SINGLE STEP FOUNDATION · 2026 SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY

6 in 10 want out

86.3% LINK IT TO WHO THEY ARE

Identity, school climate and migration intentions among LGBTI+ secondary school students in Bulgaria

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Abstract

IN NUMBERS

58.3%
of the 896 students who answered plan to leave Bulgaria for work or university abroad

86.3%
of those planning to leave say their sexual orientation or gender identity is related

72.2%
of those planning to leave or unsure who knew about the 2024 law say it made them more likely to go

3,500
students in grades 8 to 12 who leave and remain abroad (central scenario)

€129,600
lifetime taxes and contributions per person, 2026 present value

€80m
per average grade cohort of identity-related departures, lifetime present value

In 2026, Single Step Foundation ran an online survey of LGBTI+ secondary school students in Bulgaria. Of the 896 students who answered the question “Do you plan to leave Bulgaria for employment or to attend university in another country?”, 522 (58.3%) said yes. Those students were then asked “Is your sexual orientation or gender identity related to your desire to leave?”, and 449 of the 520 who answered (86.3%) said it was.

The survey also asked about the August 2024 amendment to the Pre-school and School Education Act, which bans the promotion of “non-traditional sexual orientation” in schools. Among students planning to leave or unsure who knew about the law, 72.2% said it had made them more likely to want to go. Many also said they worried more about their future in Bulgaria and had become less willing to raise LGBTI+ issues in class or to ask for help, and many said the law makes LGBTI+ students feel more invisible and unsafe.

These findings describe the students who took part. The survey was voluntary and online, and respondents weren’t selected through a probability sample, so the results can’t tell us how common these experiences are among all LGBTI+ teenagers in Bulgaria. Nor can they separate the effect of the law from everything else going on in students’ lives.

The report also asks what these intentions might add up to in numbers. With explicit assumptions about how many students are LGBTI+, how many act on their plans and how many stay abroad, the central scenario gives roughly 3,500 students who leave and remain abroad. Counting only those who link their plans to their identity, the taxes and social contributions they would have paid over a working life have a present value of about €129,600 per person, or roughly €80 million per average grade cohort. These figures are illustrations built on assumptions that haven’t been measured in Bulgaria, and the report shows how much they move when those assumptions change.

Keywords: LGBTI+ youth; emigration intentions; school climate; education law; economic cost; Bulgaria

1 Who answered the survey?

The analysis uses the Single Step Foundation's research sample of 1,071 students. Nearly all were enrolled in school during the 2025/26 school year and aged 14 to 19, and all but 44 completed the survey in Bulgarian.

As with most long questionnaires, the number of respondents fell as the survey went on (Table 1). In total, 911 students answered the section on the law and school climate, 896 answered the question about leaving Bulgaria, and 814 completed the whole survey.

Two limitations apply to everything that follows. Students chose to take part, online, and already identified as LGBTI+, so the sample can't be treated as representative of Bulgarian teenagers or of LGBTI+ teenagers in general. And the findings are self-reported: they record what respondents say they experienced, saw or believe, and they don't independently verify what individual schools did or how the law was applied in a given case.

Table 1. Survey participation by section

Survey section	Respondents	% of sample
Consented	1,071	100%
Safety and harassment	1,070	100%
Reporting harassment	995	93%
School characteristics	957	89%
Law and school climate	911	85%
School aspirations (incl. migration question)	901	84%
Answered the migration question	896	84%
Belonging and family	880	82%
How are you feeling?	869	81%
Completed the whole survey	814	76%

A respondent counts toward a section if they answered at least one of its questions.

2 How many respondents plan to leave?

Of the 896 students who answered the migration question, 522 (58.3%) said they planned to leave Bulgaria for work or university abroad. Another 268 (29.9%) weren't sure, and 106 (11.8%) said they didn't plan to leave (Table 2).

2.1 PLANS TO LEAVE BY AGE

The 95% Wilson confidence interval for the 58.3% figure runs from about 55.0% to 61.4%. That interval reflects ordinary sampling variation only. It can't account for who chose to take the survey, so it describes these respondents and shouldn't be read as a range for all LGBTI+ secondary school students in Bulgaria.

Students who planned to leave or weren't sure were then asked: "Is your sexual orientation or gender identity related to your desire to leave?" Among those planning to leave, 449 of 520 (86.3%) said yes. Among the unsure, 61.2% said yes, and across both groups the figure was 77.8%.

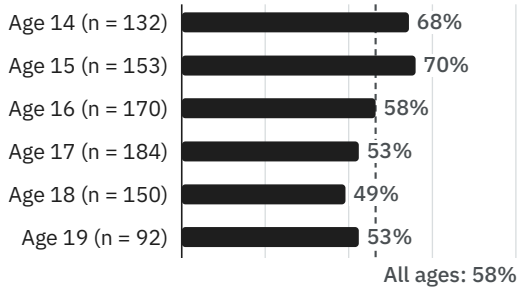
The survey can't say how many of these plans will turn into moves. What it does show is that most respondents who intend to leave link that intention to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

2.1 Plans to leave by age

Younger respondents were more likely to say they planned to leave: 68% of 14-year-olds and 70% of 15-year-olds, against 49% of 18-year-olds (Figure 1). This is a difference within the survey sample, and it doesn't prove that younger LGBTI+ students across Bulgaria are more likely to emigrate.

