

THE EU'S POLICY TOWARDS MODERNIZING THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK ON ANTI-CORRUPTION: ANTI-CORRUPTION REFORMS IN BULGARIA

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Abstract. This article explores the EU's anti-corruption legislation and policy framework, with a focus on Bulgarian reforms. It reviews key EU directives and institutions involved in combating corruption, and assesses Bulgaria's progress and alignment with EU standards. The study examines the successes and challenges of Bulgarian anti-corruption measures through comparative analysis and case studies, offering insights into the effectiveness of these initiatives. Key EU bodies such as the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) are highlighted. Key terms include EU legislation, anti-corruption policy, Bulgaria, judicial reforms, and EU directives.

Keywords: EU legislation; anti-corruption policy; Bulgaria; judicial reforms; EU directives

Introduction

Corruption undermines economic development, social justice, and democratic governance, posing significant challenges within the European Union (EU). The EU has developed comprehensive legislation and policies aimed at preventing and combating corruption across its member states. This article explores the EU's anti-corruption legislative framework and evaluates Bulgaria's efforts to implement corresponding reforms. It examines the manifestation of corruption in Bulgaria, after the state accession to the EU, the key legislative measures, and the role of EU institutions in supporting the country anti-corruption reforms. The study aims to highlight the effectiveness of the anti-corruption legislative reforms in Bulgaria and the role of education in preventing corruption

EU legislation on combating fraud, corruption and other illegal activities

The EU has developed a comprehensive legal framework to combat fraud, corruption, and other illegal activities, which is essential for maintaining high

standards of governance across member states. Article 67 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union emphasizes the need to prevent and combat crime, including corruption. At the same time, this document classifies corruption as a 'euro-crime', allowing the EU to adopt minimum rules in this area (Official Journal of the European Union 2017).

Member States need to be equipped with effective tools and strategies to address severe corruption, especially when it involves high-level abuse of power or results in significant societal harm. To enhance the effectiveness of combating high-level corruption across all Member States, it is essential for national authorities to implement targeted measures focused on the prevention, suppression, investigation, and prosecution of cases involving senior officials or the large-scale misappropriation of public funds or resources. To effectively tackle the root causes and consequences of various forms of corruption, a coordinated and harmonized approach among Member States is essential. Consequently, the Union's actions should consider the efforts of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) of the Council of Europe, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (Report – A9-0048/2024). Key legislative actions are encompassed in Directive (EU) 2017/1371 on combating fraud against the financial interests of the Union through criminal law (EUR-Lex 2017). This directive sets forth guidelines for criminal offenses and penalties concerning fraud and corruption impacting the EU's financial interests. The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), formed under Council Regulation (EU) 2017/1939, has the authority to investigate and prosecute cases of cross-border corruption (EUR-Lex 2017a). Moreover, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) is responsible for conducting administrative investigations to fight fraud and corruption, as detailed in Regulation No 883/2013 (EUR-Lex 2021). The results of the cooperation established under this provision are reported by Europol, Eurojust, the European Public Prosecutor's Office, OLAF, and the Commission. This is done without prejudice to their obligation for discretion and confidentiality regarding individual cases and personal data. These results are included in a special section of their annual reports to the European Parliament and the Council (European Parliament 2024a).

Recent EU legislation also targets money laundering and the recovery of assets. For example, the 5th Anti-Money Laundering Directive (AMLD) and its proposed update, the 6th AMLD, require member states to establish centralized bank account registries and beneficial ownership registers to enhance transparency (LSEG n.d.). In addition, EU Directive 2018/1673 criminalizes money laundering and designates corruption as a predicate offense (EUR-Lex 2018).

Regarding the EU has certain internal EU rules, including the Staff Regulation and the Code of Conduct for the Members of the European Commission, aim to

