

2023



Center for Legal Aid
Voice in Bulgaria

Center for legal aid – Voice in Bulgaria (CLA)

ANNUAL REPORT



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<https://www.facebook.com/groups/585850168115019>



Center for Legal Aid
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Our team



Our team of lawyers and human rights specialists strive to defend and promote fundamental rights and freedoms through accessible, equitable, high quality legal aid. We are constantly learning through our firsthand experience about the dire need for accessible legal services and a person-centered approach.

Leading Values

- **UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS**
- **ACCESSIBLE HIGH QUALITY LEGAL AID**
- **INDEPENDENCE**

Our vision

To make available high quality legal assistance to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants that could ensure their access to justice, empower them and facilitate their inclusion in the society. CLA believes that the access to legal aid is not merely a legal issue but a profound element of social justice, poverty alleviation, and democratic governance.

Our work

We provide a full range of legal support through legal counselling, direct court representations, administrative hearings, mobile legal teams providing legal help in immigration centers where access to legal aid is more difficult.



I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND DEVELOPMENTS

In 2023 the world marked the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the same time, the year of 2023 put us in a sobering situation, making us face and recognize the harsh truth of backsliding on human rights. In its latest report, Amnesty international refers to the last two years as a period of drastic deterioration of the human rights situation worldwide, paralyzed international institutions, and heavily undermined international law. CLA believes that promoting human rights and giving voice to people in vulnerable situations is needed more than ever in order to turn the tide on human rights.

We are at a turning point when the EU has adopted new migration policies through the newly approved EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Pact is highly criticized by human rights defenders as detrimental to the fundamental right to asylum, normalizing pushbacks on the EU external borders, extending unlawful detention of migrants, giving rise to grave humanitarian situations. Although Bulgaria has one of the longest and most complicated external land borders, Bulgaria remains a blind spot regarding violations of fundamental migrants' rights. Despite its record of rights violations on the external borders, Bulgaria, in 2023, tested the new EU migration framework in a Pilot project with the European Commission. From a civil society perspective, the Pilot project took place in Bulgaria behind closed doors. There was no clear reporting, no broad and diverse discussions and consultations, and no space for the civil society.

As providers of first-hand legal aid, CLA raises its great concerns that the new EU migration policies would impede the access to equitable, quality and free legal aid, especially for migrants stuck on the borders. Making access to legal aid more complicated would not only limit the access to justice but could well give rise to humanitarian issues, affecting social and economic well-being.

2023 was marked by record numbers of asylum seekers registered in Bulgaria, unaccompanied minors, including small children with vulnerability, along with persistent and “normalized” practices of pushbacks and disappearances of people on the move.

For 15 years, CLA works for promoting the civil society in Bulgaria. The role of CLA's legal aid is to enhance access to justice, with a focus on its accessibility, quality, challenges, impact on society, and future directions. We constantly work to establish an open and constructive debate on migration as a source of human capital, intellectual and business resources. Through partnerships and dialogue, CLA seeks to demonstrate the need to build sustainable, progressive migration policies in Bulgaria that could benefit the administration and the business, as well as achieve a balance between security and respect for human rights.



II. MAIN FIELDS OF ACTIVITIES

LEGAL AID AND STRATEGIC LITIGATION

For 15 years, the heart of CLA's legal services lies in the fieldwork. Since its foundation, every week, CLA offers an open-door reception where people can come, talk and seek legal help. Our legal team, on a monthly basis, visits the closed immigration detention center in Sofia, making it possible for people in detention to seek protection under the law. Our team litigates on a daily basis ensuring full representation before courts. CLA created and implemented an individual holistic approach to every legal case. Given the adverse trends on human rights in 2023, we needed to endorse an individual-centered legal aid more than ever.

