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Liberties EU (11.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/33iBeka> - The attempt to dissolve Bulgaria's largest human rights organization is the latest attack against civil society – and European values – by an EU government.

Misrepresent facts, call them colorful names, plant misinformation in the media, pass legally dubious regulations to hamstringing their work – it's the go-to game plan for populists trying to discredit civil society.

And it's on full display in Bulgaria. The governing coalition party VMRO-Bulgarian National Movement is trying to dissolve the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the largest and most prestigious human rights organization in the country and a member of the Liberties network. It's the latest worrying example of a European government attempting to silence the critical voices of civil society organizations.

Politics and publicity

The VMRO, led by Deputy Prime Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, considers BHC and other rights organizations to be an unnecessary annoyance for the government and an insult to the nation. But its current effort to get rid of BHC appears also to be, at least in part, a publicity stunt to exploit the media's current focus on the case of Paul "Jock" Palfreeman.

Palfreeman, an Australian citizen, was convicted in 2009 of murdering a Bulgarian student two years earlier. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison, although he has always maintained his innocence. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee gave him legal aid, first in his attempt to secure a lawful transfer to Australia to serve out his sentence, and later to secure parole in Bulgaria.

On 19 September, a three-judge panel of the Sofia Appellate Court granted Palfreeman parole. The decision triggered a backlash from nationalists and the far right, with VMRO among the most vocal in condemning the ruling. And now, unsurprisingly, the party is looking to capitalize on the media attention by going after the organization that helped secure Palfreeman's release.

Bulgaria's prosecutor general announced on 8 October that he would not initiate deregistration proceedings against BHC. But it was a short-lived victory. Almost immediately, VMRO said it would take its request directly to the courts – a possibility under Bulgarian law. The continued threats to BHC caused an international outcry resulting in 110 NGOs declaring their solidarity with BHC.

Attacks can have sinister consequences

This is not the first time VMRO has attacked the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. In 2014, the party wrote to the National Revenue Agency demanding that it audit the organizations finances. The audit uncovered no irregularities whatsoever. In 2016, VMRO asked the prosecutor general to indict BHC's director, Krassimir Kanev, for "sabotage". According to VMRO, the "sabotage" in question was nothing more than Kanev calling for stronger LGBT rights protections in Bulgaria. The prosecutor declined that request.

Even if the current efforts by VMRO fail, they will still do damage. Every public attack against civil society organizations reinforces the false accusations against these groups. And every public attack sows mistrust in these groups among the general public. And it can have sinister consequences, including physical violence against human rights activists – as happened to Kanev in 2016.

The EU as founded on precisely the values that civil society organizations work every day to protect: democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, equality. And yet today, as these values come increasingly under attack from within, the EU is not doing nearly enough to defend them. The Union's new values fund, which will help support the work of civil society organizations operating inside the EU, should be fully funded and empowered to protect European values.

We at Liberties hope that common sense will conquer political manipulation, and that citizens will come to understand that the ban of a prestigious human rights organization in an EU member state is not just an unacceptable attack on that group, but an attack on European values.