Judges' Real Estate and Cars: What the Public Data Tells Us

An analysis of the financial status of magistrates in Bulgaria

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Introduction

As of June 2026, **the Chief Inspector and the inspectors of the Inspectorate to the Supreme Judicial Council (ISJC) are serving their third term without having been elected for either the second or the third one**. The reason is that over the past six years, a series of parliaments have failed to achieve the qualified majority required for their election. On April 30, 2025, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled that it is contrary to EU law for the SJC, with an expired term, to continue performing its functions, due to concerns about political influence over judges. **The ISJC's response was to suspend some of its most essential powers**, including the authority to propose disciplinary sanctions against magistrates and to conduct integrity and conflict-of-interest checks. **This means that, in practice, there has been a long-standing lack of institutional oversight regarding the disclosure of magistrates' savings and assets.**

The project "Restoring Trust: Transparency and Integrity in the Judiciary" aims to draw attention precisely to this **systemic and institutional vacuum**.

Judges' asset declarations are one of the few **public tools** through which the public can gain a real understanding of the financial profile of judges, prosecutors, and investigators. The obligation of certain individuals holding public office to disclose their financial and asset status to the public serves two main purposes: the first is to enable specialized authorities to conduct audits for discrepancies in assets, and the second is to provide public transparency regarding the individuals entrusted with positions of authority and whom the public supports. When collected, organized, and analyzed as a whole, these declarations reveal patterns, concentrations, recurring trends, and potential risk areas that would otherwise remain hidden within thousands of individual documents.

This analysis is based on publicly available declarations submitted to the Inspectorate of the Supreme Judicial Council. **The data analyzed covers 4 162 magistrates, 9 297 declarations, over 20 000 real estate properties, and over 7 000 motor vehicles**. This makes the study one of **the most extensive civil analyses of public information** regarding the financial status of magistrates in Bulgaria. It is a continuation of the Bulgarian Institute for

Legal Initiatives' (BILI) efforts to draw attention to the work and functioning of institutions within the judiciary, as well as part of our effort to inform the public about developments in key processes within the system. In 2024, we published an analysis examining how magistrates' savings have evolved over a 10-year period, based on data extracted from public registries, and we also analyzed how the Inspectorate General of the Judiciary (IGJ) fulfills its obligation to verify declarations.

The purpose of this analysis is not to seek sensationalism or to imply individual violations. **The data itself does not prove illicit enrichment, corruption, or abuse of office**. However, they provide the necessary foundation for **an informed public and institutional dialogue**. Especially when the judiciary enjoys a high degree of independence, transparency regarding the financial status of its representatives is a key prerequisite for trust, accountability, and integrity.

The public presentation of the initial results revealed strong public interest in the topic. Media attention naturally focused on the most easily understood indicators: how many properties judges own, what cars they declare, where apartments and houses are concentrated, and whether there has been a trend toward acquiring newer and more expensive cars since 2021–2022. These questions are important, but this analysis aims to go beyond individual headlines and place the data in a broader context.

The study examines real estate and motor vehicles by type, location, year, and method of acquisition, declared value, and source of funds, where such information is available. For real estate, indicative values at current prices are used, which aim to show the scale of the declared assets without representing an individual expert appraisal of a specific asset. For motor vehicles, the declared values at the time of acquisition are used.

It is particularly important to highlight the limitations of the analysis. It is based on the content of public declarations and does not independently establish actual ownership beyond what is declared. It does not verify every transaction through documentation and does not draw conclusions regarding the legality of a specific acquisition. Its purpose is different: to create a structured basis for analyzing trends, concentrations, and anomalies that can be useful for both civic oversight and the competent institutions.

The importance of such civic monitoring is even greater in the context of **the actual weakness of institutional oversight over magistrates' asset declarations**. When public information exists but is difficult to process, scattered across inconvenient formats, and not actively used for systematic analysis, transparency remains merely formal. Therefore, this study has a broader objective—to demonstrate that public data can be transformed into a tool for accountability, the prevention of corruption risks, and the restoration of trust in the judiciary.

At BILI, we have repeatedly raised this issue, insisting that the declarations submitted by magistrates to the Inspectorate General of the Judiciary be published in a machine-readable format, as required by law. Whether due to unwillingness or a lack of competence, these declarations continue to be published on the ISJC's website in a user-unfriendly format, and they are poorly maintained and poorly administered. In this analysis, we reiterate our recommendations from November 2024 to decision-makers and the ISJC, as none of them have been implemented.

Due to the technical obstacles described, the work on data collection and analysis was extremely difficult. BIPI extends its gratitude to the multidisciplinary team that worked on the project: Bilyana Gyaurova-Wegertseder (BIPI), Attorney Tsvetomir Todorov (BILI), Dr. Teodor Slavev (BILI), Dr. Radoslava Angelova ("Global Metrics"), Marina Dimitrova ("Global Metrics"), and Dr. Atanas Chobanov (BIRD).

Methodological Notes

The analysis covers declarations for the period **2016–2025**, examining data on **4 162 magistrates**. The processed dataset identifies over **20 000 real estate properties** and over **7 000 motor vehicles** declared as owned or acquired by magistrates. The total number of declarations examined is **9 297**.

It should be noted that although the declarations analyzed were filed between 2016 and 2025, some of the declared assets were acquired prior to this period. Consequently, the years in which the declarations were filed and the years in which the assets were acquired follow different timelines. The analysis accounts for this distinction, and when presenting the results, it is clearly emphasized that the data presented reflects the year of acquisition of the respective asset.

Scope of the included tax returns

The analysis includes the asset declarations submitted to the Inspectorate General during the period under review, to the extent that they contain relevant data on real estate and motor vehicles owned by the magistrates. When interpreting the results, it should be noted that different types of declarations may serve different purposes and reflect different periods or points in time regarding the individuals' financial status—annual declarations, declarations upon taking office or leaving office, corrective declarations, as well as declarations after leaving office. Through additional analytical procedures, all properties declared in more than one declaration are included in this analysis only once—i.e., all duplicate properties are removed so that they are included in the analysis as a single analytical unit. Therefore, the results can be interpreted as a "snapshot" of the assets of all magistrates during the study period. This feature is essential, and therefore **a procedure for verifying and reducing duplicate records** has been applied in the analysis.

Extracting Data from Public Sources

Extracting data from the PDF files published by the ISJC proved to be a difficult task due to the complex tables, which in many files are broken and continue on the next page at . We experimented with various approaches to table recognition, including extraction using specialized libraries: pdfplumber, tabula-py, camelot-py, and others. These yielded unsatisfactory results with a large number of omissions and misalignment of key information between table columns. The most successful, albeit slow, approach was converting the PDF file into high-resolution images and processing them with AI models equipped with visual capabilities. The developed process can be used to extract information from future declarations as well, and can be adapted to extract other tables from them.