- In 2023, our team has provided legal aid to over 500 foreign nationals.
- We represented our clients before the national courts in over 300 court hearings.
- In 2023, CLA supported the legal cases of more than 40 refugee women with vulnerabilities such as diagnosed mental and physical health issues, women subjected to systematic gender-based violence, women in immigration detention;
- We continued our practice to visit the immigration detention center every two weeks, making legal aid accessible to people in detention by challenging before courts the lawfulness of immigration detention, appealing and shedding light on the adverse conditions of Bulgarian detention centers. In 2023, CLA legally supported the cases of around 80 people, kept in immigration detention.

In 2023, CLA referred a strategic case to the European court of Human Rights, stopping the deportation of an Iranian national back to Iran. CLA also successfully supported the reunification of unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan with his family in USA. Our team successfully worked on stopping the extradition of an Iranian family. Follow CLA impact in pictures belows, as well as the CLA websites and social media channels:



Ahmadzai came to Bulgaria as an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan in 2021 after diplomatic missions in Kabul were evacuated following the Taliban attack. He could not get on the evacuation flight to the USA with his family because of the panicked crowds at the Kabul airport, tearing the family apart. He managed to escape alone, from Afghanistan to Europe. At the Bulgarian border, he was turned back three times before accessing the asylum procedure. Through our team., a year later, he was reunited with his family in USA and stands out as an ambassador for the fact that our country can be a true home and refuge for people like him.



Alireza Beigi is an Iranian citizen with a death sentence due to his religious conversion, who was refused protection in Bulgaria by the State Agency for Refugees, as a result of which he was detained and imprisoned in immigration detention. After the ECtHR intervened and prevented deportation, he is now with granted international protection in our country and a beneficial part of our society.



Our 2023 Christmas miracle was the granting of humanitarian status to the eldest daughter of an Iraqi family, with whom we worked for the the last 5 years. Our legal team navigated them through the maze of the strenuous asylum procedure in Bulgaria. The family went through long periods of undocumented living, the threat of homelessness, difficult moments of despair and deadlock. They live in Bulgaria for over 7 years, while their youngest children were born here and know no other country than Bulgaria. The status granted to the eldest daughter is a result of intense, consistent work and the remarkable resilience of our clients!



ADVOCACY WORK

Our core legal work is promoted by regular advocacy campaigns. CLA's advocacy activities aim at establishing institutional, judicial, legislative changes in line with international and European standards. Our mission is also to voice the needs of refugees and migrants and provide objective and comprehensive information on migration and asylum issues to broad audiences, calling for a fundamental shift in the way we communicate about migration.

Some of our main 2023 campaigns referred to human rights violations at the Bulgarian borders, and creating **safe pathways for access to territory and asylum**. CLA collected and published the testimonies of unaccompanied Syrian minors, pushed-back several times at the Bulgarian borders. Our main communication campaign on the topic was "**ALMOST HERE - for secure access to protection for refugees**" - an initiative that was launched as part of the project "Effective Legal Aid for Refugees and Migrants in Bulgaria - a continuation", implemented within the framework of the Second Call for Strategic Projects of the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria under the EEA Grants 2014-2021 by CLA, Access to Rights Foundation - FAR and Mission Wings Foundation. [The special VR event](#) organized within the initiative, was made possible in partnership with the experts from LENS2LENS production company.



We continued working on our long-term advocacy campaign, calling for introducing a **legal pathway for long-term undocumented migrants**. Without an alternative regularisation procedure, undocumented migrants are trapped in a vicious circle - they cannot be removed from Bulgaria for legal, humanitarian or practical reasons, but at the same time there is no legal way for them to obtain documents. Undocumented migrants live in a legal limbo, excluded from any social system and from the possibility of being part of society. You can hear their voices in our YouTube channel [here](#).



