

# **Bulgaria 2024 Human Rights Report**

## **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 arbitrary or unlawful killings, and torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

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

## **Section 1. Life**

### **a. Extrajudicial Killings**

There were several reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year. In December 2023, a man who had allegedly threatened underage boys with a knife on the street in Stara Zagora died after a car chase and attempted police arrest. The coroner's report indicated the man died of asphyxiation caused by physical pressure. In February, after an internal investigation, two police officers complicit in

the incident were fired, and the ministry of interior requested and received the resignations of the deputy director of the Stara Zagora regional directorate as well as the head of the directorate's uniform police unit.

## **b. Coercion in Population Control**

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

## **Section 2. Liberty**

### **a. Freedom of the Press**

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 gravely damaged media pluralism.

Reporters Without Borders recognized in its 2024 *World Press Freedom Index* the efforts of the government to implement press freedom reforms but highlighted the government's failure to address adequately "endemic problems" such as the "growing number of [strategic lawsuits against public participation] (SLAPP) cases."

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.

In January Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant management filed a 500,000 leva (\$286,000) lawsuit against its former employee, Natalia Stancheva, and her mother for repeatedly filing freedom of information requests aiming to expose alleged illegal activities at the plant. According to the plant, Stancheva and her mother abused their constitutional right to information by filing more than 70 requests and subsequently releasing that information publicly. In February after public outcry and pressure from domestic and European nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the plant dropped the lawsuit.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

Journalists were subjected to harassment, threats, and intimidation by authorities. In July the Association of European Journalists-Bulgaria (AEJ) filed a complaint with the Prosecutor's Office alleging that Ivelin Mihaylov from the Velichie party ordered the head of a security company to harm journalist Yoan Zapryanov, who had been investigating Mihaylov's Historical

Park complex for nearly five years. Stefan Kalchev, the security company owner, testified to a National Assembly committee that Mihaylov wanted him to “deal with” Zapryanov. Zapryanov faced hostile actions, including having his photograph posted around the village. The AEJ urged the Prosecutor General’s Office and the Varna District Prosecutor’s Office to investigate. Zapryanov’s investigations reported on the accumulation of weapons at the park, military training, and suspected Ponzi scheme operations. The Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for National Security conducted inspections, and the National Revenue Agency investigated significant liabilities accumulated by 10 companies associated with Mihaylov.

The European Commission’s July 24 *Rule of Law Report* noted that despite steps undertaken by the government to protect journalists from SLAPP cases, journalists continued to encounter online harassment, threats, and lawsuits from public institutions and political actors.

### **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

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,

which fostered a climate of self-censorship. In July, in an analysis of SLAPPs, the Bulgarian Center for Non-Profit Law (BCNL) stated that such cases were possible because of plaintiffs' unscrupulous lawyers and asserted there was no working mechanism by which the lawyers could be sanctioned for violating ethical norms or for abusing the law. According to the BCNL, a societal stigma on public discussions of political pressure, lack of funds, as well as a reluctance by defense lawyers to spar with the plaintiffs' experienced lawyers largely discouraged activists and organizations targeted with SLAPPs from disclosing the attacks against them.

Reporters Without Borders expressed concern regarding the potential for political bias in the regulation of public media and the threat to the independence of private media because of their owners' business interests. According to the Center for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom's *Media Pluralism Monitor 2024*, released in June, editorial independence was "notably compromised by commercial and political influences" and there was a lack of regulatory safeguards against arbitrary dismissals. Freedom House reported that the media sector remained pluralistic, but many outlets' dependence on government funding through advertising pressured them into running "government-friendly material." Freedom House also reported that opaque private media ownership raised concerns of undue business and political influence over editorial content.

On November 7, hundreds protested outside the Ivan Vazov National

theater in Sofia, demanding the removal of the play premiering that night from the theater's repertoire. The protesters, claiming the play ridiculed the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian army, attacked attendees and attempted to break into the theater. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) and the AEJ condemned the violence, accusing police and local government authorities of failing to ensure public order, allowing censorship, and violating the freedom of expression of the authors, actors, and audience of the play.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and 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 regional courts or the Commission for Protection against Discrimination.

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 provided the right to strike to public service employees, except for

senior public servants, if more than 50 percent of the workers supported the strike.

The government effectively enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike. 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. The law provided for up to five years' imprisonment and a fine for violating a person's freedom of association. Penalties were regularly applied against violators.

Labor unions reported cases of employer interference, harassment, intimidation, and unequal treatment of union leaders and members as well as attempts by employers to prevent the creation of unions or shut down existing ones. The National Labor Union Protection reported that in March and July, respectively, the directors of the emergency care centers in Gotse Delchev and Panagyurishte pressured union members to leave the organization. Labor unions also accused some employers of negotiating with nonunion members similar or better terms to those contained in the respective collective bargaining agreement to erode unionism and discourage membership in a labor union.

## **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Acceptable Work Conditions**

### **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 allowed up to 300 hours of overtime work annually if provided for in a collective bargaining agreement but otherwise 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 avoid paying for overtime work.

According to the General Labor Inspectorate, the sectors in which violations of wage, hour, and overtime laws were most common included retail, catering, food processing, and horticulture.

### **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. Workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment. Some prisoners were allowed to voluntarily work at outside jobs or workshops in prisons and, according to the BHC, these prisoners rarely reported occupational complaints for fear of losing their jobs. A national program outlined employees' right to healthy and nonhazardous working conditions and specified the government's goals and priorities for occupational safety and health, in collaboration with employers and labor unions.

Violations of OSH standards were more common in sectors such as construction, mining, chemicals, and transportation that continued to pose risks for workers. The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria alleged that a substantial number of work-related accidents remained unreported.

