

North Macedonia 2023 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

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

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence and threats of violence against journalists; serious government corruption; and crimes involving violence and threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons.

The government took limited steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

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 laws prohibited such practices, but there were credible reports government officials sometimes employed them. Police abused detainees and prisoners and used excessive force. The government acted to investigate and prosecute legitimate claims. The Ministry of Interior's Professional Standards Unit (PSU) reported that during the first seven months of the year, it responded to 40 complaints of excessive force by police officers, upholding three of the complaints. In these three cases, the PSU launched disciplinary actions and filed criminal reports with the prosecutor's office against four police officers for "misconduct in the conduct of duty." In one case, the PSU filed a criminal complaint against a police officer for excessive use of force during a sporting event on March 13.

As of August, the Organized Crime and Corruption Prosecutor's Office's specialized unit for police and prison guards' abuses received 98 criminal reports involving 197 individuals. The unit investigated 36 cases involving 85 police officers and prison guards for illegal arrest, mistreatment of

detainees, and police brutality. It indicted 35 officials, four of whom received suspended sentences, two for illegal arrest and two for mistreatment in service.

As of August 31, the ombudsman's Citizen Control Mechanism Office received 10 complaints alleging excessive use of force, including police brutality in some cases: five each against police officers and prison guards. The ombudsman found one complaint well-founded and recommended prosecutors charge the involved guards for mistreatment of prisoners. It dismissed six complaints as unfounded, and three were under review. Impunity was not cited as a significant problem.

In a June 26 report by the ombudsman's National Preventive Mechanism Office, the ombudsman raised concerns regarding living and working conditions in the psychiatric hospitals Bardovci and Demir Hisar, specifically lack of sufficient and trained staff, inpatient and patient-staff violence, and inadequate medical treatment for patients.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

The prison system generally was severely overcrowded, understaffed, and corrupt, exposing inmates to inhuman and degrading conditions. Certain prisons struggled to provide access to clean food or water or basic health and educational support services, particularly for juveniles. The ombudsman reported that poor living conditions and inadequate educational and rehabilitation services, especially for juvenile girls, plagued

the prison system.

The Department for Enforcement of Sanctions (DES) noted prison overcrowding and understaffing were major challenges. In June the government declared a state of emergency in Idrizovo prison and deployed security forces. The ombudsman reported some of the five police stations visited during the year had improvements; however, issues remained, including insufficient personnel; insufficient cameras; inadequate space for interviewing arrested or detained persons, especially children; and outdated vehicles.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Overcrowding was a problem across the prison system, with some cells at Idrizovo housing up to 15 inmates in a 14 by 28 meter room. Some inmates slept on the floor and others on four-story beds. The ombudsman reported during a prison visit that in one ward housing 124 inmates, all used one toilet; 36 of the inmates slept on the floor, and others slept in the beds in shifts. The ombudsman report noted poor conditions in most of the other prisons and overall lack of funding and understaffing of the corrections system. Access to potable water and sanitation was a problem at the Kumanovo prison. The ombudsman reported insufficient health care due to lack of medical staff and medications. Only five of 11 prisons employed a full-time doctor.

Juveniles lacked educational and job skills training and were often overmedicated, according to Ombudsman reports. Idrizovo did not provide

adequate accommodation for juvenile girls ages 14 to 16. The ombudsman recommended officials amend the authorities under the Law on Execution of Sanctions to enable transferring the girls to the Tetovo Juvenile Corrections Home or other adequate premises, including provision of appropriate education and rehabilitation services. Staff diagnosed more than half of incarcerated juveniles with mental health issues.

A report from the European Committee for Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment noted poor management, endemic corruption among prison staff, intraprisoner violence, inadequate health care, and poor living conditions, particularly at Idrizovo. The report found squalid, unhygienic conditions. Authorities confined prisoners to their cells for more than 23 hours per day.

The Helsinki Human Rights Committee (HHRC) and the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) reported the same issues and reported that inmates in the high-security ward kept knives in their cells due to a lack of a permanent dining area, which presented a security risk to other inmates and the guards.

As of August, the HHRC filed 20 complaints with authorities concerning access to health care, excessive use of force against inmates, and inmates' inability to exercise their rights.

The DES reported no cases of physical abuse or use of excessive force by prison guards but numerous instances of intra-inmate violence, primarily in

Idrizovo prison. The ombudsman's offices in Bitola and Shtip reviewed 10 complaints alleging police mistreatment. Bitola dismissed two complaints for lack of evidence, two were subject to court proceedings, and the rest were pending.

The Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination found that a former interior minister serving a prison sentence was subject to gender-based discrimination. Women serving sentences in Idrizovo's low security ward did not receive legally mandated benefits such as free weekends or increased visitations.

The ombudsman noted that in general, authorities acknowledged the ombudsman's recommendations but did not sufficiently implement them. In mid-September, the ombudsman appealed for adoption of an amnesty law to relieve prison overcrowding.

Administration: Authorities conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment, including those referred by the ombudsman. The DES did not report instances of excessive use of force by prison guards in the prisons and received 38 reports of instances where use of force was proportionate. Of those, prison guards used physical force in 24 instances, used force in another 10 to isolate inmates from each other, and in four instances used handcuffs to reinstate order.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring by the ombudsman and independent nongovernmental observers, including the

International Committee of the Red Cross, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture, the HHRC, and the MYLA.

