



Freedom in the World 2016 - Bulgaria

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Freedom Status: Free

Aggregate Score: 80

Freedom Rating: 2.0

Political Rights: 2

Civil Liberties: 2

Quick Facts

Capital: Sofia

Population: 7,181,000

GDP/capita: \$7,712.80

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

Net Freedom Status: N/A

OVERVIEW

The coalition government led by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and his center-right party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), continued to function relatively effectively in 2015 despite the fallout from a 2014 banking crisis, very modest economic growth, a rising budget deficit, and a migrant crisis along the southern border. GERB easily won local elections held in October.

In May, the justice minister proposed a package of judicial reforms designed to increase the independence of the courts and reduce political influence. However, the parliament had rejected key provisions of the package by December, and the justice minister consequently resigned.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 33 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 11 / 12

The unicameral National Assembly, composed of 240 members, is elected every four years in 31 multimember constituencies. The president, elected for up to two five-year terms, is the head of state but has limited powers. The legislature chooses the prime minister, who serves as head of

government. In the 2011 presidential election, Rosen Plevneliev of GERB defeated Ivailo Kalfin of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in a runoff with 53 percent of the vote.

In the October 2014 parliamentary elections, GERB led with 84 seats, followed by the BSP with 39, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) with 38, the Reformist Bloc with 23, and the nationalist Patriotic Front with 19. A new populist party, Bulgaria without Censorship (BBT), took 15 seats, while the Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), a Socialist splinter group led by former president Georgi Parvanov, secured 11 seats. The ultranationalist Ataka party also won 11 seats. GERB leader Boyko Borisov returned as prime minister, having been in opposition since 2013, and the party formed a governing coalition with the Reformist Bloc, the ABV, and the Patriotic Front.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the elections were open and competitive, and fundamental rights were respected. In a departure from the 2013 elections, there were no prominent allegations of large-scale fraud that cast doubt on the overall validity of the voting. Nevertheless, monitors noted that certain electoral regulations, including campaign finance rules, were poorly enforced. Observers blamed the unusually low voter turnout of approximately 48 percent on voter fatigue and lackluster campaigns. As in previous national elections, accusations of vote buying and other irregularities undermined public confidence in the process.

Local elections and a referendum on electoral reform were held in October 2015. President Plevneliev had initiated the referendum, proposing that citizens approve obligatory voting, electronic voting, and a mixed electoral system that allows some members of parliament to be elected on a majoritarian basis. However, the parliament rejected two of these proposals, meaning only the question on electronic voting was included in the referendum. Voters ultimately approved the idea, but the result was not binding due to low turnout; the parliament would only be required to consider the initiative. In the local elections, GERB led with about a third of all council seats and the mayoralties of most major cities, while the BSP and DPS lost ground. The process was marred by hacking attacks on the website of the electoral commission and other state institutions, which critics of the electronic-voting proposal cited as a sign that the integrity of future elections could be at risk.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 14 / 16

A record eight parties won seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections, passing a 4 percent vote threshold required for representation. The center-left BSP lost more than half its seats, as did Ataka, which had allied itself with the unpopular BSP-led government. GERB, which was founded in 2006 and governed from 2009 to 2013, is one in a series of center-right parties to rise and fall in Bulgaria's multiparty system. Since the 2014 elections, several National Assembly members have left the parties they were elected with and declared themselves independents.

The law dictates that electoral campaigns must be conducted in the Bulgarian language. The ethnic Turkish minority is represented by the DPS, but the Romany minority is more marginalized. Small Romany parties are active, and many Roma reportedly vote for the DPS. Two Romany candidates won seats in the 2014 elections, whereas none had won in 2013. Ataka and smaller nationalist parties regularly use hate speech in their campaigns, targeting ethnic Turks, Roma, Jews, Muslims, and Syrian refugees, among other groups.

C. Functioning of Government: 8 / 12

Bulgaria, which joined the European Union (EU) in 2007, has struggled to meet the bloc's anticorruption requirements amid resistance from much of the political class. It was ranked 69 out

of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The collapse of Corporate Commercial Bank (KTB) in 2014 resulted from an example of collusion among the political and economic elite. The New Bulgarian Media Group, owned by the family of DPS politician Delyan Peevski, had consistently supported the party in power, and its rapid expansion was backed by KTB. In turn, the bank received a great deal of business from state-owned enterprises, creating a triangular relationship. A rift between Peevski and the bank's owner, Tsvetan Vassilev, allegedly triggered the run on KTB deposits that led to its takeover by the central bank.