prevent corruption within EU institutions by promoting transparency and ethical behavior (European Commission n.d.). Aiming to avoid corruption within EU institutions by promoting transparency and ethical behavior, the EU has special internal standards, such as the Staff Regulations and the Code of Conduct for the Members of the European Commission. These regulations apply to civil servants employed by the European Commission and other EU institutions, both while they are employed there and after they leave. A complete framework of rights and obligations governs the professional conduct of EU government personnel. These rules, which are covered in depth in the Code of Good Administrative Behavior and the Staff Regulations, address possible conflicts of interest, accepting gifts and accolades, outside activities, and limitations that apply after employment. EU employees contribute to the preservation of the institutions' credibility and integrity by abiding by these guidelines. To handle their particular tasks, European Commissioners are likewise subject to specific legislation. If citizens feel that the European Commission has violated the public service standards specified in the Code of Good Administrative Behavior, they have the option to file complaints. Sustaining public trust and accountability depends on this process. EU employees are required to uphold independence, impartiality, objectivity, and loyalty. They must promptly disclose any personal or business interests that might undermine these principles. Approval is necessary for any external engagements, and employees must reveal their spouse's employment or any possible conflicts of interest. The acceptance of gifts by EU employees is strictly controlled. Gifts exceeding €50 need prior approval, and the collection of smaller gifts is monitored to prevent undue influence. Former EU employees must get prior authorization before accepting new employment within two years of leaving an EU institution, especially if the new role is related to their previous work and could conflict with the Commission's interests. Senior officials are barred from lobbying their former institution on matters related to their last three years of service for 12 months after leaving (European Commission n.d.).

The EU has introduced numerous legislative measures to address fraud and corruption, especially in relation to the absorption of European funds. According to a study by Roman, Popescu, and Achim (2023), corruption significantly hinders the absorption rate of EU funds, with findings indicating, "For the period 2014 – 2020, the level of absorption of European funds is negatively influenced by corruption" (Oliinyk, Sierova, & Huliaieva 2023). This paper aims to explore the impact of corruption on economic growth within EU Member States, considering the essential components of the EU's anti-corruption strategy. The study employed GDP as the dependent variable to assess economic growth and utilized Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) as the independent variable. Data was collected from 27 EU countries for the period 2013 – 2021, and it was normalized to ensure comparability of all indices. The

findings reveal that GDP per capita exerts the most substantial positive influence on GDP growth, while the CPI, despite having a positive coefficient, does not show a statistically significant effect on GDP growth. This research indicates that policymakers should prioritize anti-corruption measures that enhance government transparency, accountability, public trust in institutions, and social equality over purely economic growth objectives (Ibid.).

The European Union established the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) as an innovative strategy to influence member states' anti-corruption efforts by focusing on monitoring instead of direct enforcement. The motive behind the initiation of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) was to compensate for the loss of sanctioning power after EU accession by continuing to monitor corruption control efforts in member states, particularly Romania and Bulgaria. This mechanism aimed to foster compliance through monitoring rather than material sanctions. (Lacatus & Sedelmeier 2020, p.1).

One of the main objectives of the EU is to achieve sustainable development. The EU is committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within its own member states and through establishing partnerships with various countries (Yu-Xia 2023, p.2).

European Single Procurement Document (ESPD), which simplifies the procurement process for businesses across the EU by allowing them to submit their details only once, rather than for every tender. This not only reduces administrative burden but also decreases the likelihood of corrupt practices by ensuring that all procurement processes are transparent and standardized (European Commission 2016).

The anti-corruption efforts at the EU member states: Theory and Practice

Anti-corruption efforts across EU member states vary significantly in theory and practice. While some countries have developed robust frameworks, others continue to struggle with implementation and enforcement. Comparative analysis reveals best practices, such as strong legal frameworks, independent anti-corruption bodies, and effective whistleblower protections. Challenges include political interference, insufficient resources, and varying levels of public awareness and engagement.

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is published annually by Transparency International, a non-governmental organization. The Corruption Perceptions Index ranks countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (not corrupt).

Table 1 below presents the 2023 CPI, which shows a decline in anti-corruption efforts in Western Europe and the EU. The region's average score dropped from 66 to 65, marking the first decline in nearly a decade. This drop highlights weakening checks and balances, which are essential for effective anti-corruption measures (Transparency international report 2023).

Table 1. Corruption Perceptions Index 2023

Country	Last	Previous	Reference	Unit
Denmark	90	90	DEC23	Points
Finland	87	87	DEC23	Points
Norway	84	84	DEC23	Points
Sweden	82	83	DEC23	Points
Switzerland	82	83	DEC23	Points
Netherlands	79	80	DEC23	Points
Germany	78	79	DEC23	Points
Luxembourg	78	77	DEC23	Points
Ireland	77	77	DEC23	Points
Estonia	76	74	DEC23	Points
Bulgaria	45	43	DEC23	Points
Macedonia	42	40	DEC23	Points
Moldova	42	39	DEC23	Points
Kosovo	41	41	DEC23	Points
Albania	37	36	DEC23	Points
Belarus	37	39	DEC23	Points
Serbia	36	36	DEC23	Points
Ukraine	36	33	DEC23	Points
Bosnia and Herzegovina	35	34	DEC23	Points
Turkey	34	36	DEC23	Points
Russia	26	28	DEC23	Points

