

## OMBUDSMAN COOPERATION WITH CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

The Ombudsman sees the established continuous and constructive dialogue with citizens, civil society organisations and with the academic community as a guarantee for greater transparency in her work, for publicity and openness in her actions, as well as an opportunity to promote human rights and their protection and make them part of the national culture.

**Human rights promotion** is also carried out through active participation of the national human rights institution in public discussions and debates, including in the media. This approach not only makes possible publicly highlighting specific aspects of different rights, but also supports better understanding and respect among citizens and institutions. CSOs are default partners in these initiatives.

With her active initiatives in 2022 the Ombudsman proves that the institution remains open to cooperation with civil society representatives, by jointly organising various initiatives, discussing legislative proposals and/or regulatory framework and public institutional practice issues.

In her work, the Ombudsman maintains contact with more than 300 civil society organisations active in various fields of human rights protection. **The institution's partnership with civil society structures is enshrined in Article 11 of the EU Treaty and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.** In this European context, the Ombudsman actively conducts an open, transparent and active dialogue with representative organisations and the civil society. The institution is regularly sought by CSOs as a mediator or the main state interlocutor for civil participation on a number of pressing public issues. The Ombudsman regularly participates with her positions and expert opinions in CSO forums and initiatives. On issues raised by non-governmental organisations regarding the constitutionality of legal texts, the Ombudsman prepares reasoned requests to the Constitutional Court.

For the national Ombudsman, CSOs in Bulgaria remain a generator of social change and have an important role in the state fulfilling its role in promoting, protecting and defending human rights. Through their work and research, CSOs create opportunities for different groups in society to express their opinions on issues that concern them. Particularly important is their **work with vulnerable groups whose communication with state authorities is difficult, often formal and unproductive due to the bureaucratic approach of the latter.** In many cases, these people rely on civil organisations to improve their situation, including through assistance before the relevant competent authorities.

The Ombudsman notes the quick and adequate response of the non-governmental sector to changing social realities and implementation of causes aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable groups. In many cases the public defender supports members of non-governmental organisations

that assist citizens in various administrative and judicial procedures in order to protect their rights, as well as as volunteer formations in emergency situations in the conditions of crises or disasters.

The Ombudsman also supports the process of expanding the role of CSO representatives in the preparation and discussion of legislation - key to the quality of laws. In this context, the Ombudsman has conducted a number of joint events and initiatives with the participation of non-governmental organisations.

✓ **A brief overview of the Ombudsman's involvement in NGO initiatives**



**3 December 2022** – On the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the Ombudsman organised a forum targeted at the protection of young people with mental disabilities “We Can Too!” The event was held in partnership with the Civil Formation Parents in Action and representatives of the Monitoring Council under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Lumos Bulgaria Foundation and Maria’s World Foundation.



**4 December 2019** – Ombudsman Prof. Dr. Diana Kovacheva took part in the meeting of local public mediators from throughout the country which was held in Kardzhali upon the invitation of Rasim Musa, Mayor. The “Kardzhali Declaration” was discussed and adopted unanimously. It insists on expanding the network of defenders in Bulgaria and changing their status in order to elevate the status of the public mediator institution.



**12 December** – *“There should be incentives for people who submit signals about irregularities to do it by ensuring clear protection.”* This is what Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva said during the round table “Protection of whistleblowers in Bulgaria” organised by the Transparency International Association.

**26 November 2020** – Participation in a web conference “The Child's Right to Protection from Violence”, organized by the Children's Legal Aid Network.





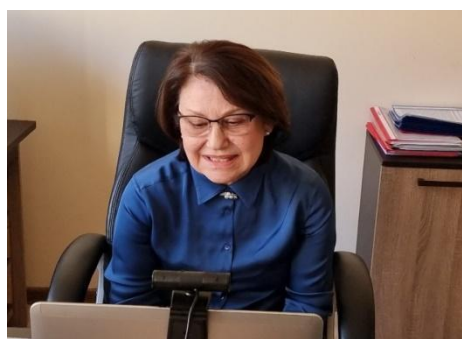
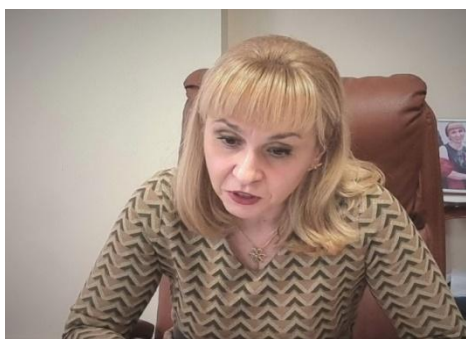
**3 December 2020** – Participation of the Ombudsman in the webinar "Domestic Violence and Violence against Women: Possible Solutions", organized by the Bulgarian Fund for Women.

