

BULGARIA 2016 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bulgaria is a constitutional republic governed by a freely elected unitary parliament. The constitution vests legislative authority in the unicameral National Assembly. A coalition government headed by a prime minister led the country. A presidential election was held in November, and the Central Election Commission did not report any major election irregularities. Observers characterized the parliamentary elections in 2014 as complying “with the fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly” but also noted pervasive allegations of vote buying and the use of racist, xenophobic, and inflammatory rhetoric throughout the election campaign.

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The marginalization of and societal intolerance towards the Romani minority remained the country’s most pressing human rights problem. A growing societal intolerance to refugees and continued deterioration of the media environment due to corporate and political dependence were also problematic. Corruption continued to be a drag on the government’s capabilities and undermined public and business confidence in the judiciary and other government institutions.

Other reported human rights problems included police violence; harsh conditions in prisons and detention facilities; and long delays in the judicial system. There were reports of religious discrimination and harassment; shortcomings in refugee integration processes and policies; election fraud; gender-based violence and discrimination against women; violence against children; increasing online anti-Semitism; trafficking in persons; discrimination against persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons; and social stigma against persons with HIV/AIDS. Child labor and discrimination against members of minorities in employment and occupation were also reported.

The government took steps to prosecute and punish officials in the security services and elsewhere who committed abuses, but their actions were insufficient, and impunity was a problem.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

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

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

In June the district prosecution in Burgas closed the investigation into the shooting death of an Afghani migrant. The migrant was shot by a border police officer in October 2015 near Sredets. The prosecutor concluded the use of deadly force had occurred by accident and did not constitute a crime.

The law allows police to use firearms only as a last resort while doing everything possible to preserve the life of the person who is in danger. The law prohibits the use of deadly force against nonviolent offenders who are not posing a threat. According to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the National Protection Service Act, adopted in 2015, does not provide the same safeguards.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and law prohibit such practices, but there were reports of government officials employing degrading treatment.

In 2015 the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) issued a statement concluding that police brutality was a systemic problem, based on a significant number of allegations of deliberate physical mistreatment of persons detained by police. The CPT noted that the number of allegations had not decreased since 2014 and had even increased in Sofia and Burgas. The CPT concluded that men and women (including juveniles) continued to run a significant risk of mistreatment, generally consisting of slaps, kicks, and in some cases truncheon blows, both at the time of apprehension and during subsequent questioning.

There were reports that police physically mistreated migrants and asylum seekers attempting to cross the border into the country (see section 2.d., Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons).

Police can detain persons for 24 hours without charging them. There were occasional reports that police arrested suspects for minor offenses and physically abused them to force confessions, especially in cases involving Romani suspects.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in most prisons were harsh, with inadequate sanitary, living, and medical facilities.

Physical Conditions: Overcrowding remained a problem in some prisons, particularly in Burgas and Pleven. Many detention centers had cells lacking adequate access to natural light. The government initiated an improvement program to implement a minimum living area of 43 square feet per prisoner by December 1. Amendments to the Execution of Punishments and Detention in Custody Act enacted in April grant exceptions to the established prisoner distribution rules, allowing prisoners to be sent to a penitentiary institution with available space rather than the one closest to their address registration. The amendments also allow for visits to prisoners in solitary confinement.

After the government made significant improvements in the asylum seeker reception and irregular migrant detention centers in 2014, independent observers and the ombudsman stated that conditions deteriorated due to negligence. They also noted inadequate hygiene and sanitation, in addition to regular interruptions in the provision of food supplies and medical and interpretation services. The ombudsman reported that the significant physical deterioration of the irregular migrant detention centers and overcrowding were problems. In January the Supreme Administrative Court revoked an Interior Ministry order providing for confinement in isolation of migrants who disturbed the internal order in detention centers, asserting that the law does not provide for such disciplinary measures.

Through September there were 18 deaths reported in prisons.

Most of the prison facilities dated from the early 1900s, and the government built the newest facility in 1983. In its latest report from November 2015, the CPT identified persistent problems with access to medical care, custodial staff violence against prisoners, violence between prisoners, prison overcrowding, poor material conditions in detention and prison facilities, and inadequate prison health care services and low custodial staffing levels. In October the Bulgarian Helsinki

Committee reported that medical personnel did not report to the prosecution service all cases of custodial staff violence against prisoners.

The October Bulgarian Helsinki Committee report criticized prison hygiene, noting that many places were infested by rodents and insects. The 2015 *Prison Condition Monitoring Index* published by the Center for the Study of Democracy evaluated the country's performance on four prison condition indicators. It characterized prison living conditions, social and correctional work, security and safety, and medical services as "problematic" and access to employment as "alarming."

Physical abuse of prisoners by guards occurred but was rare. As of October, the ombudsman identified five cases of police applying excessive force out of approximately 60,000 police detentions. The ombudsman criticized the 2015 reduction of prison guard personnel by 450 persons, which not only increased the risk of violence among the prisoners, but also posed a threat to prison security.

NGOs received complaints about both the quality and quantity of food. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee reported that access to natural light was inadequate and there were problems with lighting, ventilation, and access to potable water in solitary confinement units in half of the prisons it visited in the summer. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee criticized the prison administration for reducing medical personnel, which left 16 out of the country's 34 jails without medical services. As a result, authorities did not have medical examinations performed on detainees following reports of police abuse, and officials rarely punished offending officers. According to the ombudsman, the prison administration systematically kept prisoners continuously chained to their beds when hospitalized in a general hospital. By law prison medical facilities are part of the health system but administered by the Ministry of Justice, which oversees prisons. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee criticized this arrangement, claiming it created a conflict of interest and a source of corruption, since prison directors appoint the doctors and the doctors are not subject to outside monitoring.

