

The State of the World's Human Rights; Bulgaria 2023

Background

In April, the fifth consecutive general election in less than two years failed to produce a clear majority, leaving the country in a protracted political crisis. In July, Bulgaria experienced a prolonged heatwave, with temperatures reaching 40°C.

Freedom of expression

Independent journalists and media outlets reporting on organized crime and corruption continued to face threats, harassment and smear campaigns. Public officials and businesses filed numerous strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) against journalists and reporters.

In March, an insurance company filed a defamation lawsuit against independent news website Mediapool claiming a record BGN 1 million (EUR 500,000) in damages, putting the website at risk of bankruptcy.

In April, the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office published screenshots of a journalist's private communication with a source. The Media Freedom Rapid Response project called this an "alarming violation of source confidentiality". In the same month, journalists Dimitar Stoyanov, Atanas Tchobanov and Nikolay Marchenko were targeted by six defamation lawsuits over their reporting on links between a suspected drug lord and Bulgarian police officials. Media associations publicly condemned "retaliatory and vexatious legal actions" against journalists.

In July, parliament adopted changes to the Criminal Code that provided greater, albeit insufficient, protection for journalists against SLAPPs, including a significant reduction in fines for defamation against public officials.

The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom identified Bulgaria as a "high risk" country in terms of media freedom and pluralism.

Gender-based violence

In June, a man from Stara Zagora was arrested after a knife attack on his 18-year-old ex-girlfriend, who sustained injuries requiring more than 400 stitches. A local court's description of the wounds as "minor bodily harm" and its decision to initially release the assailant on 5 July prompted countrywide protests and demands to end impunity for domestic violence. Amid public pressure, the authorities re-arrested the man on 30 July and pressed fresh charges against him in November.

In August, parliament adopted amendments to the Criminal Code and the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence to expand the right to protection for people who experienced violence in an extramarital "intimate relationship". Civil society groups criticized the legal definition requiring an intimate relationship to have lasted at least 60 days to be subject to the law, while conservative groups objected to the amendments, saying that they promoted "gender ideology". Also in August, the government announced it was developing further measures to address the "hidden epidemic" of domestic violence.

LGBTI people's rights

In February, the Supreme Court of Cassation ended the possibility of legal gender recognition for transgender people.

In July, parliament amended the Criminal Code to include attacks against people due to their sexual orientation as hate crimes, and imposed harsher penalties for perpetrators.

Also in July, the Sofia Court of Appeals convicted the former presidential candidate Boyan Rassate of hooliganism following a 2021 attack on an activist in the LGBTI community centre Rainbow Hub and sentenced him to six months' probation.

In September, the European Court of Human Rights found that Bulgaria's failure to legally recognize same-sex couples violated people's right to private and family life.

Discrimination

In July, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination fined the conservative Bulgarian National Movement Party BGN 1,000 (EUR 500) and prohibited them from publishing content on their website that incites hatred against ethnic minorities. The Commission described some publications on the website as hate speech, and said that making generalizations about ethnic groups constituted discrimination, which is prohibited by law.

Also in July, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination said it was investigating cases of Roma being denied entry to public swimming pools across the country.

In the same month, the Prosecutor's Office investigated the pro-Russian Revival party after its official social media channel depicted a photomontage of Solomon Passy – a former foreign minister of Jewish origin – wearing a concentration camp prisoner uniform and being taken away by Nazi soldiers, presumably to be gassed. The image was captioned: "If you don't like Russian gas, have some of ours."

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Summary returns of refugees and migrants, increasingly accompanied by violence, remained widespread at the borders, especially with Türkiye. In March, the European Commission launched a EUR 45 million pilot programme in Bulgaria with the reported aim of fast-tracking the asylum process and bolstering border security and surveillance systems.

Rights of people with disabilities

In March, the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC) said Bulgaria had violated multiple rights of Valya Lazarova, who was confined in a social care home for eight years due to an intellectual disability, and died in 2007. The HRC said Bulgaria had failed to ensure her protection and that she had "lost her life as a direct consequence of the deplorable conditions" in the care home.

In April, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture visited Bulgaria to review progress on the implementation of its long-standing recommendations concerning the "extremely concerning" situation of people held in psychiatric institutions and social care homes. In November, the parliament established a temporary committee, tasked with proposing legislative changes to ensure that the rights of patients with mental illness are guaranteed in law.

Right to a healthy environment

Bulgaria's reliance on fossil fuels remained high. In January, parliament voted to backtrack on plans for an early phase-out of coal-fired plants. In July, parliament tasked the minister of energy to explore further offshore fossil gas explorations in the Black Sea, contrary to its obligations under the Paris Agreement to reduce emissions. The European Commission said Bulgaria would need to greatly strengthen its renewable targets to reflect the EU's ambitious climate and energy targets.