Age also matters for how much weight a stated plan can bear. A 14-year-old may be four or five years away from being able to study or work abroad, and a lot can change in that time, so an intention stated at that age says relatively little about what that person will eventually do.

Figure 1. Share of respondents planning to leave Bulgaria, by age



n = 881 students aged 14 to 19 who answered the migration question. Ages 13 (n = 1) and 20 (n = 3) are omitted.

Table 2. Plans to leave Bulgaria, and whether identity is related

Do you plan to leave Bulgaria?	Students	Share	Identity related (yes)
Plan to leave	522	58.3%	86.3% (449 of 520)
Not sure	268	29.9%	61.2% (164 of 268)
Not planning to leave	106	11.8%	Not asked
Total	**896**	**100%**	**77.8% (613 of 788)**

The identity question was asked only of students who answered "yes" or "not sure". 95% Wilson interval for the share planning to leave: 55.0% to 61.4%.

3 The 2024 school law

3.1 BACKGROUND 3.2 WHAT RESPONDENTS REPORT 3.3 REPORTED CHANGES IN SCHOOL CLIMATE
3.4 SEEKING SUPPORT AND ACCESS TO RESOURCES

3.1 Background

On 7 August 2024, Bulgaria's Parliament amended the Pre-school and School Education Act, the law that governs kindergartens and schools. The amendments, submitted by the nationalist Vazrazhdane party, were approved in two readings on the same day (Bulgarian National Radio, 2024). The law bans any "propaganda, popularization or instigation in any way whatsoever, whether directly or indirectly, in the educational system of any ideas and views related to non-traditional sexual orientation and/or gender identification otherwise than according to the biological sex". It defines "non-traditional sexual orientation" as any attraction different from the notions "commonly accepted and established in the Bulgarian legal tradition" (BTA, 2024), which means anything other than attraction between a man and a woman.

The law's supporters presented it as protecting children. Lawmakers said they needed to act quickly against what they called the "unacceptable normalization of a nontraditional sexual orientation" (Taipei Times, 2024), and parents' organisations applauded it at a parliamentary hearing (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2024). Its critics focused on how unclear it is. Even before the vote, Bulgaria's own Education Ministry warned that such vague texts would cause problems because they don't make clear what is permitted (RFE/RL, 2024). The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee argued that practically any information about homosexuality, bisexuality or being transgender, scientific or not, at any grade, would breach the law (Global Voices, 2024). It also noted that although the law sets no specific penalties, it can be enforced through disciplinary proceedings against teachers, principals, school nurses and school psychologists (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2024). Rights groups compared it to similar laws in Russia and Hungary (Global Voices, 2024).

The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, urged President Rumen Radev not to sign the law (BTA, 2024). The UN Human Rights Office warned that it "will only serve to deepen human rights violations against LGBT people and bullying and harassment in schools" (UN Human Rights Office, 2024). The European Commission asked the Education Minister for further information, saying it would then assess whether the law was in line with EU law (Bulgarian National Radio, 2024). The president signed it, and it was published in the State Gazette on 16 August (BTA, 2024).

3.2 What respondents report

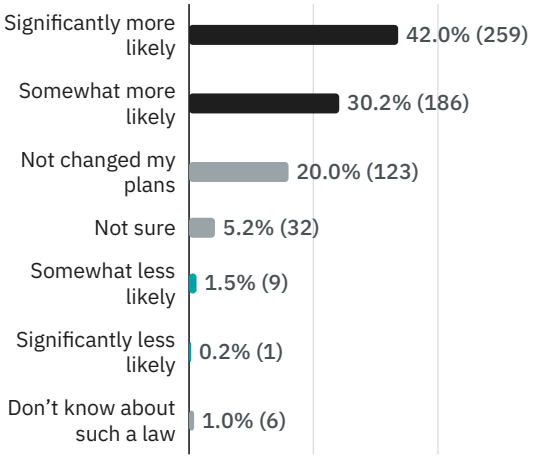
The survey asked students whether they knew about the law and how, if at all, it had affected them. Of the 911 asked, 79% had heard of it, including 300 who said they knew it well.

Students who planned to leave or were unsure were also asked whether the law had changed those plans; students planning to stay didn't see this question. Of the 616 who knew about the law and answered, 72.2% said it had made them more likely to want to leave Bulgaria, including 42.0% who said *significantly* more likely (Figure 2). Only 1.6% said it had made them less likely to leave. The effect was stronger among students already planning to go, 77.7% of whom said the law had pushed them further, than among the unsure (60.3%).

These answers capture how students see the law's influence on their own plans. They're important evidence of how students understand their situation, but a survey like this can't separate the law's effect from harassment, wider public attitudes or other political and social changes.

Asked about the law's main effect, 42.6% said it makes LGBTI+ students feel more invisible and unsafe, and 36.8% said it makes it harder for them to get support (Table 3). Only 1.9% said its main effect was to make schools safer for all students.

Figure 2. Has the 2024 law changed your plans to leave Bulgaria? (n = 616)



Students planning to leave or unsure who knew about the law and answered the question.

Table 3. What is the main effect of the 2024 law?

Response	Students	Share
It makes LGBTI+ students feel more invisible and unsafe	306	42.6%
It makes it harder for LGBTI+ students to get support	264	36.8%
It makes no practical difference	79	11.0%
I don't know / I have no opinion	29	4.0%
Other	26	3.6%
It makes schools safer for all students	14	1.9%

3.3 Reported changes in school climate

The survey also asked what had changed at school since the law came in (Table 4). Six in ten students said they felt angrier, and nearly as many were more worried about their future in Bulgaria. Many also described changes in how other people behaved. More than half (52.1%) had heard classmates use the law to make negative comments about LGBTI+ people, almost a third (29.0%) had heard staff say they couldn't discuss LGBTI+ topics positively because of it, and 14.8% knew of a student who had been disciplined, reported, outed or singled out under the law. Almost half (46.4%) said things at their school had got worse.

Table 4. Reported changes since the 2024 law

Since the law...	Share	Answered
Felt angrier (a lot or a great deal)	63.1%	675
More worried about their future in Bulgaria (a lot or a great deal)	61.4%	676
More afraid to seek help at school (a lot or a great deal)	54.6%	665
Heard peers cite the law to make negative comments about LGBTI+ people	52.1%	720
Less willing to raise LGBTI+ issues in class	47.6%	698
Said their school situation had got worse	46.4%	715
Said their mental health had got worse because of the law	38.0%	673
Less comfortable in class generally	35.7%	700
Heard staff say they couldn't discuss LGBTI+ topics positively because of the law	29.0%	720
Heard staff cite the law to make negative comments	23.8%	720
Knew of a student disciplined, reported, outed or singled out under the law	14.8%	717

Shares are of students who know about the law (n = 720), as in the main report; "Answered" is the number who answered each item.

3.4 Seeking support and access to resources

Among students who knew about the law, 51.9% said they had avoided going to a counsellor or other support professional at school about their LGBTI+ identity in the past year because of the law or school policy. This is students' own account of their choices; the survey didn't check what schools actually did.

Of 713 respondents who know about the law, 126 (17.7%) selected at least one of the four named resources as removed or restricted because of a law or official policy, most often books and posters (13.9%), followed by an LGBTI+-friendly counsellor or service (10.5%), a support club (9.0%) and online resources (6.2%). Almost a third (30.2%) said nothing had been removed, and 41.9% didn't know (Table 5).

Table 5. Has your school removed or restricted any of these because of a law or official policy?

Response	Students	Share
Books, posters or informational materials about LGBTI+ people	99	13.9%
An LGBTI+-friendly school counsellor or support service	75	10.5%
A support club or student group for LGBTI+ youth	64	9.0%
Online resources or websites	44	6.2%
Other	82	11.5%
Nothing was removed or restricted	215	30.2%
I don't know	299	41.9%

Check all that apply, so shares add up to more than 100%; n = 713 students who know about the law. In total, 17.7% (126) selected at least one of the four named resources. "Other" answers are not counted as removals, because their free-text answers have not been checked.

4 How experiences differ by migration intention

Comparing students who planned to stay, those who were unsure and those who planned to leave, several experiences rise step by step (Figure 3). Among students planning to stay, 46.0% said they had seriously considered suicide in the past year, compared with 52.6% of the unsure and 64.1% of those planning to leave. Feeling unsafe at school because of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression rose from 58.5% to 66.4% to 77.5%.

4.1 HOW THE GROUP COMPARISONS WERE TESTED

Table 6 gives the full set of comparisons with trend-test p-values. Each percentage is based on the students who answered that item, so the denominators vary. These are associations between what students report and what they plan, and they don't show that any one experience caused a student to plan to leave.

4.1 How the group comparisons were tested

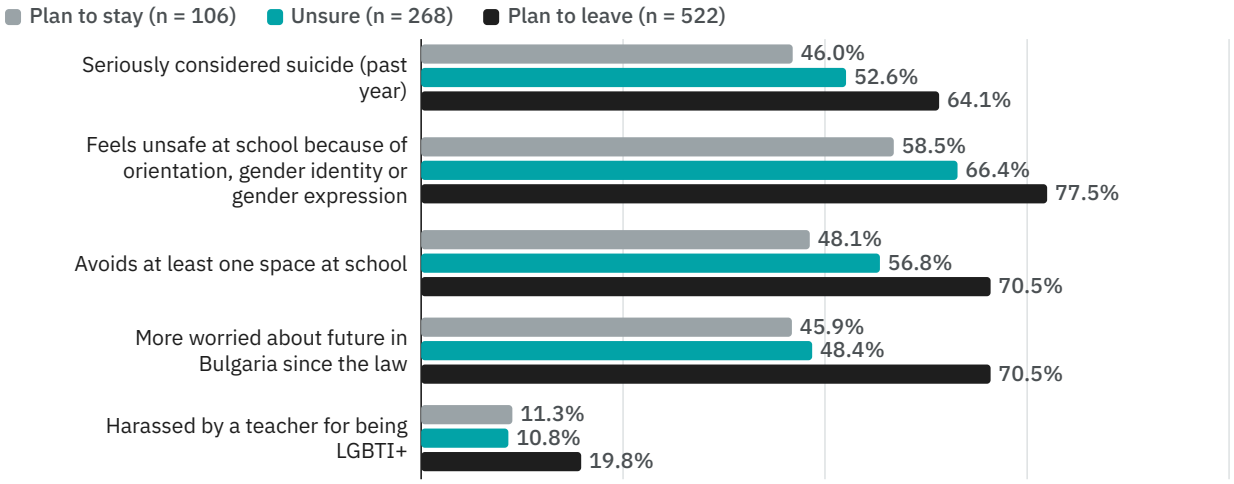
Because the three groups fall in a natural order, the analysis used the Cochran-Armitage test for trend, scoring stay as 0, unsure as 1 and leave as 2. The test asks whether the share reporting an experience changes steadily across the ordered groups.

