



Freedom in the World 2014 - Bulgaria

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2014 Scores

Status: Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 2.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 2

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 2

OVERVIEW

The center-right government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and his Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party resigned in February 2013 amid a wave of protests that included several fatal self-immolations. The protests were triggered by a sharp rise in electricity prices, but demonstrators aired broader grievances related to persistent poverty, official corruption, and an entrenched nexus of political, business, and organized crime interests in the country.

President Rosen Plevneliev appointed a technocratic caretaker government that served until parliamentary elections were held in May, two months ahead of schedule. GERB emerged with a plurality, but it was unable to form a majority coalition. The opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) consequently formed a government with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a mainly ethnic Turkish party, that controlled exactly 50 percent of the legislature and relied on support from the ultranationalist Ataka party to produce a quorum and pass legislation.

The government's June appointment of a controversial 32-year-old media tycoon as head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS) ignited fresh protests, and although the decision was quickly reversed, large demonstrations continued through the end of the year. The mostly peaceful protesters sought deeper democracy and rule of law, and expressed frustration with the entire political class. They demanded the government's resignation and proposed electoral reforms that would open the door to new parties or even nonpartisan candidates. Meanwhile, Plevneliev expressed support for the protesters and defied the government with a rare budget veto in early August, though it was soon overturned. European Union (EU) justice commissioner Viviane Reding also voiced sympathy with the demonstrators, saying their anticorruption demands matched those of the European Commission.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 31 / 40 (-3)

A. Electoral Process: 10 / 12 (-1)

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.

Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) generally praised the conduct of the May 2013 parliamentary elections, but noted an election-eve incident in which prosecutors seized hundreds of thousands of extra ballots from a printer owned by a GERB municipal official. The printer maintained that the ballots were set aside due to production defects, but prosecutors disputed that claim, and opposition parties held press conferences on the day before the election, alleging a possible fraud plot. GERB complained that the accusations violated a mandatory 24-hour period of media silence before election day. Observers noted widespread allegations of vote buying and other irregularities, with prosecutors opening dozens of criminal investigations. According to Transparency International Bulgaria, the number of registered complaints about alleged violations was significantly higher than in 2011 and 2009.

Amid low turnout of 51.3 percent, four factions won seats, down from six in the previous elections. GERB led the voting with 97 seats, followed by a BSP-led electoral bloc with 84, the DPS with 36, and Ataka with 23. The BSP formed a coalition government with the DPS, relying on support from Ataka to achieve a simple majority. Plamen Oresharski, a former finance minister who was elected on the BSP list but is not a party member, became prime minister, and some cabinet posts were assigned to nonpartisan technocrats.

Delyan Peevski, the DPS lawmaker and media mogul whose June appointment as DANS director set off renewed protests, was required to give up his parliamentary seat in order to take the new post. However, a court ruled in October that he was still a member of parliament because the chamber had not formally voted on his departure as a lawmaker before the DANS appointment was reversed. The ruling triggered clashes between police and protesters.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 14 / 16 (-1)

The BSP has long represented the center-left, while GERB, which was founded in 2006 and took power in 2009, is the latest in a series of center-right parties to rise and fall in Bulgaria's multiparty system. In a sign of disaffection with the major parties, about a quarter of voters in the May 2013 elections chose small parties that failed to cross the 4 percent threshold to win seats.

Electoral campaigns must be conducted in the Bulgarian language. While the ethnic Turkish minority is represented by the DPS, the Romany minority is more marginalized. Small Romany parties are active, and many Roma reportedly vote for the DPS, but the parliament elected in 2013 was reportedly the first since 1991 to include no Romany members, down from one member in the previous parliament. Moreover, Ataka and smaller nationalist parties regularly used anti-Roma rhetoric in their campaigns, and police efforts to combat vote buying in Romany areas may have had an intimidating effect, according to international observers. Nationalist parties also repeatedly used hate speech aimed at ethnic Turks, Muslims, and Syrian refugees, among other groups.