On **27 January 2022** the Ombudsman referred the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, the Minister of Social Policy and the chairman of the line parliamentary committee on labour, social and demographic policy. In her letter, the Ombudsman notes that more than 24 non-governmental organisations providing social services turned to the institution seeking assistance as they could not cover their costs for electricity, natural gas and activities. Thus, in practice, the normal functioning of this type of services was threatened, with a real risk of deteriorating support for thousands of children and people in vulnerable situations.

At the beginning of February, the Ombudsman submitted to the National Assembly a legislative change to the **Measures and Actions during State of Emergency Act**, proposing a deferred payment of electricity and heating bills for non-governmental organisations providing social services.

Ombudsman Prof. Dr. Diana Kovacheva participated online in the **Discussion Forum “Policies for equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma: an investment in the better future of Bulgaria”**, organised by the Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance.

At the end of February, Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva and Deputy Ombudsman Elena Cherneva-Markova participated in the final conference of the Justrom programme in several consecutive days. The programme is a joint project of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, which aims to improve access to justice for Roma women. The project is implemented in 4 European countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Italy and Greece.



The leadership of the National Union of Labour Cooperatives addressed the Ombudsman with a special invitation to participate in the 10<sup>th</sup> jubilee edition of the European Forum of the



subjects of social and solidarity economy, which takes place during the International Fair in Plovdiv.



It has become a tradition for the Bulgarian Ombudsman to participate in the opening of the annual international exhibition BULPEK'2022.



**12 December 2022** - the Ombudsman participated in the “Forum on policies and actions to combat violence against women”, organised by the Bulgarian Fund for Women and the Council of Europe. In response to Prof. Dr. Kovacheva’s participation, a letter was received stating:

*“Thank you for your strong words and your strong stance on tackling violence against women in Bulgaria! We are confident that the forum provided an opportunity to consider different views of representatives of organisations and institutions concerned with the subject. We hope that the holding of this event has brought us one step closer to the adoption of the long-awaited amendments to the Protection against Domestic Violence Act.*

*We believe that you will continue to use your authority and unquestioned expertise to bring this process to a successful end!”*



*The values that today's "Inspiring Achievement for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" initiative represents in practice are not really new values. The topic of equality appears even with the list of fundamental rights with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the United Nations in its Charter talks about equality, the European Union, the Council of Europe, and even today in the presentation we saw that as if the perception of successful women is somewhat lagging behind." This is what the Ombudsman said on 14 November at the first joint awards of the Council of Women in Business in Bulgaria and the European Investment Bank.*

Prof. Kovacheva was part of the jury that evaluated the initiatives. They competed in five categories. The jury also included Lidiya Shuleva, journalists Georgi Toshev and Ventsislav Savov, as well as the writer Georgi Burdarov.

**21 December 2022** - Deputy Ombudsman Elena Cherneva-Markova participated in the **"Volunteer Initiative 2022"** award ceremony under the patronage of Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva from the "Lale" Foundation and the National Alliance for Work with Volunteers.



### ✓ **Partnership for the protection of children's rights**

The Ombudsman's engagements and established partnerships with civil structures in the field of children's rights are particularly active. For non-governmental organisations, the Ombudsman is not only an undisputed authority, but also a like-minded person, an important partner in public initiatives.

A representative of the institution was elected deputy chairman of the Public Council of the Bulgarian Red Cross for support of Ukraine. The purpose of the formed council is to guarantee publicity when receiving and processing donations, as well as to support Ukrainians in Bulgaria.

