

# Enabling Social Innovation in Bulgaria

## Country Snapshot

**Social innovation: "the processes and outcomes of developing novel approaches to address societal challenges facing people and planet." <sup>15</sup>**

This snapshot represents a descriptive, non-exhaustive overview of key highlights from Bulgaria's social innovation ecosystem.

- ✓ Direct focus on social innovation    🔗 Connected but indirect focus on social innovation    ✗ No focus on social innovation

## INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

### Official Definition of Social Innovation 🔗



Since the beginning of 2026, a project (EU funding) has been implemented in Bulgaria, through the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP). The main task of the project is to establish a National Competence Center for Social Innovation and Promote Social Innovation. For the purposes of the project, an official definition of social innovation will be introduced no later than mid-2026.

### Government Body for Social Innovation ✓



Since the beginning of 2026, six regional centers for social economy and social innovation have been operating. They are part of a project funded through ESF Plus (pls. see above). The main task is to identify and propose for validation social innovations, as the first part of this project. The second part of the project will be to validate and finance the testing, implementation and scaling of social innovations. The six regional centers are under the management of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP). Total budget – € 3.5 mln for 33 months; Social Economy Council and Sofia Municipality play supporting roles <sup>2</sup>.

### Government Strategy for Social Innovation ✓



MLSP is implementing a project to support social innovations in two components. The first component includes the establishment of a regional structure for identifying social innovations and a national council for validating social innovations (with the participation of various stakeholders - government, academia, non-governmental sector). The second component includes providing financial support to already validated social innovations for their pilot implementation, scaling and dissemination. Social innovation also is embedded in various frameworks and programmes, such as the **National Concept for Social Economy (2012)**, **Social Economy Action Plan (2022–2023)**, **National Development Programme 2030**, and **Employment Strategy 2021–2030** <sup>3</sup>.

### Policies, Laws & Regulations ✓ 🔗



No legal frameworks for SIBs or impact investing, but:

- **Law on SSE Enterprises (2018):** Defines social enterprise status, introduces Class A/A+ certification, and provides support mechanisms <sup>4</sup>.
- **CSR Strategy, Cooperatives Act, NGO Law:** Enable support but not innovation-specific <sup>5</sup>.



### Official Statistics

- No data on social innovation.
- Social enterprise data: 3,670 entities identified (2019); a small portion officially registered under SSE law (2024) <sup>6</sup>.



### Government Programs

- **PROMOTING THE SOCIAL ECONOMY AT THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL (EU Funding):** €15.7 m provide opportunities to use new technologies and improve the digital skills of employees <sup>7</sup>.
- **Annual National Award for Social Innovation** <sup>8</sup>.
- **Sofia Social Innovations Fund:** Small grants for NGO-led pilots.

## ECOSYSTEM



### Stakeholders

- MLSP, Sofia Development Association, Social Economy Council
- BCNL, BCause Foundation, Junior Achievement, National Cooperative Unions
- Impact platforms: Move.bg, Rinker Center, A hub <sup>10</sup>



### Support Initiatives

- **A hub:** Social innovation space in Sofia <sup>11</sup>
- **SofiaLab, hackathons (InnoAir, etc.)**
- **Regional Social Economy Centers (6 regions)**
- **Rinker Center incubator, Junior Achievement innovation camp**



### Collaboration

- Sofia Municipality & NGOs via local funds; MLSP-led EU projects
- Events: National Social Economy Forum, Global Social Entrepreneurship Summit (2024)

## FINANCE



### Financing Schemes

- €2,6 billion m ESF+ via MLSP <sup>12</sup>
- Social enterprise grants are available under the EU funded Social Economy program
- Financial instruments via Fund of Funds, BDB microfinance
- Private funding: BCause Fund, Telus, Unicredit CSR grants



### Financing Inclusivity

Low uptake of official SSE status limits access, and administrative barriers exclude small/rural NGOs, but regional centers & incubators target underrepresented groups.

## Public Awareness of Social Innovation



A network of 6 regional centers (with 30 experts) has been established for the development of social innovations, which have attracted various stakeholders - business, non-governmental sector, academia. Awareness grows through media coverage of awards/forums, youth hackathons, and university events <sup>13</sup>.

## Research



- Led by Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia University
- EU projects (PROMOTING THE SOCIAL ECONOMY AT THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL, SI-Drive, SI Plus)
- "Social Innovation Blueprint for Bulgaria" (2023) <sup>14</sup>

## Education & Human Capital



Formal courses are available at Sofia University, UNWE, while informal programs include Junior Achievement, Impact Drive, and BCNL trainings.

## Entrepreneurship



SSE law supports formal recognition, and there are active NGO-to-business spinouts in education, environment, and inclusion. Capital access is limited, but ecosystem credibility is rising.

## Social & Environmental Consciousness



High awareness of social problems, but low civic participation. Volunteering tradition is weak, but the youth are more engaged. There is a growing interest in ESG and environmental action.