



To Her Excellency **Ms. Dunja Mijatović**, Commissioner for Human Rights (CoE)

To His Excellency **Mr. Didier Reynders**, European Commissioner for Justice

Your Excellencies, as representatives of major European organizations of judges and prosecutors, we are addressing you to present our strong concerns about the situation of the judiciary in Bulgaria, where - even recently - cases of judges exposed to pressure and intimidating conduct in connection with the exercise of their professional duties have been reported.

We wish to draw your attention in particular to the very alarming developments concerning Judge Vladislava Tzarigradska. After a media smear campaign in 2019 and the threats that led in January 2020 to the assignment of security measures to her and her family for several months, in February 2020 Judge Tzarigradska, at that time serving at Lukovit District Court, and Judge Tsvetko Lazarov, of the Sofia Court of Appeal, reported in a public session of the Judicial Chamber of the Superior Council of the Judiciary on the attacks and pressure they had received from specific individuals while conducting criminal proceedings. One of these individuals was shot dead in January 2024.

For the threats and pressure repeatedly denounced since 2019 by Judge Tzarigradska, criminal proceedings were only initiated in May 2023, and no charges have been yet brought against anyone. After her last public statements on the threats she received, Judge Tzarigradska was again targeted by media attacks and threatening messages, to the extent that security measures have been ordered again since last February.

These events take place against a particularly alarming background: in the past, Judge Lozan Panov, at that time President of the Supreme Court of Cassation, was the target of systematic harassment and his life and physical integrity were directly threatened; media and official sources referred to attempts of criminal organizations to put pressure on judges, also from within the judiciary itself; the lack of any effective accountability of the Prosecutor General and of any mechanism of judicial review against the decisions of prosecutors not to open investigations, as well as the excessive involvement of prosecutors, and of the Prosecutor General in particular, with the governance of judges, had been longstanding issues, which were raised by the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

The fundamental principles of independence of judicial systems require that judges shall decide matters before them impartially, without any restrictions, improper influences, pressures, threats or interferences, direct or indirect. In any context where these conditions are not guaranteed, it is an imperative and specific duty of state institutions to react promptly and to protect judges, with regard to both their physical integrity and their public image: protecting judges means protecting the rule of law and the preconditions of fair and impartial decisions. The inaction of state authorities on threats and attacks against individual judges adds a further risk of undermining the independence of the judiciary as a whole, causing a chilling effect and generating a climate of distrust that discourages judges from freely exercising their rights and fulfilling their professional duties.

Considering this, we respectfully urge your Excellencies:

- to give full and close attention to the particular situation of Judge Vladislava Tzarigradska, who is facing serious pressures and threats for acting in an independent manner, for openly denouncing attacks on the independence of the judiciary and bravely fighting for the rule of law;

-to take into account all of the above facts, and urgently ask the Bulgarian authorities for further information and clarifications on the issues addressed;

- to examine the situation in Bulgaria and to take the necessary steps to ensure the presence of an independent judiciary, free from any undue influence and from any "chilling effect" on their professional autonomy or freedom of expression, as well as the effective and proper implementation of the reforms addressing all the deficiencies concerning the rule of law in the country.



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