Source: Transparency international, 2024

Comparative analysis

Several high-ranking democracies have experienced a decline in their anti-corruption scores, indicating a negative trend in their accountability and governance. For example, Sweden's score has dropped to 82, while the Netherlands, Iceland, and the United Kingdom have seen their scores fall to 79, 72, and 71 respectively. This reflects a worrying increase in political corruption and weakened accountability in these nations. Judicial weaknesses in countries like Poland and Hungary have become a major concern, with Poland scoring 54 and Hungary 42. These issues have compromised justice and effective checks on executive power, creating environments where corruption can flourish. Conversely, there are positive trends in some countries

that have made notable improvements. Since 2012, six out of 31 countries have shown significant progress. The Czech Republic now has a score of 57, and Estonia has improved to 76. Greece, Latvia, Italy, and Ireland have also seen their scores rise to 49, 60, 56, and 77 respectively. These advancements reflect successful anti-corruption reforms and enhanced governance frameworks in these nations. At the top of the rankings, Denmark, Finland, and Norway continue to lead with robust anti-corruption measures and high standards of governance. Denmark achieved the highest score of 90, followed by Finland with 87, and Norway with 84. These countries exemplify strong anti-corruption frameworks and effective governance, setting positive examples for others to follow (corruption perceptions index 2023).

On the other end of the spectrum, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria remain the lowest performers among the EU member states. Hungary's score of 42, Romania's 46, and Bulgaria's 45 indicate persistent issues with corruption. These scores reveal deep-seated challenges that these countries face in establishing effective anti-corruption frameworks and ensuring transparency and accountability in governance. Denmark showed the highest performance in preventing and combating corruption in 2022. Denmark has developed effective strategies for preventing corruption. According to the Global Competitiveness Index 2019, Denmark holds the top position among countries with the lowest corruption levels. Other nations that consistently exhibit low corruption include Norway, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Singapore, Canada, and Germany (Rusin, Dubinskiy, Kharytonov, p.186).

Denmark has consistently been a frontrunner in maintaining low corruption levels. In 2022, it scored 90 out of 100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Tavolzhanskyi et al., 2023, p. 5). Sweden, scoring 83 out of 100 on the same index, ranked 5th among 180 countries in 2022 (Ibid.). Germany's efforts in fighting corruption are also notable, with a score of 79 out of 100, placing it 9th in 2022 according to Transparency International (Ibid.). Poland, despite losing one point, remains a leading country among Ukraine's neighbors with a score of 55, ranking 45th (Ibid.).

Corruption significantly undermines public trust and reduces the willingness to report crimes or engage with public services. Poland's drop in ranking is attributed to judicial reforms affecting independence, while Greece's decline is linked to issues like wiretapping and attacks on press freedom.

Transparency International highlights the crucial role of maintaining judicial independence, ensuring adequate resources for the justice system, and implementing strong anti-corruption legislation. Key measures include enhancing legislative oversight, safeguarding journalists, and promoting transparency in political financing to counteract negative trends (Transparency International 2023).

Anti-corruption efforts among EU member states exhibit considerable variation, with some countries implementing more effective strategies than others. The analysis

shows that “the level of absorption rate is better explained by an objective indicator (The European Funds Fraud Index) than a subjective fraud indicator (Control of Corruption)” (Oliinyk, Sierova, & Huliaieva 2023). This indicates the importance of factual data over perception-based measures in assessing anti-corruption effectiveness.

The study aimed to explore the administrative and legal frameworks of EU member states in establishing specialized anti-corruption agencies, defining legal boundaries, and implementing measures for control, supervision, transparency, and participation. By analyzing these elements, the study assessed the effectiveness of these measures in different contexts, highlighting the role of good governance principles in anti-corruption efforts. This comprehensive approach allowed for a better understanding of how various EU countries implement anti-corruption strategies and the impact of these strategies on reducing corruption within public authorities (Zlyvko et al. 2023, p. 8).

