1. INTRODUCTION

Before 1989, Bulgaria’s crime rate was lower than that in most European countries and the US. For most of the 1990s, political, demographic and social crises in Bulgaria contributed to higher levels of crime. At the end of the 1990s, though, and particularly after the year 2000, a gradual fall in the crime rate commenced. Each of these three periods was marked by specific socio-economic, political and demographic factors, as well as government policies that impacted the general level of crime.

Before 1989, Bulgaria was a police state with a large security apparatus and numerous informants. In addition, full employment, and low but stable incomes, as well as healthy demographic growth, created conditions for social stability and a low crime rate.

During the early 1990s the system of repressive political control was dismantled, which led to the removal of the communist party’s monopoly on power and the privatization of enterprises and services nationwide. The exodus of Bulgarian Turks to Turkey in 1985 and 1989, as well as the several waves of en masse emigration between 1989 and 1991 came at a time when birth rates fell significantly while mortality rates increased. Record-high unemployment reached 80% in some areas, affecting vulnerable groups, such as the Roma ethnic minority. Incomes continuously declined, by 1996 leaving most Bulgarians below the poverty line. The dissolution of some, and the transformation of other, law-enforcement and security services brought the criminal justice system to a virtual grind when in 1993 courts issued 3.2 times less sentences than in 1989, while the crime rate more than doubled for the same period.

Toward the end of the 1990s and, particularly after the year 2000, as the increasingly likely prospects of EU and NATO membership led to greater political stability, economic growth, declining unemployment and rising incomes gave individuals alternatives to criminal incomes. Demographic processes and emigration also contributed to the reduction of crime. In addition, the strengthening of the judiciary and law-enforcement systems, in an attempt to meet EU-set requirements, revived the criminal justice system, which in 2004 issued six times more sentences than it did in 1993.

During the past decade, just like in other transitional democracies (or even in some EU member-states), crime in Bulgaria has been at the top of the political agendas of most political parties. This fact has created an even greater need for assessment of the crime situation through internationally accepted standards and approaches. The Bulgarian public remains suspicious or distrustful of official crime statistics. Therefore, society tends to greet the latest estimates of falling crime during 2005 with skepticism. Therefore, the present report not only suggests an alternative source of information about the crime rate—the victimization
survey—but highlights some demographic, economic and legal changes that could explain Bulgaria’s falling crime rate.

Public distrust in official crime statistics is usually explained by the fact that the Ministry of Interior (MoI) collects, processes and announces this data. Being a very hierarchical and closed institution, the MoI is considered very important and is usually headed by key members of the political party in power. Therefore, the messages it sends are often politicized. The public deems the falling crime rate as one such message. This cynical reception also occurs in regards to the various MoI services that have their own institutional interests in demonstrating a falling crime rate—that is, to prove their work is efficient. Thus, the collection and interpretation of crime data is more than a criminological issue.

Apart from political conditions that could bring about biased crime data, another issue is the limited administrative and statistical capacity underlying the crime registration process. These only add to broader facts that could distort the real picture of the crime situation, such as: 1) that victims of a crime might not always be aware of it; 2) even if they become aware, they do not always report it to the police; 3) and even if they report it, the police filter out some of the crimes. In Bulgaria, it is the second (unreported crime) and the third factor (police “filters”) that mostly could hamper the veracity of police-registered crime data.

Nearly in all categories of crimes, some offenses remain unreported. It depends on the seriousness of the crime, the kind of response given by the police—whether their relations with citizen are satisfactory—and the public’s perceptions of whether law-enforcement bodies are effective. Unreported crime is particularly high in cases of crimes that could embarrass the victim (e.g. sex-related crimes or corruption), and when the public does not trust the police or finds them ineffective. When a bribe is given, for instance, both parties are often equally involved and as a result close to 100% of corruption-related crimes go unreported. Police filters involve deliberate actions on the part of police officers either to dissuade citizens from reporting a crime, or to apply certain administrative tricks that leave a reported crime unrecorded.

As unreported or unrecorded crime are problems in most countries, victimization surveys have been employed as an instrument to overcome this issue for over 30 years. They are regarded as an accurate tool for measuring actual crime levels with reasonable accuracy. In Bulgaria, they are carried out through household surveys based on random representative population samples and using face-to-face interviews. Moreover, they can be conducted by independent institutions, such as non-government organizations. Thus, they are simultaneously a trustworthy measuring tool and a tool preventing the manipulation of crime data for institutional or political ends.

The United Nations Institute on Criminal Justice Research (UNICRI) conducted the first victimization survey in Bulgaria in 1997 in Sofia. Following the political and economic crisis in late 1996 and early 1997, a Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) team, participating in
UNDP’s Early Warning project, included in its monthly surveys a set of victimization questions. Bulgaria’s experience supports the thesis that victimization surveys are a reliable and politically neutral crime analysis tool that is not burdened by the political opinions and attitudes.

