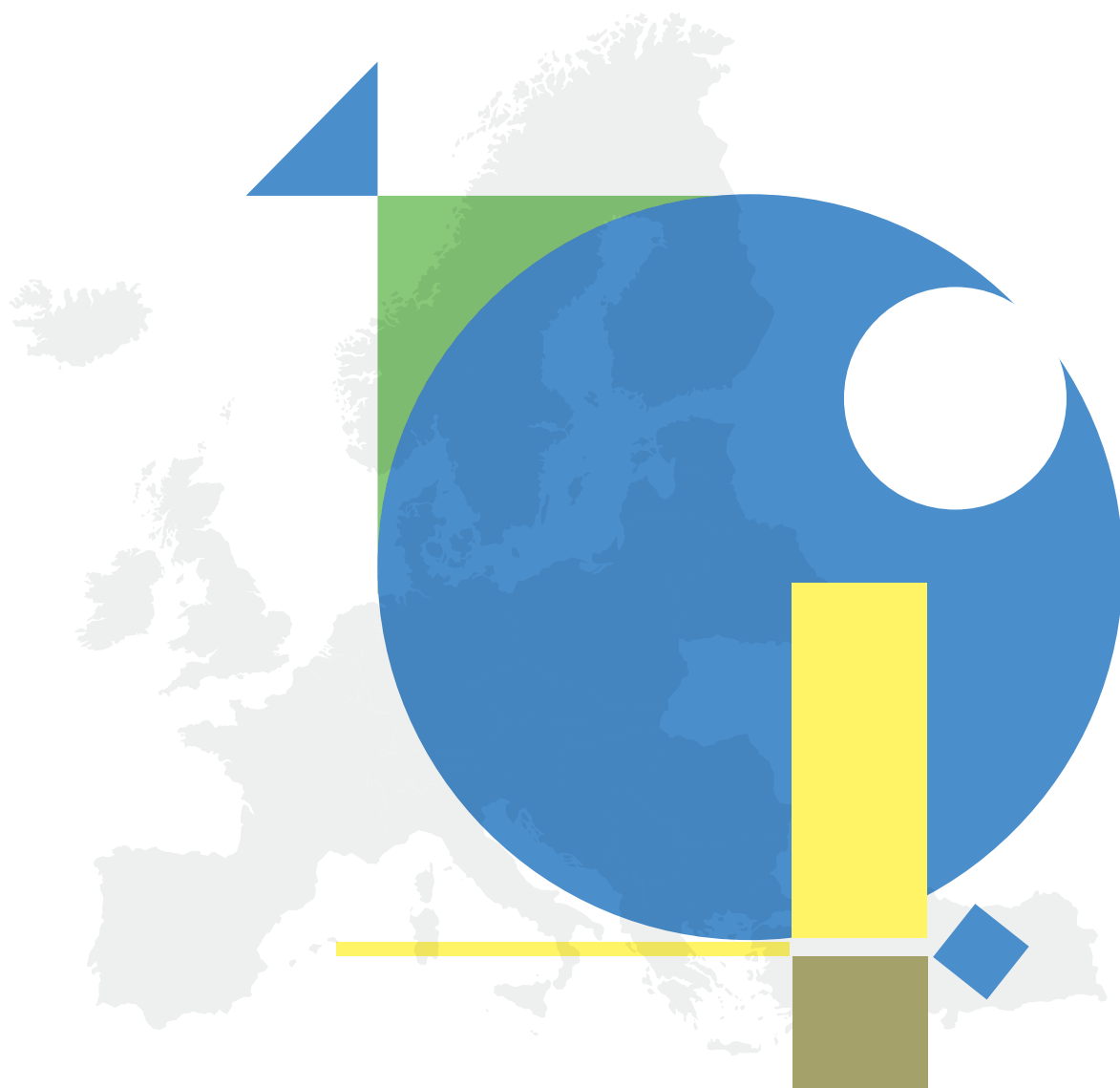




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EUROPEAN
INVENTORY
OF NQFs 2020
BULGARIA