Data Processing and Duplicate Checking

The raw data was extracted from the declarations published by the Inspectorate to the Supreme Judicial Council. Subsequently, the necessary technical processing was performed, as the declarations were not provided in a machine-readable format suitable for analysis but are primarily available as web pages and PDF files. This necessitates the extraction, structuring, and subsequent refinement of the information prior to statistical processing.

Prior to the preparation of the summary indicators, preliminary data processing was carried out. This involved reviewing and structuring the available information from the declarations so that similar entries could be compared and grouped.

Particular attention was paid to **the risk of double-counting the same assets**. Such a risk arises when the same property or vehicle appears in more than one declaration by the same person, for example in consecutive annual declarations or in amended declarations. To limit this distortion, a check for duplicate properties was performed by matching various combinations of variables, including property type, locality, year of acquisition, area, method of acquisition, and source of funds. When records were identified as referring to the same asset, they were retained only once in the calculations used to compute aggregate indicators. This approach aims to prevent the risk of overcounting declared properties and to provide an accurate basis for subsequent calculations.

At the same time, it should be noted that the check for duplication was hampered by the quality and completeness of the data in the declarations themselves. When sufficient identifying characteristics are missing or when data are entered inconsistently, a residual risk of unrecognized duplicates or the merging of similar but distinct assets cannot be entirely ruled out. However, this risk is assessed as minimal, and its impact on the overall results and calculations is negligible and would not lead to statistically significant shifts in the calculated values.

Approach for the "at current prices" valuation

The analysis uses indicators such as the average value and total value of certain property categories. For real estate, values "at current prices" are presented, including, for example, the average value of an apartment and a house, as well as the total projected value of these property categories. These values should be treated as **indicative analytical estimates**, not as individual expert appraisals of specific properties. They do not constitute a tax assessment, a market valuation under the Independent Appraisers Act, nor a statement of the actual selling price of a specific asset.

When interpreting them, it should be noted that the market value of real estate depends on numerous factors that are not always included in the declarations—exact location, condition of the property, number of floors, year of construction, type of construction, infrastructure, encumbrances, ideal shares, and other characteristics. Therefore, valuation at current prices is intended solely to provide an approximate idea of the scale of the declared assets, not to replace an individual appraisal.

For motor vehicles, the analysis uses the declared purchase and sale values, when available, and aggregates them by year, make, and method of acquisition.

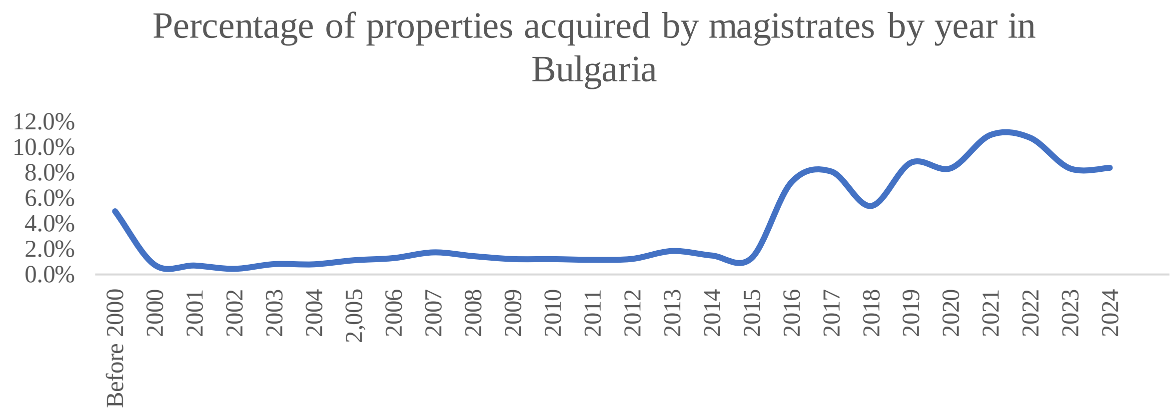
Limitations of the analysis

The analysis is based on the information contained in the declarations and therefore inherits the limitations of this type of source. It does not independently establish actual ownership beyond what is declared, does not verify each transaction with supporting documents, and does not draw conclusions regarding the legality of the acquisition of a specific asset.

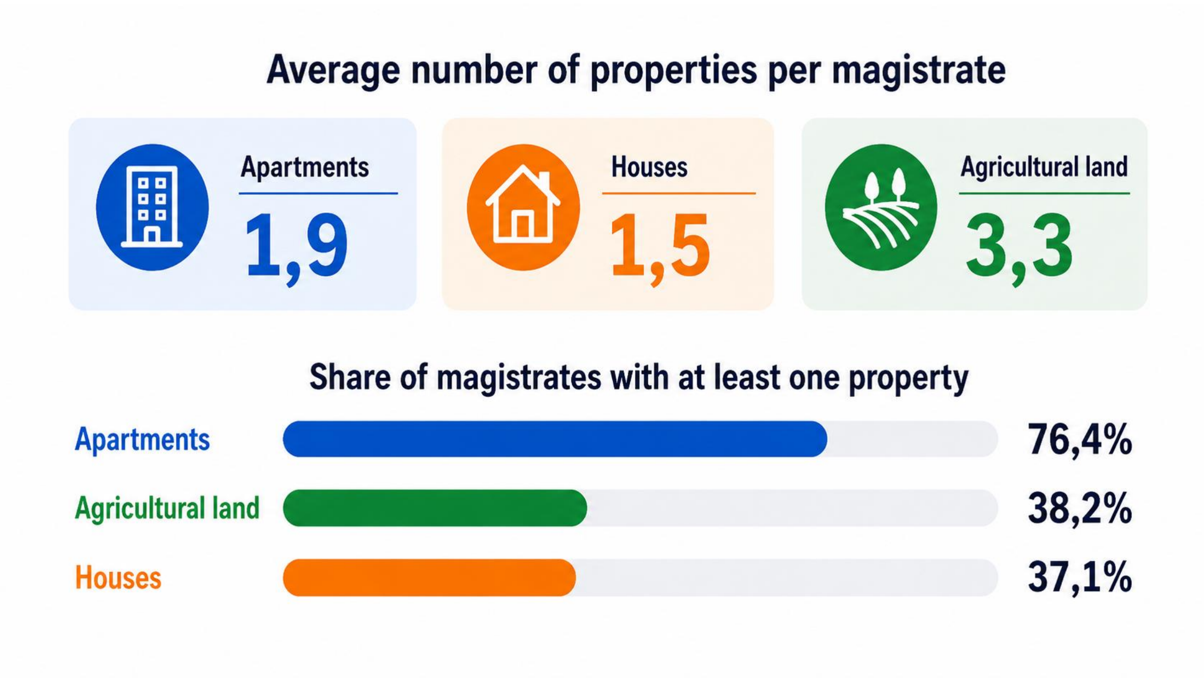
The data should be viewed as **a basis for public and institutional analysis of trends, concentrations, and patterns in declared assets**, rather than as evidence of individual violations. The main objective is to outline the scale, distribution, and interrelationships of the assets declared by magistrates, while exercising the necessary caution in interpreting aggregated values.