Digitalization and reducing corruption: The role of E-government

Digitalization plays a crucial role in reducing corruption by enhancing transparency and efficiency in government operations. E-government initiatives, such as online public services and digital procurement systems, help minimize opportunities for corrupt practices by reducing human discretion and increasing oversight. Success stories from various EU countries demonstrate the potential of digital tools to improve governance, although challenges such as cybersecurity risks and the digital divide must be addressed. By integrating advanced digital technologies, governments can create more robust anti-corruption frameworks that deter fraudulent activities. Furthermore, fostering digital literacy and investing in secure digital infrastructure are essential steps to ensure the long-term success of these initiatives. Overall, digitalization represents a powerful ally in the fight against corruption, paving the way for more accountable and transparent governance.

Moreover, the European Union itself has been actively promoting e-government through its Digital Agenda for Europe, which aims to harness the benefits of digital technology to improve public administration. The European Commission’s eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020 has laid down specific measures to accelerate the implementation of e-government across member states. This includes promoting cross-border digital public services and encouraging member states to use digital platforms for administrative procedures. By standardizing these practices, the EU aims to create a more cohesive and efficient system, reducing the inconsistencies that can be exploited for corrupt purposes. (European Parliament 2024b).

The digitalization of public administration is a very important factor in reducing corruption and enhancing the quality of public services. The implementation of digital technologies in public administration not only streamlines processes but also significantly increases transparency and accountability.” Achieving effective digitalization in public administrations and economies necessitates reimagining

how e-government and digital services, along with enhanced e-participation, can contribute to reducing corruption and fostering social development (Androniceanu, Georgescu & Kinnunen 2022, p. 1).

The Anti-Corruption Reforms in Bulgaria

Understanding the landscape of anti-corruption reforms in Bulgaria requires recognizing the systemic corruption that has long affected the country. Driven by domestic demands and EU pressures, Bulgaria has made numerous attempts to address these challenges, often under intense scrutiny. A significant milestone was the KPKONPI law in January 2018, aimed at consolidating anti-corruption efforts. However, implementation has been difficult, particularly amidst political instability from 2021 to 2024. Despite these challenges, successive governments have continued to push for effective anti-corruption measures, vital for economic progress and public trust. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to improving governance and creating a more transparent society, even as Bulgaria faces ongoing political and economic pressures. Bulgaria has experienced significant political crises during 2021 – 2024, which have impacted its anti-corruption reforms. The Bulgarian governments face significant challenges in balancing the protection of state and public interests while formulating sustainable anti-corruption policies. Economic progress requires adherence to globalization trends and relies heavily on business initiatives. In a fast-paced business environment marked by growing competition and globalization, active entrepreneurial engagement is essential for economic growth. Striking the right balance is a challenge for any modern, developing nation, particularly when it comes to establishing sustainable anti-corruption policies (Krastev 2019, p. 57).

One of the major issues highlighted by Bulgarian society is the widespread presence of corruption at various levels. The most commonly cited issues in some social researches are high prices, corruption, and inflation. This outcome aligns with prior studies identifying Bulgaria as one of the EU countries with the highest perceived levels of corruption. (Bailer & Thürk 2023, p. 10).

The political crisis in Bulgaria has significantly impacted its anti-corruption reforms. According to the study, “Among all the countries in the union, Romania has one of the lowest absorption rates, the highest number of reported fraud cases, and some of the lowest corruption control indicators” (Oliinyk, Sierova, & Huliaieva 2023). This highlights the challenges faced by countries like Bulgaria in implementing effective anti-corruption measures amidst political instability

Judicial Reforms in Bulgaria 2023

To achieve political consensus for the judicial reforms, a two-thirds qualified majority in parliament is required for constitutional changes, which was reached in December 2023 (Nikolov 2023). The reforms include:

The judicial reform splits the Supreme Judicial Council into two separate entities: the Supreme Judicial Council and the Supreme Prosecutorial Council. A shared unit will handle discussions on the budget and magistrate training, ensuring the judiciary's independence from both the prosecution and the parliament.

Regarding the prosecutor-general and the special judge: The prosecutor-general will now serve a five-year term and will lose some powers, such as the authority to order inspections. A new position, the special judge, will be responsible for investigating complaints against the Attorney General.

Access to the Constitutional Court: Any party involved in a case can request that the court refer any discrepancy between an applicable law and the Constitution to the Constitutional Court.

Selection of regulatory body heads: The heads of regulatory bodies will be chosen based on principles of transparency and openness, requiring the support of two-thirds of the MPs.

