

2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bulgaria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Bulgaria during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or on behalf of the government; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; serious government corruption; crimes, violence, or threats of violence motivated by antisemitism; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons.

The government took steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses, but those actions were often insufficient, and impunity was a problem.

Section 1.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

A. ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIFE AND OTHER UNLAWFUL OR POLITICALLY MOTIVATED KILLINGS

There was one report that an agent of the government may have committed an arbitrary or unlawful extrajudicial killing. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) accused the Ministry of Interior of incompetence and “flagrant violation of the law” when on September 18, a police officer fired his personally owned weapon and killed a man who was running away from police alongside two others suspected of committing a series of street muggings. According to BHC President Krassimir Kanev, the police officer overstepped the law, which allowed the use of weapons “only when it is absolutely necessary.” On September 27, Interior Minister Kalin Stoyanov affirmed in a television interview the political and professional leadership of the ministry “firmly support” the officer’s decision to use a firearm against “a person who, according to evidence, had committed a serious intentional crime such as robbery,” adding that the officer would be fined for using a personal weapon.

B. DISAPPEARANCE

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

C. TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN, OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT, AND OTHER RELATED ABUSES

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports that government officials employed them. The law prohibited punishment through physical suffering or degrading treatment and required law enforcement to respect citizens’ honor and dignity. In August the

National Assembly passed an amendment criminalizing torture of suspected criminals for the purpose of extracting a confession.

There were credible reports prison and police authorities subjected detainees to cruel and degrading treatment for the purpose of extracting information, obtaining a confession, or punishing individuals for a suspected crime. The BHC asserted in its annual report on human rights practices that 27 percent of prison inmates suffered abuse during detention and 24 percent were subjected to physical violence while in a police precinct. The BHC asserted prison guards and police officials were rarely punished and noted a lack of convictions or sanctions for perpetrators.

In May police conducted a drug raid in a night club in Plovdiv, allegedly forcing nearly 400 customers inside to strip, squat, and cough while detaining them on the premises for hours. In June the Ministry of Interior sanctioned six police officers, including local police department chief Georgi Tashev, for misconduct and exceeding their authority. In November the Plovdiv Administrative Court revoked Tashev's reprimand as disproportionate to the level of misconduct as well as for procedural breaches on behalf of the punishing authority.

On October 2, a patient at the Lovech psychiatric hospital died in a fire because he was tied and locked in isolation and unable to escape. The ombudsman inspected the facility after the incident and found the patient had been tied for many hours and left without supervision in breach of established procedures.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in some prisons and detention centers were poor but NGOs noted positive changes in others. There were reports of overcrowding in some detention facilities, allegations of prison staff corruption, and inadequate sanitary, living, and medical conditions.

Abusive Physical Conditions: The national ombudsman's annual report noted inspections revealed persistent problems with a lack of medical personnel and deteriorating health services as well as cockroach and bedbug infestations in all correctional facilities. In February the BHC petitioned the European Court of Human Rights and alleged prison authorities deprived prisoners of the means to maintain their personal hygiene and health. The NGO asserted government funding was inadequate to support the basic needs of incarcerated persons. According to the BHC, prisoners were unable to access health insurance due to the lack of a contract between prison hospitals and the National Health Insurance Fund. The ombudsman reported a lack of basic amenities, lack of access to ventilation and natural light, and outdated infrastructure in detention centers. According to the BHC, detention centers were largely inaccessible for persons with impaired mobility.

Administration: Authorities investigated credible allegations of mistreatment. The ombudsman identified a lack of timely and accurate registration of cases of physical mistreatment. NGOs raised concerns that prisoners' rights to appeal administrative acts, such as punishment or relocation, were pegged to local administrative courts instead of the Supreme Administrative Court, limiting the higher court's ability to address contradictory rulings by local courts.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring of prisons by independent nongovernmental observers and international bodies such as the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In January the BHC reported the Ministry of Justice refused to provide public access to reports from scheduled inspections of penitentiary facilities allegedly documenting violations, mismanagement, and corruption, despite two court rulings from the same month as well as from March 2022 revoking the ministry's decision. The Ministry of Justice asserted the reports contained sensitive information that if released could "threaten public order and citizens' health."

Improvements: During the year, the government built a new annex to the minimum-security facility in Debelt and repurposed a building in Vratsa to serve as a minimum-security annex of the local prison.

D. ARBITRARY ARREST OR DETENTION

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements, but there were occasional reports of arbitrary arrest and detention.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

Police could hold a detainee for 24 hours without charge, and a prosecutor could authorize an additional 72 hours. A court was required to approve detention longer than the additional 72 hours. The law required a suspect be brought promptly before a judicial officer and charged with a crime, and those rights were respected. As of April 1, police were required to hand detainees a written declaration informing them of their rights. The law prohibited holding detainees in custody without indictment for more than two months if they were charged with misdemeanors. Detainees charged with felonies could be held without indictment for eight months, while persons suspected of crimes punishable by at least 15 years' imprisonment could be held up to 18 months without indictment. Prosecutors could not arrest military personnel without the defense minister's approval. Authorities generally observed these laws.

The law provided for release on personal recognizance, bail, and house arrest, and these measures were widely used.

The law provided for the right to counsel from the time of detention. Regulations required detainees to have access to legal counsel no later than two hours after detention and for lawyers to have access to the detainee within 30 minutes of their arrival at a police station. The law provided for government-funded legal aid for low-income defendants, who could choose from a list of public defenders provided by the bar associations. A national hotline provided free legal consultations eight hours per day.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports of arbitrary arrest and detention. In March the Sofia Administrative Court ordered Sofia police to pay 2,900 leva (\$1,570) in compensation to Tsvetelina Tsvetkova for illegal arrest after she was arbitrarily detained for 23 hours in a police precinct and reportedly suffered police brutality during antigovernment protests in 2020. In October the Sofia Appellate Court ordered the prosecution service to compensate Alexandra Stoilova 24,500 leva (\$13,200) for an illegal arrest and false charges after she and her boyfriend were detained in a police precinct in 2013 and falsely accused of attacking a police officer and tearing his uniform.

E. DENIAL OF FAIR PUBLIC TRIAL

The constitution and law provided for an independent judiciary, but corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability were serious problems affecting judicial independence and impartiality. Judicial independence was compromised and public trust in the judicial system remained low because magistrates were susceptible to political pressure.

The European Commission's *Rule of Law Report* released on July 5 noted partial progress was made in improving the independence of magistrates, taking into account changes in the law adopted on May 26 that prevented the secondment of prosecutors and investigators, but not of judges, for an undetermined period. The commission expressed concern that the existing power of administrative heads to decide on secondments and their termination "may create situations of dependence, which in turn risks affecting judicial independence." According to the report, the Supreme Judicial Council, a self-governance body, was susceptible to political influence in the selection of its members.

On May 30, the NGO Anti-Corruption Fund released an interview with former Sofia Investigative Service Director Petyo Petrov's former wife Lyubena Pavlova in which she alleged her former spouse exerted influence on prosecutors using bribes and traded in influence, extortion, and career

development incentives. According to Pavlova, high-level government officials were aware of and participated in Petrov's activity. On May 31, the Sofia Regional Prosecutor's Office announced that an arrest warrant for Petrov had been issued on charges of suspected involvement in extortion and illegal surveillance and wiretapping. As of November, Petrov was wanted by Interpol, Europol, and the Schengen Information System.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right. According to human rights organizations, the law had low standards for a fair trial, creating possibilities for the violation of lawyers' and defendants' procedural rights.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

F. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Not applicable.

G. PROPERTY SEIZURE AND RESTITUTION

Not applicable.

H. ARBITRARY OR UNLAWFUL INTERFERENCE WITH PRIVACY, FAMILY, HOME, OR CORRESPONDENCE

The constitution and law prohibited such actions; however, there were reports that the government failed to respect these prohibitions.

In May National Investigative Service Director Borislav Sarafov claimed during a television interview that Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev operated a private unit that conducted surveillance, photographing, and audio and video recording to collect information against his "political, economic, and internal opponents." Geshev did not officially respond to the allegations. He was removed from office the following month for "damaging the prestige of the judiciary" and derogatorily referring to members of parliament.

Section 2.

Respect for Civil Liberties

A. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, INCLUDING FOR MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND OTHER MEDIA

The constitution and law provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. Legal and practical restrictions on freedom of expression occurred. Corporate and political pressure, an ineffective and corrupt

judiciary, and nontransparent government management of resources meant to support media (including EU funds) gravely damaged media pluralism.

In March Amnesty International stated in its *Report on the State of the World's Human Rights* that, in Bulgaria, “journalists and independent media outlets reporting on organized crime, corruption or minority rights faced persistent threats and harassment and were frequently victims of abusive litigation by public officials and businesspeople.” Reporters without Borders (known by its French acronym, RSF) stated in its *2023 World Press Freedom Index* that media freedom in the country was “fragile and unstable” and that “the few independent voices in Bulgaria work under constant pressure.” The index also stated, “The political affiliation of the members of the Council for Electronic Media negatively affects the editorial independence of the public media, while the independence of private media is threatened by their owners’ interests in regulated sectors.” Media freedom groups reporting on national trends asserted nearly 75 percent of the country’s journalists indicated in a nationwide survey that the media environment was “toxic” and “corrupt,” media ownership was nontransparent, and those who damaged media independence enjoyed impunity.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals generally enjoyed the ability to criticize the government and discuss matters of public interest without official reprisal. The law provided for one to four years’ imprisonment for use of and incitement to “hate speech,” defined as instigation of hatred, discrimination, or violence based on race, skin color, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, social status, or disability. Laws restricting “hate speech” were applied to print and other media.

Violence and Harassment: Journalists were subjected to harassment, threats, and intimidation by authorities. In the *2023 World Press Freedom Index*, RSF identified intimidation from politicians as well as administrative and judicial pressure against publishers and journalists as common practice and criticized authorities for their unwillingness to investigate such incidences.

Independent media outlets were subjected to open intimidation tactics from politicians at all levels and to administrative and judicial pressure. In April the Association of European Journalists (AEJ) reported on six civil lawsuits, each for 10,000 leva (\$5,400), against investigative journalists Dimitar Stoyanov, Atanas Chobanov, and Nikolay Marchenko regarding their articles alleging corrupt practices in road infrastructure construction. The association noted that the filing of the lawsuits coincided with a press statement by the prosecution service, insinuating Stoyanov had been involved in criminal activity by releasing his personal communication with a source who had been arrested for drug possession. The AEJ called on the prosecution service to “stop its attempts to discredit journalists only because it dislikes their publications and to discontinue its practice of disclosing journalist sources.”

In August the AEJ accused the ultranationalist political party Vazrazhdane of keeping a list of unwanted journalists and media whom the party referred to as “foreign agents,” denying AEJ journalists access to public party events, and harassing them on social media. According to the AEJ, Vazrazhdane members and supporters circulated pictures of *Factcheck.bg* journalists Mina Kirkova and Elitsa Kovacheva accompanied by insulting and slanderous comments and threats.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: Journalists reported editorial prohibitions on covering specific persons and topics and the imposition of political points of view by corporate leaders with the implied support of the government.

Journalists and publishers were frequently victims of abusive litigation fostering a climate of self-censorship. In an analysis of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), the Anti-Corruption Fund noted that while most cases against journalists ultimately ended in acquittal, SLAPPs increased self-censorship among 25 percent of journalists and contributed to a “vulnerable media environment.” Amnesty International referred to the AEJ’s survey in its *2022/2023 Report*, which indicated that one in two journalists in the country faced undue pressure and one in 10 had been threatened with court action. According to Amnesty, “This had a chilling effect on reporting

and resulted in increased self-censorship.” The report noted that “journalists and human rights defenders living outside of the capital, Sofia, were particularly vulnerable to intimidation.”

On March 24, the Mapping Media Freedom platform reported presidential press secretary Kiril Atanasov had reportedly “discredited and attempted to pressure” Nova TV’s Brussels correspondent Antoinette Nikolova because of her news report claiming there was a discrepancy between what President Rumen Radev said to the media and his position in front of European leaders. According to Nikolova, Atanasov called both her and the editorial management of Nova TV, complaining of “incorrect suggestions” in the report, but declined to issue a formal response on behalf of the president. Due to the press secretary’s refusal to go public with his complaints, Nikolova interpreted his call to her and the media management as attempted intimidation and harassment. Atanasov denied threatening the reporter in a subsequent Facebook post and declared that “the presidential institution ... will continue to alert the media when it sees a discrepancy between the media coverage and the facts” and that, “Staged scandals serve [as] disinformation.”