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BULGARIA

European inventory of NQFs 2020

Introduction and context

Public spending on education in Bulgaria is increasing, though the system remains underfunded and measures do not fully match the magnitude of the challenges. Despite ongoing efforts, early school leaving remains problematic, particularly among the Roma and in rural areas. The rate of early leavers has increased from 12.7% in 2018 to 13,9% in 2019 (EU average 10.2%). Measures to return out-of-school children to education are in place, and support is being offered to overcome learning gaps and to increase motivation. However, overall enrolment rates in school education are not improving and dropout rates remain high. The percentage of underachievers in science, maths and reading in the 2018 Programme for international student assessment (PISA) is 47.1%, 44.4% and 46.5% respectively, which is around double the EU average. The impact of the ongoing education reform on learning outcomes will only be measurable in future testing rounds. The teaching workforce in Bulgaria is aging rapidly but salaries have been raised significantly in recent years to improve the attractiveness of the profession. The employment rate of recent upper secondary and tertiary graduates (age group 20-34) who are no longer in education or training has increased from 78.6% in 2018 to 80.7% in 2019 and is close to the EU average of 80.9%. Measures to increase labour market relevance have been introduced both in higher education and in vocational education and training (VET). A project, *Support for the dual training system*, co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), has been launched under the coordination of the Ministry of Education and Science. Improving the labour market relevance of higher education remains a key issue. Since 2015, Bulgaria has been using the funding system to shift the profile of graduates towards qualifications in high demand in the labour market, which are to a large extent STEM ⁽¹⁾ professions. To this end, higher scholarships and support measures have been offered to students in these study fields, alongside increasing the number of state-subsidised places. As of the academic year 2020/21, tuition fees were eliminated for new entrants in 18 professional study fields in the areas of pedagogical and nature sciences and eight protected specialities in the areas of philology, physics, forestry and technical sciences. Adult participation in learning in 2019 was low (2.0% in 2019 compared to the EU average of 10.8%). The

(1) Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

National developmental programme 2030, approved in January 2020, has set a participation target of 7% by 2030. Raising the skills of the working-age population through lifelong learning is considered central to government policy. (European Commission, 2020).

The Bulgarian qualifications framework for lifelong learning (BQF) was adopted in 2012 to raise understanding and trust in the Bulgarian education system and to support mobility and recognition of qualifications. The framework is also seen as an enabler of national reform, with implications for setting up a system for validating non-formal learning, improving education and training quality, modernising curricula and strengthening provider accountability.

The BQF is a single, comprehensive, eight-level framework with an additional preparatory level 0. It includes qualifications from all levels and subsystems of formal education and training: pre-primary ⁽²⁾, primary and secondary general education, VET and higher education, described in terms of learning outcomes. It was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in May 2013.

Policy objectives

The overall objective of developing and introducing a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF), compatible with the European qualifications framework and the qualifications framework for the European higher education area (QF-EHEA), is to make Bulgarian education system levels clearer and easier to understand by describing them in terms of learning outcomes. This will also improve understanding of national qualifications among target groups and stakeholders. It is hoped that this will raise trust in education and training and make mobility and recognition of qualifications easier. More specific aims addressed by the development of the BQF include:

- (a) develop a device with translation and bridging functions;
- (b) promote mobility within education and in the labour market;
- (c) promote the learning-outcomes orientation of qualifications;
- (d) support validation of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning;
- (e) strengthen orientation towards a lifelong learning approach;
- (f) increase cooperation between stakeholders (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013).

(²) Two years of pre-school education before first grade are mandatory.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The BQF comprises eight levels and an additional preparatory level (BQF level 'zero', covering pre-school education). Level descriptors take EQF and QF-EHEA descriptors into account. All levels are described in terms of knowledge (theoretical and factual), skills described as cognitive (use of logical and creative thinking) and practical (manual dexterity and use of methods, materials, tools and instruments), and competences. Competence descriptors distinguish between personal and professional competences. Personal competences include autonomy and responsibility, and key elements such as learning competences, communicative and social competences are also emphasised. Learning-outcomes-based qualification levels are expected to give learning outcomes a more prominent role in planning education provision (Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science, 2013).

Specified learning outcomes of the qualification levels reflect the legal acts governing different subsystems of education and training, as well as State education requirements for content and expected learning outcomes in the national education system.

In January 2014, the Council of Ministers adopted a new national strategy for lifelong learning for 2014-20 ⁽³⁾. The new national strategy for lifelong learning, in addition to an explanation of the phrase 'learning outcomes', contains a definition of the term 'learning outcome units' (in Bulgarian: *единици учебни резултати*) ⁽⁴⁾; this is understood as 'a component of qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competences, which could be assessed and validated through a certain number of credit points linked to them'. As a whole, the term learning outcomes is widely used in the strategy. In the last five years, all State educational standards for acquiring a qualification in a profession from the list of professions for VET have been developed in units of learning outcomes.

