preliminary findings and conclusions. The observers found that the elections were conducted in a transparent and efficient manner with high voter turnout, while identifying a number of areas in which longstanding ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission recommendations remain unaddressed, including as regards candidate eligibility requirements, the effective investigation of electoral violations, access to legal remedies, and measures to enhance women's participation. The observers also

noted that concerns relating to vote-buying and voter intimidation persist, that transparency in campaign finance remains limited and that the role of third-party actors is not adequately regulated. As regards the media environment, the observers noted that, while legal guarantees for freedom of expression and access to information exist, criminal-defamation provisions and the partial implementation of the European Media Freedom Act remain concerns for editorial independence; ODIHR media monitoring further indicated that, despite formal compliance with airtime rules, a reduced scope of editorial and critical news coverage on the part of private media outlets weakened voters' ability to make informed choices.

The Ministry of Justice will examine the preliminary findings, and in due course the final report of the mission, with the competent authorities, with a view to the preparation of legislative and institutional follow-up within the four-pillar architecture of the present contribution; lead competence for the implementation of recommendations addressed to the Central Election Commission and the National Assembly rests with those institutions, but the Ministry stands ready to support, in particular, any work on the implementation of the European Media Freedom Act and on the criminal-defamation framework that may be necessary in light of the observers' findings.

D. Risk-management framework of the Ministry

On 30 March 2026, the Ministry of Justice held a regular meeting of the Permanent Project Working Group on Risk Management, pursuant to Section V of the Ministry's Risk Management Strategy. During the meeting, the results of the risk monitoring for the period April 2025 – April 2026 were presented, and the draft Plan for the Management of Significant Risks for the period April 2026 – April 2027 was discussed and finalised. The Plan was subsequently approved by the Minister on 21 April 2026.

E. Development of models for quicker introduction of a Property Register

The Ministry of Justice has initiated data analysis to propose a possible new approach to the establishment of a property register, aimed at overcoming long-standing structural and technological deficiencies. The objective is to create a reliable, up-to-date and interoperable system. The proposal aims at creating a balanced approach between speed and legal certainty, which shall also be flexible, depending on the accumulated data for different regions of the country. The decision whether to implement the conclusions is left to the discretion of the forthcoming Government.

V. Follow-up to the 2025 Rule of Law Report Recommendations

This section addresses, in order, each of the seven recommendations addressed to Bulgaria in the 2025 Rule of Law Report (Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2025) 902 final).

Recommendation 1 — Long-term secondment of judges

"Take steps to adapt the relevant legislative framework to avoid long-term secondment of judges to fill in vacant positions, taking into account European standards on secondment of judges."

The legislative framework on the secondment of judges is closely interlinked with the appointment competence of the Supreme Judicial Council, which during the reporting period continued to operate with an expired mandate. The Ministry of Justice has therefore prioritised the unblocking of the renewal of the mandates of the SJC and of the IJSC through the draft Act amending the Judiciary Act described in Section I.A. Once a renewed SJC is in office, ordinary competitions for the filling of vacant positions can be conducted in the regular manner

The prolonged performance of functions by a Supreme Judicial Council whose mandate has expired, while operationally constraining, is itself an aspect of the broader institutional concern that the recommendations of the 2025 Rule of Law Report seek to address.

Recommendation 2 — Functioning of the Inspectorate to the SJC

"Advance with the draft legislative amendments aiming at improving the functioning of the Inspectorate to the Supreme Judicial Council and avoiding the risk of political influence, in particular by involving judicial bodies in the selection of its members."

The draft Act amending the Judiciary Act described in Section I.A directly responds to this recommendation. The bill provides for a dedicated parliamentary expert committee - drawn from the general assemblies of the supreme courts, the President of the Republic, the Ombudsman and the Supreme Bar Council – to provide a professional assessment of candidates for the IJSC, the resulting candidate profiles to be presented to the Committee on Legal Affairs of the National Assembly and published; for the verification of the asset declarations of candidates by a temporary commission with a strong professional component (drawing on the Institute of Certified Public Accountants, the Chamber of Independent Valuers and the Bulgarian National Bank), with a mandate extending also to the identification of inexplicable transactions; for a one-month extension of the parliamentary procedure to allow such verifications to be carried out with the necessary scope and quality; and for the verification of declarations of candidates from the judicial quota by the Inspectorate itself, as part of the involvement of judicial bodies in the selection process. The fast-track bill was finalised by the Ministry of Justice on 24 April 2026 and is ready for transmission to the regular government that will follow the constitution of the 52nd National Assembly.