The group planning to stay is small (106 students), which leaves low counts for some outcomes: eight students in that group reported a suicide attempt and 12 reported teacher harassment. Each result was rechecked with a permutation test (50,000 draws), which doesn't rely on large-sample approximations, and the results matched ($p = 0.006$ for suicide attempts, $p = 0.002$ for teacher harassment).

Because ten outcomes were tested, the p-values were also adjusted for multiple comparisons using the Holm method. All eight risk indicators in Table 6 stayed significant after adjustment; the largest adjusted p-value was 0.017, for suicide attempts.

Family support was similar across the three groups: about 22% of students who were out to their family said they received "a lot" of support. Classmate acceptance showed no significant trend either. That doesn't make support unimportant. These two measures simply didn't separate the groups in this analysis.

Figure 3. Selected experiences by migration intention (n = 106 / 268 / 522)



Share of students in each group who answered the item; the row on the law uses students who know about the law. Full comparisons and trend tests are in Table 6.

Table 6. Experiences by migration intention

Indicator	Plan to stay	Unsure	Plan to leave	Trend p
Seriously considered suicide in the past year	46.0%	52.6%	64.1%	<0.001
Made a suicide plan	27.0%	31.2%	40.0%	0.002
Attempted suicide	8.0%	10.3%	16.3%	0.006
Harassed by a teacher for being LGBTI+	11.3%	10.8%	19.8%	0.002
Feels unsafe at school because of orientation, gender identity or gender expression	58.5%	66.4%	77.5%	<0.001
Avoids at least one space at school	48.1%	56.8%	70.5%	<0.001
Less willing to raise LGBTI+ issues since the law	25.8%	47.4%	52.3%	<0.001
More worried about their future in Bulgaria since the law	45.9%	48.4%	70.5%	<0.001
Family gives “a lot” of support	21.4%	21.8%	22.0%	0.93
Classmates very or somewhat accepting	28.6%	19.0%	22.8%	0.63

Groups: 106 plan to stay, 268 unsure, 522 plan to leave; each row uses the students who answered that item; the two rows on the law use students who know about the law (as in the main report). Trend p: two-sided Cochran-Armitage test (unadjusted). Family support was asked only of students who are out to their family (n = 434).

5 What remains associated with planning to leave?

To see which experiences still matter once they're considered together, a logistic regression predicted whether a student planned to leave (1) or was unsure or planning to stay (0). Alongside age, the model included five yes/no predictors, each coded 1 if the student reported it and 0 if they didn't: having seriously considered suicide in the past year; being harassed by a teacher for being LGBTI+; feeling unsafe at school because of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression; being "a lot" or "a great deal" more worried about one's future in Bulgaria since the law; and being less willing to raise LGBTI+ issues in class since the law.

Of the 896 students who answered the migration question, 746 had complete answers on every variable and were included. The other 150 were left out because they skipped at least one item or, for the class-participation question, said they didn't know about the law. The worry question had no such option, so its answers include students who said they were not aware of the law. The class-participation question accounted for the largest gap (100 students).

Worry about one's future in Bulgaria since the law was the strongest predictor, with about 2.2 times the odds of planning to leave (95% CI 1.60 to 3.06). Teacher harassment (odds ratio 1.61, CI 1.02 to 2.55) and feeling unsafe at school (1.45, CI 1.02 to 2.06) were also linked to higher odds. Each extra year of age lowered the odds by about 17% (0.83, CI 0.75 to 0.92). Table 7 gives the full results. These are associations within the model and can't be read as causal effects. An odds ratio of 2.2 also doesn't mean a student is 2.2 times as likely to plan to leave, because odds and probabilities diverge when an outcome is this common.

Once the other variables were included, suicidal thoughts were no longer significantly linked to planning to leave (odds ratio 1.21, CI 0.88 to 1.67), and neither was reluctance to raise LGBTI+ issues in class (1.27, CI 0.92 to 1.75). This says nothing about how suicidal thoughts and harassment relate to each other. It means only that, in this model, suicidal thoughts gave no clear evidence of a separate link to migration plans.

The model fits significantly better than one with no predictors (likelihood-ratio test, $p < 0.001$), but it explains a modest share of the variation (McFadden pseudo-R^2 = 0.07; area under the ROC curve = 0.68). The Hosmer-Lemeshow test showed no sign of poor fit ($p = 0.72$), and the predictors were only weakly correlated with each other (all variance inflation factors below 1.2). Plans to leave clearly depend on much more than the factors measured here.