The phrase learning outcomes is now widespread in policy documents. It is used or referred to in national curriculum, assessment and examination

⁽³⁾ National strategy for lifelong learning for 2014-20 (in Bulgarian: *Национална стратегия за учене през целия живот за периода 2014-20*), adopted by the Council of Ministers on 10.1.2014; available in Bulgarian at: <http://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=4297>

⁽⁴⁾ Note that there is a slight difference between the terminology used for 'learning outcomes units' in the *Bill amending and supplementing the law on vocational education and training* and that used in the National strategy for lifelong learning for 2014-20. In the former, the wording is 'единици резултати от ученето', whereas in the latter it is 'единици учебни резултати'.

documents, particularly in State educational standards ⁽⁵⁾ and the evaluation and accreditation procedures in higher education. However, an action plan for implementing the approach has not been adopted nor discussed in the country. The current position in the various subsystems shows that implementation of the approach has continued in the new State educational standards adopted after the law on pre-school and school education entered into force in August 2016. It is also in the State educational requirements on acquisition of higher education in regulated professions, adopted after the BQF entered into force.

Two bills amending the law on VET introduced, and provided a legal definition of, the term ‘learning outcomes’. State educational standards and examination requirements, especially those for acquiring vocational qualifications, have been updated (or new ones developed) to describe or to refer to learning outcomes. This update is a prerequisite for implementing the validation procedure and awarding of credits. The principles of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) have been used for designing standards for VET since 2015. It aims at linking units of learning outcomes with credits in VET. Higher education institutions are autonomous and responsible for developing curriculum, assessment and examination rules; some have learning outcomes within study programmes but implementation differs from one institution to another. The New Bulgarian University is an example of an institution using learning outcomes in its study programmes ⁽⁶⁾. The Burgas Free University also uses learning outcomes in some of its master programme courses ⁽⁷⁾. However, there is no systematic approach for implementing a learning outcome approach in higher education.

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The Bulgarian qualifications framework is now firmly embedded in national legislation. The referencing report was adopted by the Minister of Education and Science in March 2014 and amendments to national legislation support implementation. A new pre-school and school education bill was adopted in late 2015 ⁽⁸⁾ and is expected to lead to amendment of the BQF at secondary education

⁽⁵⁾ The term ‘standard’ has been adopted instead of the term ‘requirement’ since 1 August 2016 with the law for school and pre-school education.

⁽⁶⁾ New Bulgarian University, e-catalogue:
http://ecatalog.nbu.bg/Default.asp?V_Year=2013.

⁽⁷⁾ Burgas Free University, Master programmes:
<http://www.bfu.bg/index.php?q=node/1793>.

⁽⁸⁾ Pre-school and school education act. *State Gazette*, No 79, 13.10.2015. In force since 1.8.2016.

levels. The Bulgarian vocational education and training law was amended in 2014 and 2018. Two amendment bills in 2014 ⁽⁹⁾ support the BQF, with legal arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning, for learning outcomes units and for introduction of the VET credits accumulation and transfer system. Significant changes in legislation governing VET have taken effect from the last amendment in 2018 ⁽¹⁰⁾. They concern, for example, the structure and functions of the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) ⁽¹¹⁾, licencing procedures and the work of vocational training centres, supporting changes aiming to improve the performance of VET institutions and the VET system.

The Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science coordinated and led drafting of the BQF and is now coordinating its implementation. National coordination point (NCP) responsibilities shall lie with the International Cooperation Directorate in the ministry. NAVET develops the State educational standards for the acquisition of VET qualifications, which is integrated in the BQF. The agency maintains the list of professions according to the needs of the labour market ⁽¹²⁾. It also controls the activities of VET institutions for people older than 16 (Cedefop 2018).

The Pre-school and School Education Act 2015 (in force since August 2016) establishes quality management processes, including for VET. Quality management is a continuous process of organisational development based on its analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. The evaluation is performed through biennial self-assessment and inspection. The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, established in 1996, is a governmental institution dealing with the independent evaluation of the quality of higher education and accreditation of higher education institutions. The responsible body for quality assurance in adult

⁽⁹⁾ (a) Bill No 354-01-76 amending and supplementing the law on vocational education and training. Available in Bulgarian at the National Assembly website:
<http://parliament.bg/bills/42/354-01-76.pdf>

(b) Bill No 354-01-88 amending and supplementing the law on vocational education and training. Available in Bulgarian at the National Assembly website:
<http://parliament.bg/bills/42/354-01-88.pdf>

⁽¹⁰⁾ Bulgarian Vocational Education and Training Act (2018):
<https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/ZPOO-2018-1.pdf> (in Bulgarian)

⁽¹¹⁾ NAVET is a specialised body within the Council of ministers, supporting development of high-quality vocational education and training.
<https://www.navet.government.bg/en/about-navet/>

⁽¹²⁾ Qualifications are linked to professions, not to education levels. Qualifications can be acquired in addition to a certificate attesting an education level. There are about 500 qualifications included in the list.

education and training is the National Employment Agency. It assesses three main factors for providing training: teaching curriculum, teaching staff and facilities.