The Ministry observes that the judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union of 30 April 2025 in Joined Cases C-313/23, C-316/23 and C-332/23 (*Inspektorat kam Visshia sadeben savet*) frames the present recommendation as a matter of compliance with Article 19(1) TEU and Article 47 of the Charter, in particular as regards the consequences for the

competences of the Inspectorate of the prolonged performance of functions beyond the expiry of its constitutional mandate; the fast-track bill described above is designed to bring the Inspectorate's functioning back into conformity with the requirements identified by the Court.

Recommendation 3 — Composition of the Supreme Judicial Council

"Re-initiate the process to reform the Supreme Judicial Council, in particular its composition, to ensure its independence and effectiveness, taking into account European standards on Councils for the Judiciary."

Following the judgment of 26 July 2024 of the Constitutional Court, which struck down the comprehensive constitutional reform of December 2023 on grounds of competence and, in part, on grounds of insufficient clarity and purpose, and the consequential preservation of the pre-2023 unified Supreme Judicial Council, the Ministry of Justice has prepared the draft Act amending the Judiciary Act described in Section I.A as a first step in the renewed process of reform within the boundaries set by the Constitutional Court's interpretation. The bill addresses the procedures for the election of the members of the SJC and of the IJSC; the composition of the SJC will be addressed in the implementation of the new procedures and, more comprehensively, in the context of any future constitutional reform that may be initiated. The Ministry takes note of the European standards on Councils for the Judiciary, in particular Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)12 of the Committee of Ministers, and of the relevant Venice Commission opinions.

Recommendation 4 — High-level corruption cases and the Anti-Corruption Commission

"Ensure a robust track record of investigations, prosecutions and final judgments in high-level corruption cases and take further steps to ensure the effective performance of the Anti-Corruption Commission."

Effective performance of the Anti-Corruption Commission (institutional track)

As regards the effective functioning of the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Ministry recalls that the previous Commission was discontinued in 2026 by the amendments to the Audit Office Act (State Gazette No. 16 of 2026), and that a new institutional design has been proposed in the draft Act on Counteracting Corruption among Persons Holding Public Office described in Section II.A, with a structurally guaranteed majority of members nominated by politically independent State bodies, an annual rotating chairmanship by lottery, a non-renewable five-year term, operational, investigative and prosecutorial powers in respect of 52 categories of senior public officials, and an entitlement to challenge before the courts a refusal of the prosecutor to open pre-trial proceedings.

The Ministry has initiated, jointly with the Council of Ministers, a procedure for the revision of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the substantive content of which (as set out in Section V) is the reformulation of Milestone 218 from the operational functioning of the body to its mere constitution, and the postponement of the operational-functioning milestone from the third to the fifth payment request.

The Ministry presents this revision as a recalibration of milestones that, on the original timetable agreed with the Commission, could not be met, and not as a routine alignment exercise; the Ministry remains conscious that the substantive answer to Recommendation 4, on the institutional limb, requires the constitution and the effective operation of the new Commission, neither of which has occurred at the date of submission.

Track record: action along three complementary tracks

As regards the track record of investigations, prosecutions and final judgments in high-level corruption cases, the lead competence rests with the Prosecutor's Office; the Ministry has nonetheless worked along three complementary tracks.

First, the draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code introduces automatic mandatory judicial review of prosecutorial decisions to suspend or terminate corruption-related criminal proceedings (Section II.B), removing a procedural obstacle to the public scrutiny of such decisions. Second, the disciplinary proceedings before the Prosecutors' Chamber of the SJC against the (former) acting Prosecutor General and the acting Sofia City Prosecutor (Section II.F), and the disciplinary proposal before the Judges' Chamber of the SJC against Judge Dian Vassilev (Section I.A), address concerns regarding the integrity of the leadership of the prosecution service and of selected segments of the bench. Third, the resignation of Mr Sarafov and the appointment of Ms Vanya Stefanova as acting Prosecutor General on 22 April 2026 (Section I.A), together with the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 6/2026 of 7 April 2026 and the designation of Mr Lyubomir Gaydov as acting administrative head of the Supreme Administrative Court, restore a basis on which institutional dialogue with the Prosecutor's Office and the supreme courts on the track-record dimension can be conducted on substantive grounds.