We also continue our **campaign against arbitrary detention practices and for stable, community-based alternatives to immigration detention policies**. CLA rejects the use of immigration detention to children. For campaigning on introducing alternative to immigration detention in Bulgaria, CLA joins forces with the European Network for Alternatives to Detention and the International Coalition Against Detention. [You can read our last national report on alternatives to detention from March 2022 here.](#)

Part of our advocacy activity are **multiple research papers, advocacy statements, legal analysis, policy briefs, published by our organisations** on topics of substantive and procedural aspects of the international protection procedure and temporary protection; access to territory; regularisation; children's rights; immigration detention; expulsion; climate change and refugees; migration and national security; AI and immigration related issues; statements and analysis in regard to the new Migration Pact; etc. Publications are part of project activities, as well as part of the core work of our team.

[Access to all our materials you can have on our website here.](#)

III. PARTNERSHIPS AND COOPERATION

CLA is still the administrator of the civil society initiative launched in 2013 to support refugees in Bulgaria: the public FB group "Friends of Refugees", which has nearly 5,000 members and is mainly engaged in donation and volunteer activities, whose coordination we manage.

CLA continues to be an active member of the civil association "Equal BG", uniting over 30 national NGOs in Bulgaria under the slogan "WE MATTER."

In 2023, CLA continued its cooperation and collaboration with similar organisations and networks in the country, the region, Europe and beyond. At the national level, it collaborated with Caritas-Bulgaria, the Council of Refugee Women, the Foundation for Access to Rights (FAR) and the Mission Wings Foundation on project activities. Regular interaction continued with other organisations involved in work with refugees and migrants, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), the Bulgarian Red Cross, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Center for the Study of Democracy, the Bulgarian Women's Fund, etc.



The Foundation's collaboration with the international Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) is being formalized at the end of 2023. CLA is now a member of the network and presents opinions and joint expert positions on behalf of the international network on the topic of border violence in international fora, such as the hearing in the European Commission in 2024 on the topic of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.

In 2023 CLA continued its relationship with the two networks, of which it became an official member in 2015 - the EuroMed Rights Network, comprising more than 80 human rights organisations from Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and the International Detention Coalition, a global chain of organisations working against the administrative detention of migrants. Currently, the CLA is also a member of the international network PICUM and the European Alternatives to Detention (ADT) Network.

IV. INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

CLA continued to conduct internship programmes to train young lawyers and students or graduates in other fields related to refugee and migrant issues, to engage them in civic activism and to establish a pro bono culture among the younger generation of lawyers and activists.

In 2023 we worked with two interns from prestigious universities in Canada, establishing a lasting relationship of future collaboration.

CLA worked with several volunteers and interns at the national level, who contributed their initiative in the spheres of social mediation, psychology and working with vulnerable persons.