The prison administration and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination received complaints from prisoners about sanctions imposed on them, the poor quality of medical services and living conditions, and mistreatment by prison guards. To reinforce their protests, inmates occasionally went on hunger strikes.

The prison administration estimated that 6.8 percent of the prison population was drug dependent, based on information provided from prison medical units. Prison

authorities had trouble limiting prisoner access to narcotics and other prohibited items.

The ombudsman reported that the supply of sanitary materials and hot water in the women's prison in Sliven was irregular and that there were problems with the general water supply in the Bobov Dol prison. The ombudsman also reported that there was a lack of medical services and interpreters at detention centers for irregular migrants.

Administration: All prisoners have the right to work, and two days of work reduced the prison term by one day, but the prison administration offered work to only a limited number of prisoners. Prisoners alleged the system for determining the type of work regime a prisoner received was corrupt and lacked oversight.

While prisoners in principle have the right to receive visitors, in many cases a lack of space to accommodate visitors limited opportunities for visits. NGOs and the ombudsman noted that visits to the country's only prison for women and to the only correctional facility for minors caused undue hardship because of the travel time and expense. According to the ombudsman, prisoners were awarded extended time for visits from their families, but prison guards and surveillance cameras monitored those visits.

NGOs claimed prisoners had inadequate recourse against bad conditions, and even though they were able to sue the state and obtain compensation, conditions did not improve.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring of prisons by independent observers, including the CPT.

Improvements: With funding from the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, the government improved the living and sanitary conditions in several prisons and detention centers, including replacing the plumbing system and installing toilets in every cell at Stara Zagora prison. With its own funding, the Justice Ministry renovated the sanitary facilities in Varna, Burgas, and Sliven and made repairs and improvements at the Kremikovtsi and Plovdiv prisons.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

Although the constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention, there were reports that police at times abused their arrest and detention authority.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Ministry of Interior is responsible for law enforcement, migration, and border enforcement. The State Agency for National Security (DANS), which reports to the Prime Minister's Office, is responsible for counterintelligence, domestic intelligence analysis, and investigating corruption and organized crime. The State Intelligence Agency under the Council of Ministers is responsible for foreign intelligence, and the Military Information Service under the defense minister is responsible for military intelligence. The National Protective Service is responsible for the security of dignitaries and answers to the president. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the police and security services. Police and the prosecution service are responsible for investigating security force killings. While the government had mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption, implementation was inadequate, and impunity was a problem.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

Police normally obtained a warrant prior to apprehending an individual. Police may hold a detainee for 24 hours without charge, and a prosecutor may authorize an extension of an additional 72 hours. A court must approve detention longer than 72 hours; such detentions can last up to two years. Prosecutors may not arrest military personnel without the defense minister's approval. Authorities generally observed these laws.

The law provides for recognizance, bail, and house arrest, and these measures were widely used.

The law provides for the right to counsel from the time of detention, and internal regulations instruct that detainees have access to legal counsel no later than two hours after detention and that a lawyer have access to the detainee within 30 minutes of his or her arrival at the police station. In its November 2015 report, however, the CPT identified persistent problems with notification of custody, timely access to legal representation, and provision of information on rights for persons taken into custody. In a 2015 survey, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee reported that 34 percent of prisoners had no or limited access to legal representation while under arrest. In addition, the CPT noted that ex officio lawyers did not perform their function as a safeguard against police mistreatment.

In 2015 the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and the CPT issued reports stating that police violated detainees' right to a lawyer, used violence during arrest, and used force during interrogation. The CPT report noted a lack of sufficient guarantees for effectively implementing legal safeguards against police mistreatment. More than a third of prisoners interviewed by the organization reported problems accessing a lawyer; 16 percent claimed police beat them during arrest; and 22 percent stated police used physical force to obtain a confession. Another 10 percent claimed to have witnessed violence against other detainees.

The law provides for government-funded legal aid for low-income defendants, and defendants could choose from a list of public defenders provided by the bar associations. A national hotline provided 15-minute free legal consultations eight hours per day. The law prohibits holding detainees in custody without indictment longer than two months for those charged with general crimes, eight months for those charged with felonies, and 18 months for those charged with crimes punishable by at least 15 years' imprisonment.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports of arbitrary detention. Prosecutors conducted a criminal investigation against four police officers who were identified in a July 2015 amateur video that showed six police officers from the First Precinct in Sofia stopping two persons for a document check and manhandling them during their arrest. The investigation was pending as of September.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: Arrested or detained persons could seek redress in court for damages caused by judicial or law enforcement authorities as long as their arrest or detention measure has been repealed.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, but corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability continued to be pervasive problems. Public trust in the judicial system remained extremely low because of the perception that magistrates were susceptible to political pressure and rendered unequal justice.

The Supreme Judicial Council appoints, promotes, disciplines, and dismisses judges, investigators, and prosecutors. It also investigates complaints of judicial misconduct and recommends disciplinary action. Managing magistrates can also

impose minor punishments. Observers criticized the lack of clearly stated motives and justifications in the council's disciplinary decisions.

Judicial and investigative backlogs remained a problem in larger jurisdictions, and long delays for criminal trials were common. The law allowed defendants to request court dismissal of the charges against them if the prosecution has not formally indicted them for more than two years in serious crime cases and one year in petty crime cases.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair public trial, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. The law presumes defendants are innocent until proven guilty and allows them ample time and facilities to prepare a defense. All court hearings are public except for cases involving national security, endangerment of public morals, and the privacy of juvenile defendants. Defendants have the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges against them, with free interpretation as necessary from the moment they are charged through all their appeals.

