

Freedom in the World 2022 - Bulgaria

Free

79

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 33 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 46 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

78 / 100 Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Multiple parties compete in Bulgaria's democratic system, and there have been several transfers of power between rival parties in recent decades. The country continues to struggle with political corruption and organized crime. Though the media sector remains pluralistic, outlets face increasing pressure to provide government-friendly coverage. Journalists at times encounter threats or violence in the course of their work. Ethnic minorities, particularly Roma, face discrimination. Despite funding shortages and other obstacles, civil society groups have been active and influential.

Key Developments in 2021

- Two parliamentary elections, held in April and July, failed to bring about the formation of a new government, sparking a months-long political crisis. The crisis was resolved when a third parliamentary election—held in November to coincide with the presidential election—resulted in the consolidation of a coalition government under Prime Minister Kiril Petkov.
- Though presidential powers are generally limited, President Rumen Radev took on a prominent political role between the April and November parliamentary elections, when in the absence of an elected parliament, he was required to appoint an interim government; Radev appointed two successive provisional governments during the year. Radev won reelection in November with 65.8 percent of the vote.
- Widespread anticorruption protests were held daily until April, when then prime minister Boyko Borisov left parliament; though Borisov's departure resolved one of the protesters' key demands, frequent antigraft protests continued throughout the rest of the year. Following the November elections, the newly formed coalition government of four "protest parties" announced a shared platform centered on anticorruption and judicial reform.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The president, directly elected for up to two five-year terms, is the head of state; the prime minister, who serves as head of government, is chosen by the legislature. Though presidential powers are generally limited, in the event that parliament cannot form a government, the president has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, schedule new elections, and appoint an interim government.

In November 2021, incumbent president Rumen Radev was reelected to the presidency for a second term after winning 65.8 percent of the vote in the second round of the presidential elections. Radev, an independent candidate, was supported by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the We Continue

the Change party (PP), and the antielite There is Such a People party (ITN). The election was assessed by international observers to be generally competitive and free, though some irregularities, including problems with voting machines, were noted.

In December, the newly elected parliament confirmed Kiril Petkov, a member of the PP, as prime minister.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The unicameral National Assembly, with 240 members, is elected every four years in 31 multimember constituencies.

Parliamentary elections were held as scheduled in April 2021. Though incumbent prime minister Boyko Borisov's ruling party, the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), won the highest percentage of the vote, the party lost its majority, and was unable to form a coalition government. Following the April elections, Radev appointed a provisional government and called for new parliamentary elections to be held in July. A second interim government was put in place after the July parliamentary elections also failed to result in the formation of a government.

A third round of parliamentary elections, held in November, was won by the PP, a newly launched centrist party. The PP, which received 25.5 percent of the vote, was able to form a coalition government with the BSP, the ITN, and the Democratic Bulgaria alliance (DB). After forming, the coalition—which occupies 134 seats in the National Assembly—announced that it will govern based on a shared anticorruption platform.

All three parliamentary elections held in 2021 were deemed to be generally competitive and free by international election observation missions. However, alleged instances of voter intimidation and vote-buying by various groups, including by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) party, were reported; such irregularities are persistent in economically and socially vulnerable communities. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) election observation mission also reported the “massive” misuse of government resources by the incumbent GERB during the April elections.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 3 / 4

The Central Election Commission (CEC) administers Bulgaria's elections and generally works professionally and impartially, though some flaws have been reported in past elections.

Controversial changes to the electoral code were introduced in September 2020, just months ahead of scheduled 2021 elections. The changes mandated a “mixed” mode of voting, using both paper ballots and voting machines; OSCE observers reported that the use of paper balloting led to a high percentage of invalid ballots in the April 2021 elections.

Substantial changes to the electoral framework were introduced between the April and July 2021 parliamentary elections, removing restrictions on voting abroad, reducing the CEC from 20 members to 15, and requiring the implementation of electronic voting as the only voting method. Though the short timeframe between the electoral code amendments and election day negatively impacted electoral administration, the electoral code reforms were generally accepted by both voters and political parties. In both the July and November elections, electronic voting reduced the incidence of invalid ballots; no evidence was found to support allegations of voting machine fraud made by GERB.

In November, contrary to provisions made in the May electoral reforms, the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) ruled that the CEC would not be permitted to use mandatory manual vote counts to certify the election results.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Bulgaria's party system is quite volatile, featuring both established parties like the BSP and DPS, as well as cycles in which new parties emerge while others decline or disappear. Several new parties emerged and gained power in 2020 and 2021, including both the ITN and the PP, members of the coalition government formed after the November 2021 parliamentary elections. The DB alliance, a third member of the governing coalition, was formed in 2018.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

There have been multiple peaceful transfers of power between rival parties through elections since the end of communist rule in 1990.

In 2021, the ruling GERB party lost its majority in the April 2021 parliamentary elections; a coalition of opposition parties came to power following the November parliamentary elections.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 3 / 4

Bulgarians are generally free to make independent political choices. However, limited public funding and unlimited private funding for political parties leaves parties vulnerable to the undue influence of private donors.

Prominent businessmen dominate major political parties and exert influence over party platforms and policy decisions. The problem of business influence is exacerbated by a lack of transparency in campaign finance law.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

While marginalized groups generally have full political rights, the law dictates that electoral campaigns must be conducted in the Bulgarian language, which hinders outreach to non-Bulgarian-speaking minority groups. The ethnic Turkish minority is represented by the DPS, but the Roma are more marginalized. Small Romany parties are active, and many Roma reportedly vote for the DPS, though none hold seats in the parliament. Courts have continued to deny registration to the political party OMO Ilinden, which seeks legal recognition of a Macedonian ethnic minority in Bulgaria; this issue was featured in a critical European Parliament resolution on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Bulgaria, adopted in October 2020.

Members of far-right nationalist parties have engaged in hate speech against Roma, ethnic Turks, Jews, Muslims, migrants, and refugees, among other groups, particularly during election periods.

Women are underrepresented in parliament, and the inclusion of women's issues in politics is generally lacking.

So-called oligarchs exert influence on the vote in smaller municipalities and within marginalized groups in particular, an issue referred to as the "controlled vote." Instances of controlled voting decreased following the May 2021 adoption of electoral reforms requiring electronic voting.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 3 / 4

Elected executive and legislative officials in general are able to set and implement policies without undue interference from external or unelected entities. However, "oligarch" politicians in the last several years have had increasing influence on policy making.

The informal influence on government of the nominally opposition party DPS and its honorary chair Ahmed Dogan, and the widespread perception that aspects of the state have been "captured" by dubious business figures, were among the triggers of the mass antigovernment protests in 2020.

The businessman and DPS lawmaker Delyan Peevski is also suspected of having had influence over policymaking, and of having played a role in securing the appointment of Ivan Geshev as the country's controversial prosecutor general. In July, as protests continued, Borisov replaced several of his cabinet ministers and GERB released a statement saying the dismissals were necessary to "eliminate insinuations that GERB and the three are directly controlled by the DPS and Peevski."

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

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. Anticorruption laws are not adequately enforced, including in high-profile cases, contributing to a culture of impunity.

The country remains subject to long-term monitoring by the EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), whose annual reports have called for new legislative efforts to combat corruption.

In 2020, mass antigovernment protests were launched in response to a series of corruption scandals involving both the prosecutorial office and a number of politicians. The resignations of Geshev and Borisov, both of whom are widely associated with corrupt practices within the government, were key demand of the protesters. Though Borisov left parliament following the April 2021 elections, Geshev remained in office at year's end.

The judiciary has been inefficient in tackling high-profile corruption cases; a 2021 report released by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) criticized the prosecutor's office for its persistent failure to investigate and prosecute cases of corruption.

