

The State of the World's Human Rights; North Macedonia 2023

Background

Bulgaria's 2021 veto on North Macedonia's accession to the EU remained, after parliament failed in August to agree a constitutional amendment enshrining Bulgarians as "constituent people".

Impunity

In February, the European Court of Human Rights dismissed pardons issued in 2016 to 56 former ministers and government officials by then-president Gjorge Ivanov. In March, the justice minister subsequently renewed efforts to extradite former prime minister Nikola Gruevski from Hungary to stand trial in nine criminal cases.

In October, several prosecutions against former officials were discontinued after the government reduced sentences for criminal offences including "abuse of office" and participating in a "criminal enterprise". The officials included former secret police chief Sašo Mijalkov and others awaiting retrial for the illegal wiretapping of more than 4,200 individuals, including journalists.

Torture and other ill-treatment

A state of emergency was declared in Idrizovo prison in June, and the police and army were drafted in after chronic understaffing led to security threats. In 2021, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture had identified sections of the prison as inhumane, overcrowded and unsanitary.

An underfunded National Preventive Mechanism, inadequate training and investigations, and a lack of implementation of an independent oversight mechanism for guards and police enabled impunity for torture and other ill-treatment.

Freedom of expression

A new Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation reduced fines imposed on journalists; however, investigative journalists were subjected to strategic lawsuits against public participation. In October, Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia was fined for alleging that a former vice-president was responsible for air pollution.

Online threats against female journalists increased. The authorities had taken no action against a religious official who in July explicitly threatened to maim journalist Rita Behadini after she had criticized attacks on feminism by religious bodies.

Violence against women and girls

Six women were killed by family members or a former partner. In February, the criminal code was harmonized with the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), recognizing gender-based violence and introducing stalking and sexual harassment as offences. In September, the Council of Europe's monitoring body GREVIO advocated adding psychological violence and further offences, and criticized the police and social welfare bodies for failing to implement the Istanbul Convention.

The Istanbul Convention and proposed Gender Equality Act were strongly opposed by the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), other religious bodies, some local authorities and political parties.

LGBTI people's rights

Threats to life – mainly online – before Skopje Pride in June, were followed by a massive protest by the MOC and other religious communities against the proposed Gender Equality Act and Law on Birth Registry. Threats were so severe that the Macedonian Helsinki Committee produced a safety guide for LGBTI people.

In September, a man was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for seriously injuring the president of LGBTI United in Skopje in August 2022. The sentence reflected the discriminatory nature of the attack.

Discrimination

Roma

Systemic discrimination against Roma continued, including in segregated education, access to adequate housing and water, and within the criminal justice system.

In May, Mehmet Kamber, a 20-year-old Romani man, died in hospital after being denied treatment for hypoglycemia because he lacked an identity card, despite having his birth certificate. In September, the Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination recommended the Ministry of Interior amend legislation that prevents Roma living in informal communities from obtaining identity cards.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported that 11,645 refugees and migrants had entered the country by 30 November, less than half those in 2022. Border police continued to arbitrarily detain refugees and migrants, most of whom were then unlawfully pushed back into Greece. Others were unlawfully detained as witnesses against smugglers.

In April, Fatmata, a 23-year-old woman, was shot dead by North Macedonian police near the Greek border while travelling in a car with her husband, an alleged people-smuggler.

Right to health

In September, hundreds of people joined bereaved families protesting at the non-custodial sentences received by hospital managers convicted in June for causing the deaths of 12 patients and two

relatives in a fire at the Tetovo Covid-19 unit in 2021. The duty-doctor was acquitted. In the same month, following mass protests, prosecutors finally opened investigations into alleged corruption at Skopje university oncology clinic, including the unlawful sale of medicines.