These reforms aim to enhance the accountability and transparency of the judiciary, safeguarding its independence from political influence (*Ibid.*).

Reform of the Anti-Corruption Committee into Two Entities

The reform of the Anti-Corruption Committee has led to its division into two distinct entities: the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Commission for Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property.

Anti-Corruption Commission has proposal to prevent and investigate corruption within state institutions and among high-ranking officials.

This commission focuses on preventing and investigating corrupt activities within state institutions and among high-ranking officials. Its responsibilities include verifying asset declarations, managing conflicts of interest, conducting education campaigns, and collaborating with international organizations. The commission aims to enhance transparency and accountability in the public sector, thereby reducing corruption within public institutions.

Commission for Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property has proposal to investigate and confiscate assets obtained through corruption and criminal activities. This commission is tasked with investigating and confiscating assets obtained through corruption and criminal activities. Key activities involve tracking suspicious financial transactions, identifying and seizing illicit assets, and working with international partners to combat cross-border crime. The primary goal of the commission is to diminish criminal profits and restore justice by confiscating unlawfully acquired assets.

International organizations and institutions such as OECD, World bank, Council of Europe publish annual country reports that are pivotal in assessing and guiding national anti-corruption efforts. These reports highlight areas of progress, identify shortcomings, and provide recommendations for enhancing anti-corruption measures.

OECD

The OECD evaluates anti-corruption policies, particularly focusing on bribery and corporate compliance. Their reports provide detailed assessments and recommend measures for improving enforcement and strengthening legal frameworks.

All countries that are signatories to the Anti-Bribery Convention have a vested interest in ensuring compliance by all parties. The country monitoring reports, which offer recommendations based on detailed peer-review evaluations of each nation, are available for review. You can access these reports and the implementation efforts through the links provided below (OECD ORGANISED OECD Global Anti-Corruption & Integrity Forum).

The OECD's Phase 4 Evaluation Report on Bulgaria (2021) recommended enhancing whistleblower protections and implementing stricter corporate liability measures to tackle bribery effectively. The OECD's Phase 4 Evaluation Report on Bulgaria in 2021 recommends several measures to enhance the country's anti-corruption efforts. Key recommendations include strengthening whistleblower protections and implementing stricter corporate liability measures to effectively combat bribery. The report also provides a detailed assessment of Bulgaria's enforcement activities and legal frameworks related to anti-corruption policies (OECD 2021).

World Bank

The World Bank's reports, such as the Systematic Country Diagnostic (SCD), identify corruption as a major barrier to development. They emphasize the need for transparency and accountability in public procurement and the integration of anti-corruption measures into economic policies.

The World Bank's Control of Corruption Index offers a detailed analysis of corruption levels by examining various factors, including the likelihood of government officials engaging in corrupt activities, public trust in politicians, and the extent of corrupt practices in local businesses and foreign investments. In 2021, the index showed a marked decline in Bulgaria's corruption control, likely reflecting the country's political turmoil (The World Bank 2023).

The World Bank's Systematic Country Diagnostic Report on Bulgaria emphasized the need for increased transparency and accountability in public procurement to address corruption (The World Bank, 2022). Additionally, the GRECO Fifth Round Evaluation Report on Bulgaria (2022) underscored the necessity for enhanced judicial accountability and better transparency in lobbying activities.

Council of Europe

The above-mentioned GRECO focuses on preventing corruption among high-ranking officials, enhancing judicial accountability, and improving transparency.

Their reports provide recommendations for actions for member states. Concerning this, the GRECO's Fifth Round Evaluation Report on Bulgaria evaluated the nation's efforts to prevent corruption among senior officials. It suggested increasing judicial accountability, enhancing transparency in lobbying activities, and enforcing higher integrity standards within both the judiciary and government.

Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative in Southeast Europe

Bulgaria actively participates in the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI) publishes a variety of documents annually to support and promote anti-corruption efforts in Southeast Europe. For sectors like higher education and public enterprises, RAI produces documents outlining sector-specific corruption risks and providing tools for mitigation. Examples include the "Higher Education Sector Corruption Risk Assessment Guidance" and the "Public Enterprises Sector Corruption Risk Assessment Guidance" published as part of the "Southeast Europe – Together Against Corruption" project (Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative n.d.). RAI conducts gap analyses to assess the effectiveness of whistleblower protection laws in the Western Balkans and Moldova. These reports help identify areas for improvement in whistleblower policies and protection mechanisms (Brzanova & Berhamovic 2024). In addition, RAI regularly organizes and reports on workshops and conferences, such as the regional workshop on integrity and control measures in defense and law enforcement institutions (Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative n.d.).