The plea agreement of Mr Nikola Nikolov in the customs criminal case, approved by the Sofia City Court on 26 March 2026 and described in Section II.I, constitutes a concrete development on the track-record dimension during the reporting period; the Ministry has duly noted that proceedings against the remaining co-accused, including former senior public officials, are ongoing. The opening on 27 April 2026 by the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office of pre-trial proceedings under Article 283 of the Criminal Code in connection with the so-called Cholakov-gate disclosures (Section II.I), together with the developments concerning the alleged pressure on the acting Secretary-General of the Ministry of the Interior described in Section

IV.E, are further data points on the track-record dimension that the Ministry will follow within its institutional remit.

In addition, on 28 April 2026, the Minister of Justice submitted to the Judges' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council a proposal for the institution of disciplinary proceedings, with the request that the most severe disciplinary sanction (dismissal) be imposed, against Mr Dian Vassilev, judge at the Administrative Court – Sofia Province (and, since April 2026, seconded for an unspecified term to the Supreme Administrative Court). The proposal arises out of conduct alleged to have taken place while Mr Vassilev was the acting administrative head of the Administrative Court – Ruse, in connection with the competition for the substantive administrative head of that court. According to the materials before the Ministry, Mr Vassilev acted as an intermediary in an attempted exercise of undue influence by Mr Dragomir Koyadzhikov, member of the Judges' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council, on Judge Ivaylo Yosifov Ivanov, conveying to Judge Yosifov an instruction to withdraw from the competition together with intimations of a predetermined outcome and warnings of adverse consequences in the event of non-compliance, and subsequently attempting to dissuade Judge Yosifov from making the matter public or signalling it to the competent authorities.

The Ministry's position, set out in the proposal, is that the alleged conduct constitutes a serious violation of the Code of Ethics of Bulgarian judges, including the duty not to admit influence or pressure of any kind, the duty of an administrative head not to tolerate - and to put a stop to - informers and intriguers, and the requirements of high moral standing, integrity and propriety; and that, whether the conversation with the member of the Judges' Chamber actually took place or was fabricated, the conduct in either case is incompatible with the office of judge.

The Ministry observes that the matter is directly relevant to the rule-of-law assessment of the conditions in which Bulgarian magistrates carry out their functions, and to the assessment of Recommendations 2 and 3 of the 2025 Rule of Law Report on the institutional environment of judicial governance, and that the case is the first concrete instance in which a Minister of Justice has invoked the Judges' Chamber's disciplinary jurisdiction in respect of a sitting administrative head accused of acting as a conduit for pressure on a candidate in a career competition. The disciplinary file remains pending before the Judges' Chamber.

Further developments bearing on track record and integrity

In the same context, the Ministry of Justice further notes four additional developments during the reporting period which raise concerns directly relevant to the integrity and track-record considerations underpinning the present recommendation..

First, the operations of the Ministry of the Interior against vote-buying in the period preceding the early parliamentary elections of 19 April 2026 (Section IV.E), in the course of which more

than EUR 1 million was seized by 14 April 2026 and breaches of electoral law identified by the police were stated by the caretaker Minister of the Interior, on 26 March 2026, to be between 500 and 600 per cent higher than the level recorded before the October 2024 parliamentary elections; the Ministry observes that lead competence for the criminal prosecution of vote-buying offences rests with the Prosecutor's Office, and that the strengthened mandatory judicial review of prosecutorial suspension and termination decisions introduced by the draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code (Section II.B) is expected to address part of the long-standing concern as to the conversion of investigations into final convictions in such cases.

Second, the procedural posture adopted on 29 April 2026 by the Prosecutors' Chamber of the Supreme Judicial Council in respect of the Minister's disciplinary proposal of 31 March 2026 against the (then) *de facto* acting Prosecutor General (Section II.F) – namely, the Chamber's decision not to rule on the substance of the proposal but to instruct the Minister to amend and supplement it within one week, with the indication that, in the event of non-compliance, the proposal would be left without consideration - is itself relevant to the assessment of the effectiveness of the existing arrangements for the disciplinary accountability of the senior prosecutorial leadership and is set out under the present recommendation for that reason.