V.CLA IMPLEMENTED

PROJECTS for 2023

- **"Moving forward: sustaining progress and ensuring a lasting reduction in migration policies based on power-based methods and practices"**, funded by the European Programme on Integration and Migration (EPIM), a joint initiative of the Network of European Foundations (NEF), was completed in 2023. The project aimed to build on advocacy and communication in the field of alternatives to migrant detention in the community. As part of the project, a [Practical Handbook on Alternatives to Migration Detention](#) was created and published, aimed at decision-makers and government officials working on the ground with migrants. The handbook was presented at events with discussion groups in Sofia, Haskovo and Stara Zagora.
- **"Emergency Fund: responding to the crisis in Ukraine"**, launched at the end of 2022 and funded by the European Integration and Migration Programme (EMIP). The project is being implemented in cooperation with Mission Wings Foundation and Refugee Women's Council. The aim of the project is to provide legal aid and case management holistic support to Ukrainian and third country nationals whose needs have increased following the influx of Ukrainian refugees and the limited capacity of institutions and the NGO sector. A particular focus of the project is the expansion of the organization's activities in the Harmanli and Lyubimets area with the addition of a team of attorneys from the area and the establishment of weekly reception hours at the Mission Krile office in Harmanli.
- **"Effective Legal Aid for Refugees and Immigrants in Bulgaria"**, implemented under the Second Call for Strategic Projects of the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria (ACF) under the EEA Financial Framework 2014-2021. This project was an extension for another 2 years under the same programme, implemented together with the FAR, with the addition of a third partner - Mission Wings Foundation. The main objective of the two phases of the project was to contribute to the respect of human rights and to change institutional and judicial practices and legislation by providing legal assistance (advice, representation at administrative and judicial instances) to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants and by advocating to officials working with them and judges. [You can read the concluding legal analysis, published at the end of the project here.](#)
- **"Strengthening the labour rights of migrant workers in Bulgaria"**, with the financial support of PICUM (Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants) and the Robert Bosch Stiftung (Germany). The project explores the challenges faced by migrant workers, especially the most vulnerable among them, in the process of labour market integration in Bulgaria, the difficulties faced by employers who have hired or intend to hire migrant workers, identifying the role of trade unions in the process of labour integration of migrant workers. The information gathered within the project will be used to prepare findings, recommendations, legal and economic analysis of the labour market in Bulgaria and a final project report.
- **"Mission: possible" programme** is the only donor programme in Bulgaria that provides flexible funding for the administrative needs and organisational development of civil society organisations (the so-called core funding). The program is implemented within the framework of the project "Building an Inclusive Resilient Democratic Society in Bulgaria" (BIRDS in BG), implemented in partnership with the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law (BCNL) and Impact Drive Foundation (IDF), with the financial support of the European Union (EU). The programme is related to supporting the core activities of the organisation by funding key administrative and organisational needs.

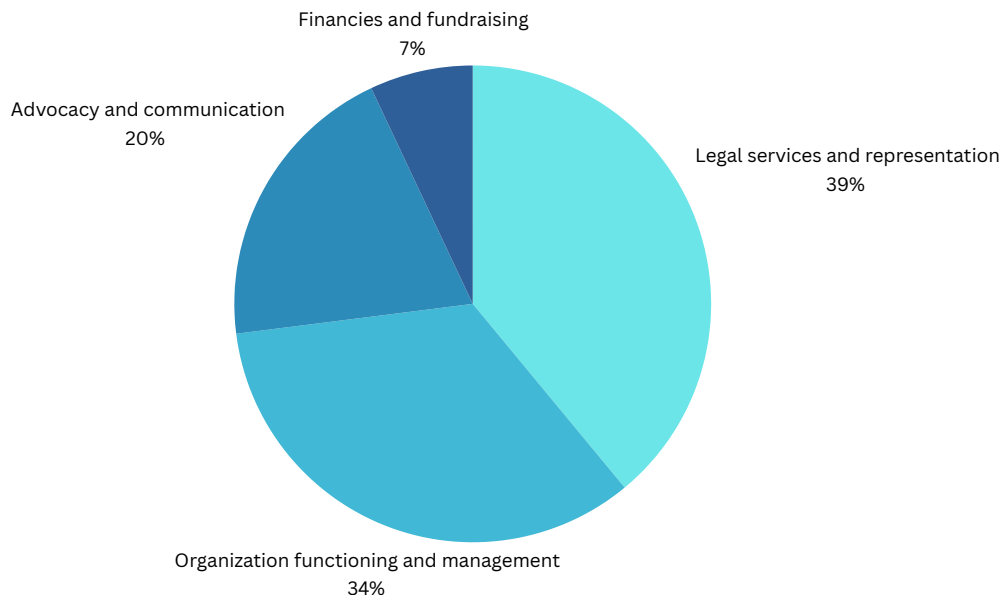
VI. FINANCE IN 2023

Total budget received for 2023
433 850 BGN (221 824 Euro)

Total project funding for 2023
421 000 BGN (215 254 Euro)

Total expenditures for 2023
433 850 BGN (221 824 Euro)

CATEGORIES OF EXPENDITURES



OUR WORK IS SUPPORTED BY