Real Estate owned by Magistrates in Bulgaria

As part of the project, the declarations submitted by magistrates to the Inspectorate of the Supreme Judicial Council, covering the period from 2016 to 2025, were analyzed. The declarations of 4 162 magistrates were reviewed, in which over 20 000 real estate properties and over 7 000 motor vehicles owned by them were declared. Although the declarations analyzed begin in 2016, they include properties acquired prior to that period; nevertheless, the focus is on the period from 2016 to 2025, which is also evident from the growth in acquired properties during this time.

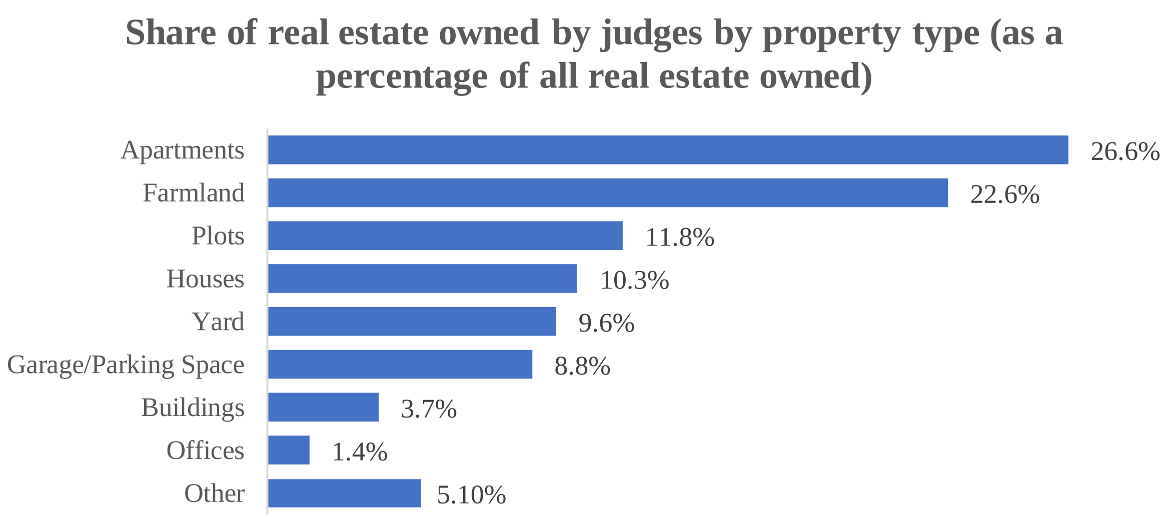


Apartments are the most common type of property among magistrates. 76% of them own at least one apartment, and the average number of apartments per magistrate is 1.9. 38% of magistrates own more than one apartment, with 3.6% owning five or more apartments. As for houses, 37% of magistrates own at least one house, with an average of 1.5 per person. More than a third—36.6%—own more than one house. 38% of magistrates own at least some agricultural land, with an average of 3.3 properties per owner. It should be noted that this category includes various types of agricultural properties—fields, gardens, and numerous fragmented plots of varying sizes.



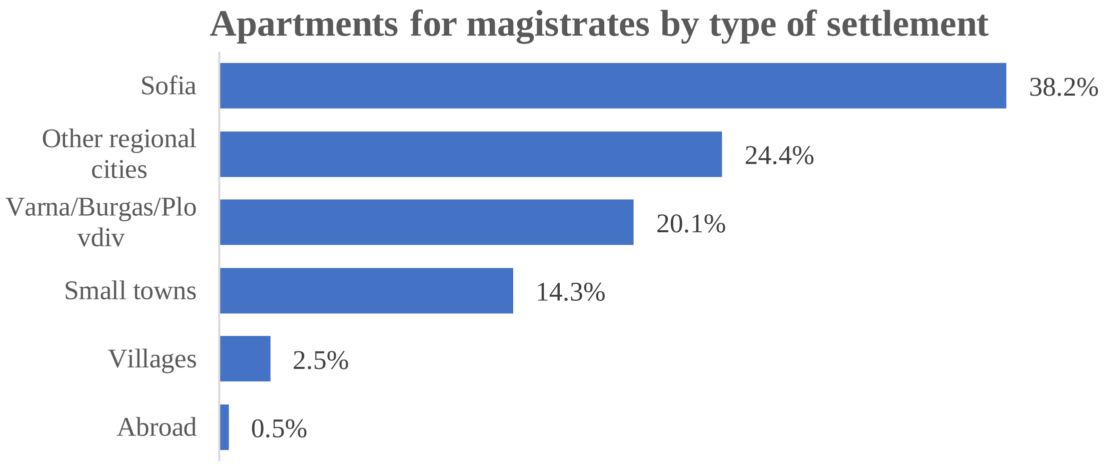
The distribution of owned properties shows that apartments account for the largest share—27% of all properties declared by magistrates. This is followed by arable land at 23%, highlighting the presence of agricultural land in their assets.

Regulated land properties account for 12% of the declared properties, and houses for 10%. Yards and garages/parking spaces also account for a significant share.



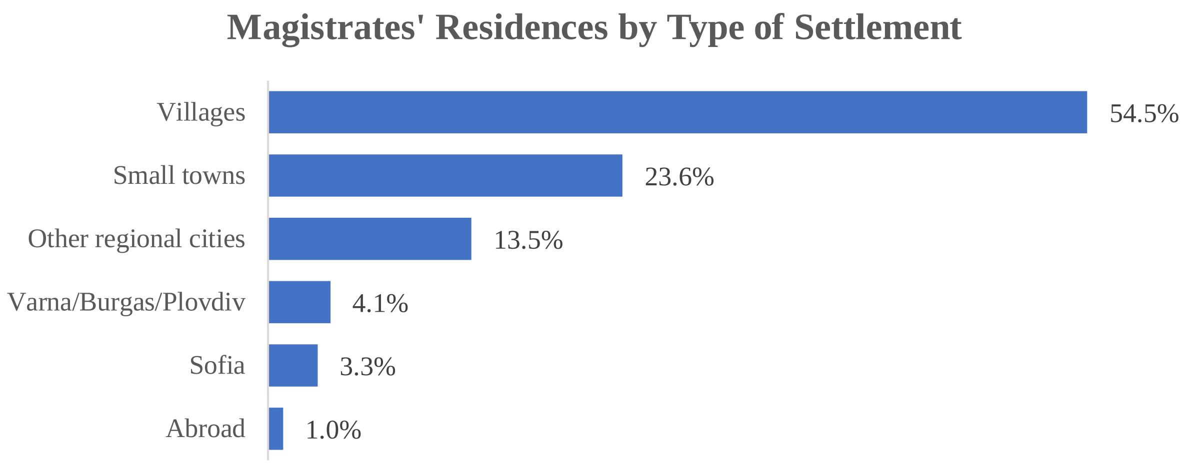
The largest share of apartments owned by magistrates is located in Sofia - 38% of the declared properties. In second place are other regional cities - 24%, followed by Varna, Burgas, and Plovdiv with a combined share of 20%. The share of apartments in small towns is significantly smaller. Only 2.5% of magistrates' apartments are located in a village.