Improvements: The ombudsman reported improved conditions at the Tetovo Juvenile Correctional Home. The domestic external oversight mechanism led to greater prevention and sanctioning of prison staff misconduct including verdicts in misconduct cases.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The 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, as well as to receive compensation for unlawful detention. The government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law required a judge to issue warrants for arrest and detention of suspects based on evidence, and police generally followed this requirement. The law prohibited police from interrogating suspects without informing them of their status and their rights and enabling them to obtain a lawyer. The law stated prosecutors needed to arraign a detainee within 24 hours of arrest. A pretrial procedure judge, at the request of a prosecutor, could order detention of suspects for up to 72 hours before arraignment. Police generally adhered to these procedures. Authorities generally informed detainees promptly of the charges against

them. Detention prior to indictment could last a maximum of 180 days. Following indictment, pretrial detention could last a maximum of two years.

There was a functioning bail system. In addition to bail, the law allowed the substitution of pretrial detention with house arrest or other measures for securing defendants' presence at trial. Common measures included passport seizure, a prohibition on leaving one's place of residence, and an obligation to report to the court on a weekly basis.

The law allowed defendants to communicate with an attorney of their choice, but defendants sometimes complained authorities did not provide sufficient time to consult with an attorney prior to arraignment.

The law provided advisory deadlines to avoid protracted criminal proceedings. Prosecutors were supposed to complete investigations within six months, although these deadlines could be extended to 12 months in more complex cases and 18 months, with a supervisor's consent, in organized crime cases. Prosecutors sometimes exceeded these deadlines, citing lack of adequate resources or case complexity.

The ombudsman reported the country overall lacked adequate legal and practical mechanisms to enable timely and efficient access to legal representation for indigent persons.

Authorities did not practice incommunicado detention.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provided for an independent judiciary, but the government did not always respect judicial independence and impartiality. Credible reports of unsanctioned judicial misconduct, undue political and business pressure on judges, nepotism, clientelism, protracted justice, inadequate funding, resistance to using legally mandated technology, and short staffing, hampered court effectiveness and affected public confidence in the rule of law. Polls showed strong public distrust of the judiciary. Politically influenced promotions lacking merit or transparency occurred in the judiciary and prosecution service.

In January the Judicial Council (JC) found two Skopje Appellate Court judges knowingly delayed rulings to push defendants past the statute of limitations. On April 26, the JC dismissed its president, a move critics claimed indicated political interference. Two members resigned from the JC in response, and several prominent civil society organizations (CSOs) called for the full resignation of the council.

A survey in June by an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Monitoring Mission found on average 70 percent of polled judges believed: the JC failed to effectively protect judicial independence; judicial promotions were not carried out based on objective, measurable, and equitable criteria; they were physically unsafe in private and professional spaces; and judicial promotions were not based on merit or transparency.

Respondents also reported protracted, conflicting, and biased experts' reports; private attorneys' misuse of processes; poor quality of indictments; and lack of professionalism by prosecutors and defense counsels.

The Minister of Justice announced in August that a ministry-led inspection found the JC failed to effectively supervise four courts in the eastern part of the country, which led to the inconsistent application of the random case assignment system, chronic shortages of judges and information technology staff, and inadequate case archiving.

As of August, the ombudsman registered two citizen complaints regarding procedures before the courts and the public administration. It also provided amicus briefs in support of 10 cases by citizens in front of the courts to help them exercise their right to a fair trial, to obtain a trial within a reasonable time, and to be tried before an independent and impartial court, as well as to address due process violations and denial of access to effective legal recourse.

As of August, the JC received 302 citizen complaints alleging problems in judicial proceedings, mostly in the Skopje Civil Court, Skopje Appellate Court, Administrative Court, and Skopje Criminal Basic Court. The JC had not received any complaints by judges alleging threats or case-related pressure. The Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO) reported on July 11 there were 15 pending inquiries against Struga Mayor Ramiz Merko in various

stages of review. A PPO-designated commission found that, since 2006, approximately 30 cases involving Merko were filed before the prosecutors, half of which were dismissed or became obsolete on various grounds.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provided for the right to a fair trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right.

The courts operated with significant delays, especially in high-profile corruption and multidefendant cases. High-profile trials and their appellate reviews were often prolonged on various procedural, health-related, or unexplained grounds. As of September, the Supreme Court operated with only 15 of 28 justices. Lay judges assisted in civil and criminal cases where defendants faced potential prison sentences of more than five years; however, lay judge involvement was problematic because resignation or retirement of a judge midcase triggered a restart of the trial with a new judge.

Defendants sometimes complained they lacked adequate time and facilities to prepare their defense.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

f. Transnational Repression

Not applicable.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

The government had no laws or mechanisms in place related to the resolution of Holocaust-era claims by foreign citizens, but citizens and foreign nationals could seek property restitution via civil proceedings. The government made significant progress on resolving Holocaust-era claims, including for foreign citizens. Advocacy groups reported only a small number of foreign citizens still sought restitution.

In May the government allocated approximately 350 million dinars (\$6.1 million) in bonds to compensate citizens whose denationalization claims were approved in 2021.

Religious communities faced delays in property restitution due to protracted court proceedings and frequent appeals. The Ministry of Finance's denationalization coordinators resolved all initial cases, but many were stalled in the High Administrative Court. Corruption reportedly hampered citizen compensation. On July 19, the Skopje Criminal Court sentenced administrative court judge Mustafa Shahini to five years in prison for embezzling denationalization bonds valued at €200,000 (\$185,000).

The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) asserted the government failed to provide timely and adequate restitution for property seized during the Yugoslavia era, including the Husamedin Pasha Mosque in Shtip and the Orta Mosque in Strumica, both nationalized in 1955. The IRC claimed denial of access to and ownership of these mosques. Ownership of the 16th century Harabati Baba Teqe compound in Tetovo, serving as the unregistered Bektashi community's seat, was in dispute.

The ombudsman noted procedural oversights in denationalization cases and ascribed delays to lax work by the Ministry of Finance's denationalization commission, particularly for cases that lasted more than one generation. The ombudsman recorded 208 complaints related to property disputes, a 25 percent increase from the previous year.