Table 7. Logistic regression: what is associated with planning to leave

Predictor	Odds ratio	95% CI	p
Age (per year)	0.83	0.75 to 0.92	<0.001
Seriously considered suicide in the past year	1.21	0.88 to 1.67	0.25
Harassed by a teacher for being LGBTI+	1.61	1.02 to 2.55	0.040
Feels unsafe at school because of orientation, gender identity or gender expression	1.45	1.02 to 2.06	0.037
More worried about future in Bulgaria since the law	2.22	1.60 to 3.06	<0.001
Less willing to raise LGBTI+ issues since the law	1.27	0.92 to 1.75	0.14

Outcome: plan to leave (1) vs unsure or plan to stay (0). n = 746 complete cases. Binary predictors coded 1 = yes, 0 = no (reference). McFadden pseudo-R^2 = 0.07; AUC = 0.68; Hosmer-Lemeshow p = 0.72.

6 How many students could this represent?

6.1 FROM INTENTION TO MIGRATION 6.2 REMAINING ABROAD

The survey reports percentages. To give a sense of what they might mean in people, this report uses a simple scenario model with five steps: the number of students in grades 8 to 12, the share of them who are LGBTI+, the share who plan to leave, the share of those who actually go, and the share of those who remain abroad. The survey measures the third step, and official statistics give the first. The other three are assumptions, set out in this section and the next two, and the final section shows how much the result depends on them.

According to the National Statistical Institute (2026b), 295,391 students were enrolled in grades 8 to 12 in the 2025/26 school year. To match this population, the model uses survey rates for respondents in grades 8 to 12 only: 56.6% plan to leave (442 of 781; 95% CI 53.1 to 60.0%), and 88.2% of them link that plan to their identity (389 of 441).

The share of Bulgarian students who identify as LGBTI+ has never been measured. The closest evidence is Ipsos's 2023 survey of 30 countries (Ipsos, 2023), where the share of adults identifying as LGBT+ ranged from 6% in Poland to 9% in Romania in the region, and Generation Z identified at about twice the overall rate. On that basis, the model uses 10% to 15%, with 12% as the central value. A Bulgarian 14-year-old differs in many ways from an 18-to-26-year-old in the Ipsos sample, so this remains an informed assumption.

Those assumptions give roughly 29,500 to 44,300 LGBTI+ students in grades 8 to 12, with about 35,400 in the central scenario. Only a representative Bulgarian survey of students, run with proper safeguards for privacy and safety, could replace this assumption with a measured figure.

6.1 From intention to migration

The survey records plans, and plenty of plans never become moves. Several studies have followed people who said they intended to emigrate and checked who actually went (Table 8). They differ in population, destination, time horizon and context, so none of their rates can be applied directly to LGBTI+ teenagers in Bulgaria.

Realisation rates in these studies run from 17% among Hungarian workers (Hárs, 2008, cited in Gödri & Feleky, 2017) to 34% among Dutch adults over five years (Van Dalen & Henkens, 2013), with a much higher rate (71%) among migrants in Switzerland who had already moved once (Wanner, 2021). A German study of university students (Fouarge et al., 2019) compared students' intentions with emigration rates from separate published data, rather than following the same students. Taken together, they show that most stated intentions don't turn into moves, though they can't give the exact rate for this group.

The model uses 25% as the central value and 17% to 34% as its range. These are judgements informed by the studies. The lower end comes from Gödri and Feleky (2017) and the upper end from the Dutch study. The central value sits below the Dutch figure because these students are younger and further from being able to act; EU free movement and an identity-based reason for leaving pull the other way. Age, money, family circumstances and changes in Bulgaria itself will all affect whether a plan becomes a move.

A follow-up survey of the same students in a few years would be the best way to measure this directly.

6.2 Remaining abroad

The last step of the model asks how many of those who leave stay away. The model assumes 70%, within a range of 60% to 85%. This is a judgement, because no study has measured return rates for people who left a country because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

General return-migration figures for Bulgaria probably don't describe this group well. Whether someone comes back depends on work, family, legal protections, social acceptance and whether the reasons they left have changed. Students who leave

Table 8. Studies comparing migration intentions with later moves

Study	Population	Follow-up	Intentions realised
Van Dalen & Henkens (2013)	Dutch adults	5 years	34%
Gödri & Feleky (2017)	Hungarians in Transylvania	3 years	17%
Hárs (2008), cited in Gödri & Feleky	Hungarian workers	4 years	17% ever moved; 10% still abroad
Wanner (2021)	Migrants already living in Switzerland	2 years	71%
Fouarge, Özer & Seegers (2019)	German university students	External comparison	About 20% intended; 5 to 8% in other datasets

The studies differ in population, horizon and context, so their rates aren't directly comparable.

through education also tend to move on: the European Commission's Erasmus Impact Study (European Commission, 2014a) found that students who had studied abroad were almost twice as likely to have moved country again after graduating.