The report *Crime Trends in Bulgaria: Police Statistics and Victimization Surveys*, published by the Center for the Study of Democracy in 2005, attempted to make a systematic comparison of the crime level according to victim-reported crime and police crime data. The crime situation in Bulgaria was also compared to the situation in a number of industrialized countries. The present report compares police crime data with the findings of the national crime victims surveys conducted by Vitosha Research—they are referred to throughout this report as *National Crime Surveys (NCS)*. Such comparative analysis provides grounds for discussing the crime situation and trends based on sound and objective criteria.

The present report presents an assessment of street crime in Bulgaria in the period 2000–2005. It does not consider organized crime and corruption insofar as they are the subject of other CSD analyses. The main objective of this analysis is to start a debate on the actual crime problems that affect the everyday life of almost every Bulgarian family. It also aims to compare the level of crime in Bulgaria and to contrast the specific features of the Bulgarian crime situation to other European countries.

The report compares the crime data from police statistics with victims’ experiences recorded by NCS (table 1). The NCS draws on the methods of the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) as well as the International Crime Business Survey (ICBS).

The first two surveys in Bulgaria using the ICVS methodology were conducted by Vitosha Research in July 2002 and in November 2004, while the third one was completed in December 2005, when 1,202 households were interviewed nationwide. The ICVS methodology examines respondents’ experiences with 11 crime categories. These crimes constitute 80% of all police-registered crime categories in Bulgaria and therefore could be considered representative of the crime situation in the country. The three NCSs allowed for the analysis of the 2000–2005 period.

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3 ICVS and ICBS have been developed and implemented by the United Nations Institute on Criminal Justice Research (UNICRI) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).
4 In addition, there was a sample booster of representatives of the Roma minority of 534 households, but it is not analyzed in the present report.
The report also incorporates for the first time the findings of a national crime victims survey of the business sector. A business victimization survey was conducted by Vitosha Research in 2000 under the supervision of UNICRI as part of an international comparative survey carried out in the capitals of eight other countries: Albania, Croatia, Belarus, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Russia and Ukraine. Based on the UNICRI methodology, the Center for the Study of Democracy and Vitosha Research conducted in September 2005 a national business victimization survey using a representative sample of 308 companies from all over Bulgaria.

The present analysis draws on two main measurements to analyze the NCS—prevalence and incidence. **Prevalence rates** are the share of respondents who experienced a certain crime once or more in a given year. **Incidence rates** express the number of crimes experienced by each 100 people in the sample in a given period. These count all incidents against victims who may have experienced more than one incident during a given year. When comparing the NCS data with the police statistics the present report uses the prevalence rates.\(^5\)

\(^5\) As NCS is nationally representative, it is accepted that its data and indicators refer to the population over 15 years of age.
### Table 1. Police statistics and victimization surveys

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<th>Goals</th>
<th>Mol statistics</th>
<th>Victimization surveys</th>
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<td>Assist all Mol agencies in their law-enforcement practice by providing crime statistics.</td>
<td>Provide more comprehensive information by including crimes not recorded by or reported to the police.</td>
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| Types of crime                                                        | **All crimes included in the Criminal Code:**  
  • Crimes against the person (murder, rape, bodily injury, etc.);  
  • Household crimes (burglary, etc.);  
  • Crimes threatening the public (vehicle theft, arson, transport and drug-related crimes, etc.);  
  • Financial crimes.                                                                 | Crimes against households and persons—11 crime categories:  
  • Car-theft, theft from cars, car vandalism;  
  • Motorcycle/bicycle theft;  
  • Burglary and attempted burglary, personal property theft;  
  • Robbery, sexual incidents, assault/threat.  
**Crimes against companies—11 crime categories:**  
  • Theft by employee or outsider;  
  • Fraud by employee or outsider;  
  • Robbery;  
  • Threats/Racketeering.                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Data collection methods                                               | The police record:  
  • Crimes reported by citizens;  
  • Crimes reported in the media.                                                                                                                    | A household survey based on interviews: data on victimized persons and households is gathered, irrespective of whether the crimes were reported to the police or not and, respectively, whether police recorded it or not. |
| Crime level indicators                                                 | Number of crimes per 100,000 of population.                                                                                                                                                                     | **Share of persons victimized (prevalence);**  
**Number of incidents per 100 persons (incidence).**                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Representative value                                                  | Substantial: the annual number of registered crimes is usually over 100,000.                                                                           | In Bulgaria, such surveys use a nationally representative sample with at least 1,100 households. In the US, the sample size used is 60,000 households and in the UK it is 46,000 households. ICVS and EUICS are based on samples with 1,200–2,000 people. |
| Differences                                                           | Record data on crimes against private companies, public institutions, and minors (below 15).                                                                                                                  | Do not include data on crimes against state or municipal property, against minors (below 15), and crimes by police and armed forces personnel.                                                                         |