The Department of State's *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act Report* to Congress, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the Department's website: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and the law prohibited such actions, and there were no reports the government failed to respect those prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. According to media and CSOs, freedom of expression was undermined by justice system ineffectiveness, lack of transparency regarding media advertising by state institutions, inappropriate conduct on behalf of public officials in their interaction with journalists, pressure on journalists investigating corruption, disinformation, hate speech in online and social media, and self-censorship.

Freedom of Expression: The law prohibited speech inciting national, religious, or ethnic hatred and provided penalties for violations. In addition to television and social media, these restrictions covered print and broadcast media, publication of books, and online newspapers and journals. Independent media associations expressed apprehension concerning proposed changes to the Law on Audio and Audio-Visual Services, which could permit “high public interest” government campaigns to be advertised through commercial broadcasters. Critics argued this could exacerbate media corruption and editorial interference. The Media Trade Union reported instances of pressure and threats against its

members for opposing these amendments.

Violence and Harassment: As of August, the Association of Journalists registered four complaints related to prevention of journalistic duties, physical attacks, threats, and insults. Complaints also cited “received while on duty, and inappropriate conduct” of central and local government officials, including the prime minister and other ministers, political party members, and wealthy and influential businesspersons.

In August the Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL) released a documentary investigating the 2020 Tetovo COVID-19 modular hospital fire, which killed 14 persons. The documentary highlighted a protracted investigation by the PPO into the fire’s underlying causes, including an allegedly manipulated tender for an inadequate hospital. The IRL received threats from a businessman and former government official linked to the construction company and certain governmental and judicial bodies. The Association for Journalists, Council of Media Ethics, Independent Media Trade Union, and Macedonian Institute for Media strongly condemned these threats.

On November 3, the Kavadarci trial court convicted a person of an “attack against an official” and ordered probation. The person had assaulted a television cameraman in October to prevent him from filming a traffic accident site.

Actions to Expand Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media: On February 13, parliament adopted changes to

the penal code providing that attacks against journalists should be prosecuted as attacks against officials. The Media Trade Union reported that as of August 25, the PPO opened two such cases.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

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.

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.

A “state of crisis,” imposed in August 2015, was in force for border areas adjacent to Greece and Serbia. It was extended by parliament every six months and was scheduled to remain in effect through the end of the year. This determination allowed the government additional authorities to manage the entry and transit of migrants and deploy resources as needed, including military forces.

Since March 2020, the government designated the Vinojug Temporary Transit Center (TTC) as a COVID-19 quarantine location for asylees, migrants with medical needs, and migrants undertaking criminal proceedings against smugglers, limiting their freedom of movement. While the government lifted most COVID-19 restrictions in early 2021, the Vinojug TTC was a *de facto* detention center for migrants, including unaccompanied or separated children. There was also no judicial oversight over migrants in the Vinojug TTC. Observers reported that migrants testifying in cases against smugglers were also held in the Gazi Baba detention center, outside the legal framework and with no judicial oversight.

According to international organizations, the number of irregular migrants decreased to approximately 7,100 by mid-September, a significant drop from 27,000 at the end of 2022. This was reportedly the lowest number of irregular migrants registered in the country in the last decade.

Unaccompanied children on average spent less than two weeks at the Vinojug TTC, with a 98 percent rate of absconding in the first week. While at the TTC, unaccompanied children received medical assistance and

language and art classes in an improvised classroom.

In-country Movement: There were no in-country movement restrictions for residents, nor for any person under the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), except for the practice of limiting the freedom of movement of migrants outside the legal framework. Stateless persons' lack of personal documentation or identification documents (such as identification card or birth certificate) prevented them from traveling.

According to the ombudsman, the Ministry of Interior made arbitrary decisions to unnecessarily restrict migrants' freedom of movement, including in cases involving unaccompanied minors.

Foreign Travel: The law regulated issuance of Convention travel documents to those granted refugee status and travel documents to persons granted subsidiary protection by the government; however, these documents were not machine-readable or in line with International Civil Aviation Organization standards. According to the UNHCR office in Skopje, these documents were never used for travel outside the country. Documents issued to persons granted subsidiary protection were valid for up to one year, which could pose additional challenges when visas were required for foreign travel.

Citizenship: Several citizenship applications from resident ethnic Albanians awaited resolution. Approximately 250 Roma were still considered noncitizens, despite state efforts to determine their citizenship status, as

reported by CSOs. The Ministry of Interior stated the government was still reviewing citizenship requests from approximately 1,000 long-term residents, most of whom could not obtain citizenship after the country's independence from Yugoslavia due to a lack of awareness of bureaucratic processes or because of perceived national security concerns.

The government granted 529 long-time residents citizenship but did not grant citizenship to any of the 5,000 naturalization applications. Ethnic Albanian opposition parties criticized the slow progress of the law's implementation.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and persons granted subsidiary protection, and it consulted on legislation and policies.

The Center for Social Work appointed guardians to detained unaccompanied children in transit centers but took no additional measures for alternative accommodation or any other specific child protection measures. Migrants and refugees smuggled through or transiting the country, particularly women and unaccompanied children, were vulnerable to trafficking.

The government issued identity documents to recognize refugees and

persons under subsidiary protection; authorities frequently delayed issuance of identity documents to new asylum seekers. Once issued, these identity documents often did not contain a personal identification number, which limited access to several government services, including education and social welfare programs.

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. All persons granted international protection had access to the same social protection services as nationals.

The legal framework provided for procedural safeguards and review of asylum procedure, and according to UNHCR, the government generally respected the right to seek asylum. Nonetheless, UNHCR recommended better coordination between responsible government institutions and neighboring countries. As of March, police registered in a database all apprehended migrants, and those needing medical attention were supported or accommodated.

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: The government did not receive any reports of physical abuse or violence directed specifically at migrants, although there were anecdotal reports of violence against migrants by smugglers and border guards. Reports received by CSOs alleged incidents of sexual violence by smugglers.