### **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The government effectively enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. 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. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those of violations such as fraud or negligence and were regularly applied. Inspectors had the

authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate penalties. The number of inspectors was sufficient to enforce compliance but, according to the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria, the government needed more inspectors to address all reports of violations.

Legal protections and government inspections did not cover part-time and workers in the informal sector, which the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association estimated at 21.5 percent of the total economy.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **Disappearance**

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

### **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

The constitution and law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge in court the lawfulness of their arrest or detention. The government generally observed these requirements, but there were occasional reports of arbitrary arrest and detention. In March the National Assembly passed a bill that prohibited testimony from police officers who obtained confessions from defendants prior to the formal initiation of criminal proceedings.

Police could legally hold a detainee for 24 hours without charge, and a prosecutor could authorize an additional 72 hours. A court order was required to approve detention beyond the additional 72 hours. The law required that a suspect be brought promptly before a judicial officer and charged with a crime, and those rights were respected. Police were required to give detainees a written declaration informing them of their rights. The law prohibited holding detainees charged with misdemeanors in custody without indictment for more than two months. 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. The law allowed the accused and their lawyer to review the evidence used as a basis for detention. 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 bar associations, and it required

authorities to provide and explain to detainees in clear and understandable language their right to legal aid and how they could obtain it. A national hotline provided free legal consultations eight hours per day.

There were reports of arbitrary arrest and detention. In May the Sofia City Administrative Court ruled police had illegally detained the leader of the NGO Bulgaria United With One Goal, Georgi Georgiev, in October 2023 during a protest against the Central Election Commission. According to the court, police failed to adequately delineate in the arrest report the reasons for Georgiev's detention.

#### **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

#### **e. Trafficking in Persons**

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

### **Section 3. Security of the Person**

#### **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or**

## Punishment

The constitution and law prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports government officials employed them. The law prohibited punishment through physical suffering or degrading treatment and required authorities to respect citizens' honor and dignity.

There were credible reports of cruel and degrading treatment toward patients in psychiatric hospitals as well as reports of police using excessive force against detainees. In February the national ombuds' annual report identified numerous weaknesses in the system of psychiatric care and protection of psychiatric patients, including a large number of cases of unwarranted immobilization and isolation, substandard facilities, and patients with chronic malnutrition.

On August 5, an immobilized resident of St. Marina Hospital's Psychiatric Clinic in Varna died in a fire. The ombuds administration subsequently criticized the regulations on physical restraint of patients, stating that they did not provide guidelines for the specific duration and frequency of patient immobilization within a 24-hour period, nor specify explicit reasons for such immobilization.

A January 31 report by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) noted "continued failure by the Ministry of Health to prevent all forms

of ill-treatment of [psychiatric hospital] patients,” which included tying up, shouting, slapping, punching, and kicking. The CPT reported the causes included staff shortages, overcrowded rooms, a punitive environment, and inadequate treatment and safety measures, in addition to authorities’ inability to sanction abusive staff. According to the report, patients were often uninformed of their rights.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

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 considered 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 reported 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.

## **Child Marriage**

The minimum legal age for marriage was 18, which was effectively enforced by the government. In 2023, parliament passed an amendment that eliminated a prior provision that allowed persons ages 16 and 17 to marry with a court's permission.

NGOs criticized authorities for treating early childbearing as a “Romani tradition” rather than a gender problem but acknowledged that cases of children giving birth was pervasive in Romani communities. In March the State Agency for Child Protection indicated in a press release that the country was facing a serious problem with early childbearing, especially in the Sliven region where nearly a quarter of all cases occurred, and cited

cases of girls ages 10, 11, and 12 giving birth.

### **c. Protection to Refugees**

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

#### **Provision of First Asylum**

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a 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 the country admitted and registered refugees from Ukraine for temporary protection, while at the same time increasing pushback practices against other migrants and asylum seekers, primarily from the Near East, Asia, and Africa. The BHC criticized authorities for allegedly failing to assess vulnerable applicants during registration in 50 percent of the cases, for failing to conduct needs assessments in 91 percent of the cases of



vulnerable applicants, and for failing to consider such needs assessment in asylum decisions.

## **Resettlement**

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. As of September, the government relocated seven refugees from Cyprus.

## **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

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 in online postings and media articles. The Organization of Bulgarian Jews Shalom repeatedly expressed concerns regarding what it called an alarming escalation of public hate speech and antisemitism in the country “masked as antizionism and disapproval of Israel” as well as attempts to trivialize antisemitism. Shalom criticized government institutions for supporting historical revisionism and incorrect theories of the history of the Jewish population in the country during World War Two.

Jewish organizations protested events and publications they viewed as “making malicious comments” and “providing a platform for hate speech, manipulative, and blatantly false statements...slandering the state of Israel.” In May Shalom decided to revoke its Shofar awards, presented in 2009 and 2018, respectively, to journalist Petar Volgin due to his subsequent “spreading [of] pro-Russian and antidemocratic positions, conspiracy theories, and false information” and journalist Yuliana Metodieva due to her subsequent “systematic demonization of the state of Israel and justification of the crimes of the terrorist organization Hamas.”

Items with Nazi insignia were widely available for sale in tourist areas around the country. Prominent individuals, including members of parliament, published material on social media promoting antisemitic views.

In February authorities banned the annual demonstration 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 and international organizations.

On February 17, the day of the march, the mayor of Sofia banned the event upon receiving information from police of participants gathering to march in breach of the local government’s permission only to hold a commemoration

at Lukov's plaque. By the time the mayor's order reached police, the "Lukov march" had already taken place. The Sofia municipality did not approve a related event – the Tolerance March against the Desecration of the Memory of the Victims of Communist Terror – styled after the "Lukov march" by the same organizers. The Sofia City Administrative Court, however, overturned the local government's decision and the march occurred.

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 annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.