In 2018, a decree of the Council of Ministers established the National inspectorate of education, which has the main function of organising expert analysis and assessment of the quality of education provided in kindergartens and schools.

The State requirements in the field of higher education are adopted by the Council of Ministers as proposed by the relevant minister, usually the Minister of Education and Science or the Minister of Health. The legislative documents or their updates are elaborated by working groups in which different stakeholders are included, such as higher education institutions, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, employers, students etc.

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽¹³⁾

The validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning is an integral part of Bulgarian lifelong learning policy. The national lifelong learning strategy 2014-20 aimed at introducing validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal training and informal learning by 2018; and the VET development strategy 2015-20 defined validation as a priority in the context of lifelong learning.

Validation arrangements currently exist in general, vocational and adult education, but not in higher education. The Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA) was amended in 2014 to include a procedure for validation, to establish equivalence between vocational knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal or informal learning and VET standards related to a specific professional qualification (Article 40, *State Gazette* No 61/2014). In relation to this, Ordinance No 2 ⁽¹⁴⁾, on the conditions and procedures for the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences, was approved and has been in force since 2015 (*State Gazette* No 96/2014). It defines validation stages, requirements for assessors, procedural requirements and types of validation certificate to be issued. It also sets in place an institutional framework with clear

⁽¹³⁾ This section draws mainly on input from: Dzhengozova, M. (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Bulgaria*.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ministry of Education and Science (2014). Ordinance No 2 on the conditions and procedures for the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences: https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/N2_Validirane_21_11_14.pdf [in Bulgarian]

allocation of responsibilities and coordination between public institutions and social partners, which is one of the strengths of the current system. Amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act (in force since 2016), brought it in line with VETA. Validation provides access to general education, VET and/or facilitates access to the labour market.

In VET, validation includes two main stages. The first, 'identification of professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired by a candidate', is further subdivided into sub-stages: determination of the professional field and profession; preliminary comparison of the declared professional knowledge, skills and competences with the learning outcomes included in the VET standard; guidance on additional training where necessary and verification of acquired professional knowledge, skills and competences; and assessment by examination in the theory and practice of the profession. The second stage refers to the recognition of the professional qualification or partial professional qualification (Article 6 of *State gazette* No 96/2014). The standards used for validation are the same as the VET standards used in formal education and training.

While there are no explicit quality assurance indicators for validation, current legislation stipulates that institutions must put in place internal quality assurance systems. A project ⁽¹⁵⁾, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science in cooperation with NAVET, other relevant ministries and social partners, contributed to developing internal quality assurance mechanisms related to assessing evidence of previous learning. Training was provided to validation practitioners in VET and a *Manual for vocational schools for validating non-formal and informal learning* was developed, providing methodological guidelines and instruments for assessing equivalence between competences declared by a candidate and those defined for a specific vocational qualification in the corresponding VET standard.

One of the aims of the BQF is to facilitate validation and recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning and work-based training, by virtue of presenting detailed descriptions of learning outcomes in line with State education standards. Each unit of learning outcomes can be independently assessed and validated. However, at this stage the framework is restricted to qualifications from the formal education and training system. Certificates acquired through validation differ, in title and description, from those issued in VET: the former describe validated competences ⁽¹⁶⁾ and the latter subjects of education.

⁽¹⁵⁾ *System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences: new opportunity for my future (2013-15).*

⁽¹⁶⁾ A demo version of a certificate for validation is available in Bulgarian at:
http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/Svidetelstvo_validirane.pdf

The project *New chance for success* (2014-20), implemented under the Science and education for smart growth operational programme 2014-20, enables validation arrangements for disadvantaged groups, including unemployed individuals and those at risk of unemployment. It provides literacy and basic education courses and awards certificates that allow access to general secondary education or to training for the acquisition of a VET qualification at BQF/EQF level 2.

In the VET system, the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences for adults is still poorly represented. According to NAVET data, procedures for recognition of qualifications through validation have been completed as follows: 570 procedures in 2015; 257 in 2016; 162 in 2017; 117 in 2018; 413 in 2019 and 176 in 2020.

