



Document #2089428

AI – Amnesty International

Amnesty International Report 2022/23; The State of the World's Human Rights; Bulgaria 2022

Media freedom further deteriorated as journalists were subjected to threats, intimidation and abusive litigation. Migrants and asylum seekers faced pushbacks. Domestic violence increased. Courts found discrimination against Roma during riots in 2019. People with disabilities faced persistent discrimination.

Background

In June, the reformist coalition led by Kiril Petkov lost a no-confidence vote, triggering an early parliamentary election in October. Galab Donev took on the role of caretaker prime minister in August. The former prime minister Boyko Borissov's GERB party won most seats but failed to win a clear majority, likely leaving the country in a state of protracted political crisis.

Freedom of expression

ecoi.net summary:
Report on the human rights situation covering 2022

Country:
Bulgaria

Source:
[AI – Amnesty International](#)

Original link:
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/bulgaria/report-bulgaria/>

Document type:

Journalists and independent media outlets reporting on organized crime, corruption or minority rights faced persistent threats and harassment and were frequently victims of abusive litigation by public officials and business people. An Association of European Journalists' survey indicated that one in two journalists in Bulgaria faced undue pressure and one in 10 had been threatened with court action. This had a chilling effect on reporting and resulted in increased self-censorship. Journalists and human rights defenders living outside of the capital, Sofia, were particularly vulnerable to intimidation.

Major media outlets continued to be controlled by politicians and oligarchs, further undermining editorial independence and limiting access to information.

In November, the parliament adopted at first reading amendments to harmonize the Criminal Code with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings on freedom of expression. The amendments would remove the existing provision treating the defamation of a public official as an aggravating circumstance and reduce excessive and disproportionate fines for defamation.

In November, the Revival party proposed legislation which would publicly label individuals and organizations who received financial support from foreign sources as "foreign agents", fine them for failing to disclose foreign donations and prohibit them from carrying out political or educational activities. Civil society organizations warned that the law would undermine freedom of expression and association.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

There was a sharp rise in the number of refugees and migrants who arrived at the border with Türkiye. Authorities recorded over 85,000

Periodical Report

Language:
English

Published:
27 March 2023

Available on ecoi.net
since:
28 March 2023

Document ID:
2089428

arrivals, more than double the 2021 number. Summary returns, sometimes accompanied by violence, remained widespread.

Rights organizations reported continuing discriminatory practices in the asylum system, with applications by nationals of certain countries, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Morocco and Tunisia, being automatically rejected.

Bulgaria received nearly 1 million Ukrainians, mostly women and children, and provided access to healthcare, social services and education to 150,000 who registered for temporary protection. Many refugees left after September amid growing uncertainty about the government's extension of the hotel accommodation scheme. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, urged the authorities to provide a lasting solution for accommodation of refugees.

On several occasions, the authorities provisionally accommodated Ukrainian refugees, including families with children, in a temporary accommodation centre in Elhovo, which was designed as a detention facility for people entering irregularly. The NGO the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee highlighted inadequate and undignified conditions at the Elhovo centre.

In August, an appeals court in Varna overturned an earlier district court decision that had approved the extradition to Russia of Aleksei Alchin, a Russian national who had criticized the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The appeal court said that due to Aleksei Alchin's political beliefs, his rights would likely be violated upon his return.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Cases of domestic violence, which spiked during the Covid-19 pandemic,

continued to rise.

Amendments to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence and the Criminal Code, aimed at further harmonizing domestic legislation with international standards and strengthening protection for victims, had not been adopted by the end of the year.

The Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner asked the authorities to urgently address the severe lack of support services for victims of domestic violence in all parts of the country.

LGBTI people's rights

In June, a court in Sofia ordered Boyan Rassate, the Bulgarian National Union Party's candidate in the 2021 presidential election, to pay a BGN 3,000 (EUR 1,500) fine for a break-in at an LGBTI community centre – the Rainbow Hub – in 2021, during which the facility was vandalized and an activist assaulted. He was cleared of charges of assault.

In June, the ECtHR called on Bulgaria to pay compensation to the mother of a young man killed in a homophobic attack in 2008. In line with Court's ruling, in December, the Council of Ministers proposed amendments to the Criminal Code, which would recognize homophobia as an aggravating circumstance in respect of certain crimes against the person, including murder.

The authorities failed to take steps to develop a national strategy and an action plan to combat discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Discrimination

In October, the ECtHR ruled that the authorities violated the right to private and family life of the Roma residents of Voivodinovo who were driven from their homes during the violent anti-Roma protests in 2019, and ordered the authorities to pay compensation. In August, the national Commission for Protection against Discrimination said that the expulsion of Roma from Voivodinovo was an act of discrimination.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance urged the authorities to do more to tackle hate speech and prejudice against Roma.

Right to privacy

In a ruling in January, the ECtHR found that Bulgaria's laws on secret surveillance were in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Court said that the laws failed to provide sufficient safeguards against arbitrary or abusive surveillance and that there was insufficient oversight against unnecessary and disproportionate access to stored communications data.

Rights of people with disabilities

In two separate cases, the ECtHR ruled that Bulgaria had violated the right to vote of two people with a mental disability who were under partial guardianship. It found that Bulgaria's de facto blanket ban on people affected by a mental disability voting was disproportionate and unjustifiable. The Constitutional Court refused to provide an interpretation of the national legislation relating to the right of people with a mental disability to vote, stating that the relevant provisions in the Constitution were sufficiently clear.

The authorities reiterated their commitment to closing specialized institutions for adults with disabilities. However, rights organizations said

that the government needed to improve community-based services to provide a dignified alternative to group accommodation in institutions.

In June, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture urged Bulgaria to urgently adopt measures to address poor living conditions and physical neglect in social care homes.

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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.