Third, the finding of serious misconduct by the College of the European Public Prosecutor's Office of 25 February 2026 against the Bulgarian European Prosecutor, Ms Teodora Georgieva (Section II.G), is directly relevant to the integrity dimension of the present recommendation and to compliance with Regulation (EU) 2017/1939; the College deferred its decision on the appropriate sanction, indicating that dismissal could not be excluded.

Fourth, and in connection with the foregoing, the working group established by the Ministry of Justice to receive, systematise and conduct a legal analysis of materials concerning the so-called "Eight Dwarfs" network of criminal influence in the judicial system (Section II.G), and the transmission of the materials to the Ministry of the Interior and to the Chair of the Criminal Chamber of the Supreme Court of Cassation, constitute organisational and procedural steps the substantive impact of which will depend on the action of the competent authorities; the Ministry will report on substantive developments in the next reporting cycle.

Recommendation 5 — Integrity of top executive functions

"Improve the integrity of top executive functions, taking into account European standards, in particular by ensuring that clear integrity standards for the Government as well as an appropriate sanctioning mechanism are in place."

The Ministry of Justice has acted along several tracks. First, the draft Act on Counteracting Corruption among Persons Holding Public Office establishes verification of asset and interest declarations of senior public officials, including officials with top executive functions, by a

politically independent commission with appropriate sanctioning instruments. Second, the Lobbying Transparency Act sets out clear rules of accountability for contacts between persons exercising public authority and interest representatives, with a Transparency Register and corresponding obligations. Third, the standard for ministerial nominations to senior judicial positions (Section I.A) is part of a broader Government initiative to make competitive, methodology-based selection a default for high-trust positions in the public service. Fourth, the procedural reform of the selection of Bulgarian candidates for the European Public Prosecutor's Office and the General Court of the European Union (Section I.A) translates the principles of political neutrality, transparency, equal treatment and merit-based competition into concrete operational rules. Fifth, the draft Act amending Decree No. 240 of 2019 on the National Coordination Mechanism for the Rule of Law (Section IV.A) brings the institutional architecture into line with the new distribution of integrity competences between the National Audit Office, the Ministry of the Interior and the proposed Anti-Corruption Commission, ensuring continuity of follow-up and reporting.

The Ministry further notes that the matters set out in Sections II.I and IV.E of the present contribution engage the integrity dimension of senior public functions across the judicial, executive and law-enforcement spheres and are accordingly relevant to the present recommendation. The opening on 27 April 2026 by the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office of pre-trial proceedings under Article 283 of the Criminal Code in connection with the so-called Cholakov-gate disclosures concerning the recent leadership of the Supreme Administrative Court (Section II.I) demonstrates the practical need for the integrity verification of candidates for senior judicial office that the fast-track Judiciary Act bill described in Section I.A is designed to introduce.

The allegations of pressure directed at the acting Secretary-General of the Ministry of the Interior, Mr Kandev, made public on 24 April 2026 (Section IV.E) - characterised by the caretaker Prime Minister as an act of retribution involving a former senior official of the Ministry of the Interior - engage the resilience of the institutional environment of the rule of law to informal channels of influence at the senior level of the law-enforcement administration.

Both matters fall under the lead competence of the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of the Interior and (in respect of magistrates) the Supreme Judicial Council, and the Ministry of Justice does not pre-empt their substantive findings. In addition, the Mechanism for the institutional protection of magistrates (Section I.A), through its public register of cases at high risk of pressure populated on the basis of objective criteria, complements the asset-declaration verification machinery referenced above by providing a structured response to the operational manifestations of undue interference with the performance of public functions.

In this context, it is also relevant to note the action taken by the Minister of Justice on 15 April 2026, whereby an inspection was commissioned at the Directorate-General for Security (DGO) concerning the employment status of the Deputy Director-General of DGO, Mr Deyan Dimitrov. The inspection was initiated in connection with information disseminated in the public domain through a journalistic investigation and aims to establish whether the DGO holds data relating to the publicly known circumstances, as well as whether there is any conduct incompatible with the requirements of the Code of Ethics for Civil Servants within the DGO system. By order of the Minister of Justice, the inspection has been entrusted to the Inspectorate under Article 46 of the Administration of Justice Act.