A multisector system and procedures protected vulnerable individuals from

gender-based violence, including foreign nationals, unaccompanied children, and trafficking victims. UNHCR and the European Commission urged strengthening the system for universal and consistent procedure application, particularly in case identification.

Freedom of Movement: UNHCR reported detention of individuals intercepted during irregular travel with smugglers to ensure their presence in country to testify against the smugglers, including detention of children at Reception Center for Foreigners Gazi Baba.

As of September, there were 117 Afghan evacuees and 18,345 Ukrainians in the country. Another 405 Ukrainians were also present in the country under temporary residence on humanitarian grounds. The government issued Afghan refugees one-year visitor permits and limited their movement outside of designated hotels in Skopje for security reasons, but Ukrainian refugees did not have similar movement restrictions.

Access to Basic Services: The 2022 EU progress report noted efforts to ensure basic living conditions and services for all migrants in the country; however, the EU recommended the government further improve the protection-sensitive profiling of migrants to comport with EU and international standards.

Durable Solutions: The country was not a country of resettlement. The law provided for naturalization of refugees residing in the country under slightly preferential conditions. Individuals granted subsidiary protection

could naturalize only after legally residing in the country for eight years. During the year, nine persons from Kosovo were naturalized, and one person voluntarily returned to Kosovo with the support of UNHCR and the government.

There were 65 beneficiaries of international protection, with access to social and housing assistance, education, health care, and the labor market.

Temporary Protection: In August the country granted one-year temporary protected status to Ukrainian nationals, their families, stateless individuals, and foreign nationals with asylum in Ukraine. It also extended temporary protection status to those who arrived after February 24, 2022, and received Ukrainian permanent or temporary residence but could not return to their home country.

As of September, the government granted temporary residence on humanitarian grounds to 405 persons. The country also hosted eight persons with subsidiary protection status originally from Syria, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. International Organization for Migration data via the Ministry of Interior showed eight Ukrainians were granted temporary residence on humanitarian grounds.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

The government generally observed the UN Guiding Principles on Internal

Displacement, despite no national policy document specific to IDPs.

Housing was among the top issues affecting IDPs, due to often substandard spatial conditions. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy's Strategic Work Plan for 2020-2023 included funding for the monthly rental costs for IDPs' accommodation, although IDPs demanded permanent solutions.

The government supported the safe, voluntary return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs. Its 2023 Social Protection Program envisioned regular care for IDPs, as well as activities to stimulate return to their places of residence.

For further information concerning IDPs in the country, please see the materials of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center:

<https://www.internal-displacement.org>.

g. Stateless Persons

There was no official count of stateless persons, and the absence of a formal statelessness determination procedure hindered the determination of whether those individuals were de jure stateless or held citizenship of another former Yugoslav republic.

UNHCR and MYLA reported that 353 individuals with undetermined nationality or no birth or civil registration were at risk of statelessness. Of these, 248 were at risk of statelessness due to unregistered birth, and 105 were long-term residents in the country following the dissolution of

Yugoslavia.

On June 14, parliament amended the 2020 Law on Persons Unregistered in the Birth Registry to expedite registration of the estimated 732 Roma persons lacking citizenship documents, most of whom were Romani children at risk of statelessness.

The 2021 modifications to the Law on Citizenship included provisions to facilitate naturalization for citizens of the former Yugoslavia who had documentary evidence they had continued to reside in the country since the declaration of independence in 1991. The government estimated there were approximately 350 cases that needed to be resolved before the legally set deadline of the end of the year.

Stateless persons could not obtain legal employment and did not have access to courts or other governmental services that required identification, such as health care, education, and social assistance. Press reported extensively on the case of Memet Kamber, a stateless man aged 19, who was unable to receive an identity card and health insurance and died on May 24 due to complications stemming from diabetes.

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 widely reported to be fair and free of abuses and irregularities.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were few restrictions on forming or joining political parties, which were subject to the same laws as ordinary citizens. While membership in a political party was not mandatory, there was an active patronage system in the country through which parties conferred special benefits and advantages to their members. Primary opposition party VMRO-DPMNE accused the government of these practices, alleging party membership overrode educational and professional qualifications prescribed by law for public administration positions. Political party finance lacked transparency, according to credible CSOs, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and State Audit Office reports.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: No laws limited the participation of women or members of nonmajority groups in the political process, and they did participate. The law required gender diversity in each political party's candidate list for parliamentary and municipal elections; at least 40 percent of a party's candidates needed to be of the lesser-represented gender. As of August, 51 of the 120 members of parliament were women, and one deputy prime minister and another four women ministers served in the prime minister's 20-member cabinet. Only two of the 81 mayors were women.

Members of the smaller ethnic communities complained of inequitable representation in senior positions within government.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption. In September the government passed amendments to the penal code, significantly reducing charges and sentences for corruption-related crimes. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) argued that as the country's largest employer, the government's dominant role in the economy created widespread opportunities for corruption.

Corruption: The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) reported corruption was generally getting worse. As of August, it received 370 complaints alleging corruption and reviewed another nine cases on its own initiative. Based on its review, the SCPC filed 20 motions with the PPO, requesting criminal prosecution for alleged misuse of public funds against former and current central and local government officials, including cabinet ministers, local mayors, members of parliament, judges, prosecutors, and heads of public entities such as schools and hospitals. The SCPC submitted 18 motions with other government and public agencies recommending liability measures against managerial and service staff for professional ethics and integrity violations. As of August, the SCPC issued 143

misdemeanor fines against public sector officials and senior-level employees, including for failing to submit mandatory financial statements and failing to report public-sector employment of relatives.

