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Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Bulgaria

Summary detentions, pushbacks and abuses at the border continued. The necessary services were not provided to migrants and refugees, including to unaccompanied children. A climate of xenophobia and intolerance sharply intensified. Roma continued to be at risk of pervasive discrimination.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

The number of refugees and migrants entering Bulgaria declined, but reports of frequent pushbacks, excessive use of force and theft by border police continued. Irregular border crossing remained criminalized resulting in administrative detention of migrants and refugees, including unaccompanied children, who arrived in greater numbers. Human rights organizations documented numerous allegations of ill-treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers and substandard conditions in detention facilities.

In February, local authorities in the town of Elin Pelin refused to receive a Syrian family that had been granted humanitarian status in Bulgaria. The Mayor publicly warned that “Muslims from Syria [were] not welcome” and refused to register the family or issue them with identity documents. Other municipalities expressed a similar unwillingness to accommodate refugees.

In July, the government adopted the Regulation on Integration of Refugees; however, this fell short of providing an effective mechanism for integration. According to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, the Regulation failed to address the persistent problem of uncooperative municipalities or to propose measures to create more favourable conditions for integration in local communities. It also failed to address the gaps in refugees' access to social housing, family benefits for children or language training, which limited their enjoyment of social and economic rights.

The government issued an order restricting freedom of movement for registered asylum-seekers. Adopted in September, it imposed territorial limits for asylum-seekers in refugee centres, prohibiting them from moving out of prescribed areas.

Although Bulgaria committed to accept 1,302 asylum-seekers from Greece and Italy under the EU emergency relocation scheme, it had only resettled 50 people from Greece by the end of the year. It did not receive any Syrian refugees from Turkey under the EU-Turkey “one-for-one” resettlement deal although it had originally committed to accept 100 people under the scheme.

Children’s rights

Reception conditions for unaccompanied refugee and migrant children remained inadequate. Children were routinely denied adequate access to legal representation, translation, health services and psychosocial support. Basic education was not available in the centres and most children were not enrolled in local schools. Limited social and educational activities were available several days a week and organized exclusively by NGOs and humanitarian organizations.

The authorities lacked developed systems for early identification, assessment and referral mechanisms for unaccompanied children. Children often did not have access to qualified legal guardians and legal representation. In February, mayors and residents of several towns refused to accommodate two unaccompanied refugee children in facilities in their communities. The boys were moved several times and finally separated, causing the younger boy to abscond.

In September, the National Assembly adopted, in the first reading, amendments to the Law on Foreigners. They included an obligation to provide legal representation for all unaccompanied children and to increase the authority of the Social Assistance Directorate in all proceedings involving unaccompanied children who had not applied for international protection. The amendments, however, proposed repealing the requirement for an individual assessment of the best interests of the child before placing children in short-term immigration detention. Human rights organizations warned that the proposals would legitimize the practice of “attaching” unaccompanied children to often unrelated adults travelling in the same group in order to avoid the prohibition of detention of children.

Discrimination

Hate speech and hate crimes continued, directed at minority groups, including Turks and Roma; refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants remained vulnerable to violence and harassment. Discriminatory or xenophobic statements were made during the campaign for parliamentary elections held in March, by candidates and political parties as well as by the coalition of far-right parties, the Patriotic Front, which gained enough seats to enter the government.

Marginalization and widespread discrimination against Roma persisted. They faced systemic obstacles in all aspects of life, including education, health care, housing and employment. Roma children were enrolled in special schools and denied access to

mainstream education. High numbers of Roma lacked health insurance and faced persistent barriers to adequate health care and services. The authorities continued the practice of forced evictions without the provision of adequate alternative housing, leaving many families homeless. Human rights organizations documented numerous cases involving ill-treatment and physical abuse of Roma by police. Roma remained over-represented in places of detention. In July, mass anti-Roma demonstrations organized by the Patriotic Front took place in the towns of Asenovgrad and Byala, following a violent incident between a sports youth team and several Roma.

People with disabilities, particularly children, continued to face discrimination and systemic social exclusion, including limited access to education, health services and employment. Those with intellectual disabilities and psychosocial problems were deprived of their legal capacity and the right to independent living and were frequently placed under guardianship or social care institutions without their consent.

Despite numerous threats and simultaneous counter-demonstrations organized by far-right groups, Sofia Gay Pride took place in June under heavy police presence.

Freedom of expression

Journalists and media

A pattern of threats, political pressure and attacks against journalists continued; a significant portion of the media remained under the tight control of political parties and local oligarchs. In October, Deputy Prime Minister Valeriy Simeonov and MP Anton Todorov publicly threatened TV journalist Victor Nikolaev that he would be fired unless he stopped investigating the government's purchase of a fighter aircraft. The incident was widely condemned by civil society, but no action was taken against the public officials.

Bulgaria remained the lowest ranking EU member state on the World Press Freedom Index. The NGO Reporters without Borders ranked Bulgaria 109th out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom.

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