

Bulgaria Chronicle 4 – Occupational safety and health

by IRIS

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July mine deaths cause for alarm as work accidents rise in Bulgaria

On 16 July a deadly [accident](#) occurred in the Oranovo mine in southwest Bulgaria. Two miners died and two more are presumed dead (search for them, in extremely difficult conditions, has been going on without results as of 31 July) after a landslide in the mine. Accidents such as this one are not novel in this specific mine, which has seen several deaths lately. Economy and energy minister Daniela Bobeva [said](#) after the tragedy that 31 inspections had been made in Oranovo in the past years registering 163 violations, 124 of which linked with safe working conditions. What is more worrying is that Oranovo is not an isolated case, and neither is the mining sector.



The Oranovo mine after the accident. Photo by E-79.com

Bulgaria's legislation on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) is entirely in compliance with the requirements of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the European Union. Where some ILO conventions are not ratified yet, they have been fully [incorporated](#) in the national legislation. Bulgaria has [ratified](#) a total of 100 conventions and 1 protocol (Fundamental Conventions: 8 of 8; Governance Conventions [Priority]: 3 of 4; Technical Conventions: 89 of 177; Out of 100 Conventions ratified by Bulgaria, of which 85 are in force, 15 Conventions have been denounced; none have been ratified in the past 12 months). A notable exception in light of the Oranovo accident, however, is Convention 176 on Safety and Health in Mines, 1995, though it is incorporated in the national body of law as mentioned above. With regard to EU law, Bulgaria, as an EU member, has adopted all required legislation on work safety.

But the problem, as in most other sectors in the Bulgarian economy and public life, is not legislation but its implementation and the practice associated with it. Statistics of the National Social Security Institute [show](#) an alarming trend. In 2012,



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3,027 work accidents took place in Bulgaria, up from 2,752 in 2011. Of those last year, 82 were fatal and 11 caused permanent disability, compared to 86 and 20, respectively, in 2011. While deaths and injuries have slightly dropped, the overall number of cases has risen by 10 percent. The biggest percentage of accidents in 2012 were in the processing industry, some 25 percent, followed by ones in vehicle repairing (9.9 percent), transport (9.6 percent) and construction (8.4 percent). Between 1990 and 2012, a total of 2,994 Bulgarians died in work accidents, more than 1,700 were permanently disabled and more than 300,000 had accidents leading to temporary inability to work. The trend is global: according to ILO [data](#) released on the occasion of the 2013 World Day of Safety and Health at Work, each year more than 150 million people undergo work accidents and for 2.3 million it is lethal.

In [recent](#) times, Bulgaria has seen several especially serious accidents related to work (mostly in the military and mining industries). In March 1993, five tonnes of TNT exploded in the Dunarit ammunition factory in Ruse, northern Bulgaria, killing 5. A follow-up explosion of 55 tonnes of TNT injures 250 workers. Six policemen and firemen died in 1999 after an explosion of 50 tonnes of TNT in the Bobov Dol mines in southwest Bulgaria. For the last 13 years, there were 5 major explosions in military/ammunition warehouses and mines in Bulgaria, injuring 4 people. The biggest explosion took place in 2008 near Sofia, in the Chelopechene military warehouses holding 2,500 tonnes of ammunition and 50 tonnes of TNT, when 50 blasts caused all surrounding villages to be evacuated. There were no casualties.

One of the most often cited reasons in the media for accidents at work in Bulgaria generally has been failure of the state companies or private business owners to comply with safety and health standards. Families of the casualties and the injured have claimed owners have saved on introduction of expensive OSH standards in order to maximise their profits, all this to the expense of employees' lives and well-being. Indeed, 'wild' capitalism involving unaccountable businessmen, miserable working conditions and pay, and big grey sector began to be the characteristics of Bulgarian society and state after the collapse of Communism in 1989. Despite the legislation and measures adopted subsequently, some practices have remained, and the ethics of some companies remains questionable. What is worse, in present-day Bulgaria, huge bits of the economy are held by oligarchic/monopolistic conglomerates in close ties with every government on power which are allowed to evade the laws and abuse their employees, and workers are afraid or unwilling to stand up for their rights on the work place.

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