Libel/Slander Laws: Defamation, including libel and slander, was a criminal offense punishable by a fine and public censure. On August 4, a new law entered into force that reduced the fines for libel and insult against public officials and public figures to the same levels as fines for libel against private individuals. Government officials and corporate interests used criminal libel and slander laws to attempt to limit freedom of expression.

In March online news site *Mediapool.bg* reported the insurance company Lev Ins filed a libel lawsuit against the outlet regarding a September 2022 publication that recounted a government meeting, citing a transcript during which a minister mentioned the company’s debt to a multinational insurance system. The lawsuit claimed one million leva (\$540,000) in damages. A Mediapool editorial insisted the article accurately quoted a minister’s statement at the meeting and provided an accurate account of the meeting transcript, concluding that the sole purpose of the lawsuit was “to intimidate the media and the entire journalist community.” As of November, the lawsuit was pending at the Sofia City Court. The AEJ commented the case was a “classic example of SLAPP,” noting the “record high amount” of the claim.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content.

B. FREEDOMS OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

The constitution and law provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law provided for freedom of peaceful assembly and the government generally respected the right.

At a media briefing on October 10, member of parliament Toshko Yordanov accused the police of harassing and intimidating representatives of protesting miners by summoning them for questioning and interrogation during ongoing negotiations with the government.

On November 17, Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov dismissed Deputy Interior Minister Stoyan Temelakiev over numerous media reports of excessive use of force and police brutality during a protest of soccer fans on November 16 in Sofia, including against journalists and nonparticipants. Defense lawyer Polina Velcheva alleged in a television interview that four policemen shoved her client, a woman age 19, to the ground and one of them grabbed her by the hair while another punched her in the stomach. Video recordings of the protest reportedly showed a person lying on

the ground, surrounded by several police officers who were kicking him. In response to the allegations, Denkov requested from the interior ministry “a speedy and as transparent as possible” identification of the individual police officers, public announcement of their names, and maximum disciplinary actions against them.

Freedom of Association

The law provided for the right to freedom of association and the government generally respected it.

Authorities continued to deny registration of ethnic-Macedonian activist groups such as the United Macedonian Organization-Ilinden, Society of Oppressed Macedonians in Bulgaria-Victims of Communist Terror, Association for Protection of Basic Individual Human Rights 2023, and Macedonian Culture Club “Nikola Vaptsarov” despite numerous prior decisions by the European Court of Human Rights that the denials violated the groups’ freedom of association. In February the Plovdiv District Court confirmed the Registration Agency’s decision denying registration of the United Macedonian Organization Ilinden-Plovdiv on the grounds that the group’s goals, including official recognition of a Macedonian ethnic minority, were aimed at dividing the nation and would create conditions for an ethnic conflict. In May the Plovdiv Appellate Court confirmed the lower court’s decision.

C. FREEDOM OF RELIGION

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

D. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

E. PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had an established system for providing protection to refugees. The president could grant asylum to persons who were persecuted for their belief or activities advocating for internationally recognized rights and freedoms. Asylum seekers who crossed the border irregularly were subjected to detention. The BHC’s annual report on international protection proceedings released in March noted that authorities discontinued the registration of asylum seekers and issuance of asylum decisions at migrant detention centers rather than at refugee reception centers. The BHC criticized authorities for allegedly failing to conduct needs assessments in one-third of the cases of vulnerable applicants and for failing to consider such needs assessments in asylum decisions.

Refoulement: In November the Sofia Administrative Court ruled against a decision by the State Agency for Refugees denying access to asylum to Iranian Ali Reza Hasan Beygi Rizi, who claimed he was facing a death sentence in Iran, and the court ordered the agency to review his application. The State Agency for Refugees and two subsequent court decisions had denied a prior application by Rizi in 2022 in which he was seeking asylum due to alleged persecution in Iran for converting to

Christianity and proselytizing. Rizi claimed he was not aware of a death sentence against him at the time of his previous application and asserted his case should be reconsidered. The State Agency for Refugees and the courts previously concluded that his refugee history could not be verified and the situation in his home country did not pose a risk of persecution. On July 30, the European Court of Human Rights issued interim measures stopping Rizi's deportation, pending appeal at the Sofia Administrative Court.

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Organizations reported instances of authorities allegedly violently pushing back would-be asylum seekers at the country's borders. UNHCR and NGOs reported a surge in cases of "pushback" violence, robbery, and the use of humiliating practices by authorities against asylum seekers along the border with Turkey, including reported use of dogs and firing of bullets at persons attempting to cross into the country. In its *World Report 2023* released in January, Human Rights Watch accused border authorities of engaging in "unlawful pushbacks and violence." The NGO Mission Wings reported receiving numerous reports of border police pushbacks, including 10 cases in April involving 26 Syrians, four of whom claimed they suffered physical abuse; four were allegedly stripped and robbed of their cell phones and money; and one reportedly received bite wounds from police dogs.

In October local groups in Harmanli protested and accused refugees of harassing local women and committing refugee-on-refugee violence. Demonstrators demanded the transformation of the refugee center into a closed-type facility that would house only families.

In November a citizen in Harmanli physically and verbally assaulted Mission Wings Foundation's coordinator Hamid Khoshsiar. The police patrol called to the scene reportedly sent the attacker home "to drink a coffee and sober up." Mission Wings asserted local political activists, including the local leader of Vazrazhdane, instilled hatred and spread online incitements, including calls for physical violence against refugees. Mission Wings reported receiving complaints from refugees of alleged police violence inside and outside the local refugee reception center as well as of threats by the police that they would not receive protection unless they withdrew their complaints.

Freedom of Movement: The law restricted asylum seekers' movement to the administrative region in which the reception center accommodating them was located. The restriction was valid until the protection status determination process was completed.