2022 was marked by active actions of the human rights body and NGOs, united in common causes – **for mental health at schools, building a national children’s hospital, supporting children and refugees from Ukraine, for the rights of adolescents whose parents live and work abroad.**

Dozens of citizens and organisations appealed to the Ombudsman demanding that action be taken to ensure a safe public environment and specifically to ban the use and sale of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) to children. The national Ombudsman launched a wide-ranging campaign to ban its sale and use, and drafted special legislative proposals, which were supported by a group of MPs. The National Assembly urgently adopted the legislative changes. These actions show that measures can only be effective if they combine the efforts of civil and institutional resources.

Together with the Network of School Psychologists, the “Animus Association” Foundation and a number of civil organisations, a public discussion “**Mental health at school** – possible and necessary measures” was held. The topic of **children’s mental health** is one of the Ombudsman’s top priorities in the field of children’s rights. Through this initiative, the Ombudsman has brought the topic of school mental health in a definitive way to the attention of institutions, schools, parents and the public. The purpose of the public forum is to open new spaces for mental health in school, to build an environment for the prevention and intervention of violence, aggression, bullying and cyberbullying, and through its introduction to form lifelong skills in children and young people. The discussion focused on finding an answer to the question of how the Bulgarian school can be transformed in a way as to engage all resources in teaching children to successfully cope with the demands of modern times by communicating without harming themselves or others.

The Ombudsman actively supported the campaign of an insurance company for the safety of children on the internet entitled “Keep the child safe on the internet”.



Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva referred the caretaker Deputy Prime Minister for Public Order and Minister of Interior Ivan Demerdzhiev, the caretaker ministers of Justice Krum Zarkov, of Electronic Government Georgi Todorov, of Youth and Sports Vesela Lecheva, as well as the Chairman of the State Agency for Child Protection Eleonora Lilova, about the danger of terminating the work of the **National Safer Internet Center and closing the SafeNet Hotline.**

Civil organisations and parents alerted Prof. Kovacheva that the only organisation in Bulgaria which deals with the safety of children on the Internet and fights against any harmful content on the web was due to seize to exist.

The problem is that the National Safer Internet Center operates entirely on project funding. The European Commission provides 50% of the funds through the “Safer Internet” EU-funded



programmes, and from 2014 “**Better Internet for Kids**” with a pre-condition for national co-financing of the activities.

In **May 2022**, management, parents, children and teachers turned to the Ombudsman for help because the former mayor of the capital's "Vazrazhdane" district, Savina Savova, had decided to close the school and relocate the nearly 100 children to the neighbouring 32 Secondary School “Kliment Ohridski”. After the intervention of the Ombudsman, the case ended safely and the children remained in their beloved school with traditions and 65 years of history.



**14 July 2022** - *“It is important to constantly talk about problems in the field of children’s rights, which remain unresolved for a long time and continue to be painful for the whole society.”* With these words, the Ombudsman **opened on 14 July the forum “With care from 0 to 3”, organised by the public defender, jointly with the “Trust for a Social Alternative” Foundation.** Maternal and child health issues were at the focus of the discussion, with a clear emphasis on vulnerable groups and every child’s right to development support. Early childhood is a period of remarkable change, in which investment matters enormously and can prevent the inheritance of poverty and vulnerability. The partnership with the foundation on early childhood development is yielding positive results, such as the **campaign to drop fees for kindergartens, providing more screenings for uninsured pregnant women, free medicines for children.**

During the year, the Ombudsman developed sustainable partnerships with non-governmental organisations, as well as created new ones. In partnership with the programme of the European Commission and the Council of Europe ROMACT, a public forum **“The child between labour migration, institutional standards and extended family”** was held on **12 December 2022.** Participants in the discussion outlined the main issues and made common messages and recommendations for taking the necessary steps at policy level and their implementation.

*“Every fourth child in Bulgaria is abandoned by their parents, or somewhere around 20%-25% of the children in our country are practically without one or both of their parents who work abroad. In the Roma community, the percentage reaches 40%. These are children who are left in the care of their grandparents, their extended family. And when I say that every fourth child is a Viber child – a child who only communicates with their parents through Viber, I am actually quoting an old statistic, because the truth is that today we do not know how many children are actually victims of this problem.”* - the Ombudsman at the opening of the public discussion.





A partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund **UNICEF** has developed over the years and fully implemented in 2022. The areas in which the two organisations cooperate are:

- developing and strengthening the capacity of the Ombudsman institution to carry out independent monitoring of the implementation of children's rights in Bulgaria;
- raising awareness and sensitivity of the Bulgarian society for knowledge, respect and observance of children's rights;
- working towards access to rights and services of children in conflict with law;
- developing and strengthening the capacity of the Ombudsman institution to consider individual complaints and alerts, including those submitted on behalf of or directly by children, and to carry out inspections;
- advocacy for and promotion of the participation of non-governmental organisations working in the field of children's rights, including organisations composed of children, in the development of national legislation and international instruments on issues affecting children.

### ✓ **Partnership with the organisations of and for people with disabilities**

In 2022 the institution of the Ombudsman continued fruitful cooperation with the organisations of and for people with disabilities.

In fulfillment of the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the institution maintains continuous dialogue with the representatives of persons with disabilities and insists to the responsible authorities on their active inclusion in the processes of determination and decision-making concerning the rights of these vulnerable persons.

Proof of the good partnership between the institution and civil society are the proposals made by the Ombudsman for legislative amendments to the People with Disabilities Act and the Health Act at the end of the year, which ensure opportunities for people with disabilities to exercise their rights in case of delays with REMC decisions. The proposals were agreed with the representative organisations of and for people with disabilities, which are members of the National Council for People with Disabilities under the Council of Ministers, and were subsequently supported by them with opinions in the National Assembly.

The public defender participated actively in the initiatives organised and carried out by organisations of and for people with disabilities regarding access to justice for people with mental and intellectual disabilities. As the Ombudsman has emphasised more than once in her opinions,

a large number of these citizens find it difficult to exercise their rights freely, equally and above all, independently, as required by a number of international human rights acts. With the clear position, the institution shows that it is an active and stable partner of the responsible authorities in search of adequate solutions to the problems.

The considerable confidence in the institution is reflected in the significant number of complaints from NGOs providing social services to vulnerable people following the sharp rise in electricity and natural gas prices. The serious difficulties faced by the organisations in covering the costs and the real risk of harm to the users of the services prompted the Ombudsman to take active steps to find an appropriate solution. Joint efforts ensured the continuation of the supply of electricity and natural gas to service providers and thus to consumers, without interruption, until a final decision on the matter is found.

The Ombudsman also supported the initiatives of the CSO representatives in the Monitoring Council, which monitors the implementation of the CRPD in Bulgaria although the institution did not chair the network in the past year.

The Ombudsman is also facilitating the process of expanding the role of civil society representatives in the drafting and discussion of legislation, which is essential for the quality of the laws. In this context, in **2023**, the Ombudsman held a number of joint events, trainings and partnership initiatives involving non-government organisations.

**14 January 2023** – Little survakari – pupils from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grades from the "Georgi Stoykov Rakovski" primary school in the village of Turnak (Vratsa region) visit the Ombudsman institution and use decorated sticks calling for health, success and prosperity on the eve of the Roma New Year on 14 January. The initiative is of the **Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance**, which traditionally organizes Vasilitsa in the institutions as the Day of Roma Culture.



**February 2023** – Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva sent a recommendation to the interim Minister of Health Dr. Asen Medjidiev, to the acting Director of the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) Dr. Yordanka Penkova and to the President of the Bulgarian Doctors' Union Dr. Ivan Madzharov, recommending that the package of health activities covered by the budget of the National Health Insurance Fund should include annual reproductive tests – for women this is the assessment of the ovarian reserve, and for men this is the examination of the spermogram.

The reason for this recommendation is a **signal from the "I want a baby" foundation**, which alarms that more and more young people between the ages of 25–35 have a seriously impaired reproductive function in our country.



**March 2023** – Amnesty International Bulgaria Leadership Presentation.



**March 2023** – Meeting of the Deputy Ombudsman with the **Ekaterina Karavelova Foundation** in connection with the publication of the analytical report "Women's Voices in Bulgaria."





**5 April 2023** – At the initiative of UNICEF, a government delegation from Turkmenistan visited the Ombudsman institution to exchange experiences.