In parallel, the Minister of Justice has sent a request to the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office for information regarding the road traffic accident referred to in the journalistic investigation, with a view to clarifying the conduct of the DGO official. The Sofia City Prosecutor's Office has also been asked whether there may have been an infringement of the internal rules on the allocation of files within the prosecution service, in light of the alleged replacement of the supervising prosecutor reported in the media publication.

These actions form part of the broader efforts to strengthen the integrity of senior public functions and illustrate the need for effective institutional mechanisms to address potential undue influence or conflicts of interest within the executive and law-enforcement systems.

Recommendation 6 — Transparency in the allocation of state advertising

"Complete the work aimed at improving transparency in the allocation of state advertising, in particular with regard to state advertising contracted through intermediaries, such as media agencies."

Lead competence on the substantive rules governing the allocation of state advertising rests with the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Finance and the Public Procurement Agency. The Ministry of Justice draws attention, in the context of this recommendation, to the systemic transparency measures introduced during the reporting period that bear directly on the integrity of public contracting and on the visibility of contractual relations between the State and the media: the Lobbying Transparency Act establishing a Transparency Register, the proposed amendments to the rules on the integrity of senior public officials, and the strengthened judicial review of decisions to terminate corruption-related criminal proceedings. The Ministry of Justice will continue to coordinate with the line ministries with a view to ensuring a coherent legal framework on this point.

The Ministry further notes, in the context of the broader media-funding ecosystem of which the allocation of state advertising forms part, the observations on the situation in Bulgaria contained in the Annual Report of the partner organisations to the Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalism and the Safety of Journalists, presented in Brussels on 3

March 2026 (Section III), in particular as regards the funding and editorial independence of the public-service broadcasters. The implementation of the European Media Freedom Act, falling within the lead competence of other authorities, will provide a complementary framework on the funding and editorial independence of the public-service broadcasters, on which the Ministry stands ready to support the line ministries.

Recommendation 7 — Quality of the legislative process

"Strengthen the quality of the legislative process by ensuring the use of public consultations and impact assessments for legislative initiatives by Parliament."

All Government bills prepared by the Ministry of Justice during the reporting period, including the bills described in Sections I, II and III, were subject to public consultation under Article 26 of the Normative Acts Law and to inter-ministerial coordination under Articles 32 and 35 of the Council of Ministers' Rules of Procedure. Partial preliminary impact assessments were prepared for all bills with significant impact and were approved by the Directorate for Coordination and Modernisation of the Administration of the Council of Ministers. Notably, the Anti-Corruption Bill was published for public consultation on 31 March 2026 with a 14-day consultation period, and the Anti-SLAPP CPC bill on 16 April 2026 with a one-month consultation period. As regards bills tabled by Members of the National Assembly, the Government recognises that the Commission's recommendation calls for action by the National Assembly itself; the Ministry stands ready to support the 52nd National Assembly, in any work on amendments to the Standing Orders intended to align the procedures applied to private Members' bills more closely with those applied to Government bills, particularly as regards public consultation and impact assessment.

As a quantitative anchor for the present recommendation, the Ministry of Justice prepared during the reporting period a total of seventeen normative-act drafts (Section IV.A), all of which Government bills were subject to public consultation under Article 26 of the Normative Acts Law and to inter-ministerial coordination under Articles 32 and 35 of the Council of Ministers' Rules of Procedure, with publication on the Public Consultations Portal of the Republic of Bulgaria. In addition to the Anti-Corruption Bill and the Anti-SLAPP CPC bill referenced above, the draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code on the mechanism for the investigation of the Prosecutor General and on judicial control over corruption-case decisions (Section I.A) was published for public consultation on 31 March 2026, the consultation period closing on 14 April 2026; and the draft Act amending the Criminal Procedure Code on the acceleration of criminal proceedings (Section I.C) was published for public consultation on 24 April 2026.

As regards the fast-track draft Act amending the Judiciary Act on the procedures for the election of members of the Supreme Judicial Council and the Inspectorate to the SJC (Section

I.A), finalised on 24 April 2026 for transmission to the regular government in ready form, the Ministry notes for completeness that the standard pre-tabling steps under Article 26 of the Normative Acts Law and Articles 32 and 35 of the Council of Ministers' Rules of Procedure have not yet been carried out and will fall to be undertaken by the regular government in advance of the bill's tabling in the 52nd National Assembly.