Time matters here too. Most migration studies follow people for only a few years, but the economic calculation assumes that those remaining abroad are absent throughout the modelled working life, ages 23 to 64. This is a long-term scenario assumption, not a finding from those follow-up studies. Return data for this specific group would be needed to replace the assumption with an estimate.

7 Putting the assumptions together

Multiplying the central values gives about 3,500 students who leave and remain abroad: 295,391 students × 12% LGBTI+ × 56.6% planning to leave × 25% acting on that plan × 70% remaining abroad (Table 9). Spread across the five grades, that's roughly 700 young people per average grade cohort.

Table 9 also shows a low and a high scenario, which set every assumption to its lowest or highest value at the same time. Together they give a range of about 1,600 to 7,700. These are illustrative scenarios, not a confidence interval or bounds on the true number; no probabilities are assigned to them.

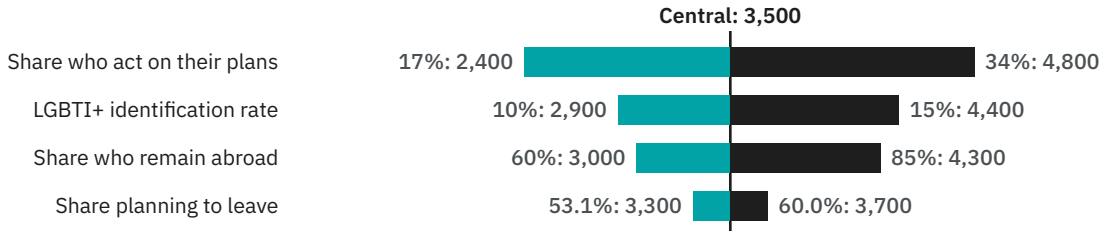
Figure 4 changes one assumption at a time and holds the rest at their central values. The share who act on their plans moves the result the most, from about 2,400 to 4,800, followed by the identification rate.

Table 9. Scenario model: from enrolment to students who leave and remain abroad

Step	Low	Central	High
Students in grades 8 to 12	295,391	295,391	295,391
× LGBTI+ identification rate	10%	12%	15%
= LGBTI+ students	29,500	35,400	44,300
× Share planning to leave	53.1%	56.6%	60.0%
= Planning to leave	15,700	20,100	26,600
× Share who act on their plans	17%	25%	34%
= Leave Bulgaria	2,700	5,000	9,000
× Share remaining abroad	60%	70%	85%
= Leave and remain abroad	**1,600**	**3,500**	**7,700**

Low and high columns set every assumption to its lowest or highest value at once. Figures rounded to the nearest hundred. Enrolment: National Statistical Institute, 2025/26 school year.

Figure 4. How the estimate changes when one assumption changes



Each bar changes one assumption and holds the others at their central values (central estimate: 3,500). Rounded to the nearest hundred.

The economic cost

8

When a young person leaves Bulgaria for good, the state loses the taxes and social contributions they would have paid over a working life. This section estimates that loss for the students in the central scenario who leave, remain abroad and link their plans to their sexual orientation or gender identity (88.2% of those in grades 8 to 12 planning to leave). That gives about 3,100 people across grades 8 to 12, or roughly 620 per average grade cohort.

8.1 TAXES AND CONTRIBUTIONS LOST **8.2** WHAT IT ADDS UP TO **8.3** EDUCATION ALREADY PAID FOR
8.4 THE PENSION SYSTEM **8.5** WHAT THE ESTIMATE LEAVES OUT

8.1 Taxes and contributions lost

The starting point is the average gross annual wage, €15,969 in 2025 (National Statistical Institute, 2026a). What these students would have earned depends on how far they go in education. In October 2022, employees with upper secondary education earned 73% of the all-employee average per hour, and those with a bachelor's or master's degree earned 147% (National Statistical Institute, n.d.). The central scenario uses the all-employee average, the low scenario the upper-secondary level and the high scenario the graduate level.

Wage growth and employment are based on the official long-term projections that Bulgaria's Ministry of Finance and National Social Security Institute prepared for the European Commission's 2024 Ageing

Report. There, the average gross wage rises from €21,100 in 2030 to €106,300 in 2070 in nominal terms, and the employment rate of 20-to-64-year-olds stays between 74% and 77% (Ministry of Finance & National Social Security Institute, 2023). Allowing for 2% inflation, that's real wage growth of about 2.6% a year in the 2030s, slowing to about 1.5% by the 2060s.

But not all of the statutory rates reach the public budget. For anyone born after 1959, five percentage points of the pension contribution go to an individual account in a private pension fund rather than to the state (Ministry of Finance & National Social Security Institute, 2023), and informal work and under-declared pay reduce what's collected. The model therefore uses an estimated effective collection rate. In 2023, taxes and social contributions on income from employment came to BGN 20.1 billion (European Commission, 2026). The 2.30 million employees under labour contract earned an average of BGN 24,485, a wage bill of BGN 56.3 billion (National Statistical Institute, 2024), so the state collected about 35.7% of declared pay. Because about 93.2% of people in work pay contributions (Ministry of Finance & National Social Security Institute, 2023), the model uses 35.7% × 93.2% = 33.2%. The low scenario uses 29.6%, which corresponds to the Commission's implicit tax rate on labour of 24.9% for 2022 (European Commission, 2024), and the high scenario uses 36.4%, the share of the 2026 statutory rates that goes to public funds (Republic of Bulgaria, 2026).