**19 April 2023** – Meeting with the leadership of the **Civic Organization for Just Rights and Cultural Cooperation in the Balkans** from Turkey on the return of names from the “Revival Process”.

**11 May** – Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva supports the "Nutrition Revolution" campaign of the "For Food" Foundation, organised for the sixth time with the aim of introducing adolescents to the healthy benefits of proper and balanced nutrition.

**In 2023, the focus of the initiative is on children with food allergies and intolerances, as well as the problems their parents and teachers face every day.**

During the campaign on **12 and 13 May 2023**, more than 6,000 children took part in many children's cooking workshops organised by more than 1,000 volunteer parents and teachers from large and small towns across Bulgaria.





**4 June 2023** – The ladies of **Zonta Club Sofia** managed to raise more than BGN 28,000 during the 17<sup>th</sup> traditional charity "Ball of the Yellow Rose". **The ball is under the patronage of the National Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva.** Around 200 guests gathered to celebrate the 28<sup>th</sup> year of the Zonta Club Sofia and to unite efforts for the talented graduates of the Music School. In 2023, the cause was dedicated to support the Lyubomir Pipkov National School of Music. The donated amount is used to provide new musical instruments for the pupils, and part of the funds is used to finance a summer workshop for the children.



**10 June 2023** – Deputy Ombudsman Elena Cherneva-Markova welcomed the participants in a national meeting of Roma women – educational mediators and leaders in their community, held in the Hall of Arms of the Regional Administration of Veliko Tarnovo, within the 18<sup>th</sup> edition of the Children's Roma Festival "Open Heart", organised by **Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance.**



**15 June 2023** – *"Every time a woman comes forward with her story of domestic violence, she stands up on behalf of all victims. This not only takes courage, but it means that the woman is*

*up against the wall.*" This is what Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva said at a round table "Measures to combat domestic violence in Bulgaria: together against violence", organised by the **Animus Association Foundation**. The occasion for her speech was the shocking story of Tanya, a victim of domestic violence, who dared to speak in front of the attendees of the event.

In **October 2023**, the Ombudsman assumed the Chairmanship of the Council for the next two years. This is the monitoring body for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



**25 October 2023** – The Ombudsman welcomed Acad. Hristo Grigorov on the occasion of the celebration of the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the **Bulgarian Red Cross**.



**7 November 2023** – Meeting with a delegation from Ukraine – **Association of Ukrainian Women Lawyers JurFem** from Lviv, Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, where good practices in the field of domestic violence prevention were discussed with the aim of improving women's rights and safety.



**24 November 2023** – Address by Deputy Ombudsman Elena Cherneva-Markova at the opening of the **5<sup>th</sup> International Conference "Complementary Alternative and Communication"**.

**1 December 2023** - *"It is a great pleasure, joy and satisfaction for me, together with two smiling and nice people – Vanya and Svetlio, to say welcome to the Ombudsman institution. Dear friends, I have no hesitation how we should celebrate 3 December, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, this is the way – beautifully and lovingly to address all those whom we should support. This photo exhibition is very beautiful, very real – about love, about the mirrors in which we look, where the true self is reflected. I think this is the way to beautifully and lovingly address all the people with disabilities that we need to support because they support us with their smile and their love. I am happy when we are able to help people with disabilities, because the meaning of the Ombudsman institution is to give support"* – with these words Prof. Diana Kovache opened the photo exhibition **Mirrors of Love. About love from the first person**, organised jointly with **Bulgarian Mothers' Movement Foundation** and **Down Syndrome - Bulgaria Association**.



**18 December 2023** – Young pupils from the first and second grades of the 76th “William Saroyan” Primary School visited the Ombudsman institution. Together with Mrs. Maria Manolova they congratulated Prof. Kovacheva on the eve of the upcoming holidays and thanked her for helping to preserve their beloved school, also known as the Armenian School.



## ✓ Initiatives related to the academic community



**7 May 2019** – The Deputy Ombudsman delivered a public lecture on the topic of “International legal standards of combating corruption” to students at the University of National and World Economy under the brand of the Anti-Corruption Academy.