Access to Basic Services: Banks often refused to open accounts for refugees, which impeded their ability to obtain legal jobs and receive benefits. In February a National Patient Organization survey asserted refugees often received inadequate information regarding their rights to access to health services. Also in February, the Supreme Administrative Court canceled a previous decision by the caretaker government to cut the funding for food for individuals displaced by Russia's war against Ukraine.

Durable Solutions: The government accepted refugees for resettlement and relocation, offered naturalization to refugees residing on its territory, and assisted in their voluntary return to their homes. Despite the government's October 2022 decision to resettle 50 refugees located in Greece and Italy to Bulgaria during the year, as of November the program was on hold due to a lack of funding.

Temporary Protection: The Council of Ministers could provide temporary protection in case of mass influx of foreign nationals driven by an armed conflict, civil war, violence, or large-scale human rights violations in their country of origin, as determined by the Council of the European Union. As of November 5, 171,128 Ukrainians had received temporary protection, according to government figures. The government also provided humanitarian protection to individuals who would not qualify as refugees and did so for 4,305 persons as of November 5.

Section 3.

Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: National elections were reported to be generally fair and free, although there were reports of some abuses and irregularities, such as allegations of vote buying. The country held National Assembly elections on April 2. A Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe observer delegation and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) described the elections as “competitive with fundamental freedoms respected, and well managed by the election administration,” although it noted that, “frequent [legislative] changes erode[d] trust, undercut efficiency and pose[d] challenges to timely preparations.” On election day Minister of Interior Ivan Demerdzhiev blamed the return of paper ballot voting for an uptick in election fraud, noting a 100 percent increase in vote-buying investigations compared to the previous election, but added that thanks to law enforcements efforts the outcome of the election was not affected.

ODIHR criticized the existence of controversial legal amendments, which “reduced the use of voting machines and reignited concerns regarding the secrecy and integrity of the ballot and undue influence on voters in socially vulnerable communities.” According to caretaker Interior Minister Ivan Demerdzhiev, law enforcement efforts reduced “classic vote buying with money” to a scale that it did not make a meaningful difference in the vote.

Under political pressure, the Central Election Commission banned machine voting just one day ahead of the first round of key local elections held on October 29, causing confusion among the electorate and precipitating an overnight overhaul of voting procedures. Independent observers criticized the decision as an attempt to institutionalize opportunities for ballot fraud and said it undermined confidence in the democratic process. Transparency International later assessed instances of vote buying, controlled voting, ballot counterfeiting, and fraudulent voting protocols occurred, and the Ministry of the Interior reported an “unprecedented number” of reports of election fraud.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: The law prohibited campaigning in languages other than Bulgarian. NGOs reported that address registration laws limited the ability of Roma occupying irregular housing to obtain identity cards, which in turn restricted their ability to register for and vote in elections.

Section 4.

Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but NGOs reported the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of serious government corruption during the year.

Corruption: According to a Basel Institute of Governance survey released in May, the judicial system, the public health system, and police were most affected by corruption. The National Assembly passed a whistleblower protection law on January 27. As part of a larger legislative package aimed at curbing government corruption, a May 26 law created an accountability mechanism for the prosecutor general and the deputy prosecutor generals. In September parliament passed legislation to enhance the effectiveness of the country’s anti-corruption commission.

In its July report, the European Commission acknowledged the new legislation was a positive step but noted “a continuous issue” with poor effectiveness of investigations and a weak track record of prosecution and final convictions in high-level cases of corruption. It also asserted there were serious legal gaps regarding integrity of top executive functions such as “persons hired for ministers’ private offices.”

Transparency International Bulgaria asserted the lack of transparent use of public resources, attacks against civil society, and unregulated lobbying in the legislature were factors contributing to corruption. According to the Anti-Corruption Fund, the real scale of high-level government corruption remained hidden due to the high rate of acquittals in corruption cases. The NGO Institute for Market Economics concluded in an analysis of local-level anti-corruption efforts released on July 6 that authorities were reluctant to adopt regulations that provided a satisfactory and comprehensive solution to eliminating local-level corruption, which dissuaded citizens and stakeholders from reporting corruption and conflicts of interest.

For additional information about corruption in the country, please see the Department of State’s *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of States *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5.

Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction to monitor or investigate human rights conditions or cases and published their findings. Government officials were often cooperative and responsive to the views of these groups.

Retribution against Human Rights Defenders: Nationalist parties routinely targeted human rights organizations and activists, as well as NGOs receiving foreign funding, with accusations of treason and criminal offenses. As of year’s end, the Personal Data Protection Commission had not decided on the complaint filed by the Association of European Journalists concerning the Vazrazhdane party’s public release of the personal data of more than 800 individuals who the party alleged acted as “foreign agents” because they were involved with NGOs allegedly funded by the America for Bulgaria Foundation.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The national ombudsman, an independent constitutional body, was elected in 2020 by the National Assembly and continued to serve a five-year mandate. The ombudsman reviewed individuals’ complaints against the government for violations of rights and freedoms. The ombudsman could request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals to end existing practices, refer information to the prosecution service, and request the Constitutional Court to abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination, an independent specialized agency, sought to prevent and protect against discrimination and ensure equal opportunity.

A National Assembly permanent committee covered human rights, religious groups, and citizen petitions.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversaw a National Human Rights Coordination Mechanism focused on the country’s responsibilities and dialogue under international treaties and had some responsibilities for monitoring the domestic human rights situation.

Discrimination and Societal Abuses

WOMEN

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape of women, and authorities generally enforced the law when violations came to their attention. Sentences for rape convictions ranged up to 20 years in prison. There was no specific criminal law against spousal rape and domestic or intimate partner rape, so-called corrective rape of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons, or the rape of men; authorities could prosecute spousal rape under the general rape statute, but rarely did so.

The law provided penalties ranging from two years' imprisonment for bodily injury to life imprisonment for murder committed in the context of domestic violence. The law defined domestic violence as physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence or attempted violence; or coercive restriction of the personal life, personal liberty, and personal rights of persons who were related, who were or used to be spouses or cohabiting partners, or intimate partners. Amendments to the law on domestic violence were passed in August, expanding the scope of persons who could report domestic violence by adding the following categories: the survivor or the survivor's direct relatives, their intimate partners, and a parent's current or former spouse. The law defined "intimate partnership" as consensual personal, intimate, and sexual relations between a man and a woman lasting for at least 60 days, regardless of whether they shared a household. The law did not provide protection to same-sex couples. The law empowered courts to impose fines, issue restraining or eviction orders, and order special counseling. Noncompliance with a restraining order could result in imprisonment for up to three years, or a fine. The government enforced the law effectively.