Of the 47 referrals to the PPO since 2019 recommending criminal inquiries, the PPO conducted inquiries for 16 and dismissed nine on various grounds. It did not respond to 22 referrals. Of the 49 referrals to other government or public agencies in the same period, recommending administrative sanctions for professional ethics and integrity violations, the concerned agencies endorsed 19, dismissed 10, and provided no response to the SCPC on the remaining 20.

There were significant delays in trials involving serious corruption, with only a few concluded as of September, including those against former government officials.

The Skopje PPO initiated an investigation into allegations State Oncology Clinic staff stole cancer medications and sold them on the black market. Citizens protested these allegations on numerous occasions, and police and prosecutors raided the clinic on September 1 to collect evidence.

The Skopje Criminal Court sentenced former government secretary general Dragi Rashkovski to eight years in prison for money laundering and abuse of office in violation of public procurement laws.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see

the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *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 publish their findings. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to the views of these groups.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The ombudsman and the Commission for Prevention of and Protection against Discrimination (also known as the Anti-Discrimination Commission) worked to protect citizens from infringement of their rights by public institutions, to reduce discrimination against minority communities and persons with disabilities, to promote equitable representation in public life, and to address abuses of children's rights. As of September, the Anti-Discrimination Commission operated with limited capacity, with five of the required seven members.

As of August 31, the Anti-Discrimination Commission received 190 complaints, reviewed 146 complaints, and found discrimination in 35 cases,

most of which were intersectional discrimination. The public perceived the commission as independent and its operations efficient and complementary to the ombudsman's work.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape of a person, regardless of gender, including spousal rape, was illegal, but laws were poorly enforced. Penalties for rape ranged from one to 15 years' imprisonment. Domestic violence was illegal but was a persistent issue. Penalties ranged from six months to five years' imprisonment for lower-level offenses and one to 10 years' imprisonment for crimes resulting in grave or permanent bodily injury. Offenders could receive up to life imprisonment if their actions resulted in the death of their victim. Additionally, courts could impose fines. The law was enforced in cases where survivors pressed charges, but many did not. The ombudsman characterized the courts' sentences against convicted offenders as "overly lenient" and said the sentences neither contributed to a reduction or elimination of severe forms of domestic violence nor provided sufficient protection to survivors.

In September the country updated its penal code to align with the Council of Europe's Convention to Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Changes included

criminalizing nonconsensual rape and increasing penalties for marital rape, online and in-person sexual harassment, stalking, and female genital mutilation. Underreporting of gender-based violence cases was common due to stigma, distrust of institutions, and lack of awareness.

As of September, the Ministry of Interior reported 517 cases of family violence, with 526 alleged offenders. The authorities reported at least six cases of femicide, committed by the victims' current or former partners, spouses, or other close family members.

On September 27, the HHRC demanded liability for the police officers who failed to protect two women who filed multiple complaints against their intimate partners for violence. Both women, as well as the mother of one of the victims, were reported killed by those same intimate partners, in separate incidents on September 25 in Kocani and August 25 in Kumanovo, respectively. Coalition Margini recorded 48 cases of gender-based violence between February and July, of which sexual harassment was documented in 15 of the cases. Rape and sexual violence by an intimate partner were not reported in any of these cases.

As of August 31, the ombudsman received three complaints regarding domestic violence and referred them to the Ministry of Interior for further inquiries. According to the ombudsman, in most instances police responded to domestic violence incidents in a timely manner; however, survivors' frequent reluctance to report attacks to authorities enabled

impunity.

The Skopje Basic Criminal Court received 68 gender-based violence cases and the court ruled on 63 gender-based violence cases. In 21 cases the court sentenced the defendants to jail, and in other cases the court gave conditional sentences.

The government funded 12 regional domestic violence survivor centers, and a CSO financed and managed one additional center. The central government operated three centers in collaboration with civil society, and a local government ran one. The Ministry of Labor funded nine specialized counseling centers for survivors and perpetrators, fully supporting eight. A local government co-founded and co-funded another, managed by a CSO. An NGO operated a hotline and two crisis centers for domestic violence survivors' temporary shelter.

The ministry's national free SOS line for survivors of domestic violence provided round-the-clock, accurate, timely, and confidential assistance, including information on survivor protection, available services, and telephone counseling to survivors of gender-based and domestic violence.

Between January and August, Skopje Criminal Court convicted 69 individuals of domestic violence-related crimes.

Discrimination: Women had the same legal status as men under family, religious, personal status, and nationality laws, as well as laws related to

labor, property, nationality, inheritance, employment, access to credit, and owning or managing businesses or property. These laws were effectively enforced. Certain communities followed the practice of men directing the voting or voting on behalf of disenfranchised women family members. Women were unable to work in the same industries as men, and women working in the private sector often received lower pay than men in comparable positions.

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

Women from rural areas had limited access to family planning counseling and gynecological services. Roma women and girls were vulnerable regarding access to adequate medical care, especially reproductive health and family planning services.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Emergency contraception was available as part of clinical management of rape. Postexposure prophylaxis was also available at the infectious diseases clinic of the main state hospital in Skopje; however, according to the NGO Health Education and Research Association, victims of rape from rural areas rarely benefitted from efficient prophylaxis due to belated reporting of rape. State health centers accepted all persons who sought medical attention, including patients with complications from abortion. Three centers for survivors of sexual

violence, in Skopje, Kumanovo, and Tetovo, were integrated with and funded by the state hospitals in each city. A shelter in Skopje for trafficking victims provided reproductive health care.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The country had civil and criminal laws and affirmative action regulations to protect members of racial or ethnic groups from violence and discrimination. The constitution and laws referred to ethnic minorities as communities. The Anti-Discrimination Commission effectively enforced the civil antidiscrimination laws; enforcement of the criminal law, however, was lax, according to CSO Romalitico.