In cases involving serious crimes, two nonprofessional judges join a professional judge. If a crime carries a sentence of more than 15 years' imprisonment, two professional judges and three lay judges hear the case. In such circumstances, a majority vote determines verdicts. The constitution and the law give defendants the right to an attorney, provided at public expense for those who cannot afford to pay for one. A defense attorney is mandatory if the alleged crime carries a possible punishment of 10 or more years in prison; if the defendant is a juvenile, foreigner, or person with mental or physical disabilities; or if the accused is absent. Defendants have the right to be present at their trial and can demand a retrial if they were convicted in absentia, unless they were evading justice at the time of the first trial. Defendants have the right to confront witnesses, examine evidence, and present their own witnesses and evidence. Defendants are not compelled to testify or confess guilt. The law provides for the right of appeal, which was widely used. Trial procedures apply equally to all defendants.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

While the law provides for an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters, the same long delays in criminal cases affected civil cases. Individuals may file allegations of human rights abuses with courts and with the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, which can impose fines on violators. Individuals could appeal decisions involving alleged violations of the European Convention on Human Rights by the state to the European Court of Human Rights once all remedies in domestic courts have been exhausted.

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

The constitution and law prohibit such actions, and there were no reports the government failed to respect these provisions. The maximum period during which wiretapping is permitted in national security-related cases is 12 months. Law enforcement agencies can access electronic data traffic only in cases related to serious crime or national security. The National Bureau for Oversight of Specialized Investigative Techniques reported significant improvement in the control of wiretapping and other intrusive techniques during the first six months of the year, noting that only 6.5 percent of the inspected cases involve violations of the law.

In March 2015, the Constitutional Court annulled legislative provisions obligating service providers to retain electronic communication data for up to 24 months, which, according to the ombudsman, encroached on privacy.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The law provides for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights. Concerns persisted, however, that corporate and political pressure combined with the growing and nontransparent concentration of media ownership and distribution networks, as well as government regulation of resources and support for the media, gravely damaged media pluralism.

According to the Association of European Journalists Bulgaria (AEJ), a “culture of pressure” was steadily restricting media pluralism. A survey conducted in 2015 by the AEJ showed that 72 percent of journalists witnessed their colleagues being subjected to pressure, 67 percent stated that politicians significantly interfered with

their work, 54 percent were personally prevented from freely exercising their profession, 43 percent admitted to pressure from the government and local institutions, and 41 percent were the targets of rumor spreading and slander. In January the AEJ expressed concern that public institutions could “buy” the media and influence editorial content through a provision in the law that allows direct public procurement of media airtime without transparent selection procedures.

The International Research and Exchanges Board’s (IREX) 2016 media sustainability index indicated “significant shifts on the Bulgarian media ownership scene” and “a radical increase in corporate and political propaganda.” IREX noted that the media market was defined by a growing number of quasi-media, externally funded propaganda mouthpieces and progovernment propaganda outlets leading smear campaigns against politicians, journalists, and media who “do not follow the official line.” Reports of intimidation and violence against journalists continued.

Freedom of Speech and Expression: Individuals criticized the government without official reprisal. In rural areas offering fewer employment opportunities, however, individuals were more hesitant to criticize local governments. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee expressed concern over the “deterioration of the freedom of expression, particularly the freedom and ethical standards of practicing journalism.”

In June Sofia Administrative Court revoked the 100,000 lev (\$56,000) fine on Economedia imposed in 2015 by the Financial Supervision Commission (FSC) over publications in *Capital Daily and Dnevnik Online* perceived as aiming to destabilize the banking sector. As of September, Economedia was still appealing a second 50,000 lev (\$28,000) fine imposed by the FSC after *Economedia* outlets implicated FSC chair Stoyan Mavrodiev in a money laundering case and accused him of having connections with an organized crime figure. NGOs commented that the National Assembly, which appoints the FSC chair, and other authorities declined to address the press allegations.

The penal code provides for one to four years’ imprisonment for incitement to “hate speech.” The law defines hate speech as speech that instigates hatred, discrimination, or violence based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, marital or social status, or disability. In July the Open Society Institute presented a survey highlighting “a disturbing trend of increasing public occurrence and acceptance of hate speech.” NGOs noted that hate speech escalated especially around the time of elections, turning into a common form of expression, not just for xenophobic politicians but also for media and social network commentators.

Paid “trolls” populated forums and social media of all media outlets, targeting political opponents with racist and xenophobic comments.

As of July prosecutors had opened 12 hate crime investigations and had pursued two indictments.

Press and Media Freedoms: The media were active and expressed a wide variety of views. Laws restricting “hate speech” also applied to material appearing in the print media. According to the Reporters without Borders’ 2016 *World Press Freedom Index*, the press environment was “dominated by corruption and collusion between media, politicians and oligarchs” and the FSC deterred journalists from “shedding light on problems with the country’s banks and the banking regulatory system.” Following a June European Court of Human Rights ruling that publishers are obliged to control the content of their forums, some online media outlets imposed stricter policies on postings. Domestic and international organizations criticized both print and electronic media for lack of ownership and financial transparency, editorial bias, and susceptibility to economic and political influence.