The calculation is timed for a student who leaves in 2026 and starts work in 2030, as today's grade 12 students will; younger grades start work up to four years later (grade 8 in 2034), which would lower the per-person figure by about 2.5% if each grade were timed separately. All future amounts are converted to their 2026 present value with a real discount rate of 3.5%. The European Commission's current guidance on economic appraisal no longer sets a reference rate (European Commission, 2021); its 2014 cost-benefit guide used 5% for cohesion countries such as Bulgaria and 3% for other member states (European Commission, 2014b). Those rates were designed for infrastructure projects rather than lifetime earnings, so the model uses 3.5% as the central value, with the Commission's 5% as the low case and 3% as the high case. At 5%, the lifetime loss per average grade cohort would be about €59 million instead of €80 million. On the central assumptions, each person who leaves takes with them about €129,600 in taxes and contributions over a working life, in today's money.

8.2 What it adds up to

For the roughly 3,100 identity-related departures among the modelled students in grades 8 to 12, that comes to about €401 million in lifetime gross public revenue, valued in 2026, or roughly €80 million per average grade cohort (Table 10). With the number of people held at its central value, the economic assumptions alone move the lifetime loss per average grade cohort between about €38 million and €144 million.

Figure 5 shows which assumptions matter most. The wage these students would have earned and the share who act on their plans have the largest effect, followed by the identification rate, the discount rate and the share remaining abroad; wage growth, the collection rate and the share planning to leave matter least. Setting every assumption to its extreme at once gives illustrative lifetime losses of about €17 million and €316 million per average grade cohort. These are not confidence bounds, and no probabilities are assigned to them.

8.3 Education already paid for

Bulgaria has also paid to educate each of these students. In 2023, public spending came to about €3,170 per pupil a year at every school level: €3,168 in primary, €3,166 in lower secondary and €3,172 in upper secondary education (Eurostat, 2026). Over twelve years of schooling, from grade 1 to grade 12, that's about €38,000 per pupil. The money is spent whether or not a student leaves, so it isn't added to the figures above. It measures something different: an investment in Bulgaria's future whose return will now go to another country. For an average grade cohort of identity-related departures, it comes to about €24 million.

8.4 The pension system

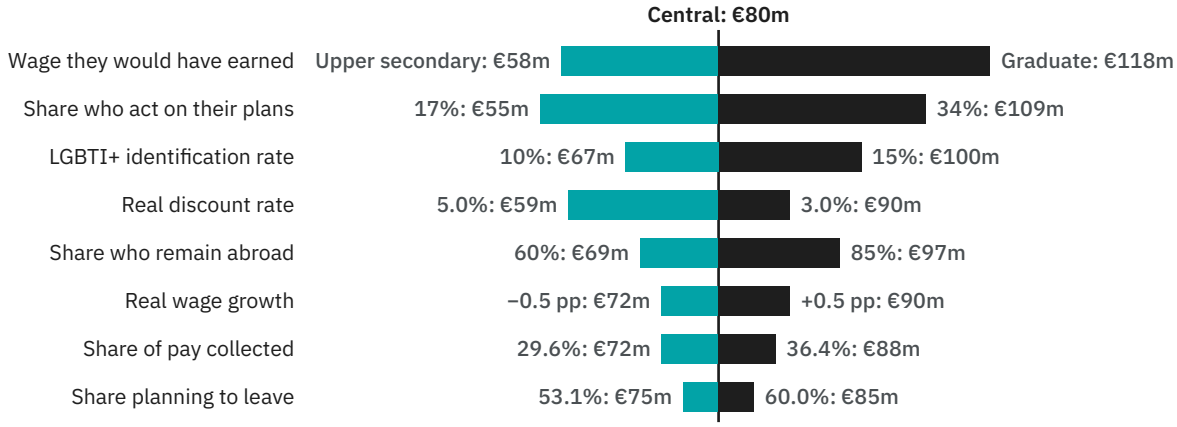
Bulgaria's pensions are paid out of the contributions of people working today. In 2022, those contributions covered about half of public pension spending, 4.7% of GDP against 9.5%, and the state budget made up the rest. The same projections expect the number of pensioners for every 100 people in work to rise from 64 in 2022 to 82 by 2060 (Ministry of Finance & National Social Security Institute, 2023). Each young contributor who leaves pushes that ratio further in the wrong direction.

Table 10. Lifetime taxes and contributions lost through identity-related emigration

Component	Low	Central	High
Wage level (share of all-employee average)	73% (upper secondary)	100%	147% (graduate)
Share of gross pay collected by the state	29.6%	33.2%	36.4%
Real discount rate	5.0%	3.5%	3.0%
Lifetime taxes and contributions lost, per person	€61,600	€129,600	€233,300
× Identity-related departures, grades 8 to 12	3,100	3,100	3,100
= Total for modelled students in grades 8 to 12	€191m	€401m	€722m
= Per average grade cohort (about 620 people)	**€38m**	**€80m**	**€144m**

Low and high vary the economic assumptions only; the number of people is held at its central value. 2026 present values for ages 23 to 64, with real wage growth from a 2025 wage base. Cohort totals cover a working life, not one year's budget. Education spending (about €38,000 per person) is reported separately and not included.

