



People gather to protest against the only nominee for Bulgaria's chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev, in Sofia, on October 23, 2019. © NIKOLAY DOYCHINOV/AFP via Getty Images

BULGARIA

Republic of Bulgaria

Head of state: **Rumen Radev**

Head of government: **Boyko Borisov**

Conditions in reception and detention centres for refugees and asylum-seekers remained inadequate. Domestic violence was widespread. A climate of xenophobia and intolerance intensified in the run-up to elections. Widespread discrimination against Roma, Jews and other minority communities resulted in incidents of violence and harassment. Journalists were threatened and prosecuted because of their work.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Reception and accommodation conditions, including food provision, for

migrants and asylum-seekers remained inadequate, despite the significantly reduced number of people entering Bulgaria.

Detention, including of unaccompanied children, remained a routine practice. Irregular migrants in detention centres had limited access to legal representation, interpretation or health care, including essential psychological and psychiatric care.

The authorities lacked systems to correctly identify asylum-seekers in particularly vulnerable situations and provide them with safe accommodation and adequate support.

Discrimination against certain groups resulted in some asylum-seekers facing an increased likelihood of having their applications rejected: people from countries including Pakistan, Iraq and

Algeria seemed to receive automatic rejections, while the recognition rate of Afghan nationals remained significantly lower than that in many other EU countries.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Bulgaria failed to ratify the Istanbul Convention following a sustained campaign by far-right groups, supported by the nationalist parties in the coalition government, and a 2018 Constitutional Court ruling declaring the Convention unconstitutional.

Domestic violence remained widespread, with significant under-reporting masking the true scale of the problem. Police failed to thoroughly investigate violence against women. Funding for shelters and support services was insufficient and

victims in some regions had no access at all to shelters or assistance.

In February, the National Assembly amended the country's criminal legislation to introduce tougher penalties for perpetrators of domestic violence. However, the measures were partial and insufficient. The Council of Europe asked Bulgaria to invest more in education and prevention programmes and provide consistent funding for shelters and psychological and other support for the victims of domestic violence.

DISCRIMINATION

Racist and intolerant rhetoric increased in the lead-up to European Parliament and local elections. The authorities not only failed to condemn hate speech, but some actively encouraged or engaged in it. Minority groups continued to be at risk of persistent discrimination and harassment.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights noted limited impact of the government's Roma integration strategy, with Roma remaining disproportionately affected by poverty and social exclusion and facing systemic barriers to education, housing, health services and employment.

In January, following violent anti-Roma protests in Voivodinovo triggered by an incident in which two Roma men assaulted a Bulgarian army officer, the authorities forcibly evicted and demolished the homes of local Roma leaving more than 50 people, including children, without alternative accommodation.

In April, several Roma homes in Gabrovo were burned down by a violent mob calling for the town to be "cleansed" of its Roma community, following widely

circulated footage that showed Roma men allegedly assaulting a shop owner. Nearly 80% of Gabrovo's 600 Roma fled the village as a result of the violence. Instead of providing police protection, the authorities instructed the Roma to flee, according to some members of the community and Roma rights activists.

The Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) party, a member of the coalition government, proposed a "Strategy for Integration of Unsocialized Roma", including measures to restrict welfare payments to Roma families, provide free abortions for mothers with more than three children, dismantle informal settlements and "eradicate crime in Gypsy ghettos". The proposed strategy was widely criticized by human rights organizations.

Political parties and government officials made discriminatory and xenophobic statements. Deputy Prime Minister Krasimir Karakachanov regularly used derogatory language about Roma and called for a "final solution to the Gypsy question". The government failed to unequivocally condemn his statements.

In January, the Supreme Administrative Court in Bulgaria ruled that Valery Simeonov, the former Deputy Prime Minister, was not liable for harassment resulting from openly anti-Roma public statements he had made in 2017, thereby overturning a rare lower court conviction for hate speech.

In February, over 2,000 members of far-right groups gathered in Sofia to honour a Bulgarian pro-Nazi general despite the opposition of Jewish groups and other political parties. Physical attacks against religious sites, including the desecration of cemeteries, continued throughout 2019.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) groups reported a rise in

the number of homophobic incidents. In July, a court officially recognized a marriage between two women who married in France. Despite the ruling, same-sex unions, which are explicitly prohibited by the Constitution, remained illegal.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In September, the VMRO asked the country's Prosecutor General to deregister the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, one of the oldest and largest human rights organizations in the country, accusing it of "unconstitutional, unlawful, immoral and openly anti-Bulgarian activities".

Journalists continued to face intense political pressure, threats and intimidation, as a significant portion of the media remained under the tight control of political parties. The authorities brought criminal charges against investigative reporters who exposed corruption scandals that potentially implicated senior government and judicial officials, while others routinely faced threats for their work.

Journalists who were publicly opposed to the government were particular targets. In September, a popular Bulgarian national radio channel came off air for several hours and its editor was suspended from her job after she had criticized the appointment of the new Prosecutor General, which sparked public protests.

Bulgaria remained the lowest ranking EU member state on the World Press Freedom Index, lagging even behind other countries in the Balkans. The NGO Reporters without Borders ranked Bulgaria 111th out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom.