



Amnesty International Report 2014/15 - Bulgaria

Publisher [Amnesty International](#)

Publication Date 25 February 2015

Cite as Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2014/15 - Bulgaria*, 25 February 2015, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/54f07e10c.html> [accessed 13 May 2015]

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Republic of Bulgaria

Head of state: **Rosen Plevneliev**

Head of government: **Boyko Borisov (replaced Georgi Bliznashki in November)**

The reception conditions for asylum-seekers entering Bulgaria partially improved but concerns remained over access to Bulgarian territory and the integration of refugees. Prevention and investigation of hate crimes by the authorities was inadequate.

Background

In July, the government coalition headed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party resigned following heavy losses in the European Parliament elections. Its year in power had been plagued by protests against government corruption and backroom dealing sparked by the controversial appointment of Delyan Peevski, a prominent media mogul and MP, as head of the Bulgarian Security Agency. New parliamentary elections were set for October 2014, less than 18 months after the previous round, which was also prompted by the resignation of the government. Following the elections, a new government under Prime Minister Boyko Borisov from the GERB party was appointed in November.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

In August 2013, Bulgaria experienced a large increase in the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants entering the country irregularly. By the end of 2013 over 11,000 people, many of them refugees from Syria, had crossed the border, compared to a total of 1,700 in 2012.

The Bulgarian authorities initially struggled to respond adequately. Hundreds of people in need of international protection ended up living for months in substandard conditions without access to asylum procedures. In January 2014, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, stated that asylum-seekers in Bulgaria faced a real risk of inhuman and degrading treatment due to systemic deficiencies in the Bulgarian asylum and reception system. It called on the EU Member States to suspend transfers of asylum-seekers back to Bulgaria.^[1] The reception conditions for new arrivals

improved, thanks in large measure to EU and bilateral assistance. In April, UNHCR reviewed the situation in Bulgaria and found that despite progress made by the authorities, serious shortcomings remained. It lifted its call for the general suspension of transfers with the exception of certain groups, especially those with special needs.

The number of refugees and migrants dropped dramatically in 2014, to 3,966 by October as a result of a government policy adopted in November 2013 that aimed to decrease the number of people irregularly entering Bulgaria. A number of NGOs, including Amnesty International, documented violations including unlawful expulsions of people back to Turkey (push-backs) without giving them a chance to seek asylum, which the authorities strenuously denied. An official investigation was initiated only in one such case.

Integration of refugees

Recognized refugees faced problems in accessing education, housing, health care and other public services. In August, the government rejected a plan prepared by the State Agency for Refugees and the Ministry of Labour for the implementation of the National Integration Strategy adopted earlier in the year.

According to the State Agency for Refugees, in September only 98 out of 520 registered refugee children were enrolled in school. This was due to the Schools Act which requires any new pupil to pass an exam in the Bulgarian language and in other subjects. A draft Law on Asylum and Refugees, which was intended to ensure unhindered access to primary education for refugee children, was not adopted due to the fall of the government.

Human rights defenders

A prominent human rights NGO, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), faced a tax inspection as well as harassment by far right groups. These were seen as intimidatory since the BHC is known for its criticism of the government's human rights record, in particular the treatment of asylum-seekers and the failure to prevent and address hate crimes. In January, prompted by a request by VMRO-BND, an ultra-nationalist political party, the National Revenue Agency carried out a large-scale audit of the BHC's finances for the period 2007-2012. The audit did not establish any breach.

On 12 September, a far right political party, the Bulgarian National Union, organized a rally under the slogan "Let's ban BHC!" The rally concluded outside the offices of the BHC, where participants verbally abused staff and visitors. They reportedly also called for the banning of all NGOs in Bulgaria. The police officers present at the rally did not intervene to prevent or stop the harassment and verbal assaults. In November, in communication with Amnesty International, the Ministry of Interior denied any harassment or intimidation of BHC staff or visitors during the protest.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Concerns remained regarding the effectiveness and independence of investigations into allegations of police ill-treatment. Investigations into several allegations of the excessive use of force by police during the protests in the capital, Sofia, in June 2013 were still ongoing by the end of 2014. [\[2\]](#)

Hate crimes against ethnic minorities and migrants

In the second half of 2013, many violent attacks targeting ethnic and religious minorities, including migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, were reported by the media and NGOs,

exposing shortcomings in the prevention and investigation of such hate crimes.^[3] In March, the European Court of Human Rights found in *Abdu v. Bulgaria* that authorities had failed to thoroughly investigate the racist motive associated with the physical assault of a Sudanese national in 2003.

Between July and September, Amnesty International researched 16 cases of alleged hate crimes against individuals and properties. The hate motive was investigated only in one of them.

Legislative gaps regarding hate crimes on other protected grounds, such as sexual orientation, gender identity or disability, persisted. In January, the government proposed a draft new Criminal Code closing some of these gaps, but it had not been adopted by the end of the year.

1. Bulgaria: Refugees continue to endure bad conditions (EUR 15/001/2014)

www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR15/001/2014/en

2. Bulgaria: Investigations into alleged excessive use of force during Sofia protests must be prompt and thorough (EUR 15/001/2013) www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR15/001/2013/en

3. Because of who I am: Homophobia, transphobia and hate crimes in Europe (EUR 01/014/2013)

www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR01/014/2013/en

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