A national information system on domestic violence was established in August to compile relevant data from all stakeholders as well as a National Council on Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection headed by a deputy prime minister to coordinate and monitor enforcement. Free legal aid for those who could not afford it was introduced and reporting time limits were expanded from one to three months. The law required the first official to respond to the scene where domestic violence allegedly occurred (e.g., police, doctor, social worker) and not the victim to initiate a restraining order against the suspected perpetrator. In August the government announced measures, including specific guidelines for police reaction to domestic violence cases and the creation of a special domestic violence unit at the National Police; a network of support services for violence survivors; and six regional specialized teams to oversee the implementation of the measures.

On July 31, tens of thousands of persons protested in all major cities in the country against violence against women, demanding justice for a woman from Stara Zagora who was reportedly viciously assaulted on June 26 by her boyfriend, who allegedly forcefully cut her hair and inflicted 21 knife cuts to her body. After his arrest, the court ruled that the case involved causing a "light injury" and released him from custody, pending further investigation. The case triggered strong media and public reactions, leading authorities to rearrest the accused attacker under heavier additional charges. The case also prompted the National Assembly to pass amendments to the domestic violence legislation. As of November, the accused remained in jail awaiting an indictment.

Discrimination: The law provided the same legal status and rights for women as for men, and those laws were generally respected.

Women faced some discrimination in economic participation and political empowerment. In March the Institute for Market Economics reported that while the employment rate of women was higher than for men, women earned less than 70 percent of the salary of men in similar positions in fields such as finance, health care, information technology, culture, sports, and entertainment. According to the National Statistical Institute, women received 11.8 percent less pay than men on average. As

a result of the gender pay gap, according to the National Social Security Institute, women received 24 percent lower pensions. The age at which women and men could access both full and partial pension benefits was not equal, nor was the legal retirement age, with men able to retire at 64 and a half and women at 62. According to an analytical report released by the Ekaterina Karavelova Foundation in March, ethnic minority women such as Roma, Turkish, and Pomak, as well as women with disabilities, routinely faced discrimination.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Women and girls in poor rural and Romani communities had less access to contraception due to limited economic resources, information, and education. The cost of contraception was frequently not covered by health insurance. Individuals younger than 16 could not schedule an appointment with a gynecologist or have an HIV test performed without parental consent.

Romani NGOs stated that many municipalities set discriminatory requirements for access to health services to restrict Romani women's access, including requiring secondary school education in order to obtain access to assisted reproduction programs.

Lack of health insurance sometimes limited skilled attendance at childbirth. Uninsured survivors of sexual violence often did not have access to sexual and reproductive health services. In June the National Network for Children, the National Network of Health Mediators, and other NGOs expressed concern that doctors largely did not apply a new regulation, which entered into force on January 1, allowing uninsured women the right to choose a medical practice and receive prenatal care, increasing the number of free annual medical checks from one to four and access to lab testing from one to three, in addition to emergency hospitalization up to two times. NGOs launched a nationwide awareness campaign to popularize the new regulation.

Home births were illegal, and medical personnel could be prosecuted if they assisted them. Emergency contraception was available as part of clinical management of rape. Postexposure prophylaxis was available in one clinic for the whole country, with a capacity to serve 20-30 patients a year. Survivors of trafficking had access to health care through NGOs approved by authorities.

SYSTEMIC RACIAL OR ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

The law sought to protect all citizens against discrimination based on race, ethnic background, or nationality. The law provided severe punishments for racial or ethnic-based crimes, with homicide carrying up to a life sentence, injury carrying up to 15 years' imprisonment, mob attack carrying up to six years' imprisonment, and violence and enticement to discrimination carrying up to four years' imprisonment. Racial or ethnic discrimination in employment, education, and other social areas could be punished with a modest fine. The government did not enforce the law effectively.

Societal intolerance against minority groups persisted and manifested in frequent societal discrimination against Roma and ethnic Turks. Political and government actors sometimes condoned or prompted discrimination. Authorities often refused to issue identity documents to Romani persons, and there were multiple credible reports of Romani persons being denied access to public swimming pools. Media outlets often described Roma and other minority groups using discriminatory, denigrating, and abusive language, highlighting instances in which Romani persons allegedly committed crimes. Nationalist parties such as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO-BND) and Vazrazhdane routinely resorted to anti-Romani and antisemitic slogans and rhetoric. NGOs identified an overall rise in the occurrence of hate speech and hate crimes, particularly against the Romani community.

In July the Commission for Protection against Discrimination imposed a 1,000 lev (\$540) fine on VMRO-BND regarding hundreds of articles grouped on the party's website under a section called "The Gypsy Question," and concluded that the publications "abound in hate speech, create a feeling

of enmity between Bulgarians and Roma” and could encourage violence against Roma. The commission also instructed VMRO-BND to refrain from publications that created prejudice against particular ethnic groups.

NGOs alleged that local authorities and politicians routinely “punished” Romani communities for political gain, often by targeting irregular Romani dwellings for demolition and evicting Romani families without providing adequate alternative accommodation.

In August the local administration in Sofia demolished more than 50 informal houses in the Orlandovtsi neighborhood, leaving their Romani inhabitants homeless, without alternative accommodation. According to the BHC, authorities failed to assess the vulnerable situation the evicted would fall into and refused to provide them with support.

Workplace discrimination against minorities continued to be a problem. Locating work was difficult for Romani individuals due to public mistrust. Limited educational opportunities remained a barrier to employment. NGOs estimated life expectancy was 10 years lower and infant mortality twice as high in the Romani community compared with the general population.

CHILDREN

Education: There was discrimination in the way education was provided to some minority groups and children with special needs and disabilities though the secondary level. The law prohibited ethnic segregation within multiethnic schools and kindergartens but allowed for the ethnic segregation of entire schools. Approximately 10 percent of general education and 37 percent of vocational education schools in the country were ethnically segregated. NGOs estimated that 60 percent of Romani children were enrolled in segregated schools. In its annual score book, released in May, the National Network for Children observed that educational segregation was increasing. According to UNICEF, nearly 10,000 children with special needs and disabilities did not have access to the education system.