The coalition government that formed following the November 2021 elections is made up of four "protest parties" that share an anticorruption platform centered on judicial reform.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

Although Bulgaria has laws meant to ensure that the government operates with transparency, they are only partially enforced. While the transparency in the work of Parliament, the cabinet, and municipal bodies has increased considerably in recent years, public access to information about budgets and spending of various government agencies is sometimes inadequate or presented in an inaccessible way.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

The constitution protects freedom of expression, including for the press, but journalists face threats and pressure from private owners or public media management. Even though the media sector remains pluralistic, many outlets are dependent on financial contributions from the state (through advertising), effectively resulting in pressure to run government-friendly material. Media ownership remains opaque.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 3 / and private? 4

Religious freedom is generally respected, but members of minority faiths in the mostly Orthodox Christian country have reported instances of harassment and discrimination, and some local authorities have prohibited proselytizing and other religious activities by such groups. A 2016 law that imposed fines for the wearing of face-covering garments in public locations was widely understood to be directed against Muslims.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political 4 / indoctrination? 4

Academic freedom is generally upheld in practice.

In April 2021 a professor was fired for criticizing a preelection university visit by the prime minister Borisov as politically motivated on social media; he was reinstated following public outcry.

Due to a pervasive lack of access to both the internet and digital devices, Roma students have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19-related online learning requirements. In 2020, the government offered to provide free internet access to Roma communities and local NGOs donated a number of electronic devices to students in need. The education ministry provided 20,000 computers and tablets to students at state and municipal schools in August 2021.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 4 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution. However, Bulgaria's criminal code allows for legal secret surveillance of citizens in a wide range of cases; in recent years, there has been increasing concern that authorities have misused such surveillance laws in order to monitor citizens who criticize the government.

In July 2021, then interim interior minister, Boyko Rashkov, testified that the prosecutor’s office had conducted illegal mass wiretapping of antigovernment protesters in 2020. His testimony was corroborated in September by leaked police documents that showed that the government had secretly wiretapped around 1,000 people who had participated in the protests.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

The authorities generally respect constitutional guarantees of freedom of assembly.

Mass antigovernment demonstrations erupted in July 2020; though state authorities generally respected the right to peaceful protest during the protests, on at least two occasions police used excessive force against participants, prompting criticism in the country and from international organizations. In 2021, it was revealed that the government had ordered the unlawful secret surveillance of roughly 1,000 protesters in 2020.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate freely and have a degree of influence, though they experience funding shortages, often rely on foreign donors, and sometimes face hostility from politicians and interest groups.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 3 / 4

Workers have the right to join trade unions, which are generally able to operate, but some public employees cannot legally strike. Collective bargaining is legal—collective contracts are listed in a specialized public registry. Trade unions are partners to the government and business in discussing public budgets and other issues (retirement age, pensions reforms, and healthcare reforms, for example), yet their voice and influence is weak.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

Bulgaria’s judiciary has benefited from legal and institutional reforms associated with EU membership and is generally considered independent, but is still prone to politicization. Despite significant legislation formally guaranteeing judicial independence, the members and governing bodies of the judiciary often act in accordance with the ruling majority.

A Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), responsible for judicial and prosecutorial appointments and management, was installed under revised rules in 2017, with half the members (six judges, four prosecutors, and an investigator) elected by their peers and half by a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Bulgarian legal observers have reported that in practice, requiring a two-thirds majority vote in parliament to appoint SJC members has allowed political parties—including minority parties such as DPS—to exert undue influence over the selection and appointment of the country’s top magistrates.

Tensions have increased in recent years between the prosecutor general’s office and some of the courts, with high-ranking prosecutors verbally attacking the Supreme Court of Cassation (SCC), its court decisions, and its chair. The SJC, taking the side of the prosecutors, has launched disciplinary procedures against judges critical of it, which are widely seen as politically motivated.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 2 / 4

Constitutional rights to due process are not always upheld. Police have been accused of misconduct, including arbitrary arrests and failure to inform suspects of their rights. Public trust in the justice system is low due to its reputed vulnerability to political and outside pressure.