RAI demonstrates effective regional cooperation in anti-corruption efforts across Southeast Europe. The Southeast Europe Coalition on Whistleblower Protection holds annual meetings, supported by RAI, to discuss challenges, strategies, and successes in protecting whistleblowers. These meetings foster collaboration between governmental and non-governmental sectors (Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative n.d.). The organization's strategic objectives for 2023 – 2025 emphasize enhancing regional cooperation in asset disclosure, strengthening public institutions, and promoting integrity. RAI's initiatives, such as tailored training and the International Treaty on Exchange of Data for Asset Declarations, highlight practical measures in combating corruption. This cooperative approach exemplifies the theory and practice of anti-corruption efforts within EU member states

The role of education in preventing corruption

The University of National and World Economy (UNWE) implements international models for anti-corruption education by offering a master's program developed in collaboration with organizations like UNODC and the International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA). This program focuses on the practical application of anti-corruption strategies and enhancing integrity in the public sector. At the end of 2015 in Vienna, at the initiative of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Bulgaria to the UN and OSCE and the UNWE, an agreement

was signed between UNODC and the Bulgarian government to launch training on anti-corruption in Bulgaria. In 2016, the UNWE, the KPKONPI, the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Anti-Corruption Commission launched a joint initiative – “Anti-Corruption Academy”. In 2018, a memorandum was signed between the four institutions to conduct anti-corruption education through the “Anti-Corruption Academy” (Spasov 2022). In the realm of anti-corruption education, E4J offers two distinct series of modules titled “Integrity and Ethics” and “Anti-Corruption”. Each series comprises 14 modules that address various facets of the primary subject. These modules are structured as 3-hour lectures suitable for inclusion in a range of courses and disciplines. They can be integrated into existing curricula or delivered as independent lectures and training programs. This flexible approach allows anti-corruption education to be incorporated into any field of study – such as economics, national security, law, and international relations – without necessitating the creation of a dedicated course or subject in anti-corruption (Ibid.).

Through familiarizing citizens with the nature of corruption, its manifestations, the detrimental effects of its existence in a particular society, and the opportunities for active participation of citizens in efforts to preserve the public interest, anti-corruption education seeks to instill in them a culture of intolerance towards corrupt practices. Because of this, the UN and the EU advise nations to implement effective anti-corruption education initiatives at various educational levels. The 2004 UN Convention against Corruption is the primary vehicle for promoting and spreading the concept of anti-corruption education. Each State Party shall take the necessary steps to implement “public information activities that contribute to the non-tolerance of corruption, and educational programs, including in the curricula of schools and universities,” according to Article 13 of the agreement. In light of this, the Council of Europe has proclaimed 2005 to be the Year of Democratic Citizenship via Education, which offers nations in Europe even more motivation to launch numerous programs aimed at promoting democratic citizenship. (Petrunov 2019). Anti-corruption education aims to build a societal mindset that rejects corrupt behaviors. It focuses on informing citizens about what constitutes corruption, its different manifestations, the harmful impact it has on society, and how individuals can engage in protecting public interests (Ibid.).

Conclusion

The EU's anti-corruption framework is built on comprehensive legislative measures and institutions like the EPPO and OLAF, which aim to improve transparency and accountability across member states. Bulgaria has made significant strides in aligning with EU standards, particularly through judicial reforms and the establishment of anti-corruption bodies. Despite these efforts, challenges such as political interference and inadequate enforcement remain prevalent. Comparative analyses reveal that while some EU countries have implemented robust anti-

corruption measures, Bulgaria continues to face difficulties with effective implementation. Best practices from other EU nations underscore the importance of independent anti-corruption agencies and robust legal frameworks. Digitalization plays a crucial role in reducing corruption, with e-government initiatives enhancing transparency and efficiency. However, it is essential to address cybersecurity risks and the digital divide to fully benefit from these tools. International organizations provide valuable assessments and recommendations, highlighting the necessity for legislative reforms and international cooperation. In summary, Bulgaria's anti-corruption efforts demonstrate progress but require continuous efforts to overcome existing challenges. Effective implementation, strong political will, and public engagement are vital for achieving sustainable anti-corruption outcomes in Bulgaria and the EU.

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