The Education Ministry provided financial support to nine municipalities that pursued policies for educational desegregation and prevention of resegregation.

Child Abuse: The law sought to protect children against any type of abuse, including physical, psychological, and sexual violence and exploitation. The law punished violators with fines unless the abuses constituted a criminal or more severe administrative offense. The government enforced the law effectively.

Violence against children was a problem. In June a national representative survey commissioned by UNICEF indicated that one out of two children in the country had suffered some form of violence. The survey identified emotional abuse as the most prevalent form, followed by physical violence, sexual abuse, and neglect.

The ombudsman reported that the government lacked consistent policies and a long-term strategy for accommodation, protection, and integration of unaccompanied migrant children. In January the government adopted a four-year national program on the prevention of violence and abuse of children as well as a two-year plan for its implementation.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum age for marriage was 18. In exceptional cases a person could enter marriage at 16 with permission from the regional court. The legal minimum age for marriage was effectively enforced by the government.

NGOs criticized authorities for treating early marriages as an ethnic Romani rather than a gender problem but acknowledged that child marriage was pervasive in Romani communities.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited commercial sexual exploitation and the sale, grooming, or using of children for commercial exploitation, including child sex trafficking.

Amendments to the law in July increased the punishment for forcing children into commercial sex from up to eight years' to up to 10 years' imprisonment plus a fine and established a national database for prevention and protection against pedophilia. Child sex trafficking was punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine. The law prohibited child pornography and punished violations with up to 10 years in prison. Authorities enforced the law. The legal minimum age for consensual sex was 14.

ANTISEMITISM

The 2021 census indicated that 1,143 Jews lived in the country, but local Jewish organizations estimated the actual number was between 5,000 and 6,000. The law included several offenses under which antisemitic crimes could be investigated and punished.

Antisemitic rhetoric appeared regularly on social networking sites and as comments under online media articles. The Organization of Bulgarian Jews Shalom repeatedly expressed concerns regarding escalating public hate speech and antisemitism in the country. Shalom asserted historical revisionism and the “participation of Bulgarian institutions in the [spreading] of incorrect theories and distortion of the history of the Jewish population under Bulgarian rule during World War 2” was an increasingly worrisome trend. The Jewish community protested an annual book fair which included books on Holocaust denial that promoted an antisemitic and racist ideology, and called on the organizer to reevaluate publishers participating in the fair. Items with Nazi insignia were widely available in tourist areas around the country.

On July 13, Shalom filed a complaint with the prosecution service concerning a collage distributed in the Vazrazhdane party's Telegram channel depicting armed soldiers in Nazi uniforms carrying away a man bearing the face of a former minister of foreign affairs and prominent member of the Jewish community in a prison uniform and with the following caption: “If you don't want Russian gas, you can have some of ours.” The president, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria political party coalition, and many NGOs condemned the publication as an act of antisemitism. Vazrazhdane filed a complaint with the prosecution service, accusing Shalom President Alexander Oscar of pursuing political goals, discrimination, and anti-Bulgarian actions. In a separate incident in June, one day after the owner of a craft beer shop put up a sign stating supporters of the Vazrazhdane party were not welcome, employees found the word “Jude” scrawled on the store's front window alongside a Star of David, which was photographed and widely shared on social media.

In February authorities banned the annual demonstration of right-wing extremists honoring General Hristo Lukov, the 1940s antisemitic, pro-Nazi leader of the Union of Bulgarian National Legions, after a public outcry against the event, including by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the prosecution service, political parties We Continue the Change, Bulgarian Socialist Party, Democratic Bulgaria, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, and Movement for Rights and Freedoms, as well as NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions. On February 25, the day of the march, Sofia police prevented participants from gathering or marching. Visiting right-wing extremists from the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and Sweden took part in a protest march against the ban, ending in front of the Sofia courthouse. Despite the ban, the “Lukov march” took place on two other dates: February 13, when approximately 200 participants gathered outside Lukov's house in Sofia to mark the anniversary of his killing, and February 24, when a few dozen participants marched in downtown Sofia with banners and torches.

For further information on incidents of antisemitism in the country, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, please see the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

ACTS OF VIOLENCE, CRIMINALIZATION, AND OTHER ABUSES BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION, OR SEX CHARACTERISTICS

Criminalization: The law did not criminalize consensual same-sex conduct between adults, cross dressing, or other sexual or gender characteristic-related behaviors. Seemingly neutral laws, such as laws on immorality or loitering, were not disproportionately applied to LGBTQI+ persons.

Violence and Harassment: There were reports of violence against LGBTQI+ persons; at times government officials condoned or tolerated such violence. In June and July, promoters canceled multiple screenings of a film regarding the rights of LGBTQI+ persons due to protests and safety concerns. On June 10, a group of Vazrazhdane supporters entered the Odeon cinema in Sofia, took pictures of the audience, and shouted homophobic slurs at attendees, leading the venue to cancel the screening. On June 14, Vazrazhdane supporters accosted attendees of a screening of the same film in Plovdiv, confronting them with slurs and anti-LGBTQI+ posters. Police successfully escorted the protesters out of the theater. On June 23, a film screening in Varna was canceled due to an organized protest by Vazrazhdane and Bulgarian Socialist Party supporters who reportedly threw bottles and other objects at attendees. On July 11, homophobic insults were written on the façade of Goethe Institute in Sofia, which was scheduled to show the same film the following evening. Several LGBTQI+ groups criticized the police response to the Sofia and Varna incidents and accused authorities of complicity and siding with the protesters. In September the prosecution service in Plovdiv refused to open a formal investigation, arguing that the Vazrazhdane supporters did not act as hooligans, did not violate any rights or laws, and did not overstep freedom of expression standards.

In July the Sofia Appellate Court convicted former presidential candidate and Bulgarian National Union-National Democracy leader Boyan “Rasate” Stankov for inflicting minor bodily harm on an activist at the LGBTQI+ center Rainbow Hub in 2021. The court convicted Rasate of hooliganism, sentenced him to six months of probation, and ordered him to pay a fine.

