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Legislation aimed at protecting journalists and media freedom was proposed. A law protecting women from violence was not fully implemented. Inter-ethnic tensions were exacerbated by hate speech. At least 18,000 refugees and migrants were pushed back to Greece.

Background

Bulgaria continued to oppose North Macedonia's accession to the EU, claiming its history, cultural identity and language were Bulgarian. A solution proposed by France included recognizing the Bulgarian minority in the constitution for the first time; this was met with large public protests in July and political opposition. In September, the European Commission initiated a screening process towards eventual EU membership.

Right to truth, justice and reparation

Over 20 years since the internal armed conflict, at least 22 people remained missing.

In July, former prime minister Nikola Gruevski was convicted in his absence to seven years' imprisonment for stealing and laundering EUR 1.3 million.

Freedom of expression

A new criminal code proposed in July included provisions to protect the rights of journalists, including an increased penalty for their assault or murder, and obliged the authorities to initiate prosecutions.

Torture and other ill-treatment

In May, on retrial, a police officer known as GP was sentenced to a year's imprisonment – the first officer to serve a custodial sentence for ill-treatment. A witness had videoed GP in 2020 kicking Nevzat Jasharov, a Roma man, as he lay on the ground.

Violence against women and girls

Two women were killed by a family member. The 2021 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was not yet fully implemented. The authorities failed to adopt relevant by-laws, budgets and procedures and police were often reluctant to act.

In February, after an outcry from women's NGOs, the manslaughter charge against Pale Illovska was changed to self-defence. She had stabbed her police-officer husband in September 2021 as he punched, kicked and attempted to strangle her. Neighbours and family testified that they had repeatedly reported his violence to the police, who had failed to respond.

A March report from Šuto Orizari's Roma women's rights group analysed how low reporting levels of domestic violence were due to structural discrimination including poverty, poor access to medical care and distrust of NGOs and authorities.

LGBTI people's rights

In March, lacking parliamentary support, the government abruptly withdrew the NGO-supported 2021 gender recognition bill, which provided that trans people could legally change their gender identity through a simplified notary procedure. A redrafted law was anticipated for 2023.

In May, Bekim Asani, director of NGO LGBT United, based in Tetovo, was verbally abused by four men as he sat with his mother at his father's graveside; one of them subsequently assaulted him. He was twice assaulted in August, for which one perpetrator was sentenced to six months' imprisonment; the other case remained pending.

In June, hate speech and online abuse increased around the 10th Skopje Pride.

Discrimination

The Helsinki Committee cautioned that inter-ethnic hate speech on social media contravened legislation against spreading racist and xenophobic material online. NGOs and international actors expressed concern at

widespread discriminatory speech fuelled by Bulgaria's opposition to North Macedonia's EU accession.

Roma

The European Roma Rights Centre brought successful discrimination cases against local authorities responsible for segregation in a Skopje school and denying Roma communities access to clean water in Prilep. In December, the European Court of Human Rights also found that two schools in Bitola and Štip had violated Roma children's right to non-discrimination through segregation.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Over 20,591 refugees and migrants entered the country; as of 30 October, 65 had applied for asylum. Over 18,000 were subsequently pushed back to Greece, many after having their biometric data recorded at the Vinojug Transit Centre, as reported by 44 people in July.

In August, 35 people were injured when a truck concealing 49 Syrians overturned. Police reported the interception of 83 migrant-smuggling operations up to October. At least 619 individuals were unlawfully detained for up to 24 days as witnesses against alleged smugglers.

Right to life

In December, proceedings finally opened against two hospital managers and a doctor indicted for causing the deaths of 12 patients and two visiting relatives in a fire at the Tetovo Covid-19 unit in 2021.

Environmental degradation

In April, a report released by NGO Bankwatch based on monitoring in 2021 documented adverse health impacts on the local population of emissions from the Bitola lignite power plant, open-cast mines and ash disposal sites. Dust and sulphur dioxide emissions regularly exceeded legal limits and WHO guidelines. No measures were taken by the government to reduce emissions.

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