Violence and Harassment: In January authorities in Pomorie arrested Martin Dushev on charges of severely beating journalist Stoyan Tonchev, who was hospitalized with multiple injuries to his head and body. According to Tonchev, the attack was prompted by his online criticism of the local government. In March the court released Dushev on bail and, as of September, an investigation was in progress.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Journalists continued to privately report self-censorship, editorial prohibitions on covering specific persons and subjects, and the imposition of a political point of view by corporate leaders. In July the AEJ demanded Culture Minister Vezhdi Rashidov’s resignation following his letter to the public broadcaster BNT in which he accused Georgi Angelov, the host of a morning culture show, of encouraging criticism of the government and “advised” him to be careful what he said because the government paid his salary. On April 13, Nova TV terminated its contract with cartoonist Chavdar Nikolov and removed all his cartoons from its website following posting of his cartoon featuring the prime minister as leader of a vigilante group that captures migrants at the border.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel is illegal and punishable by a 3,000-15,000 lev (\$1,700-\$8,400) fine and public censure. The courts usually interpreted the law in a manner favoring journalistic expression. Journalists’ reporting on corruption or

mismanagement prompted many defamation cases brought by politicians, government officials, and other persons in public positions.

In September the Sofia City Court exonerated the owner and editor of the online outlet *e-vestnik*, Ivan Bakalov, of slander charges filed by the owner of Investbank stemming from his 2011 publications on the banking system. In May the Sofia Regional Court exonerated Bakalov of the criminal charges pressed by the Investbank owner over the same publications. As of September, a lawsuit over a 2015 *e-vestnik* article reporting on a company's nine million lev (five million dollar) claim against Investbank was underway in civil court.

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. According to the National Statistics Institute, approximately 59.1 percent of households had access to the internet in 2015.

The security services could access electronic data with judicial permission when investigating cyber and serious crimes and electronic data traffic in cases related to serious crime or national security (also see section 1.f.).

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution and law provide for freedom of assembly, and the government generally respected this right.

The law requires groups requesting a permit for gatherings to give 48 hours' notice. The law prohibits public gatherings within a security zone (16 to 66 feet) around the National Assembly, the Council of Ministers, and presidency buildings. Mayors can prohibit, suggest an alternative site for, or dismiss (if in progress) a gathering they believe poses a threat to public order, security, or traffic.

Freedom of Association

The constitution and law provide for freedom of association. While the government generally respected these rights, the law prohibits some groups, including political parties that endangered national unity, promoted racial, national, or religious hatred, violated the rights of citizens, or sought to achieve their objectives through violent means. The government generally respected the rights of individuals and groups to establish political parties or other political organizations. According to the constitution, NGOs may not pursue political goals or engage in political activity. There was no legal limitation on NGOs participating in demonstrations, discussions, or developing and debating legislative amendments as long as those activities are not part of an election campaign. The law allows NGOs to engage in other activities, such as providing services or advocacy.

On July 8, Sofia City Court judge Lilia Ilieva denied the registration of political party DOST, asserting that it is an ethnic and religious organization because the majority of its founders have Turkish names, because its name, DOST, is a Turkish word, and because there are no guarantees that it will accomplish the goals in its manifesto. On July 29, the Supreme Cassation Court allowed DOST's registration, stating that the lower court's judgment of the ethnic and religious character of the party was hypothetical.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution and law provide for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: Human rights organizations continued to report police and civilian vigilante violence against migrants and asylum seekers, including assaults, beating, and humiliation, at the country's borders. In June the prosecution brought charges of xenophobia-motivated

attempted murder against two men who attacked and stabbed an asylum seeker returning to a refugee center after a trip to the grocery store.

Human rights organizations claimed that data indicated the government employed violence and forceful pushbacks to prevent access to the border.

In January, Human Rights Watch released a report describing 59 cases of asylum seekers from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan being pushed back to Turkey, with 46 of them claiming to have been robbed and beaten by border guards.

On November 17, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee accused the government of indiscriminately pushing back asylum seekers and migrants and stated that between May and September it had received 33 reports of police mistreatment, including the robbing, physical violence against, and degrading treatment of more than 600 migrants.

On November 24, police fired water cannon and rubber bullets at rioting migrants in the reception center near Harmanli. The camp was sealed after reports that some migrants were suffering from infectious skin diseases. A week earlier, local residents had protested and called for the camp's closure after media reports of contagious skin diseases. Camp residents threw stones and tires at police, broke windows, and set fire to furniture. More than 400 asylum seekers were arrested after the clash, and their deportation to their countries of origin was pending at the end of the year.

There were reports of vigilante groups conducting citizen arrests of migrants along the border with Turkey, and police authorities encouraged citizens to alert them when they spotted groups of migrants who entered the country illegally. A video posted online on April 10 showed Petar Nizamov, who purportedly belonged to the group Civil Squad for Protection of Women and Faith, detaining three migrants by forcing them to lie on the ground with their hands zip tied behind their backs and telling them to go back to Turkey. A similar video featured the self-proclaimed "migrant hunter" Dinko Valev who, on February 14, called the emergency line 112 to report that he had detained 16 migrants--15 adults and one child--forcing them to lie on the ground and subjecting them to death threats and verbal abuse. On April 10, the prime minister expressed gratitude to the vigilante groups because "everyone helping [the government] deserves thanks" and told journalists that he had instructed the border police leadership to award a vigilante group for its contribution to border security. On April 11, he stated he had been misquoted and noted that the government does not tolerate any violations of the law or inhuman

treatment. On November 25, the Burgas district court started a trial against Nizamov for an illegal arrest and on November 15, the Sredets prosecution service opened an investigation against Valev for ethnic/nationality-based discrimination, violence, and hatred.