Discrimination: The law prohibited discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. The law considered the term “spousal” to apply only to married heterosexual persons and did not recognize LGBTQI+ couples and their families, leading courts to reject the right of same-sex partners to protection from domestic violence. The government did not effectively enforce antidiscrimination and equality laws. Amendments passed in July introduced punishments for hate crimes based on sexual orientation.

Societal intolerance toward LGBTQI+ persons was prevalent. Research commissioned by the Gays and Lesbians Accepted in Society Foundation in March asserted 42 percent of adults surveyed indicated they would not change their attitude towards a loved one if they found out the person was LGBTQI+, one in three would feel comfortable working with LGBTQI+ persons, and only 43 percent considered themselves tolerant of LGBTQI+ persons.

On March 1, the Supreme Administrative Court overturned the decision of the Sofia Administrative Court of May 2022 and rejected an application for a Bulgarian birth certificate for a child born in Spain of two mothers, one of whom was a Bulgarian citizen, despite an opposite ruling from the EU Court of Justice. The court ruled that the baby was not a Bulgarian citizen and that the court’s decision was final and could not be appealed.

In July the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a prior decision of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, ordering the *Trud* daily newspaper and its chief editor Petyo Blaskov to introduce nondiscrimination regulations and practices. The chief editor was also ordered to pay a

fine for reprinting an article from the Russian press that used homophobic rhetoric. The decision found that terms such as “pederasts,” “sodomites,” and “perverts” published in the article constituted hate speech and unambiguously instilled hostility, bigotry, intolerance, and exclusion of LGBTQI+ persons.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: On February 20, the Supreme Cassation Court ruled the law did not provide for changing the sex, name, or unique identity number in the civil status on legal and government identification documents of an applicant who identified as transgender, arguing that the constitution and the laws were built on the understanding of the binary existence of the human species. In May the Single Step Foundation asserted in a statement on its website that gender change recognition would still be possible given that the Supreme Court’s ruling could only instruct courts how to interpret laws and would have no impact on its application. On November 13, Gabriela Bankova went on a hunger strike in front of the Palace of Justice after the Sofia District Court refused to legally change her gender, making it difficult to access health services. She destroyed her identification card, telling media she could no longer use the document because the data contained in it were different from her identity. Three days later, police arrested her for not having an identification document. Bankova subsequently told media that during the 30 minutes she spent in custody at the police precinct, a higher-ranking officer addressed her in an insulting manner and ordered her to undress in order to establish her sex because she could not be identified as a woman in the official register. As of late November, she was arrested at least two additional times, which NGOs alleged police did in order to disrupt her hunger strike.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There were no official reports of forced or involuntary so-called conversion therapy practiced on adults or children to try to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, although several advocates and NGOs acknowledged cases occurred in rural areas.

There were no reports of medically unnecessary and irreversible “normalization” surgeries performed on nonconsenting adult intersex persons. The National Health Insurance Fund funded “normalization” therapies, including invasive and permanent surgical modifications to the bodies of intersex children, with consent from their parents. NGOs noted a positive trend in which some doctors informed parents of the possibility to wait until the child grows old enough to self-identify.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: There were no legal or other restrictions on freedom of expression, association, or peaceful assembly for those speaking out concerning LGBTQI+ matters, or on the ability of LGBTQI+ organizations or individuals to legally register or convene events.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Persons with disabilities were not able to access education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The law sought to protect the rights of persons with physical, mental, intellectual, and sensory disabilities, including their access to health services, education, employment, housing, public infrastructure, transportation, sports and cultural events, public and political events, the judicial system, and other services, but the government did not effectively enforce these provisions. The law provided for including sign language in the school curriculum and the right to interpretation in public administrations, hospitals, and within the judicial system. On January 24, the National Assembly amended the law, relaxing qualification requirements and increasing fees for sign language interpreters due to a shortage of individuals and an inadequate legal framework for providing such services. Government information and communication on disability concerns was sometimes provided in accessible formats.

Individuals with mental and physical disabilities were widely stigmatized and often housed in institutions in remote areas under harsh conditions. According to NGOs, the government did not provide adequate medical care for all persons with mental disabilities. In July the Kera Foundation alleged the criminal justice system took a prejudiced and clinical approach to persons with disabilities, with proceedings largely focused on identifying incompetency to stand trial due to

“insanity,” which frequently resulted in the termination of criminal proceedings and placement of the accused in compulsory treatment. The foundation noted that under the criminal justice system, disability was not a condition requiring additional support but rather was instead treated as a psychiatric care issue. It noted disabilities were often confused with disobedience or an attempt to evade justice. Kera’s report further criticized the lack of regulations ensuring adequate access to justice for persons with mental disabilities, asserting, “there is a long history in the country of stigmatization and the belief that persons with disabilities are unworthy of and incapable of benefiting from due process.” NGOs alleged police and prosecutors lacked training and skills in dealing with persons with mental disabilities and often traumatized them further with their actions.

Harassment and abuse of persons with disabilities occurred. In April a group of self-identified “social media influencers” recorded a video at the Plovdiv mall that showed them forcing a young man with a mental disability to wear a collar, crawl on the floor, act like a dog, and listen to their commands. Days after the video spread on social media, the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination announced it had opened an investigation.

While the law required improved access to public and transportation infrastructure for persons with disabilities, enforcement lagged in some new public works projects and existing buildings, including schools. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination inspected public buildings, utility providers, telecommunications operators, banks, and insurance companies. Those not in compliance with the law for persons with disabilities were fined. The commission noted that the law, the government, and all other stakeholders agreed on the need for accessible infrastructure but lacked consensus on the methods for achieving it.

The law promoted the employment of persons with disabilities and helped offset employers’ related costs. The law required the Interior Ministry, the State Agency for National Security, and the State Agency for Technical Operations to allot 1 percent of their public administration positions to persons with disabilities. Enforcement was poor, however, and the agencies were reportedly not motivated to hire persons with disabilities, citing inaccessible infrastructure, lack of sufficient funding for modifying workplaces, and poor qualifications by the applicants. Government grants were available for employers for workplace accommodation as well as for individuals with disabilities for starting or developing small businesses. NGOs alleged that many employers preferred to discontinue the employment of a person with disability after the government subsidy expired and criticized the legal framework for providing incentives for employers but neglecting practical support.

