

The value of bilateral cooperation regarding domestic and gender-based violence in Bulgaria

By Lillian Hjorth and Solveig Bergman¹

Can a bilateral cooperation project in Bulgaria say something in general about the value of international cooperation regarding domestic and gender-based violence?

From December 2019 until February 2022, *PULSE Foundation* and the *Centre for the Study of Democracy*, both Bulgarian NGOs, together with the Norwegian non-profit foundation *Human Rights Academy* cooperated in a project about gender-based and domestic violence in Bulgaria. The aim was to develop a methodology for monitoring policy, legal instruments, and institutional practice in relation to such violence, and – by using the new methodology – to write a monitoring report about the current situation.

A main conclusion is that Bulgaria is still struggling to adopt adequate and comprehensive measures to counter gender-based violence and violence against women, and that the authorities continue to fail to fully grasp the seriousness of these phenomena. Key recommendations were inter alia the need for more clear, well-crafted evidence- and data-based policies, an official definition of the term “gender-based” violence, better statistical and administrative data, and a better understanding of different types of violence.

Below, we will highlight some of the valuable aspects of the project’s bilateral cooperation. What has the Norwegian contribution added to the work? What have the partners learned? We will also try to say something in general about the value of international cooperation regarding combatting domestic and gender-based violence.

The Human Rights Dimension

As a human rights organization, it was essential for Human Rights Academy to emphasize the human rights dimension in the project. This perspective is important because it underlines that it is the Bulgarian state that has the main responsibility both to put domestic and gender-based violence on the agenda and to implement preventive and restoring mechanisms. One recommendation from the partners is that Bulgaria should ratify the *Istanbul Convention*² and thus strengthen the state’s obligations in regard to protecting its inhabitants from domestic and gender-based violence. Underlining the human rights dimension could be fruitful also for other international cooperation initiatives because it focuses on the important role of the states.

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² Council of Europe’s *Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (2011)

Learning from each other

Domestic and gender-based violence have severe and negative effects on individuals, families, and the society at large. Because all states, in various ways, struggle with handling these challenges, it is obvious that countries need to learn from each other. Mistakes done by some, should not be repeated by others. Good examples should be spread.

The fact that Norway has come further than Bulgaria in dealing with domestic and gender-based violence – even if they still continue to be a major problem – made the exchange of knowledge and experience an essential part of the project. Even if many aspects of the phenomenon are similar in the two countries, the problem seems to be more extensive in Bulgaria, partly because the development of policies and practices to tackle violence started later here. One main contribution from the Human Rights Academy has thus been to include key points from over 40 years of experiences and examples of ‘best practice’ from Norway. Characteristic for the Norwegian approach is a mix of public policies and measures, collaborations, and civil-society initiatives. Major policies and measures have been developed which include the emphasis on a coherent and coordinated approach to violence at both national and local levels, the importance of preventive work, the role of shelters as key institutions for helping victims, and the need for a solid knowledge-basis for developing policies and practices. The Norwegian experiences have been an inspiration for the Bulgarian partners.

The Important Role of the Civil Society

In Norway, the work to combat violence against women has shifted since the 1970s from being a primarily private initiative spearheaded by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially women’s and feminist groups, to becoming part of public policies and responsibilities. Also in Bulgaria, many civil society actors – also often dominated by women – do important work on the ground as well as function as drivers in encouraging the states to take more responsibility. The Bulgarian NGOs deal with a broad range of challenges, including offering shelter and caring for the victims, developing school campaigns, materials and awareness raising programs, and initiate and implement research. Many use their knowledge and platforms to lob municipal and state authorities and to raise political demands.

International cooperation regarding domestic and gender-based violence should be aware of the crucial role that the civil society plays. The more professional the NGOs become, the better chances will they have in influencing the states to do more. Their work should be supported.

Common understanding

Despite the different historical and political contexts in Bulgaria and Norway, the partners share many of the same perspectives on how domestic and gender-based violence is to be understood, as well as the effectiveness of preventive and restoring mechanisms. This common fundament has been essential for the good cooperation in the project, as well as for its successful results.

The fact that partners in international cooperation projects often share much of the same understanding of domestic and gender-based violence, despite different cultural, historical and political backgrounds, is important to be aware of. Common perspectives can have a positive impact and create a good fundament for partnership.

A broad approach includes different stakeholders

In all countries, a prerequisite for sustainable handling of domestic and gender-based violence, increase in focus and resources, is that the issue must be recognized as political important. A broad approach is therefore needed which includes legislation, practical measures and prevention. This cannot be done by NGOs alone. The states must take responsibility. In view of this, international cooperation projects could have as an aim to include cooperation with official authorities, either at municipal or state level, and/or urge them to do more.

Awareness raising about gender equality and women's rights

A final conclusion from the Bulgarian-Norwegian cooperation, which is highly relevant for other international initiatives, is that all work aiming at combatting domestic and gender-based violence, should take into consideration the complex nature of the phenomenon. As long as discrimination against women remains embedded in the social fabric of our societies, it is not possible to effectively prevent and respond to domestic violence. For this reason, work against domestic and gender-based violence should include knowledge and awareness raising about inter alia women rights, stereotypes, biases, and gender roles through the education systems as well as in work with youth. Girls should be encouraged to participate at all levels in the society. With increased participation of women in politics and leading positions, the problem with domestic and gender-based violence can come higher up on the political agenda and probably be better handled.

Domestic and gender-based violence, as well as gender equality and women's rights are areas where international cooperation is highly needed. The good news is that such cooperation has a great potential to tackle shared challenges.

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