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Freedom in the World 2013 - Bulgaria

Overview:

In July 2012, a suicide bomber attacked a bus at an airport in the coastal city of Burgas, killing the driver and five Israeli tourists. A European Union progress report released the same day found continued shortcomings in Bulgaria's attempts to fight corruption and organized crime and implement judicial reforms. The center-right government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov nevertheless survived a confidence motion in the parliament later that month.

Bulgaria gained autonomy within the Ottoman Empire in 1878 and full independence in 1908. Its monarchy was replaced by communist rule after Soviet forces occupied the country during World War II. Communist leader Todor Zhivkov governed Bulgaria from 1954 until 1989, when the broader political changes sweeping the region inspired a massive prodemocracy rally in Sofia.

Over the next 12 years, power alternated between the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)—the successor to the Communist Party—and the center-right Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). In 2001, the National Movement for Simeon II, led by the former monarch, won national elections and formed a governing coalition with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a party representing Bulgaria's ethnic Turkish minority. However, both parties became junior partners in a BSP-led coalition government after the 2005 elections.

Bulgaria formally joined the European Union (EU) in January 2007, and its first elections for the European Parliament in May featured the emergence of a new right-leaning opposition party, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), led by Sofia mayor Boyko Borisov. The party gained popularity as the BSP and its allies were blamed for unchecked corruption, particularly after the EU suspended hundreds of millions of dollars in aid funds over the issue in July 2008.

GERB captured 117 of 240 seats in the July 2009 parliamentary elections. Borisov took office as prime minister with the support of the ultranationalist Ataka party (21 seats), the center-right Blue Coalition (15 seats), and the new right-wing Order, Law, and Justice (RZS) party (10 seats). The BSP-led Coalition for Bulgaria was left in opposition with 40 seats, as was the DPS, with 37.

The new GERB government pledged to tackle corruption and organized crime, and oversaw a series of high-profile reforms, police raids, and prosecutions that lasted through 2010. However, according to EU progress reports, flawed investigations and deep-seated problems with the judiciary meant that few major cases resulted in convictions.

In the October 2011 presidential election, GERB candidate Rosen Plevneliev, a businessman who had served as regional development and public works minister in Borisov's government, led the first round with 40 percent of the vote, followed by Ivailo Kalfin of the BSP with 29 percent. Meglena Kuneva, a former member of the European Commission and head of the Bulgaria for Citizens party, took 14 percent of the vote, and Ataka leader Volen Siderov won 3.6 percent; more than a dozen other candidates took smaller shares of the vote. Plevneliev went on to win the runoff with about 53 percent and formally replaced the term-limited Georgi Parvanov of the BSP in January 2012. GERB also performed well in concurrent municipal elections, winning in most large cities.

A suicide bombing at the Burgas airport in July 2012 killed five Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian bus driver. The attack, which Israel and other observers attributed to the Lebanese Islamist militant group Hezbollah, raised questions about the effectiveness of Bulgaria's security services. Later that month, the government survived a parliamentary confidence vote that was triggered by the airport bombing and a negative EU progress report on Bulgaria's efforts to reform its judiciary and fight corruption and organized crime.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Bulgaria is an electoral democracy. The unicameral National Assembly, composed of 240 members, is elected every four years. The president, elected for up to two five-year terms, is the head of state, but his powers are limited. The legislature chooses the prime minister, who serves as head of government. International observers generally praised the 2011 presidential and municipal elections, but found flaws in the Central Election Commission's performance, adherence to vote-counting procedures, and accuracy of the voter list. There were widespread claims of vote buying.

Bulgaria's multiparty system includes a variety of left- and right-leaning factions, and the ethnic Turkish minority is represented by the DPS. Roma are not as well represented, with just one Romany candidate winning a National Assembly seat in 2009. However, a number of small Romany parties are active, and many Roma reportedly vote for the DPS.

Corruption is a serious concern in Bulgaria. The European Commission's July 2012 progress report found that acquittal rates were disproportionately high in corruption cases against senior government officials, and that the number of cases in the courts declined sharply in 2011 after increases in 2009 and 2010. The director of a new commission for the identification and seizure of criminal assets resigned in early 2012, citing insufficient political support. A new law passed in May allowed assets to be seized through the civil courts rather than requiring a criminal conviction, though the EU report warned that further improvements were needed for the commission to be effective. The informal, untaxed "shadow economy" accounts for an estimated one-third of Bulgaria's gross domestic product, and the Sofia-based Center for the Study of Democracy estimated in June 2012 that an average of 150,000 bribes were paid each month in 2011. Bulgaria was ranked 75 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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. 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 2012. The car of veteran organized crime reporter Lidia Pavlova, who had endured multiple threats and attacks in the past, was set on fire in May. In July, Varna-based newspaper correspondent Spas Spasov received a threatening message that appeared related to his investigation of a construction project. The government does not place restrictions on internet access.

Members of minority faiths report occasional instances of harassment and discrimination despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, and some local authorities have blocked proselytizing or the construction of minority religious buildings. In September 2012, a group of 13 Muslims, most of them imams, went on trial for allegedly distributing extremist literature and conspiring to undermine democracy and the constitution. The case was ongoing at year's end. The government does not restrict academic freedom.

The authorities generally respect freedoms of assembly and association. A gay pride parade in Sofia proceeded without incident in June 2012, despite condemnations from the Orthodox Church and past violence at a 2008 gay rights march. 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 week-long strike by coal miners in January ended after their state-owned mining company agreed to concessions on issues including bonuses and working conditions.

Bulgaria's judiciary has benefited from reforms associated with EU accession, but the 2012 European Commission report found that institutional and legal improvements have not led to practical gains in efficiency or accountability. The EU has noted ongoing flaws in the judicial appointment and disciplinary processes. In November 2012, a judge resigned from the Constitutional Court just weeks after her appointment due to allegations of abuse of office in a prior judicial posting.

Organized crime remains a serious problem, and scores of suspected contract killings over the past decade have gone unsolved. A number of fresh murders with organized crime connections occurred during 2012. The GERB government has overseen the arrest and prosecution of many alleged mob figures, but there have been few major convictions to date; the EU has cited weaknesses in investigations, evidence collection, and witness protection for the lack of convictions. Prosecutors in 2012 declined to investigate evidence of past links between Borisov and organized crime. 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. The murder of an ethnic Bulgarian youth by men linked to reputed local Romany crime boss Kiril Rashkov set off sometimes violent nationwide anti-Roma protests in the fall of 2011. Rashkov was sentenced to three and a half years in prison in January 2012 after being convicted of making death threats against two villagers.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal, but societal bias reportedly persists.

Women remain underrepresented in political life, accounting for 21 percent of the National Assembly seats after the 2009 elections. Also that year, however, the chamber elected Bulgaria's first female speaker, and Sofia elected its first female mayor. Domestic violence is an ongoing concern. The country is a source of human-trafficking victims, of whom Roma make up a disproportionately large share.

2013 Scores

Status

Free

Freedom Rating

2.0

Civil Liberties

2

Political Rights

2