

## Breast Cancer Inequalities in the European Union



# BULGARIA

Bulgaria is among the EU countries with the lowest self-reported breast cancer screening rates. In January 2023, Bulgaria adopted a National Cancer Plan; unfortunately, Bulgaria has no national population-based breast cancer screening program <sup>1</sup>

### More must be done!

TBCT calls for the implementation of a **national breast cancer screening program** that aligns with the European Union's recommendations <sup>2</sup>

**TBCT**  
Transforming Breast  
Cancer Together

## Breast cancer mortality

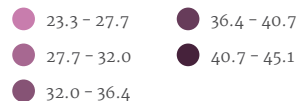
**BREAST CANCER IS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF CANCER DEATHS AMONGST BULGARIAN WOMEN, AMOUNTING TO 17.6% OF CANCER MORTALITY <sup>3</sup>**

In Bulgaria, it is estimated that

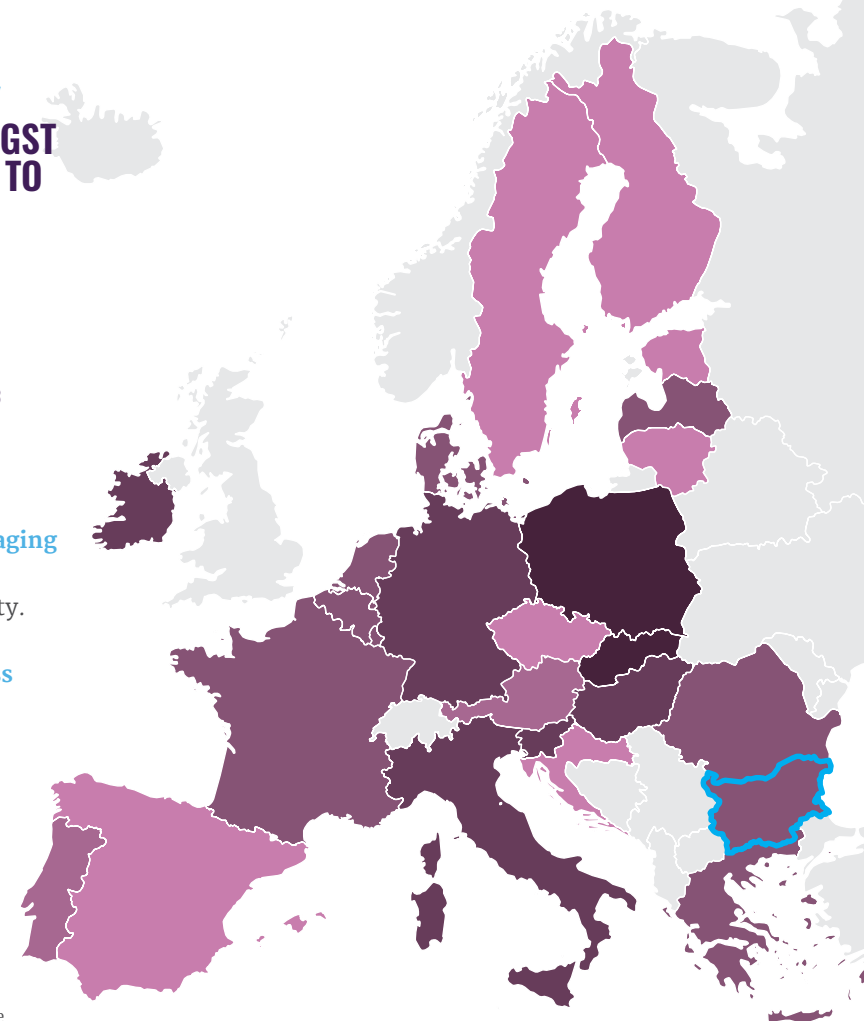
**1,399** WOMEN DIED FROM BREAST CANCER IN 2022 <sup>3</sup>

Treating breast cancer at an **early stage gives patients the best chance of managing the disease**, significantly reducing the burden on patients, families, and society. TBCT urges policymakers to **prioritise early detection and ensure equal access to timely and effective screening and treatment** across all Member States

### Mortality per 100,000 women



EU27, Women, Breast Cancer, All Ages, Age-Standardised Rate (European Standard Population) per 100,000 (2022) <sup>4</sup>



### Did you know?

In most hospitals in Bulgaria, surgeons are responsible for both diagnosing and treating breast cancer, primarily using core needle biopsy for diagnosis. As a result, the rate of breast-conserving surgery is only 47.8%, with 52% of operations being unilateral or bilateral mastectomies. Additionally, implant-based breast reconstruction is performed in only 1.3% of surgeries. This limited access to reconstructive options leaves many patients with fewer choices for post-surgery recovery <sup>5</sup>