The average value of **an apartment at current prices amounts to €178 649**, with the total value of **all declared apartments at current prices reaching €1 062 508 483**. The total living area of these apartments is 526 555 square meters, with **an average area of 86 square meters per apartment**.

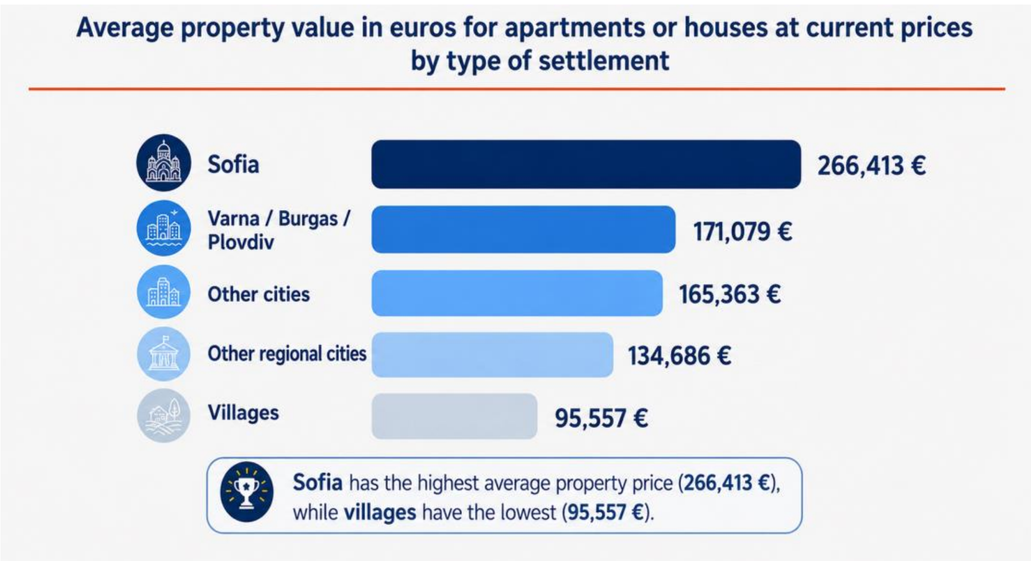


When it comes to the houses declared by magistrates, there is a concentration in smaller settlements. 55% of the houses are located in villages, and 24% in small towns. The shares of houses in regional cities and the capital are significantly smaller. This distribution of properties by type of settlement shows a trend for houses to be located primarily in smaller settlements and rural areas, unlike apartments, which are concentrated mainly in large cities and the capital.

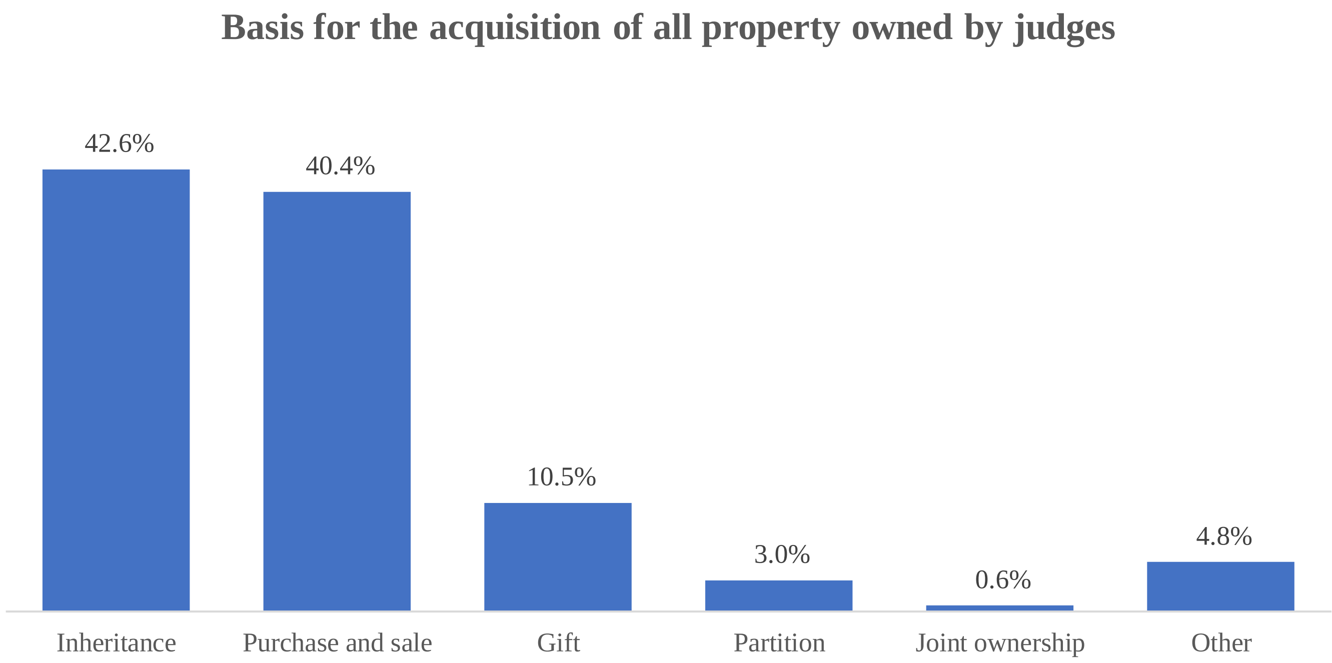
The average price of a house at current prices is €175 301, and the total value of the declared houses at current prices amounts to €395 804 702. The total built-up area of all houses is 387 872 square meters, with an average area of 167 square meters per property.