NQF implementation and impact

The Bulgarian qualifications framework for lifelong learning is a comprehensive eight-level framework with an additional preparatory level 0. It has reached the activation stage. It includes qualifications from all levels of formal education and training: pre-primary, primary and secondary general education, VET and higher education. In accordance with Article 141 of the law for pre-school and school education ⁽¹⁷⁾, all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents will be referenced to the relevant BQF level and linked to the corresponding EQF level. An update of the State requirements in the most significant documents issued by the higher education institutions is being developed. All legislative documents in the field of higher education, adopted after the introduction of the BQF, call for explicit mentioning of the BQF level.

A national consultation with stakeholders – including education providers, students, employers, experts, and government officials – was carried out in 2018 to assess the impact of the framework and to inform further developments (NAVET, 2019). It was found that over 75% of survey participants were somewhat familiar with the NQF. Other findings included the need for more targeted information to employers and citizens, the need to improve awareness of the links between the NQF, the EQF and the State education standards, to more closely link the NQF to the quality of training, and to facilitate the validation and recognition of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. There is relatively little information so far on the conditions and role of the BQF in

⁽¹⁷⁾ Law on pre-school and school education, *State Gazette*, No 79/2015.
<http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=8245>

promoting lifelong learning and supporting access, progression and adult participation in education and training. Implementing the BQF at institutional level is seen as a challenge, particularly in higher education. For the BQF to achieve its aims, sustained implementation efforts are required.

Referencing to the EQF

The Bulgarian qualifications framework for lifelong learning was referenced to the European qualifications framework and self-certified against the qualifications framework of the European higher education area (QF-EHEA) in May 2013. The referencing report has not yet been published on the official EQF website.

Important lessons and future plans

The BQF aims to increase transparency in education and training and aid knowledge and skills transfer, improving labour force mobility. Level descriptors defined in learning outcomes aim to provide a reference point and common language for diverse qualifications from different education subsystems. Stakeholders (including State institutions) in some economic sectors (IT, machinery, transport) have started discussions regarding sectoral qualifications at levels 2 to 7 of the BQF, including labour market needs, current possibilities and horizontal and vertical permeability. This might be perceived as a step towards development of a sectoral qualifications framework.

Improving the quality and labour market relevance of vocational education and training and of higher education remain important for the Bulgarian economy in the post-Covid-19 context. Authorities made efforts to ensure the continuity of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the abrupt shift to remote learning has posed major challenges, risking exacerbating already high inequalities in access to quality education. Upskilling and reskilling the population remain a significant challenge in the context of the economic recovery from Covid-19. Increasing participation in adult learning is particularly important considering the low-skilled account for 17.5% of the working-age population. To this end, incentives and mechanisms will be introduced with the aim of improving skills and supporting the reintegration of the unemployed and inactive low-skilled persons into the labour market (European Commission, 2020).

Main sources of information:

- The International and European Cooperation Directorate in the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science is designated as the EQF national coordination point: <https://www.mon.bg/en/303>
- Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science (2013) [unpublished]. *Bulgarian referencing report to the European qualifications framework and to the qualifications framework for the European higher education area.*

Bulgarian qualifications framework (BQF)

BQF levels	Qualification types	EQF levels
8	Doctor degree (Доктор)	8
7	Master degree (Магистър)	7
6	Bachelor degree (Бакалавър) Professional bachelor degree (Професионален Бакалавър)	6
5	Vocational qualification – national VET level 4 (IV Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	5
4	Upper secondary general education school leaving certificate (Средно Образование Общо Образование) Vocational qualification – national VET level 3 (III Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	4
3	Vocational qualification – national VET level 2 (II Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	3
2	Lower secondary (basic education) certificate (grades 5-7) (Основно Образование) Vocational qualification – national VET level 1 (I Степен На Професионална Квалификация)	2
1	Primary education certificate (grades 1-4) (Начален Етап На Основното Образование)	1
0	Pre-primary education (Подготвително Ниво – Предучилищно Образование)	N/A

Source: National qualifications framework of the Republic of Bulgaria, adopted by Decision of the Council of Ministers No 96/ 2.2.2012 – Annex 1:
<http://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=719>

Acronyms

BQF	Bulgarian qualifications framework
EQF	European qualifications framework
NAVET	National Agency for Vocational Education and Training
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	qualifications framework for the European higher education area
VET	vocational education and training
VETA	vocational education and training act

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<http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/600634>

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<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/european-inventory-validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning-2018-update-bulgaria>

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NAVET (2019). Анализ за оценяване на въздействието на НКР в България [Analysis for assessing the impact of NQF in Bulgaria].
<https://www.navet.government.bg/bg/analiz-za-otsenyavane-na-azdejstviето-na-nkr-v-balgariya/>