**25 November 2019** – Ombudsman Assoc.Prof. Diana Kovacheva and New Bulgarian University Rector Prof. Plamen Bochkov signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with a view to organising student internships at the institution of the Public Advocate.





**10 December 2019** – On the occasion of the International Human Rights Day, the Ombudsman “opened” the doors to the institution for students of law. The event was attended by National Assembly Speaker Tsveta Karayancheva while H.E. US Ambassador Herro Mustafa welcome the young lawyers in a video message.



**11 December 2019** – The Public Advocate and the Rector of Varna University of Economics Prof. Evgeni Stanimirov signed a Memorandum of Cooperation whereby the two institutions committed to holding joint training and internships at the Ombudsman institution. Assoc.Prof. Kovacheva delivered a public lecture to the students at Varna University of Economics on the topic of “Role of the Ombudsman for the protection of human right”.



**7 February 2020** – The Ombudsman welcomes students from the First Language High School in Varna to the institution, whom he introduces to the work of the public defender.



**21 July 2020** – Lecture by Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva at the invitation of the Bulgarian School of Politics "Dimitar Panitsa" on the topic: "Bulgarian Justice for Children. Problems and Possible Solutions for Counteracting Domestic Violence".



**1 October 2020** – Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva, Chairman of the Committee on Combating Corruption, Conflict of Interest and Parliamentary Ethics of the 44<sup>th</sup> National Assembly Boris Yachev, Chairman of the Committee on Combating Corruption and for the Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property Sotir Tsatsarov and the Rector of the University of National and World Economy Prof. Dimitar Dimitrov sign an agreement to launch a student internship program. The document is part of the Memorandum of Cooperation on **the Anti-Corruption Academy initiative** signed on **23 June 2020**.



**28 October 2020** – Online lecture by the Ombudsman at the invitation of the School of Politics.

In **March 2022** Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva recommended to the Minister of Education and Science Academician Nikolay Denkov that the subject of the transformation of state higher education institutions should be subject to an in-depth analysis and broad public discussion, by making an in-depth assessment of the university network, to take into account the objective data on the current state of tertiary education and assess the positive and negative consequences of such a decision.

*“I want to express my conviction that the positions of the academic community will be taken into account, because only with broad public support can changes be implemented that actually improve the quality of tertiary education in the country”,* pointed out Prof. Diana Kovacheva.

The reason for the recommendation were two positions from the Student Councils of the Higher School of Telecommunications and Posts in the city of Sofia and the University of Mining and Geology “St. Ivan Rilski” of Sofia, received by the institution within a few days, which were against the idea of the Ministry of Education for the unification and restructuring of state higher education institutions.



**11 April 2022** - With her active actions, the Ombudsman supported the development of the university network and on 11 April 2022 attended the opening of the newly established Institute for Computer Science, Artificial Intelligence and Technologies – INSAIT.





In **May 2022**, public defender Diana Kovacheva participated in a scientific conference “Law and Society in the (post) pandemic world”, organised by the Faculty of Law and History of the Southwestern University “Neofit Rilski” on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding. The Ombudsman delivered a report on the topic: **“Challenges for National Human Rights Institutions in Pandemic Conditions”**.



The national Ombudsman opened the **2022/2023 academic year** at the Higher School of Insurance and Finance of Sofia.



On the occasion of the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Chamber of Architects in Bulgaria in **2022**, Ombudsman Prof. Dr. Diana Kovechva was awarded the badge of honour of the architects.





**19 October 2022** - Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva presented the special award to “Doctor of the Year 2022”, which the Bulgarian Medical Union traditionally organises for the Day of the Bulgarian Doctor, 19 October. The Ombudsman presented the special award “For high professionalism and bravery” to Dr. Anton Elkin – a vascular surgeon from Trakia Hospital in Stara Zagora. The award was presented for his selflessness in the summer when he helped and prevented victims in an accident on Trakia highway with a Serbian bus full of children.



- **10 June 2023** – *"Being a graduate of this university is a privilege that obliges. The expectations on you will always be high. And you will have to protect not only your own reputation, but also the reputation of Sofia University and the Law Faculty",* said Ombudsman Prof. Diana Kovacheva at the ceremony of awarding the diplomas of the graduates of the 2022 class from the **Law Faculty of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"**.