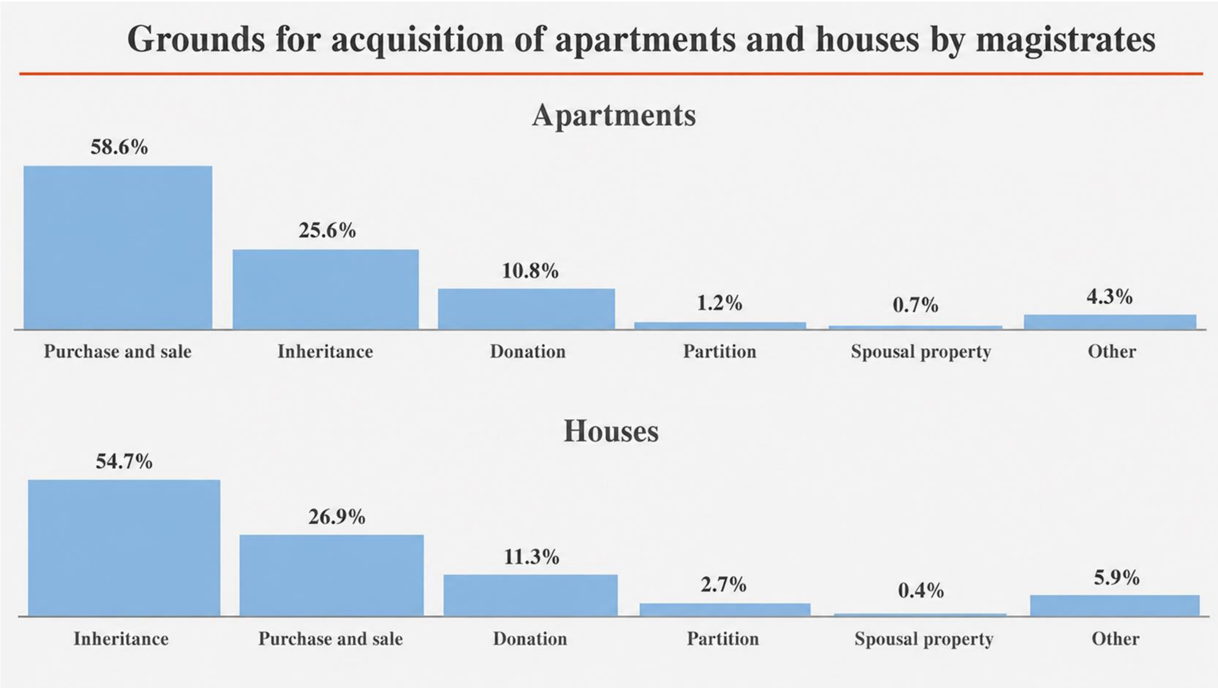
Significant differences in the average property value are observed depending on the type of settlement. Properties in Sofia have the highest average value—€266 413 at current prices—which confirms the capital's leading position in terms of real estate prices. Following Sofia are Varna, Burgas, and Plovdiv with an average value of €171 079 at current prices, as well as the other major cities with an average value of €165 363 at current prices. In other regional cities, the average property value reaches €134 686 at current prices. The average property value remains lowest in villages—€95 557 at current prices—which is nearly three times lower than the levels in Sofia. The data clearly shows a concentration of higher real estate values in the capital and major urban centers, while prices in smaller towns and rural areas remain significantly lower.



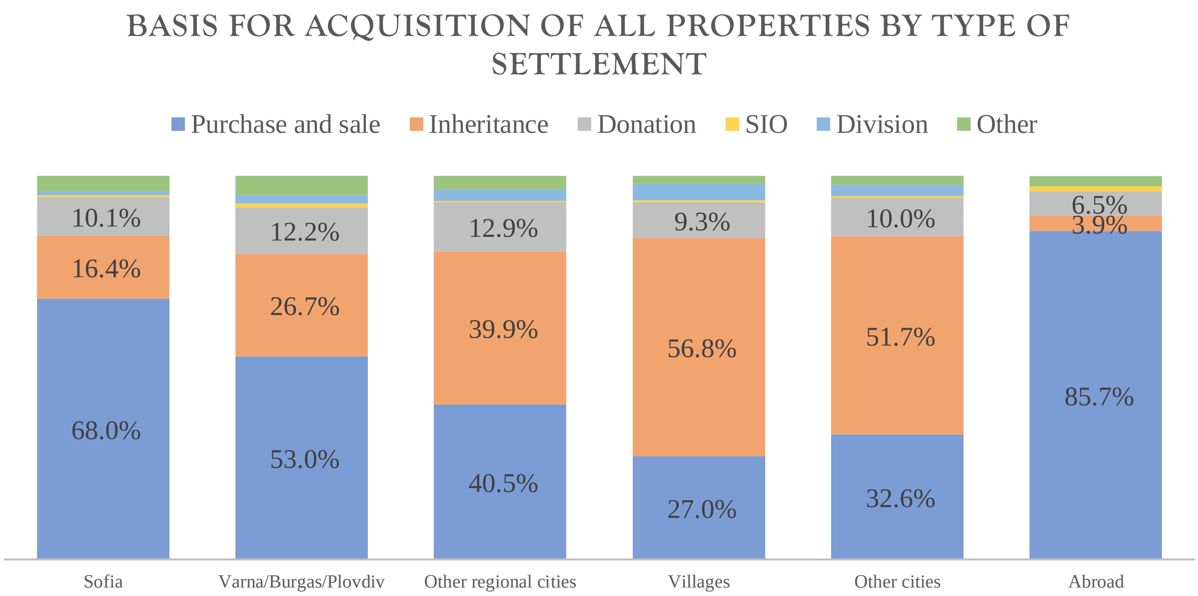
The main ways in which magistrates acquired the properties they declared were through **inheritance and purchase and sale**. Inherited properties account for the largest share - 43% of all declared properties. The share of properties acquired through purchase and sale is nearly equal - 40%. Donations account for 11% of all declared acquisitions, while division of property has a relatively limited share - 3%.