There is a pressing need for initiatives that improve access to specialised care. TBCT calls on Member States to **prioritise initiatives which provide more personalised and less invasive breast cancer treatment options**

## The care journey



OF OVER 14,673 NEW CANCERS  
DIAGNOSED IN WOMEN (2022),

# 24,3%

3565,2 - 24,3%

14,673 (2022)

ARE BREAST CANCER DETECTED BOTH IN  
THE EARLY AND ADVANCED STAGES <sup>3</sup>

67.3% of breast cancer patients are diagnosed  
during stage I and stage II <sup>5</sup>

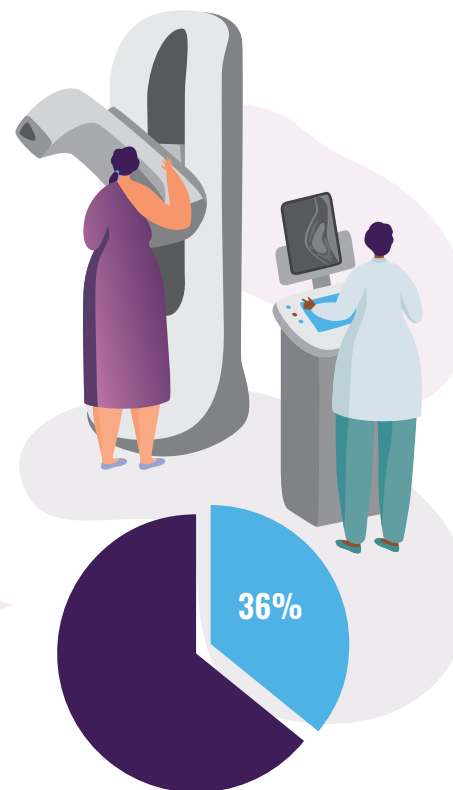
The journey to better outcomes for patients begins by ensuring that healthcare providers, policymakers, and the broader medical community have a **clear understanding of the diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment options for breast cancer at every stage**



In Bulgaria, multidisciplinary breast cancer care is provided through specialised centres, such as the Breast Cancer Center at the University Hospital “Queen Joanna” in Sofia. These centres offer comprehensive services involving a multidisciplinary team of oncologists, surgeons, radiologists, and psychologists, including screening, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation

While staffing Comprehensive Cancer Centres (CCCs) across the EU is crucial, TBCT emphasises that these centres must be equipped with **sufficient, well-trained, and multi-disciplinary teams**. It is particularly important that CCCs adhere to **established quality standards and guidelines** to effectively address the unique needs of breast cancer patients, including those with advanced and metastatic breast cancer

## Inequalities in breast cancer screening

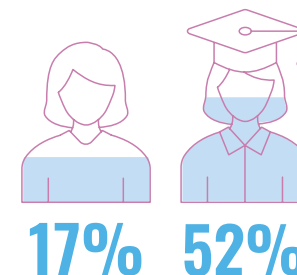


# ONLY 36%

OF BULGARIAN WOMEN  
AGED 50 TO 69 HAD  
MAMMOGRAMS IN THE  
PAST TWO YEARS (2019)<sup>6</sup>

Implementing Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan initiatives across all Member States is essential, including the European Union Cancer Screening Scheme’s goal of providing **screening across all Member States to 90% of eligible EU citizens** by 2025

Although **there is no recent data**, 2019 figures **reveal significant disparities in breast cancer screening rates in Bulgaria**. The country has the **largest gap among EU countries**, with 52% of higher-educated women undergoing screenings, compared to only 17% without a university education<sup>7,8</sup>



To address the significant inequalities in breast cancer screening, implementation of prevention strategies, and testing across the EU, TBCT strongly advocates for **policies that guarantee every patient access to high-quality care, regardless of location or socio-economic background**. It is crucial to implement measures that ensure equitable healthcare access, enabling all women to benefit from **early detection and effective treatment**

## Use of biomarker technologies in breast cancer



# TWO TYPES OF GENE BIOMARKER TESTING ARE USED IN BREAST CANCER: GENETIC & GENOMIC

## GENETIC

Genetic testing allows the identification of specific gene alterations and, therefore, informs patients of their high risk of developing breast cancer or their treatment options

TBCT calls for the launch of a **European Commission initiative** (e.g. a Communication) **on a comprehensive genetic & genomic testing strategy**

## GENOMIC

Genomic biomarker testing is performed to determine the type of cancer and guide possible personalised treatments

To ensure that each breast cancer patient receives the right treatment at the right time, it is essential to **improve awareness, healthcare workforce understanding, infrastructure, funding and reimbursement of biomarker testing**. This is particularly critical for those living with metastatic disease



