The Bulgarian authorities’ inaction on hate speech was widely criticised in 2015; both from within the country and by external actors. Following the publication of an Amnesty International report, national activists called on the government to act on hate crimes. Political parties and religious leaders continued to speak out against equality but a long list of ambassadors pledged their support to Sofia Pride. An intersex person was refused gender recognition in a novel legal case and people who have undergone change of gender were protected from discrimination for the first time. In another historic first, an Iraqi asylum seeker was recognised as a refugee on the basis of sexual orientation.
**Asylum**
- A gay man, originally from Iraq, was granted asylum on 17 December. The man had left Iraq, after he had been kidnapped, threatened and violently assaulted because of his sexual orientation. This was the first time that the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees granted refugee status to a person seeking protection because of persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation.

**Bias-motivated speech**
- A statement released by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on 26 June (see Freedom of assembly) referred to homosexuality as an “unnatural lust which undoubtedly damages the individual, the family and society and causes detrimental effects on physical, mental and spiritual state of people”.

**Bias-motivated violence**
- Amnesty International criticised the lack of effective hate crime investigation in Bulgaria. In their Missing the Point report released in February, the NGO stated that the failure to investigate hate crime creates a climate of impunity and that legislative gaps contribute to the “… invisibility of homophobic and transphobic hate crimes”.

**Bodily integrity**
- On 5 June, the Sofia District Court rejected an intersex person’s application for legal gender recognition. This was the first case of its kind in Bulgaria. The court turned down the application as the applicant had not undergone “body corrective surgery”. The decision was appealed to the Sofia City Court and the next hearing will take place on 16 May 2016.

**Data collection**
- LGBT NGO Bilitis published the results of a research project with LGBTI students and teachers, entitled Schools for All?. The study, based on structured interviews with students and teachers in Sofia, found that current school anti-discrimination policies are ineffective, verbal harassment is widespread and that sexual orientation and gender identities are not discussed in educational programmes.

**Education**
- The Sofia Pride organising committee compiled the Declaration for Non-Discrimination of LGBTI People in the Sphere of Education, a list of demands for changes in the education system to improve the lives of LGBTI students. 13 NGOs and two political parties (The Greens and DEOS (Movement for European Association and Solidarity; liberal)) signed the declaration.

**Equality and non-discrimination**
- The government specifically added gender reassignment to the ground of ‘sex’ in the Law on Protection against Discrimination (01/2004). The law was amended on 25 March, protecting trans people from all forms of discrimination. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee criticised the amendment’s wording; the NGO stated that the provision leaves room for interpretation that might lead to a situation where trans persons who have not undergone gender reassignment surgery are left unprotected.
- A final report under the UN’s Universal Periodic Review process was adopted for Bulgaria in 2015 (see United Nations).

**Family**
- Youth LGBT organisation Deystvie filed a request for protection under the Law on Domestic Violence for a woman who was psychologically attacked by her female former civil partner. The Sofia Regional Court refused the request, stating that the woman did not have legal grounds to ask for protection as she was in a same-sex partnership. The court also held that civil partnership could only exist between a man and a woman and closed the case. Complaints were pending before the National Anti-Discrimination Body and the ECtHR respectively at the end of 2015.
- Planning to get married to his partner in the Netherlands, in August, a Bulgarian citizen applied to the Sofia municipality to obtain the certificate required by the Amsterdam municipality. The Sofia administration refused the request, citing the Bulgarian constitutional ban on equal marriage and stating that if they issued the
certificate, they would be bound to accept the subsequent marriage. At the end of 2015, the citizen’s case was pending before the Sofia city Administrative court and the National Anti-Discrimination Body.

- An application was filed in court on behalf of a same-sex couple with a child born using artificial insemination to one of the women. As the non-birth mother is not recognised under Bulgarian law, her father recognised the child in order to give her some rights. However, this means that the child and the non-birth mother now share a family name (and are practically legal step-sisters) while the biological mother regularly has to prove that she is the mother of a child with a different family name. The couple asked the court to allow the biological mother change her surname on the basis of her same-sex relationship; decision was pending at the end of 2015.

- In December, youth LGBT organisation Deystvie started a campaign which aims to gather 100 same-sex couples to enter applications for issuing certificates for their marital status. The campaign’s long term aim is to legalise equal marriages concluded in a foreign country.

Freedom of assembly

- On 17 May, LGBTI activists gathered in front of the Sofia City Courthouse to protest against homophobic and transphobic hate crimes. 40 people took part in the IDAHOT protest march. The activists called on the authorities to add homophobic and transphobic motives to existing hate crime legislation.

- In June, the Ataka Party (far-right) filed a bill in parliament calling for participants in Pride events to be imprisoned; the bill was later defeated.

- Sofia Pride was scheduled for 27 June; its main focus in 2015 was discrimination in education (see Education). In the weeks leading up to the event, anti-equality groups and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church called for the parade to be cancelled (see Bias-motivated speech). Media editors, sports personalities and political figures wrote to Sofia’s mayor, asking Yordanka Fandakova (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, GERB; centre-right) to call off the march. A statement of support for Sofia Pride was signed by the Bulgarian ambassadors from Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. Over 1,500 participants took part in the Pride celebrations, including members of the DEOS and Zelenite (The Greens) parties.

Participation in public, cultural and political life

- Victor Lilov (DEOS) became the first openly gay candidate to run in local elections in October. He contested the mayoral race in Sofia and his party won 0.76% of the vote.

Public opinion

- According to Eurobarometer 2015, 34% of people surveyed in Bulgaria believe that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is widespread (EU28 average was 58%). When asked about gender identity, 31% felt discrimination on this ground was widespread (EU 28 average was 56%). 51% totally agreed with the statement that LGB people should have the same rights as heterosexual people (EU28 average was 71%). When asked to grade how comfortable they would be with certain scenarios on a scale of 1 (not comfortable at all) - 10 (totally comfortable), 39% said they would be comfortable or moderately comfortable with an LGB work colleague (EU28 average was 72%). When asked about a potential trans work colleague, 36% said they would be comfortable or moderately comfortable (EU28 average was 67%).