Roma reported widespread societal discrimination. According to the ombudsman, Roma were underrepresented in the civil service and other state and public institutions, while other smaller ethnic communities were underrepresented at the managerial level. NGOs and international experts reported employers often denied Romani applicants job opportunities, and some Roma complained of lack of access to public services and benefits. According to credible reports, there was also significant police mistreatment against the Roma community. The Roma-led CSO Romalitico reported at least four cases of police brutality against Roma were brought to the authorities but many more were unreported due to Roma community fear and distrust in these institutions.

Data from the national employment agency showed that due to low participation in the education system, particularly in higher education, Roma generally had difficulties finding jobs in the formal economy. On April 7, the Ministry of Labor announced the government introduced a 5 percent quota for Roma inclusion in the labor market until 2024.

In May the appellate court replaced a one-year prison sentence with a suspended sentence for a police officer from Bitola convicted by a lower court of “mistreatment in the conduct of duty” of a Roma person.

Access to adequate housing was a systemic problem for the Roma. Even in instances where the government provided housing for the Roma, non-Roma residents refused to live in the same neighborhoods due to societal prejudice.

As of August, the ombudsman received 36 complaints alleging discrimination on grounds of fair and just representation of the ethnic communities, and one complaint alleging hate speech.

Coalition Margini reported 24 cases of violations against Roma regarding access to health, social protection, access to goods and services, protection from gender-based violence, and inappropriate entry of data in personal documents.

The minister of justice closed Bulgarian cultural clubs “Tsar Boris III” and “Ivan (Vanco) Mihajlov”, citing the 2022 law requiring organizations named

after fascist supporters or collaborators to change their names. In February and on the recommendation of the Anti-Discrimination Commission, the prosecutor's office in Bitola opened a preliminary investigation into the "Ivan (Vanco) Mihajlov" club on hate speech grounds. The club's president was charged with inciting ethnic and racial hate and intolerance and spreading racism and xenophobia.

Two persons were charged with inflicting serious bodily injuries on Hristijan Pendikov, who self-identified as Bulgarian, on national and ethnic hate grounds.

Children

Education: Discrimination against Roma school-age children via segregation occurred. Credible reports stated local school authorities and communities, often at the insistence of non-Roma students' parents, resisted changing segregation practices. CSOs reported practices of local authorities pressuring Roma students' parents to enroll them in schools in areas with a predominant Romani population; when in the same school as other non-Roma students, the Roma students were often put in different classrooms. According to reports, some of those practices were also due to some Roma students being unable to speak languages other than Romani.

Child Abuse: There were laws against child abuse, and penalties for conviction included fines, imprisonment, and closure of businesses. Child

abuse was a problem in certain areas. The government operated a hotline for domestic violence, including child abuse. The Ministry of Interior registered 83 street children who were forced by their parents or other adults to beg, wash cars, or sell small items. All 83 children were referred to day care centers for children at risk.

The ombudsman received 18 complaints of violence, abuse, and exploitation of children, most involving peer violence and bullying, violence from school staff, and domestic violence.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage was 18. A court could issue a marriage license to persons between the ages of 16 and 18 if it found them mentally and physically fit for marriage. Early and forced marriage occurred in the Romani community and, to a much lesser extent, in some Albanian and other communities. According to local CSOs, the early and forced marriages among the Romani community accounted for 15-20 percent of the total number of early and forced marriages in the country, showing progressive decline compared with previous years.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibited all forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children and provided penalties of 10 to 15 years in prison for violations. The law prohibited child pornography and provided penalties of five to 15 years in prison for violations. Authorities enforced the law. The minimum age for consensual sex was 16.

The ombudsman acted on four cases of sexual abuse of children, two on their own initiative based on media information, one case referred by NGO Megjasi, and one resulting from a petition by MYLA.

The country had an online registry, searchable by name and address, of convicted child traffickers and sex offenders, listing photographs, conviction records, and residential addresses. Offenders could ask authorities to remove them from the register 10 years after they completed their sentence, provided they did not commit a new offense.

As of September, the registry listed a total of 323 offenders (13 women and 310 men), 13 of whom were sentenced during the year. Of these, 183 had been released from prison, and the rest were serving prison sentences of between two and 20 years.

Antisemitism

The Jewish community estimated that approximately 200 Jewish persons resided in the country, although only 66 persons declared themselves as Jewish by ethnicity in the 2021 census. The community reported no violent incidents against its members, but observers reported a significant increase in the number of antisemitic incidents. There were instances of antisemitic graffiti in several towns across the country, including a swastika drawing on the fence of the Jewish Community building in Skopje and anti-Israeli messages in interiors of public busses.

Jewish community leaders said antisemitic behavior was on the rise and that conspiracy theories and online hate speech against Jews presented worrisome trends. In March the Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from North Macedonia issued a joint press release condemning the Hitler mask of a participant and the appearance of a Nazi flag at the carnival in Strumica. The reaction stated it was unacceptable under the guise of humor and satire to ridicule the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust, including the 7,144 Jews from the country.

In the same period, retired university professor Doreana Hristova wrote an antisemitic post on social media against the Jews and Israel, blaming them for conspiring against the country's EU integration.

The Jewish Community expressed regret that its 2017 initiative for an amendment to the criminal code that would criminalize antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, or the glorification of the Nazi and fascist symbols had not been adopted.

For further information on incidents in the country of antisemitism, 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

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

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: No laws criminalized consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, cross-dressing, or other sexual or gender characteristic-related behavior. Seemingly neutral laws were not disproportionately applied to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) persons to justify arbitrary arrest.

Violence and Harassment: Violence against LGBTQI+ persons was a problem. CSOs reported authorities failed to adequately investigate and prosecute instances of violence against LGBTQI+ persons.

The Skopje Basic PPO reported three criminal complaints involving LGBTQI+ victims during the year. As of August, two were withdrawn, and one was in plea negotiation before the Kumanovo prosecutor's office.