In Bulgaria, although biomarker testing methods such as IHC and FISH **are available occasionally in routine clinical practice**, other genomic testing such as PCR, liquid biopsies and NGS small, **have low availability**, limiting patient access to the correct treatment <sup>9</sup>

## Access to treatment - rate of availability of oncology treatment



... is the time that patients in Bulgaria **must wait** after the central EU marketing authorisation to access an innovative oncology treatment.<sup>10</sup> **The European Union's average is 526 days**

As of January 2023, **of the 46 oncology medicines approved by the European Medicines Agency, only 23 are fully publicly available** (listed in the reimbursement list)<sup>11</sup>

TBCT supports cutting red tape to **streamline the approval and adoption of new therapies to ensure equal patient access**

## AVAILABILITY OF BIOMARKER TECHNIQUES ACROSS COUNTRIES <sup>9</sup>

		Always	Usually	Occasionally	Research	Never
		IHC*	FISH** Lung_breast_ Gastric	PCR***	NGS**** Small	Liquid Biopsies
Western European Countries	Austria					
	Belgium					
	Cyprus					
	Denmark					
	Finland					
	France					
	Germany					
	Greece					
	Ireland					
	Italy					
	Luxembourg					
	Malta					
	Netherlands					
	Norway					
	Portugal					
Spain						
Sweden						
Eastern European Countries	Bulgaria					
	Croatia					
	Czech Republic					
	Estonia					
	Hungary					
	Latvia					
	Lithuania					
	Poland					
	Romania					
	Slovakia					
Slovenia						

\* IHC: Immunohistochemistry

\*\*\* PCR: polymerase chain reaction

\*\* FISH: Fluorescence in situ hybridization

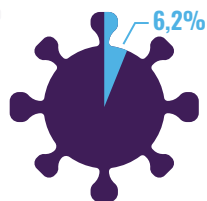
\*\*\*\* NGS: next-generation sequencing

## Metastatic Breast Cancer



Metastatic Breast Cancer refers to an advanced stage of breast cancer where the disease spreads to another part of the body.

In Bulgaria, a metastatic breast cancer diagnosis has a worse prognosis, with a five-year survival rate of about 27% in comparison to early breast cancer diagnosis (2021)<sup>12</sup>



IT IS ESTIMATED THAT IN **6.2% OF CASES, BREAST CANCER IS ALREADY METASTATIC AT DIAGNOSIS**<sup>13</sup>



## NO STRUCTURED METASTATIC BREAST CANCER DATA IS AVAILABLE FOR BULGARIA

**Why does it matter?** Registries are crucial for metastatic breast cancer patients as they provide vital data on treatments, outcomes, and survival rates, enabling a better understanding of the disease and guiding treatment decisions to improve patient care and outcomes

TBCT calls on every Member State to have **harmonised breast cancer data collection, which includes metastatic and advanced breast cancer data as well as relapse**, across the European Union to facilitate research and improve knowledge and care



# 1/11



## WOMEN IN THE EU-27 WILL DEVELOP BREAST CANCER BEFORE THE AGE OF 74<sup>13</sup>

**Transforming Breast Cancer Together** (TBCT) is a unique multi-stakeholder group representing patient and healthcare professional organisations, experts, and industry whose mission is to place the needs of those living with breast cancer at the heart of European policymaking. Together we can improve outcomes for breast cancer patients, survivors, and their families

Breast cancer **has an impact on everyone**

[www.tbct.eu](http://www.tbct.eu)

# TBCT

Transforming Breast Cancer Together

References:

<sup>1</sup>OECD - Beating Cancer Inequalities in the EU (2024) - p.175 / <sup>2</sup> Council Recommendation on strengthening prevention through early detection: A new EU approach on cancer screening (2022) / <sup>3</sup> European Cancer Information System (2022) / <sup>4</sup> European Commission, Breast Cancer in the EU (2023) - factsheet / <sup>5</sup> Nationwide analysis of the breast cancer guidelines adherence in Bulgaria, Clinical Surgical Oncology (2024) - p. 3 / <sup>6</sup> OECD EU Country Cancer Profile: Bulgaria (2023) - p.09 / <sup>7</sup> OECD Report - Beating Cancer Inequalities in the EU - p.36 / <sup>8</sup> OECD report Country profile - p.10 / <sup>9</sup> ESMO study on the availability and accessibility of biomolecular technologies in oncology in Europe-p.938 / <sup>10</sup> EFPIA WAIT Patient Indicator - p.20 & 22 / <sup>11</sup> National registers authorised medicines / <sup>12</sup> Pilot Study on the Incidence of Breast Cancer among the population of the north east region of Bulgaria (2021) - p.3868 / <sup>13</sup> Data from Europa Donna (2017)