Figure 5. How the lifetime loss per average grade cohort changes when one assumption changes



Each bar changes one assumption and holds the others at their central values (central estimate: €80 million in lifetime present value per average grade cohort). Inputs and formulas are in the accompanying spreadsheet.

8.5 What the estimate leaves out

This is a gross figure. It doesn't subtract the public services these young people would have used or the pensions they would eventually have drawn, and it doesn't add the money emigrants send home or model later returns among those assumed to remain abroad. On the other side, it leaves out VAT and other taxes on spending, along with the wider loss of economic output, which is far larger than what the state collects. Every input is a published figure or a stated assumption.

Debates about Bulgaria's population decline tend to focus on birth rates and on workers leaving for better pay. These results suggest that how LGBTI+ students are treated at school belongs in that debate as well, as a loss measured in people and in public money.

9 Conclusion

Of the 896 respondents who answered the question, 58.3% said they planned to leave Bulgaria for work or university, and 86.3% of those linked that plan to their sexual orientation or gender identity. These are strong findings about the students who took part, though the self-selected sample means they can't be generalised to every LGBTI+ student in Bulgaria.

Respondents also described feeling unsafe at school, being harassed, avoiding the adults who might help them and worrying about their future in the country. Most of those who knew about the law and were thinking of leaving said it had made them more likely to go. The survey shows clearly how students experience the law and their schools, while a one-off survey like this can't measure the law's causal effect on its own.

The possible scale is much less certain. The central estimate of about 3,500 students who leave and remain abroad, and the associated lifetime gross loss of about €80 million in taxes and contributions per average grade cohort (present value), rest on assumptions about the size of the LGBTI+ student population, how many plans turn into moves, how many people return and what they would have earned. They're useful for seeing how those assumptions combine, and they should be quoted as scenarios.

The most useful next steps would be better monitoring of safety and access to support in schools, and research that both represents LGBTI+ students across Bulgaria and follows them over time to see who leaves and who comes back. Until then, this survey is strongest as a record of what these students say about their lives.

10 Methods and interpretation notes

Sample and groups. The analysis uses the recommended sample of 1,071 students. Migration-intention groups are based on the question "Do you plan to leave Bulgaria for employment or to attend university in another country?" (yes = plan to leave, not sure = unsure, no = plan to stay). Respondents who skipped that question are excluded from group comparisons.

Trend tests. Two-sided Cochran-Armitage test for linear trend in proportions, with scores of 0 (plan to stay), 1 (unsure) and 2 (plan to leave). Each test was checked with a permutation test (50,000 draws), and p-values were adjusted across the ten outcomes in Table 6 using the Holm method.

Confidence intervals. Wilson 95% intervals for proportions. They reflect sampling variation only and don't correct for non-probability recruitment or other sources of selection bias.

Regression. Logistic regression on complete cases (n = 746). All predictors except age are binary, with "no" as the reference category. Diagnostics: likelihood-ratio test against the null model, McFadden pseudo-R^2, area under the ROC curve, Hosmer-Lemeshow test on deciles of predicted risk, and variance inflation factors.

Law-related items. Shares are of students who said they knew about the law (n = 720), as in the main report, with each item's "I don't know about such a law" answers kept in the base; the law-and-migration item has n = 616. The comparison by migration intention (Table 6) uses the same base; the regression uses all students with complete answers (section 5). Scaled items count the two most negative response options, such as "a lot" and "a great deal". Multi-select blocks count a respondent as having answered if they selected any option; "I do not feel unsafe" and "I don't avoid anywhere" count as no.

Scenario model. Enrolment in grades 8 to 12 is the National Statistical Institute count for the 2025/26 school year (295,391). The identification rate, realisation rate and share remaining abroad are assumptions, explained in the text. Scenario figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Economic cost. Lifetime taxes and contributions are the 2026 present value, at a 3.5% real discount rate, of the estimated share of gross pay collected by the state (33.2%: 2023 collections divided by the wage bill of employees under labour contract, adjusted for the 93.2% who pay contributions) on each person's wage from age 23 to 64 (timed from 2030, when today's grade 12 students turn 23; timing each grade separately, with

grade 8 starting work in 2034, would lower the per-person figure by about 2.5%), weighted by the projected employment rate. Wages start from the 2025 average, scaled by education level from the 2022 Structure of Earnings Survey, and grow in line with the 2024 Ageing Report projection deflated at 2% a year. Low and high scenarios vary the wage level (73% or 147% of the average), the collection rate (29.6% or 36.4%) and the discount rate (5% or 3%). Education spending is reported separately and not added. Only departures linked to identity (88.2%, grades 8 to 12) are counted. Full inputs and formulas are in the accompanying spreadsheet.

Limitations. This is a voluntary, online, self-selected survey of respondents who identified as LGBTI+, and its findings can't be assumed to represent all Bulgarian teenagers or all LGBTI+ students. The data are cross-sectional and self-reported, so they can't establish causal effects or show whether respondents later emigrate.

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