

Freedom in the World 2017

Bulgaria

Profile

Freedom Status:

Free



Freedom in the World Scores

Created with Highcharts 5.0.14Aggregate Score80/10080/10080/10080/100

(0=Least Free, 100=Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 2/7

Created with Highcharts 5.0.142/72/72/72/72/72/7**Political Rights**

Created with Highcharts 5.0.142/72/72/72/72/72/7**Civil Liberties**

(1=Most Free, 7=Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population:

7,100,000

Capital:

Sofia

GDP/capita:

\$6,993

Press Freedom Status:

Partly Free

REPORT NAVIGATION

Overview:

Multiple parties compete in Bulgaria's democratic electoral 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, and the political discourse is marred by hate speech against minority groups and foreigners, especially from smaller right-wing parties. While the media sector remains pluralistic, ownership concentration is a growing problem, and news outlets often tailor coverage to suit the interests of their owners. Journalists sometimes 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 2016:

- Rumen Radev, a candidate endorsed by the center-left opposition, defeated a government-backed rival in the November presidential election. Incumbent Rosen Plevneliev had decided not to seek reelection.
- Following the election, the right-leaning prime minister resigned, meaning snap parliamentary elections would likely be held in early 2017.

- In September, amid growing nationalist hostility toward Muslim migrants, the parliament passed a nationwide ban on face-covering clothing in public places.

Executive Summary:

A coalition government led by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and his center-right party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), held power for most of 2016. However, it began to weaken in May, when the left-leaning Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV) party withdrew its support.

One of the reasons for ABV's withdrawal was disagreement over electoral reforms ahead of the November presidential election. In April, the parliament had adopted a series of changes, including the introduction of mandatory voting and the limitation of voting sites abroad to embassies and consulates. Individuals who failed to vote in two successive elections of the same type would be removed from the registry, meaning they would have to reregister to vote again. The national ombudsman appealed the mandatory voting provision to the Constitutional Court, which was considering it at year's end. Meanwhile, President Plevneliev, responding to objections from civil society and the ombudsman, vetoed the provision on voting abroad in May, and in July lawmakers adopted a new version allowing up to 35 polling sites per country. The rule was modified again in October, authorizing more than 35 sites in European Union (EU) member states.

The presidential election was held in two rounds in early November. After leading in the first round, former air force commander Rumen Radev—an independent supported by the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)—defeated GERB parliament speaker Tsetska Tsacheva, taking more than 59 percent of the vote. In light of his candidate's upset defeat, Borisov resigned as prime minister, meaning snap parliamentary elections were likely to be called in early 2017.

Voters in the presidential election also cast ballots for a referendum on electoral reforms initiated by a popular television personality. Although turnout fell short of a threshold that would have made the referendum binding, participants overwhelmingly supported cutting state subsidies to political parties and switching from a party-list system to a two-round majoritarian system for parliamentary elections.

Separately during the year, the parliament continued to work on judicial reform, adopting two packages of legal amendments in March and July that were designed to help improve transparency and independence among judges and prosecutors.

In September, lawmakers approved a ban on face-covering clothing in public places, with escalating fines for repeat offenses. The measure was introduced by the nationalist Patriotic Front, part of the ruling coalition. In December, the parliament adopted counterterrorism legislation that allows the president to declare an emergency and empower authorities to curb civil liberties following a broadly defined terrorist act. The law also permits officials to limit the movement of terrorism suspects as a preventive measure.

The flow of migrants into Bulgaria appeared to ebb slightly in 2016, with some 19,400 asylum applications reported, compared with about 20,400 in 2015. A new EU border agency began assisting the country in patrolling its frontier with Turkey in October. Human rights groups noted continued reports of mistreatment of migrants and refugees by both security forces and highly publicized vigilante groups that conducted their own border patrols. Some vigilante figures faced criminal charges at year's end. In November, police clashed with migrants who rioted after their reception center was sealed off in response to false media reports about infectious disease at the site.

Political Rights

POLITICAL RIGHTS 33 / 40

A. Electoral Process 11 / 12

- A1. Is the head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?
- A2. Are the national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?
- A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair?

B. Political Pluralism and Participation 14 / 16

- B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system open to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?
- B2. Is there a significant opposition vote and a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?
- B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group?
- B4. Do cultural, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

C. Functioning of Government 8 / 12

- C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?
- C2. Is the government free from pervasive corruption?
- C3. Is the government accountable to the electorate between elections, and does it operate with openness and transparency?

Civil Liberties

CIVIL LIBERTIES 47 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief 14 / 16

- D1. Are there free and independent media and other forms of cultural expression?
- D2. Are religious institutions and communities free to practice their faith and express themselves in public and private?
- D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free of extensive political indoctrination?
- D4. Is there open and free private discussion?

E. Associational and Organizational Rights 11 / 12

- E1. Is there freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion?
- E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations?
- E3. Are there free trade unions and peasant organizations or equivalents, and is there effective collective bargaining? Are there free professional and other private organizations?

F. Rule of Law 10 / 16

- F1. Is there an independent judiciary?
- F2. Does the rule of law prevail in civil and criminal matters? Are police under direct civilian control?
- F3. Is there protection from political terror, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system? Is there freedom from war and insurgencies?
- F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights 12 / 16

- G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of travel or choice of residence, employment, or institution of higher education?
- G2. Do individuals have the right to own property and establish private businesses? Is private business activity unduly influenced by government officials, the security forces, political parties/organizations, or organized crime?
- G3. Are there personal social freedoms, including gender equality, choice of marriage partners, and size of family?
- G4. Is there equality of opportunity and the absence of economic exploitation?

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Explanatory Note:

This country report has been abridged for *Freedom in the World 2017*. For background information on political rights and civil liberties in Bulgaria, see *Freedom in the World 2016*.

Aggregate Score:

80

Freedom Rating:

2.0

Political Rights:

2

Civil Liberties:

2