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12 (-1)

Corruption is a serious concern in Bulgaria. The Peevski affair touched off major protests because it was seen as a symbol of broader corrupt collusion among the political and economic elite. Peevski's New Bulgarian Media Group (NBMG), owned on paper by his mother, consistently supports whatever party is in power, and its rapid expansion has been backed by the Corporate Commercial Bank (KTB), owned by Tsvetan Vassilev. The bank in turn receives much business from state-owned enterprises, creating a triangular relationship. Peevski's appointment as DANS director was made with no public debate. Protesters denounced a number of other government

nominees and officials for their alleged links to powerful businessmen and, in at least one case, to organized crime. A recording leaked in April featured Borisov improperly discussing a corruption case against a former agriculture minister with the Sofia city prosecutor and the accused. Bulgaria was ranked 77 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although the leadership's lack of transparency and accountability were core grievances behind six months of daily protests that had broad support in Bulgarian society, the BSP-led government failed to respond to the demonstrators' demands for reform, reinforcing their sense of exclusion and causing an indefinite impasse.

Civil Liberties: 47 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 14 / 16

Bulgarian media have become more vulnerable to political and economic pressures as some foreign media firms withdraw from the struggling market and domestic ownership becomes more concentrated. NBMG controls about 40 percent of the print sector, the distributor for about 80 percent of newspapers, and the fourth-largest television broadcaster, among other assets. Although the state-owned media generally provide balanced coverage, ineffective legislation leaves them exposed to political influence. Journalists continued to face the threat of violence during 2013. Ataka leader Volen Siderov and his supporters were involved in at least two incidents, forcing their way into the public television station in June and assaulting a television crew from SKAT TV in July. A talk-show host was beaten by an unidentified attacker in June, and the vehicle of another host was set on fire in front of her home in September. Journalists covering a protest were reportedly attacked by police in one instance in July. The government does not place restrictions on internet access.

Religious freedom is generally upheld, 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, though students occupied many of the country's universities beginning in October 2013, shutting down classes in solidarity with the broader antigovernment protests.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

The authorities generally respect freedoms of assembly and association. The large and frequent protests during 2013 were generally peaceful and did not prompt widespread police abuses, although police beatings of demonstrators in February triggered Borisov's resignation. Another incident occurred during an attempt by protesters in July to blockade the parliament building; police ultimately dispersed the blockade using excessive and indiscriminate force, according to human rights groups. Police clashed with protesters outside the parliament again in November. A gay pride parade in Sofia proceeded without incident in September, having been postponed from June for security reasons.

Nongovernmental organizations operate freely, and the surge in activism and public engagement during 2013 was welcomed as a major awakening for Bulgarian civil society. 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. A large union federation announced in July 2013 that it would join the antigovernment protests.

F. Rule of Law: 11 / 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.

Organized crime is a serious problem, and scores of suspected contract killings over the past decade have gone unsolved. In March 2013, Interior Ministry officials were implicated in a scandal involving the illegal wiretapping of a wide range of political and business figures. Incidents of mistreatment by police have been reported, and prison conditions remain inadequate in many places.

Ethnic minorities, particularly Roma, continue to face discrimination in employment, health care, education, and housing. Discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal, but societal bias reportedly persists. Thousands of Syrian refugees entered the country during 2013, overwhelming government preparations and drawing hostility from ultranationalist groups. Anti-immigrant rallies were held in multiple cities in November, and some speakers were subsequently prosecuted for hate speech. A series of assaults targeting minorities, immigrants, and refugees were reported during the year.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 11 / 16

The informal, untaxed "shadow economy" accounts for a large share of the country's gross domestic product, and organized crime is believed to play an influential role in private business activity.

Women remain underrepresented in political life, accounting for just a quarter of the National Assembly seats after the 2013 elections, though the OSCE reported a high level of participation by women in the administration of the May elections. Domestic violence is an ongoing concern. The country is a source of human-trafficking victims, of whom Roma make up a disproportionately large share.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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