There were five segregated schools for students with sensory and hearing disabilities. Most students with disabilities attended mainstream schools. Those studying in segregated schools received diplomas that higher-level learning establishments often did not recognize as qualifying the student for further education.

The law provided specific measures for persons with disabilities to have access to the polls, including through use of mobile ballot boxes, voting in a polling station of their choice, and assisted voting.

Institutionalized Children: The government began a process of deinstitutionalization in 2010. As of October, approximately 200 children with disabilities needed to be relocated from four legacy facilities and placed in community-based care. According to the government, its goal was to prevent child abandonment, encourage reintegration in a family environment, and provide complex support taking heed of individual needs. NGOs, however, asserted that the new family-type placement centers did not ensure improved quality of life for children and the quality of family support services remained unchanged.

OTHER SOCIETAL VIOLENCE OR DISCRIMINATION

The government’s national program for HIV and sexually transmitted disease prevention and control made little progress in overcoming the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV.

Negative societal attitudes significantly affected the social reintegration of persons with HIV or AIDS and posed a serious obstacle to their access to medical treatment, care, and support. NGOs reported the general stigma around sexual orientation and gender identity frequently resulted in denial of health services to persons with HIV or AIDS. According to the NGO Checkpoint Sofia, the government's AIDS prevention activities were inadequate and ineffective. The NGO alleged a six-year absence of prevention programs and targeted testing of at-risk groups.

Section 7.

Worker Rights

A. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The law provided workers the right to form and join independent labor unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination, provided for workers to receive up to six months' salary as compensation for illegal dismissal, and provided for the right of the employee to demand reinstatement for such dismissal. Workers alleging discrimination based on union affiliation could file complaints with the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. In July the National Assembly criminalized violations of the right of association, providing for punishment of up to five years' imprisonment and a fine.

There were some limitations on these rights. The law prohibited Interior Ministry and judicial system officials from membership in national union federations. When employers and labor unions reached a collective agreement at the sector level, they had to obtain the agreement of the minister of labor to extend it to cover all enterprises in the sector. The law prohibited most public servants from engaging in collective bargaining. The law also prohibited employees of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, State Agency for Intelligence, National Protection Service, courts, and prosecutorial and investigative authorities from striking. Those employees could take the government to court to provide due process in protecting their rights.

The law provided the right to strike to other public service employees, except for senior public servants, if at least 50 percent of the workers supported the strike. The law also limited the ability of transport workers to organize their administrative activities and formulate their programs. Labor unions stated that the legal limitations on the right to strike and the lack of criminal liability for employers who abused their workers' right of association were contrary to the constitution.

The government effectively enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers. Penalties for violations of freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike were commensurate with or less than those for analogous crimes such as civil right violations. Penalties were regularly applied against violators.

Labor unions reported cases of employer interference, obstruction, harassment, intimidation, and unequal treatment of union leaders and members. Labor unions also accused some employers of negotiating similar or better terms to those contained in the respective collective bargaining agreement with nonunion members to erode unionism and discourage membership in a labor union.

B. PROHIBITION OF FORCED OR COMPULSORY LABOR

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

C. PROHIBITION OF CHILD LABOR AND MINIMUM AGE FOR EMPLOYMENT

The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor. The law set the minimum age for employment at 16 and the minimum age for hazardous work at 18. To employ children younger than 18, employers were required to obtain a work permit from the government's General Labor Inspectorate. Employers could hire children younger than 16 with special permits for light work that was not hazardous or harmful to the child's development and did not interfere with the child's education or training.

The government effectively enforced child labor laws. Employment of children without a work permit was a criminal offense but was not a serious crime and carried a penalty of up to one year's imprisonment or a fine. There were no confirmed reports during the year of the worst forms of child labor. Penalties for the worst forms of child labor were commensurate with those for other serious crimes. Penalties were regularly applied against violators.

The General Labor Inspectorate was generally effective in inspecting working conditions at companies seeking and holding child work permits and applying sanctions regarding child labor in the formal sector.

NGOs continued to report the exploitation of children by organized crime, notably for commercial sexual exploitation, pickpocketing, and the distribution of narcotics. Children living in vulnerable situations, particularly Romani children, were exposed to harmful and exploitative work in the informal economy, mainly in agriculture, construction, hospitality, and the service sector.

D. DISCRIMINATION (SEE SECTION 6)

E. ACCEPTABLE CONDITIONS OF WORK

Wage and Hour Laws: The law provided for a national minimum wage for all sectors of the economy that was higher than the government's official poverty line. The law prohibited excessive compulsory overtime and prohibited any overtime work for children younger than 18 and for pregnant women. Persons with disabilities, women with children younger than six, and persons undertaking continuing education could work overtime at the employer's request if the employee provided written consent. The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria criticized the legal provision allowing calculation of cumulative working time over a 12-month period, alleging that employers abused it to hide unpaid overtime work. In May the Union of Bulgarian Medical Specialists reported some nurses in Burgas, Dobrich, and Varna were forced to work up to 250 hours of overtime in one month, in violation of the law that allowed up to 150 hours of overtime annually.

Occupational Safety and Health: Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were appropriate for the main industries, and the government proactively identified unsafe conditions and responded to workers' OSH complaints. A national labor safety program provided employees the right to healthy and nonhazardous working conditions. The government adopted an annual program that outlined its goals and priorities for occupational safety and health.

Violations of OSH standards were more common in sectors such as construction, mining, chemicals, and transportation that continued to pose risks for workers. According to the BHC, prisoners rarely filed occupational complaints for fear of losing their jobs.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The government effectively enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those of similar violations such as fraud or negligence and were regularly applied against violators. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy was responsible for enforcing wage, hour, and OSH laws. The General

Labor Inspectorate was responsible for monitoring and enforcing occupational safety and health requirements. Of the violations identified by the inspectorate, more than half involved safety and health requirements, predominantly occurring in the construction, retail, and catering sectors as well as in crop and animal production and in hunting. The number of inspectors was sufficient to enforce compliance. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions.

Legal protections and government inspections did not cover part-time and informal workers in the gray-market economy, which the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association estimated at 22 percent of the total economy.