Extreme nationalist parties used antimigrant rhetoric in their political campaigns. Negative coverage of migrants appeared in some media, claiming they were mostly criminals and terrorists and repeating negative stereotypes that encouraged societal intolerance. In September, following a brawl among asylum seekers in the Harmanli reception center, the extreme nationalist parties Patriotic Front and Ataka held a demonstration demanding the immediate closure of all reception centers and the return of their occupants to their countries of origin. The patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church stated in September that it is important “to maintain the ethnic balance on Bulgaria’s territory and the peace and security of Bulgarian citizens.”

In August the UN high commissioner for human rights criticized the country for detaining all irregular migrants who have not applied for asylum and for prosecuting and jailing them “if they try to leave.”

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

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for protecting refugees. The president may grant asylum to persons who are persecuted for their belief or activities advocating for internationally recognized rights and freedoms. The council of ministers may provide temporary protection in case of mass influx of foreign nationals driven by an armed conflict, civil war, violence or large-scale human rights violations in their country of origin, as determined by the Council of the European Union. The State Agency for Refugees provides international protection (refugee status) under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol.

As of November, the overall number of asylum seekers had decreased by 37 percent compared with the same period in 2015. Independent observers had access to refugee reception centers, whose capacity was 5,130. During the first half of the

year, migrants and asylum seekers were able to leave the country for destinations further west shortly after arriving. As a result of Serbia strengthening its border controls in July, migrants accumulated at the border and completely filled reception centers, while detention centers for those that did not qualify for asylum or with whom the government had security concerns were overcrowded. At various times throughout the year, the State Agency for Refugees experienced financial shortfalls, resulting in disruptions in medical and interpretation services. Humanitarian organizations and volunteers helped with food, educational, and other support. NGOs expressed concern that the government has no administrative mechanism for the early identification, referral, and provision of adequate services to vulnerable asylum seekers, such as minors, persons with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, and survivors of rape, torture, or other forms of severe physical or sexual violence.

As of September, according to the government, approximately 95 miles of the fence along the country's border with Turkey were complete. In February the National Assembly approved a legislative amendment allowing the government to deploy up to 1,000 military personnel to assist border police in managing the entry of migrants and asylum seekers. Human rights NGOs expressed concern that the government viewed migrants and asylum seekers more as a national security matter than as vulnerable persons in need of humanitarian assistance.

Refoulement: The government provided some protection against the expulsion or return of migrants and asylum seekers to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened due to their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. As of September authorities reported there had been more than 32,000 attempts by foreign nationals to cross the border and border police had detained approximately 12,000 persons.

On October 17, the government handed over to Turkey seven Turkish nationals--three former police commissioners, a university lecturer, a newspaper journalist, a high school teacher and a shop owner--wanted for suspected ties to the exiled opposition cleric Fethullah Guillen. The seven had been detained hiding in a truck bound for Romania. According to the Interior Ministry, none of the seven had asked for protection and they were returned under the bilateral readmission agreement. In August authorities handed over to Turkey businessman Abdullah Buyuk, who was also wanted for ties to Gulen. Buyuk, whose permanent residence status in the country had expired, applied for political asylum in July. The vice president denied the application, but in June the Sofia Appellate Court

refused to extradite Buyuk to Turkey. Human rights organizations accused the authorities of ignoring the court's decision and violating due process.

Access to Basic Services: In August the government adopted rules for concluding integration agreements with persons with refugee status that spell out the basic services--housing, education, language training, health services, professional qualification, and job search assistance--to which they will receive access and the obligations of the responsible institutions. As of June 13, 61 persons with refugee/humanitarian status had registered with an unemployment office, 11 found jobs, and 10 were placed in training programs.

Durable Solutions: As of October 25, Bulgaria had accepted 21 refugees relocated from Greece, out of an agreed quota of 1,302 for the country.

Temporary Protection: The government provided humanitarian protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees. As of August, the government provided protection to 384 persons.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and law provide 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

Recent Elections: In November the country held a presidential election. The Central Election Commission (CEC) did not report any major election irregularities, and most political commentators considered the election free and fair. Transparency International Bulgaria reported that nearly 77 percent of violation reports involved bad organization, nearly 10 percent involved controlled and corporate voting, and approximately 1 percent involved vote buying. The organization attributed the violations to poor work by the electoral committees and attempts by political parties to influence voter preferences. Migration from the Middle East, Africa, and Afghanistan was a central theme of the campaign. Most candidates expressed the need for Bulgaria to improve border security and some expressed reluctance to accept refugees, but there was no overt racist or extremist rhetoric.

In parliamentary elections in 2014, eight parties passed the 4 percent threshold for representation in the National Assembly. The final report of the election observation mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the OSCE on the elections, released in January 2015, stated that “fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly were respected” and that a new method of appointing the election commission, greater involvement of civil society, and public support by the interim government contributed to inclusiveness and public engagement. It also remarked that a new election law provided a good foundation for democratic elections, although several previous ODIHR recommendations remained unaddressed. The report also observed that “widespread and pervasive accusations of vote-buying, controlled voting and other election irregularities, from all sides, marred the campaign and negatively affected the public, confidence in the integrity of the process.”

The law prohibits campaigning in languages other than Bulgarian. ODIHR has repeatedly noted that this requirement as well as the absence of official voter information in minority languages limited the ability of ethnic minority groups to understand election rules and to participate effectively in the election process. In 2015 the CEC imposed a fine on the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party leader at the time, Lyutvi Mestan, for speaking in Turkish during the local election campaign, but the Momchilgrad Regional Court subsequently reversed the CEC decision.

In October the National Assembly abolished the limit on the number of polling stations that could be opened abroad during elections, but only in EU countries. The National Assembly had passed earlier in July amendments to the Electoral Code imposing a limit of 35 polling stations which could be opened in any one foreign country, but abolished some of the limits following protests and online petitions against the amendment.