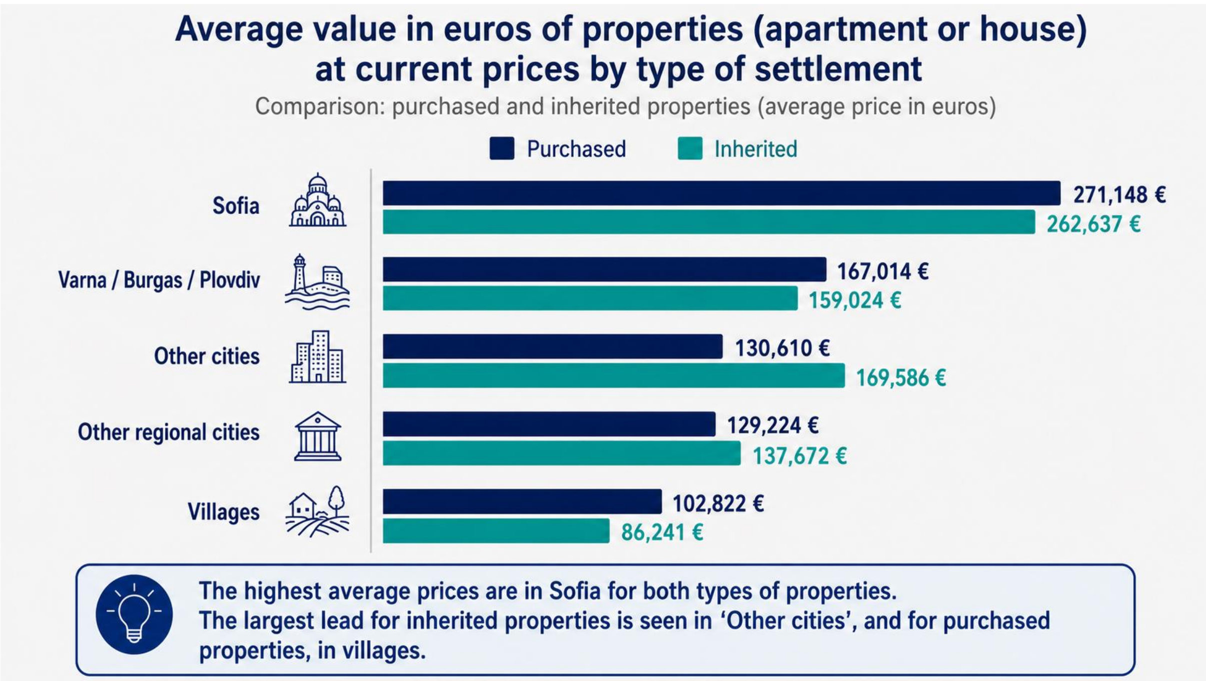
There are significant differences in how judges acquire apartments and houses. For apartments, purchases and sales predominate - 59%. Inheritance ranks second at 26%, followed by donations - 11%. For houses, more than half of the properties were acquired through inheritance. Sales account for a significantly lower share - 27%, while donations represent 11.3%.



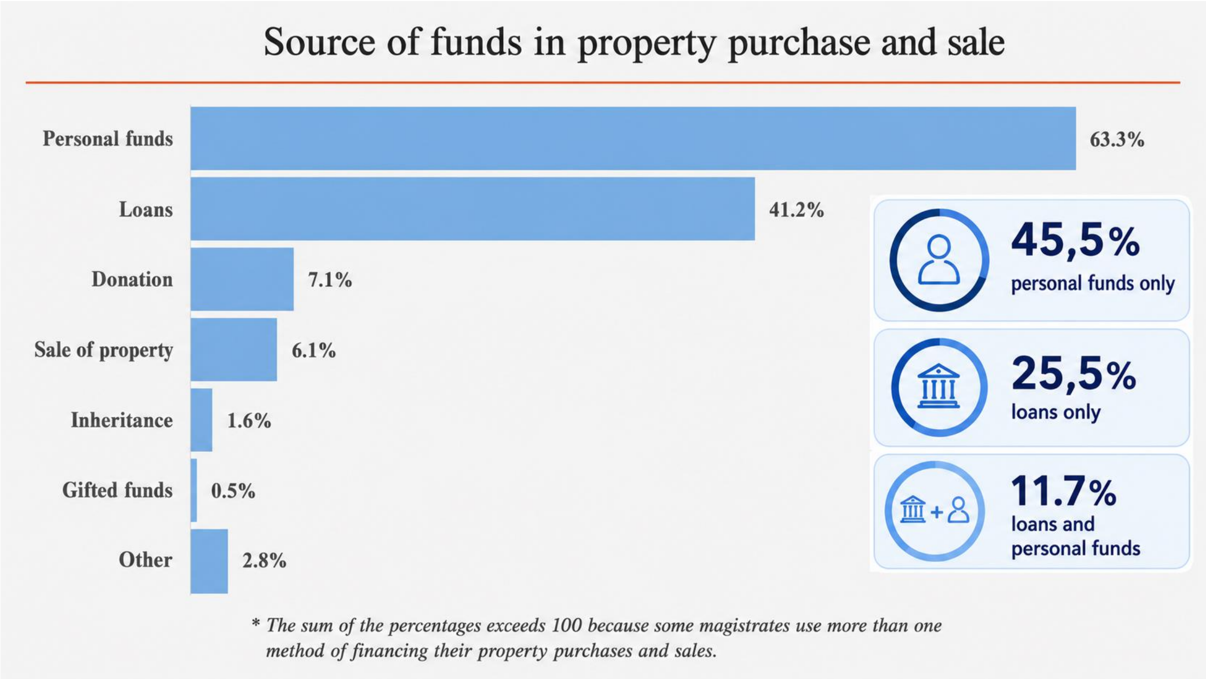
At the same time, in Sofia and the major regional cities, properties are most often acquired through purchase, while in villages and small towns, inherited properties predominate. These trends reflect both the professional mobility of magistrates and their ties to their hometowns and inherited family property.



A comparison between purchased and inherited properties reveals significant differences in average values <u>at current prices</u> depending on the type of settlement. The highest average values are observed in Sofia for both types of property. The average value of a purchased property in the capital reaches approximately 271 000 euros at current prices, while for inherited properties it is around 263 000 euros at current prices. High values are also observed in Varna, Burgas, and Plovdiv—an average of approximately 167 000 euros at current prices for purchased properties and 159 000 euros at current prices for inherited properties. The differences between the two types of ownership in these major urban centers remain relatively limited. In the "other cities" category, inherited properties have a higher average value—€169 586 at current prices, compared to €130 610 at current prices for purchased properties. This suggests the presence of inherited properties with higher value, better locations, or larger floor areas. A similar trend, albeit less pronounced, is observed in the other regional cities. In villages, the opposite relationship is observed—purchased properties have a significantly higher average value (€102 822 at current prices) compared to inherited ones (€86 241 at current prices). This can be explained by the acquisition of newer or more expensive rural properties used for investment or vacation purposes.



The analysis of **the source of funds** for property purchases is also of interest. **For 63% of the purchased properties, personal funds were used, and for 41%, bank loans**. In some cases, funds from donations, inheritances, or the sale of other property were also used. 45% of the properties were acquired entirely with personal funds, 25% entirely with a loan, and 11% with a combination of a loan and personal funds.



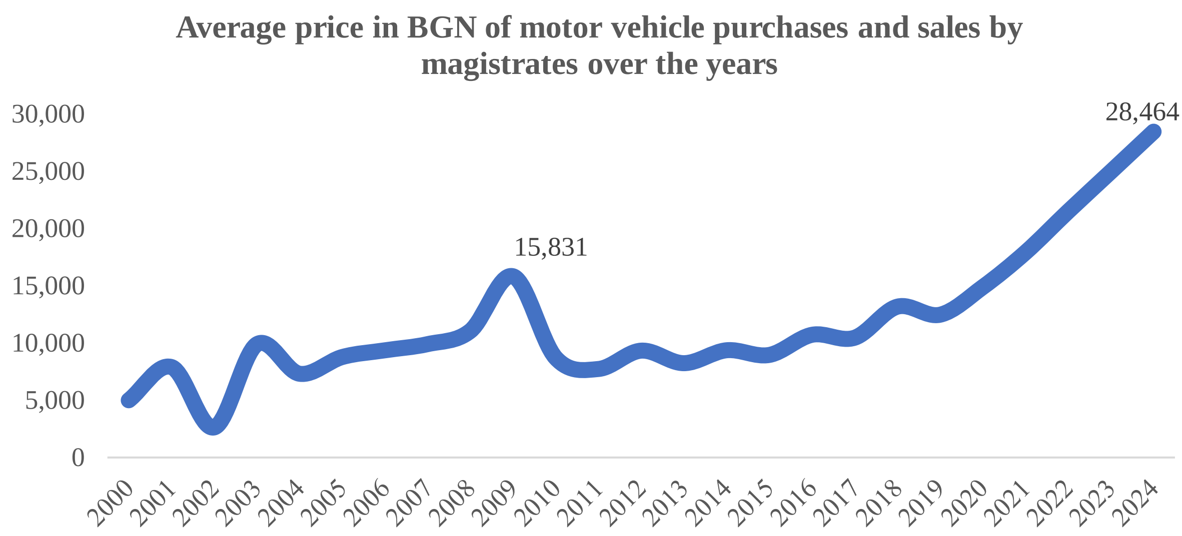
The data presented should also be viewed within the broader socio-economic context. Bulgaria has traditionally been among the countries with a high rate of homeownership; according to the latest data, approximately 85% of the population owns the home in which they live. In this sense, the ownership of real estate by magistrates largely reflects general economic trends and the profile of highly qualified professionals with relatively stable incomes.

Motor Vehicles Owned by Magistrates in Bulgaria

The project also examined the motor vehicles owned by magistrates. Similar to real estate, the majority of declared vehicles are concentrated after 2016, which is explained both by the specifics of the declaration process and by the natural dynamics of vehicle replacement. A trend is observed **after 2021–2022 for magistrates to acquire more expensive and newer**

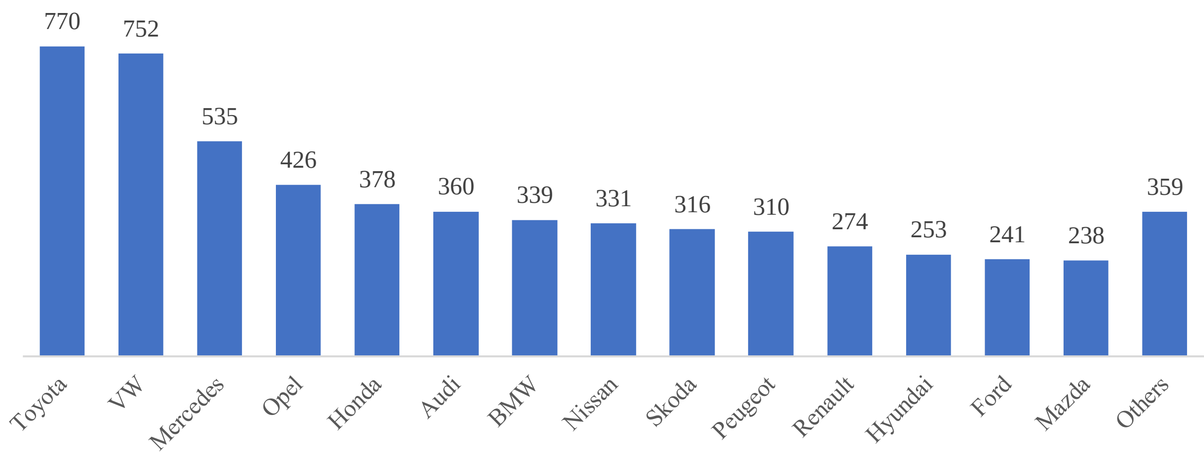
vehicles. While prior to this period the average value of the vehicles acquired remained below 15 000 BGN, a significant increase was subsequently reported.

An important methodological clarification should be made regarding the currencies used in presenting the data. Information on real estate is presented in euros, as appraisals are prepared at current market prices, and the real estate market traditionally operates primarily in euros. Data on motor vehicles, however, is presented in leva, as this is the currency in which the values are declared by magistrates in their asset declarations. In the analysis of motor vehicles, the values actually declared by the magistrates were used, without additional recalculation at current market prices. This distinction should be kept in mind when interpreting and comparing the presented data.



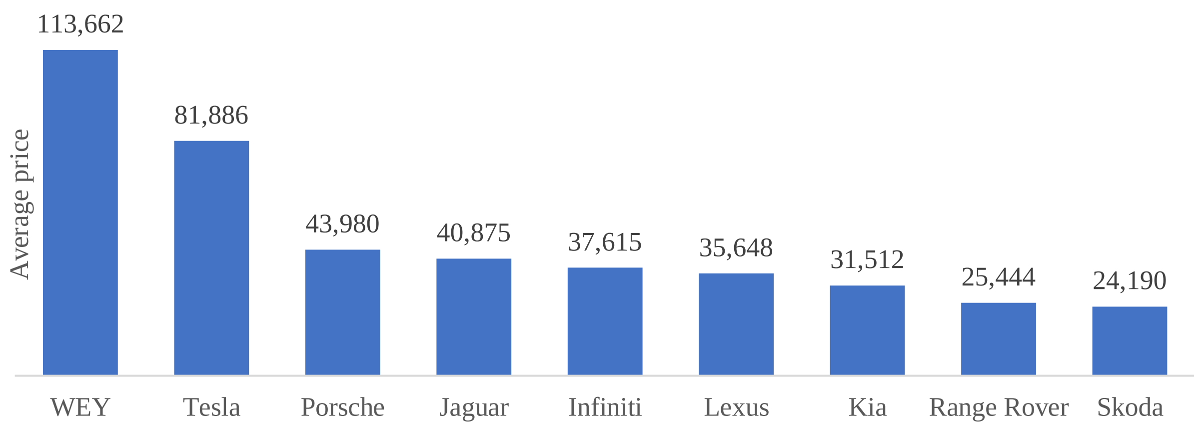
The most commonly owned car brands are Toyota, Volkswagen, Mercedes, Opel, and Honda, which largely corresponds to the structure of the country's vehicle fleet as a whole.