The long seven-year mandate granted to the prosecutor general and the lack of effective accountability mechanisms have long been noted as major problems with the prosecutorial office, weakening due process and rule of law in the country. In July 2020, the Constitutional Court ruled that any prosecutor may launch an investigation on the activities of the prosecutor general; however, the prosecutor general’s strong position both with regard to career promotion, and within the SJC, does not *de facto* permit such investigations to take place. This leaves the most powerful figure within the judicial system without effective mechanisms of control over their actions.

A series of scandals involving the prosecutorial office, including alleged raids of private businesses, actions suppressing voices critical of the government, as well as a raid of the offices of the Bulgarian president, were among the triggers of the 2020 antigovernment protests.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Although the population faces few acute threats to physical security, police brutality, including abuse of suspects in custody, remains a problem. Overcrowding and violence plague many of Bulgaria's prisons. Organized crime is still a major issue, and scores of suspected contract killings since the 1990s are unsolved. A September 2021 report found that authorities had committed severe civil rights violations against citizens during the 2020 antigovernment protests, including the disproportionate use of force by police.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

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. Authorities periodically demolish illegally constructed or irregular housing—mostly in areas occupied by Roma—without providing alternative shelter.

COVID-19-related lockdown measures left many Roma unable to access basic services in 2020 and 2021; the Romany minority was also subject to disproportionately severe pandemic-related restrictions throughout 2020. Human rights watchdogs in the country and abroad raised serious concerns that COVID-19 had exacerbated racism against the Roma in Bulgaria.

Migrants and asylum seekers have reportedly faced various forms of mistreatment by Bulgarian authorities, including beatings and extortion.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is illegal, but societal bias against LGBT+ people persists. Throughout 2021, several LGBT+ events were disrupted, and in October, Rainbow Hub—a well-known LGBT+ organization in Sofia—and its employees were violently attacked by a mob allegedly led by a far-right political figure. Anti-LGBT+ violence is significantly underreported in Bulgaria, and largely goes unaddressed by authorities. However, following the October attack on Rainbow Hub, several politicians and the prosecutor's office announced that they plan to propose legislation that will allow homophobic attacks to be prosecuted as hate crimes.

A gender equality law passed in 2016 was designed to foster equal opportunity for women, but discrimination in employment persists: women are employed less often and paid less than men.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

For the most part, Bulgarians have faced few major restrictions on their freedom of movement. However, the government restricts the ability of asylum seekers to move outside of the district where they are housed.

In 2020, the COVID-19-related state of emergency featured selective blockades of mostly Romany-populated neighborhoods in several towns. These discriminatory restrictions were discontinued in 2021, though the state of emergency was extended through the end of the year.

Corruption and bias can sometimes hamper efforts to change one's place of employment.

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because disproportionate and discriminatory COVID-19 movement restrictions issued against members of the Romany minority were rescinded during the year.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 3 / 4

The legal and regulatory framework is generally supportive of property rights and private business, though property rights are not always respected in practice, and corruption continues to hamper business and investment. The gray economy of undeclared business activity has been estimated at over 20 percent of the country's economy. Attempts at business raiding, including with the suspected assistance of state institutions and the prosecutorial office, are perceived to be on the rise and were among the triggers of the antigraft protests in 2020–21.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

The law generally grants equal rights to men and women regarding personal status matters such as marriage and divorce. Domestic violence remains a problem. People who have experienced domestic violence and NGOs addressing gender-based violence claim that state authorities are often ineffective in providing protection and pursuing criminal charges when abuse is reported.

Same-sex marriage is illegal in Bulgaria, and same-sex couples are barred from adopting children.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

Labor laws provide basic protections against exploitative working conditions, but they do not extend in practice to gray-market employment. Roma and other ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation. Although the government has continued to step up efforts to combat trafficking, shelter victims, and punish perpetrators, these measures have not matched the scale of the problem, and punishments remain light in practice.

ecoi.net summary: 
Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2021

Country:
Bulgaria

Source:
[Freedom House](#)

Original link:
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2022>

Document type:
Periodical Report

Language:
English

Published:
28 February 2022

Document ID:
2071856

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583
F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
Imprint & Disclaimer
F.A.Q.
Data Protection Notice

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