CSOs reported 28 documented cases of violations of LGBTQI+ persons' rights. Of those, 15 involved sexual harassment in public spaces and hate motivated violence and speech against seven gay men, one trans woman,

and a lesbian. Seven of those cases occurred at an LGBTQI+ space “committee.” CSOs reported two cases of domestic violence against LGBTQI+ persons, one of which involved violence against a transgender woman by her intimate partner and the other involved a former husband who threatened, stalked, and shamed a bisexual woman to her family and at her work over her sexual orientation.

Two individuals were sentenced for physically assaulting and injuring the “LGBTI United Tetovo” president in two separate incidents in 2022; one received a six-month sentence and the other a two-year prison sentence. Coalition Margini reported 12 cases of homophobic or transphobic speech, one of which occurred in Strumica in a public space that according to reports was a center of anti-gender movements due to religious officials sponsoring anti-gender events attended by local government officials.

Discrimination: The constitution and law prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. When victims filed complaints, the government generally enforced the law, although prosecution of violence against LGBTQI+ individuals proceeded slowly. The antidiscrimination law explicitly provided for protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in education, employment, housing, and health care; the criminal code sanctioned serious cases of hate speech and induced coercion, harassment, public mockery, or violence based on sex, gender identity, affiliation with a marginalized group, “and other types of belief.” The statute proposed a

sentence of a minimum of one and maximum of five years in prison, with harsher penalties for offenders acting in an official capacity or causing large-scale violence against individuals or damage to property.

As of August, the ombudsman received one complaint alleging discrimination based on sex characteristics.

CSOs reported an increase in transphobic and homophobic speech. LGBTQI+ persons were marginalized, and activists supporting the rights of LGBTQI+ persons reported numerous incidents of societal prejudice. The HHRC reported a surge in derogatory and violent speech against LGBTQI+ persons in social and traditional media before and after the Skopje Pride Parade. The committee filed two criminal complaints for hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity, one of which was dismissed.

According to a World Bank study released September 26, labor discrimination, i.e., exclusion of “LGBTI” persons from the labor market, cost the country 3.6 billion dinars (\$64 million), as well as another 964 million dinars (\$17 million) in fiscal loss (0.13 percent of GDP) annually. The unemployment rate of “LGBTI” persons was 1.5 percent higher when compared to the general population. According to the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, anti-gender movements from across Europe reached the country in the recent years and hindered government efforts to improve the legal framework for nondiscrimination.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: Legal gender recognition was possible but limited and inconsistent. Coalition Margini reported that as of August, 18 persons had successfully completed alteration of sex/gender markers in personal documents. In March the government withdrew draft amendments to the Law on Civil Registry, which included legal gender recognition provisions. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) noted the lack of a law explicitly allowing alteration of a person's sex/gender marker status in the civil status register.

In 2023, the ECtHR rendered two judgments in response to Coalition Margini applications. In one of the cases, the ECtHR ruled a national TV station violated the privacy of two transgender women by publishing their photos, personal information, and medical data without their consent; the court ordered the TV station to pay damages. In the second case, the ECtHR found police violated the human rights of a group of individuals in commercial sex and nine other women by detaining them in inhuman conditions in November 2008, and it ordered the state to pay damages.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There were allegations so-called conversion therapy was practiced on adults or children to try to change the person's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression, and activists confirmed there were such cases, although they had few details. Activists reported psychologists and other educational professionals in schools often asked LGBTQI+ students to conform to heteronormative standards and to act in accordance with the roles

expected of the gender they were assigned at birth.

There were no reports of surgeries performed on intersex children or on nonconsenting adult intersex persons. There were no reports the government or medical associations made efforts to limit these practices.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

The country did not have any formal restrictions on those speaking on LGBTQI+ issues or on the ability of LGBTQI+ individuals and organizations to legally register or convene events, such as Pride festivities.

Persons with Disabilities

Despite constitution and statutory laws to protect the rights of persons with disabilities (physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities), they could not access education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis. This limited their access to education, employment, health services, information, communications, buildings, transportation, the judicial system, or other state services. The government did not enforce legal requirements effectively. A law governing the employment of persons with disabilities provided financial incentives for companies and vocational training for persons with disabilities, and it supplemented the general labor law. The government required persons with physical or mental disabilities to obtain approval from a medical commission to serve in supervisory positions in the private

or public sector, which violated the right to equal treatment and employment based on merit according to experts.

There were no reports of violence, harassment, or intimidation targeted at persons with disabilities; however, persons with disabilities and their families experienced stigmatization and segregation due to entrenched prejudice.

The law established accessibility standards for new buildings; however, NGOs reported noncompliance in many public and government buildings and other structures, including shelters for victims of violence. NGOs reported companies skirted the law by paying bribes to avoid the costs of including accessibility features in new construction.

Government buses in Skopje procured since 2013 needed to be accessible to persons with physical disabilities. Many buses were inaccessible due to insufficient maintenance, lack of training, and failure to sanction drivers who refused to utilize ramps. Public transportation was largely inaccessible for persons with disabilities outside of Skopje.

As of mid-September, two weeks after the start of the academic year, high school students with disabilities did not have access to government-paid education assistants. The government provided an increased number of government-paid education assistants to primary school students with disabilities for the 2023-2024 academic year.

The Ministry of Education and Science made efforts to provide suitable support to children with disabilities to attend schools, but a lack of funding and qualified education assistants negatively affected students. The law mandated children with disabilities attend all schools and envisioned transforming specific schools into resource centers for teachers, parents, and students. Most schools were unprepared to implement the law and struggled to provide appropriate support to children with disabilities. Most schools were inaccessible for persons with physical disabilities and lacked wheelchair accessibility ramps, accessible toilets, and elevators. Many students with disabilities attended separate schools. Disability CSOs reported a lack of antiepileptic medications, which caused financial burden to parents who had to buy the medications abroad.