Top 15 vehicle brands owned by judges in Bulgaria (number)



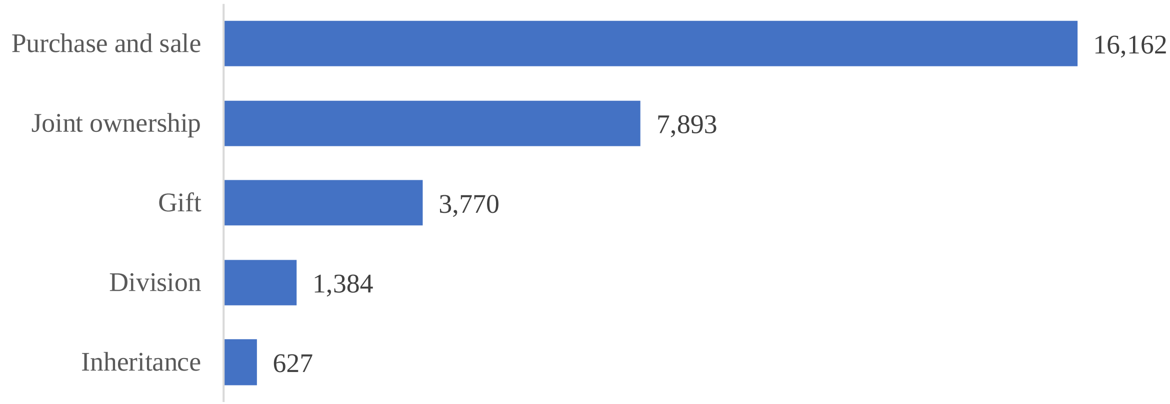
Regarding the average value of cars acquired through purchase and sale, the highest figures are observed for brands such as WEY, Tesla, Porsche, Jaguar, Infiniti, and Lexus. For some brands, such as Kia, isolated cases of particularly expensive models have been reported. The lowest average values are observed for older cars such as Moskvich and Trabant, which are likely inherited or have collector's value.

All vehicle brands sold by judges in Bulgaria: average price in BGN (1)



The data analyzed reveals differences in the average value of magistrates' motor vehicles depending on the method of acquisition. Vehicles acquired through purchase have the highest average price - 16 162 BGN. In second place are vehicles acquired under the joint ownership regime, with an average value of 7 893 BGN. The lowest average price is observed for inherited vehicles - 627 BGN.

Average price in BGN of motor vehicles owned by magistrates in Bulgaria, by method of acquisition



In summary, the analysis outlines a comprehensive picture of the financial status of Bulgarian magistrates, which **largely follows the general socio-economic trends in the country**. Alongside the prevailing pattern of standard financial security, the study also highlights **individual cases of significant concentration of property**, which are of interest from the perspective of future in-depth analyses and institutional oversight.

Recommendations

It is difficult to offer unambiguous recommendations for improving the work of an institution that is in a state of **chronic crisis**. This crisis is primarily due to the Inspectorate's excessive concentration of power through a series of constitutional and legislative amendments. The Inspectorate itself also exploited every legislative opportunity to seek additional powers—most notably through its desire to have a fully independent budget. The stated goal of the changes was for Bulgarian society to have a body sufficiently independent from other branches of government to conduct high-quality oversight, investigative, and analytical work regarding the work of magistrates, as well as to exercise control and provide protection (when necessary) regarding their integrity and conflicts of interest. For the time being, unfortunately, **the Inspectorate has failed to meet expectations of becoming a guarantor of transparency and integrity in the judicial system**. The Inspectorate also fails to fulfill its most important indirect role, namely to help restore the public's long-eroded trust in the judicial system. What can be changed or improved? This question concerns the overall work of the Inspectorate and is not limited to the issues addressed in this analysis.

1. It is necessary **to reduce political influence over the ISJC**, and this does not require new constitutional amendments. For now, it is sufficient to amend Article 44, Paragraph 3 of the Constitution. Currently, it allows only members of parliament to nominate candidates for chief inspector and inspectors.

Instead, magistrates' assemblies should be allowed to nominate candidates, in accordance with the principle of self-governance. Proposals to reduce this influence have already been made in some of the draft laws amending and supplementing the Judicial System Act. It is recommended that these be retained and even expanded when the Judicial System Act is next opened for amendments.

2. In the long term, the constitutional provision requiring a two-thirds qualified majority for the election of the Chief Inspector and inspectors should also be reviewed. What more than a decade ago seemed like a reasonable solution to balance political dependencies in the

formation of the Inspectorate has today turned out to be a difficult obstacle to overcome and has become a “dictate of the minority”;

3. Regarding **improving the work of the Inspectorate** in verifying integrity, independence, conflicts of interest, and damage to the prestige of the judiciary—the most important thing is to encourage its **proactivity**—increasing inspections and deepening cooperation with other bodies and institutions relevant to the information collected by the Inspectorate.

4. The ISJC must analyze the information it collects. This means not only presenting data but also producing thematic reports on identified problems, as well as follow-up reports on actual changes that have occurred.

Formally, the Inspectorate carries out these activities in strict accordance with the letter of the law. However, it is not fulfilling the vital role for which it was established. To date**, no magistrates have been adequately sanctioned by the Inspectorate** for their involvement in corrupt practices. **Judges’ declarations should be reviewed analytically**, not mechanically; to this end, the Inspectorate itself should call **for strengthened inter-institutional cooperation** and collaboration with institutions from foreign partner jurisdictions. This activity should also be linked to the reinstatement of a good practice from the time when the competent authority for processing magistrates’ declarations was the National Audit Office, namely **the creation of a public register of inspections conducted by other competent authorities** regarding magistrates, or at a minimum—the inclusion of the results of these inspections in the annual reports of the Inspectorate;

5. In the context of the above recommendation, consideration could be given at the legislative level to establishing **a public register of cases of conflict of interest** related to the Inspectorate’s powers to inspect magistrates under Article 175k of the Judicial System Act.

6. Finally, two technical recommendations regarding the declarations: since magistrates often submit a corrected declaration, it would be advisable to provide for this as a separate requirement within the declaration itself. Due to the current lack of such a provision, when

submitting corrections, magistrates again indicate that they are filing an annual declaration, which can lead to confusion.

7. To facilitate the search, processing, and analysis of submitted declarations, they should be published on the ISJC website in a machine-readable format.