NGOs reported that address registration laws limited the ability of Roma occupying illegal housing to obtain identity cards, which in turn restricted their ability to register for and vote in elections.

The ODIHR report noted there were no high-level prosecutions for vote buying, which contributed to a sense of impunity and a lack of accountability. A national representative survey in February showed that 10 percent of the votes in the 2015 local elections were bought or otherwise controlled. In the first six months of the year, prosecutors filed 125 cases and pursued 99 prosecutions, and the courts convicted 110 persons of election-related violations. During the presidential

election and national referendum campaign in November, the prosecution service stated it had received more than 230 reports of violations aimed at committing election fraud, but dismissed 170 of them. It opened 13 cases into vote buying and document fraud.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The law requires a political party to have at least 2,500 members to register officially. Even though the constitution does not allow for the establishment of political parties along ethnic lines, the prohibition did not weaken the role of some ethnic minorities in the political process, and a number of parties represented various ethnic minority groups. During the year some National Assembly members abandoned their party affiliation without losing their seats.

Participation of Women and Minorities: There were no laws or customary practices that prevented women from participating in political life on the same basis as men. Women occupied 46 of 240 seats (19.2 percent) in parliament. While the ethnic Turkish minority enjoyed fair representation, Roma were underrepresented, particularly in appointed leadership positions. Ethnic Turks, Roma, and Pomaks (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule) held elected positions at the local level.

As of October, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination was reviewing a discrimination case against the mayor of Kyustendil, Petar Paunov, who prohibited residents of the Romani Iztok neighborhood from participating in a 2015 local referendum, asserting that the vote-buying reputation of Roma would discredit the results.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

While the law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials in all branches of government reportedly engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Corrupt practices included bribery, conflict of interest, elaborate embezzlement schemes, procurement violations, and influence trading.

DANS investigates corrupt activities of high-level government and other officials. The Anticorruption Task Force, established in March, is an interagency unit comprised of prosecutors, DANS agents, and police officers that investigates high-level government corruption. The National Anticorruption Policy Council is an interagency body that develops and implements anticorruption policies. The

Center for Prevention and Combating Corruption and Organized Crime is responsible for analyzing, planning, and developing anticorruption solutions and policies. NGOs stated the government lacked sustainable anticorruption mechanisms, and the European Commission concluded that the authorities were “unable or unwilling to initiate proactive investigations” and that “serious allegations of corruption and influence peddling in the judiciary have only been followed up after internal and external pressure.” According to NGOs, government agencies did not apply a systematic approach for collaborating with civil society.

Corruption: In September the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry reported that 46 percent of its member companies admitted to having been subjected to corruption pressure, while 20 percent claimed that corruption did not pose problems for doing business. According to the Center for the Study of Democracy, there was “rule of corruption” in the country. In a July report, the center estimated that more than 22 percent of the population was affected by corruption, but that charges were brought in only 0.01 percent of all cases. The center concluded that corruption had become systematic, functioning as an additional tax on public services, and that state institutions have practically been privatized by their employees. In 2015 the National Assembly adopted amendments to the constitution to increase the transparency and independence in the management of the courts and prosecutors’ offices.

According to the 2015 annual report of the prosecution service, only petty corruption is uncovered and punished, and the overall number of bribery proceedings remained small. Investigators were unable to work on high-level corruption, as senior officials hid behind collective bodies in the majority of cases. The overall quality of the investigative process was poor and the percentage of acquittals in corruption cases, at 25 percent, has increased. As of July, prosecutors had pursued 306 prosecutions and the courts convicted 162 persons, including 14 to nonsuspended prison sentences.

In May the military court of appeals confirmed former national intelligence director Kircho Kirov’s 10-year prison sentence for embezzling 4.7 million lev (\$2.6 million), but in November the Supreme Cassation Court asserted that the lower court had made procedural errors in assessing the evidence and returned the case for retrial by a different panel.

Corruption cases also involved the judiciary and police. In April the Supreme Cassation Court passed a final judgment on Veliko Turnovo judge Slavcho

Petkov's bribery case and sentenced him to four years in prison for taking a 25,000 lev (\$14,000) bribe from a defendant. In February the authorities arrested five border police officers from Svilengrad on charges of accepting bribes from smugglers who transport migrants from Turkey to Western Europe. As of September, the investigation was pending.

According to the Access to Information Program watchdog organization, only 36 percent of the public institutions complied with the legal requirement to publish the conflict of interest declarations of their employees.

Financial Disclosure: The law mandates that government officials publicly declare any circumstances in which they could face accusations of using their position for personal profit. The National Audit Office verified and monitored disclosures. High-level public officials who fail to submit a financial disclosure declaration can incur fines of up to 1,500 lev (\$840) and up to 5,000 lev (\$2,800) for a repeat violation.

Public Access to Information: The law provides the right of public access to government information with a sufficiently narrow list of exceptions outlining the grounds for nondisclosure and a reasonable timeline for response and reasonable processing fees. There are administrative sanctions for noncompliance and an appeal mechanism for review of disclosure denials. Amendments to the law, which entered into effect in January, increased the number of information categories that government agencies are obliged to publish online from four to 17 and made it mandatory for the government to maintain an open data portal. NGOs complained the government did not implement the law effectively and equally. The courts allowed greater access to government information, but the government selectively complied with court decisions. NGOs continued to insist on the need for a central independent body to oversee enforcement of the law, the application of unified practices, and sanctions for noncompliance.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Numerous domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Human rights observers reported uneven levels of cooperation from various national and local government officials. There was increasing public rhetoric opposing human rights and the work of NGOs. Some political parties, civic movements, and media outlets advocated closing certain NGOs because they

obtained funding from foreign donors. In 2015 prosecutors terminated a year-long financial fraud and tax and insurance evasion investigation of four Protest Network civic activists, who believed the government had taken action against them as harassment for their role in antigovernment protests.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The ombudsman reviews individuals' complaints against the government for violations of rights or freedoms. The ombudsman can request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals to end existing practices, refer information to the prosecution service, and request the Constitutional Court to abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional.