In a positive development in 2015, the Supreme Administrative Court found that former GERB lawmaker Emil Dimitrov had improperly participated in the creation and adoption of legislation on health and smoking despite his family's involvement in the cigarette business, which amounted to a conflict of interest.

Civil Liberties: 47 / 60 (+1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 14 / 16

The constitution protects freedom of expression, including for the press. The media sector is pluralistic, but dependent on financial contributions from the state – often in the form of advertising – and on private business interests. Some foreign media firms have withdrawn from the struggling market in recent years, and domestic ownership has become more concentrated in the hands of wealthy Bulgarian businessmen, leaving Bulgarian media more vulnerable to political and economic pressures. News outlets often tailor coverage to suit the interests of their owners. Although the state-owned media generally provide balanced coverage, ineffective legislation leaves them exposed to political influence. The government does not restrict internet access.

Religious freedom is generally respected, but Muslims and members of other minority faiths have reported instances of harassment and discrimination, and some local authorities have blocked proselytizing or the construction of minority religious buildings.

The government does not restrict academic freedom, and there are no significant impediments to free and open private discussion.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

The authorities generally respect constitutional guarantees on freedom of assembly and freedom of association. Protests were held during 2015 on issues including proposed pay and benefit cuts for policemen and construction projects in environmentally sensitive areas.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate freely and have a degree of influence, though they suffer from funding shortages, often rely on foreign donors, and sometimes face hostility from politicians and economic interest groups. NGOs are affected by corruption and nontransparent procedures for various tenders and grant competitions, especially those related to EU funding.

Workers have the right to join trade unions, but public employees cannot strike or bargain collectively, and private employers often discriminate against union members without facing serious repercussions.

F. Rule of Law: 10 / 16

Bulgaria's judiciary has benefited from legal and institutional reforms associated with EU accession, but practical gains in efficiency and accountability have been lacking. The EU has noted ongoing flaws in the judicial appointment and disciplinary processes.

In December 2015, the National Assembly gave its final approval to constitutional amendments that will divide the Supreme Judicial Council so that separate entities oversee judges and prosecutors. However, lawmakers, including those from GERB, rejected a package of additional reforms originally proposed by Justice Minister Hristo Ivanov of the Reformist Bloc, which were designed to reduce political influence over the judiciary. Ivanov consequently resigned.

In July, the National Assembly elected Maya Manolova as the country's human rights ombudsman in a secret ballot, sparking a public outcry from civil society organizations. Manolova was widely viewed as an unpopular, highly partisan political figure with deep roots in the BSP.

Organized crime has been a serious problem, and scores of suspected contract killings since the 1990s remain unsolved. Incidents of mistreatment by police have been reported, and conditions in many prisons remain inadequate.

Ethnic minorities, particularly Roma, face discrimination in employment, health care, education, and housing, though the government and NGOs operate a number of programs meant to improve their social integration. Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is illegal, but societal bias against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people reportedly persists.

The government continued to extend fencing along Bulgaria's southern border to block the irregular entry of migrants and refugees, which increased during 2015. Human rights organizations reported new incidents in which such people were allegedly abused by security forces and summarily expelled back across the border into Turkey. Early in the year, the government discontinued payment of a small monthly allowance to asylum seekers in the country, citing financial difficulties.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 12 / 16 (+1)

Bulgarians face no restrictions on the freedom of movement, whether for internal or external travel. They are also free to change residence and employment, though corruption and bias can sometimes restrict access to jobs. Authorities periodically demolish illegally constructed or irregular housing – mostly in areas occupied by Roma – without providing alternative shelter; several incidents of this kind were reported during 2015.

Bulgaria's shadow economy accounts for approximately one-third of the country's gross domestic product; corruption has been suggested as a key factor behind the phenomenon. Organized crime is believed to play an influential role in private business activity.

The constitution guarantees women equal rights, but gender discrimination is still a problem. Women account for about a fifth of the seats in the National Assembly. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, women are paid about 13 percent below the average of their male counterparts and receive 40 percent less in pensions than males. Domestic violence is an ongoing concern.

The country is a source of human trafficking victims, of whom Roma make up a disproportionately large share. Bulgarians are subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor elsewhere in Europe. Although the government makes some efforts to combat trafficking, shelter victims, and punish complicit officials, these measures have not matched the scale of the problem, and punishments remain light in practice.

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