Advocates reported improvements for children with autism, due to mainstream acceptance of their presence in schools, where they were often accompanied by teaching assistants.

Institutionalized Children: Orphans younger than three were placed in foster homes. The Ministry of Labor promoted child foster care by recruiting new and supporting existing foster families, and it opened three new centers for foster care support during the reporting period.

The ombudsman conducted periodic visits to group and foster homes for children with disabilities.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Social stigma and discrimination against persons with HIV and AIDS were problems. The government made additional budget cuts to HIV preventative programs. The country did not have a national HIV strategy. CSOs reported four cases of discrimination against persons with HIV health service access; in one case, Coalition Margini filed a discrimination lawsuit.

CSOs supporting persons with HIV, in cooperation with the Clinic for Infectious Diseases, provided free distribution of antiretroviral therapy to all HIV patients in need, particularly those living outside Skopje.

As of August, the Institute for Public Health reported 34 newly contracted HIV cases: 30 men and four women. Credible sources reported one-third of persons with HIV in the country were unaware of it.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and provided for reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. The law required federated unions to register with the Ministry of Labor and with the State Central Registry.

The law covered those working for employers that were registered with the government and did not discriminate against foreign workers or migrants who were legally employed. The Ministry of Labor's State Labor Inspectorate (SLI) did not receive any complaints over violations of the right to union organization and freedom of association. Nonetheless, workers often feared reprisal and refrained from filing direct complaints. Some workers had unions file complaints on their behalf.

Trade unions were based on voluntary membership, and activities were financed by membership dues. Approximately 22 percent of employees, mostly in public administration, were union members. Union representatives, except a few branch unions, claimed they were generally not free from the influence of government officials, political parties, and employers.

A court of general jurisdiction could terminate trade union activities at the request of the registrar or competent court when those activities were deemed to be "against the constitution and law." There were no nationality restrictions on membership in trade unions, although foreign nationals needed a valid work permit and to be employed by the company or government body listed on the permit. Although legally permitted, no unions operated in the free economic zones.

Government enforcement resources and remediation were inadequate. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those of other laws

involving the denial of civil rights. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays. In unionized sectors, the government effectively enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers. Due to the absence of unions in some sectors, there were no reports of government enforcement of laws respecting their establishment or operation. Penalties were regularly applied in segments controlled by the SLI.

Several unions organized strikes and protests, demanding salary increases and implementation of collective bargaining agreements, following 78 percent salary increases for elected government officials. In July the management board of the Skopje public Waste Collection Company fired 32 employees for organizing a week-long strike; six were reinstated, and others pressed charges in court. The government and employers usually respected freedom of association, the right to strike, and the right to collective bargaining. Unions cited the law's "exclusionary" provision, which allowed employers to terminate up to 2 percent of workers from collective bargaining negotiations during a strike. Collective bargaining was restricted to trade unions representing at least 20 percent of the employees and employers' associations representing at least 10 percent of the employers at the level at which the agreement was concluded (company, sector, or country).

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

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law set a minimum wage below the poverty income level in all sectors. The Economic Social Council, which equally represented unions, employer associations, and the government, negotiated the minimum wage. The law established a 40-hour work week with a minimum 24-hour rest period, paid vacation of 20 to 26 workdays, and sick leave benefits. Employees could not legally work more than an average of eight hours of overtime per week over a three-month period, or 190 hours per year. According to the collective agreement for the private sector between employers and unions, employees in the private sector had

a right to overtime pay at 135 percent of their regular rate. In addition, the law entitled employees who worked more than 150 hours of overtime per year to a bonus of one month's salary.

In May parliament amended the Labor Law's provisions regulating maximum weekly overtime hours to facilitate and speed up construction of two new motorways, corridors 8 and 10d. The amended law enabled workers to sign labor contracts according to which they would decide whether they would work additional paid hours, without setting an upper limit. Although the Constitutional Court previously overturned a related legal provision, the president signed the new amendments, and they entered in force. On September 19, the Constitutional Court announced a review of three petitions challenging the amendments.

Occupational Safety and Health: Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were generally appropriate for the main industries, and employers were responsible for assessing risks their employees faced on the job. The SLI proactively identified unsafe working conditions. The law required employers to appoint an OSH officer or contract a licensed company to implement OSH standards.

Workers had the legal right to remove themselves from situations endangering their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment. Nevertheless, employees did not always exercise this right, reportedly based on fear of losing their jobs due to the high unemployment rate.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The SLI and the State Inspectorate for Technical Inspection were responsible for implementing pertinent laws. The number of labor inspectors was adequate to investigate violations of labor law, but inspectors were not appropriately distributed throughout the country. Labor inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions, but distribution of inspectors made it difficult to enforce compliance. The SLI had an OSH department with three regional offices, but they were understaffed and lacked adequate training and modern equipment. The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, hours of work, and OSH standards, particularly in textiles and construction sectors. Some violators received no penalties, and penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for similar crimes such as fraud or negligence.

The SLI filed complaints against businesses for nonpayment of minimum wage, benefits, and overtime, often on Sundays. Violations in wage and overtime were most common in the textile, construction, railroad, and retail sectors. Many employers hired workers without complying with the law, and small retail businesses often required employees to work well beyond legal hourly limits.

Construction, manufacturing, wholesale trade, catering, mining and quarrying, and transportation and storage were the riskiest areas in the labor market.

The informal sector of the economy was estimated to account for approximately 40 percent of the overall economy. Many workers in the informal sector were men, including young persons, as well as retired persons working in the agricultural sector. After agriculture, construction and commerce were assumed to have the most informal workers. The government did not effectively enforce laws in the informal sector.