As of October, the ombudsman had received double the number of complaints-- 8,100 versus 4,069--than during the same period in 2015. The majority concerned public utility and telecommunication companies' debt collection practices and their lack of fair process, social assistance programs, and property problems, including forced evictions. Authorities sometimes acted in response to recommendations from the ombudsman by adjusting their practices and regulations.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination is an independent specialized agency for preventing discrimination, protecting against discrimination, and ensuring equal opportunity.

One permanent committee of the National Assembly oversees religious denominations and human rights.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape, and authorities generally enforced its provisions when violations came to their attention. Sentences for rape range from two to eight years in prison or from three to 10 years if the victim is under 18 years of age or a lineal descendant. When rape results in serious injury or attempted suicide, sentences range between three and 15 years' imprisonment and, when the victim is a minor, between 10 and 20 years.

While authorities could prosecute spousal rape under the general rape statute, they rarely did so. According to the Alliance for Protection against Gender-based Violence, the law does not criminalize all forms of violence against women and the

government does not implement consistent policies with adequate funding for prevention and protection of women against violence. Data from the National Statistics Institute showed that statutory rape convictions in 2015 dropped by 31 percent compared to 2014 and by 80 percent compared to 2011. On March 13, the fourth annual Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event took place in Sofia to raise awareness about domestic violence, sexual assault, and sexism.

The law defines domestic violence as any act, or attempted act, of sexual violence or physical, psychological, emotional, or economic pressure against members of one's family or between cohabiting persons. It empowers courts to impose fines, issue restraining or eviction orders, or require special counseling. Noncompliance with a restraining order may result in imprisonment for up to three years or a fine of 5,000 levs (\$2,800). According to a September survey jointly conducted by three NGOs (the Partners Bulgaria Foundation, the Center for the Study of Democracy, and Human Rights Academy), 40 percent of police officers, and 30 percent of social workers believed that the rate of domestic violence had increased over the previous several years. A June analysis by the Gender Alternatives Foundation found that 99 percent of the prosecutions for noncompliance with restraining orders ended with convictions, but the courts imposed minimal punishments, mostly due to plea bargaining, which was perceived as downgrading the seriousness of domestic violence as an offense as well as the importance of restraining orders.

According to the Center for the Study of Democracy, 70 to 80 percent of domestic violence cases remain unreported. According to an April report by the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, the rate was as high as 90 percent among Romani women due to fear and lack of family and institutional support.

The Animus Association Foundation operated a free hotline for women in crisis, funded through a two-year government grant. As of September, the hotline had worked with 1,166 clients, including 790 survivors of domestic violence and 13 survivors of sexual violence. The hotline operator expressed concern that its future was uncertain, as funding was only available through grants and was only sufficient to operate 12 hours per day rather than around the clock. The Animus Association Foundation and other NGOs provided short-term protection and counseling to victims in 20 crisis centers and shelters throughout the country.

Police and social workers referred victims of domestic violence to NGO-run shelters, but NGOs complained that local authorities rarely provided financial assistance for their operating costs. The government provided standard annual

funding for crisis centers at a level of 8,251 levs (\$4,600) per client and for social support centers at 2,865 levs (\$1,600) per client. Women's rights organizations continued to insist the government lacked strong gender equality and domestic violence policies, despite having an annual action plan in both areas.

Sexual Harassment: The law identifies sexual harassment as a specific form of discrimination rather than a criminal offense, although prosecutors may identify cases in which harassment involves coercion. If prosecuted as coercion, sexual harassment is punishable by up to six years in prison.

Harassment remained an underreported problem. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination reported seven complaints of sexual harassment as of October, an increase from the one complaint it received for the same period in 2015. In May a female police officer took Deputy Prosecutor General Borislav Sarafov to court for pressuring her due to her investigative actions, using vulgar and sexist language, and threatening her with undue punishment in front of other prosecutors and police officers. The officer subsequently withdrew her claim "in the spirit of good will and understanding," stating that Sarafov had apologized for his insults. The Supreme Judicial Council and the Judicial Inspectorate stated they were not in a position to take disciplinary action on the case.

Reproductive Rights: The government generally respected the right of couples and individuals to decide the number, spacing, and timing of their children, manage their reproductive health, and have access to the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. Women in poor rural areas and marginalized communities had less access to contraception due to poverty and lack of education. Skilled attendance at childbirth was sometimes less available due to lack of health insurance.

Discrimination: While the law provides women the same legal status and rights as men, including to equal pay for equal work, women faced some discrimination in economic participation and political empowerment (see section 7.d.).

In April the National Assembly passed a gender equality law that establishes equal opportunities in all spheres of public, economic, and political life, equal access to all public resources, equal treatment and exclusion of gender-based discrimination and violence, balanced representation of men and women in all decision-making authorities, and overcoming of gender-based stereotypes. The law establishes a National Council on Equality between Women and Men, headed by the minister of labor and social policy, as a consultative and coordination body between the

central and local governments and civil society. Half of the ministers in the cabinet were women, but women represented only 9 percent of municipal mayors. Some Romani communities followed patriarchal traditions that restricted women's participation in public, economic, and social life.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives from one's parents. The law requires the registration of all births within seven days without discriminating between boys and girls. Authorities did not register children born to asylum seekers, however, until the mother received either refugee or humanitarian status.

Education: While public education is universal and compulsory until the age of 16 and free through the 12th grade, authorities did not effectively enforce attendance requirements. According to the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) and NGOs, 23.2 percent of Romani children did not attend school.

Child Abuse: Violence against children continued to be a problem. In April the ombudsman reported that the number of reported cases of violence against children in schools had increased more than 100 percent in less than one year. The SACP registered the same rate of reports of child abuse in 2015 as the year before. The government has an interagency coordination mechanism for children who are either survivors or at risk of violence. The interagency mechanism is tasked with cooperating in crisis interventions but the multidisciplinary teams implementing it complained of a lack of access to social services and a lack of qualified experts in many municipalities. According to the Animus Association Foundation, discussion of sexual violence against children remained a social taboo.

In January the Supreme Administrative Prosecution Service acted upon an ombudsman's report and ordered inspections of all correctional boarding schools, uncovering cases of physical and psychological violence and of degrading treatment of children by staff. Similar inspections in 2014 revealed similar violations, and the prosecution service concluded that the measures taken by authorities have not been effective.

NGOs continued to advocate closing all juvenile detention centers and reforming the juvenile justice system, which dated back to 1958.

The government funded an NGO-operated 24-hour free helpline that children could call for counseling, information, and support as well as to report abuse. Due

to a rising number of calls, the government increased the number of helpline consultants from three to four, which made it possible to answer every second call instead of every third. During the first eight months of the year, helpline counselors received nearly 60,000 calls and carried out 6,684 consultations, 76 percent of which were with children and the rest with parents. More than 8 percent of the calls concerned cases of violence, with most of the callers in violence cases being adults reaching out on behalf of children. Helpline consultants referred 360 cases of children at risk to the child protection administration. Approximately one third of those cases involved children from rural areas where access to community services and programs was a problem due to isolation and insufficient funding. NGOs expressed concern that, in many cases, social workers, guided by conflicting laws, preferred to send a child out of an abusive home into an institution rather than to remove the abusive parent.

According to the National Institute of Statistics, the number of children registered with juvenile delinquency offices in 2015 increased 15 percent to 2,849. The most common reasons for registration were running away from home, drug abuse, vagrancy, and begging.

Early and Forced Marriage: The minimum age for marriage is 18. In exceptional cases, a person can enter into marriage at 16 with permission from the regional court. According to the National Statistical Institute, in 2015 there were 481 marriages of girls under 18, or 1.7 percent of total marriages, which continued an increasing trend since 2009, when the figure was 0.6 percent. In addition, there were 2,767 children born to mothers between the ages of 15 and 17 as well as 294 to mothers under 15. As of July, courts had sentenced 68 persons over a five-year period for cohabitating with a person less than 14 years of age, which is punishable by law with two to five years in prison; 63 of the sentences were suspended, however.

NGOs criticized authorities for treating early marriages and resulting early parenthood as an ethnic Romani rather than a gender problem, but acknowledged that child marriage was a pervasive problem in Romani communities and resulted in school dropouts, early childbirths, poor parenting, and spreading poverty. In February, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) published a report which noted that the number of child marriages and early births in Romani communities has decreased in the previous 10 years, but the number of Romani girls who gave birth to a second or third child, while slightly lower, remained high. The law provides for in-kind allowance payments for underage mothers in order to avert child

neglect. If a minor parent continues to attend school, however, his or her family is entitled to the full amount of the allowance as a lump sum.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The penal code differentiates between forcing children into prostitution, for which it provides for two to eight years' imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 to 15,000 leva (\$2,800 to \$8,400), and child sex trafficking, for which it provides for three to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 to 20,000 leva (\$5,600 to \$11,100). The legal minimum age for consensual sex is 14. The law prohibits child pornography and provides for up to six years in prison and a fine of up to 8,000 leva (\$4,500) for violations.

Displaced Children: As of September 28, the State Agency for Refugees had received asylum applications for 1,857 unaccompanied minors and had issued refugee status to six and humanitarian status to another six. There were approximately 150 unaccompanied minors at any given time in refugee reception centers. The ombudsman reported that authorities registered unaccompanied minors as relatives of other asylum-seeking families in order to evade the legal prohibition on detaining minors alone. As a result, instead of receiving specialized assistance and protection, minors ended up in detention centers for adults. The ombudsman's report further stated that refugee centers did not meet the minimum requirements for accommodating unaccompanied minors.

Institutionalized Children: As of February, the government had closed all residential care institutions for children with disabilities. Through August the government closed six institutions for parentless children and one for medical and social care as part of a plan to close all institutions by 2025 and replace them with community-based care. NGOs criticized the system of financing new centers by paying them per child staying per day, as it motivated them to fill the center to capacity without regard to the individual needs of the child. NGOs further criticized the deinstitutionalization process, noting that the new centers recreated the atmosphere of the larger institutions, serving as "final destinations" for children rather than developing their self-reliance and social inclusion skills. A November 2015 survey showed a high rate of societal tolerance to housing children in institutions rather than integrating them in larger society as well as to stigmatizing children with intellectual disabilities. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee was concerned that, despite its deinstitutionalization policy, the government continued to place children in institutions.

Most children in government institutions were not orphans; courts institutionalized children when they determined their families were unable to provide them

adequate care. The government continued to inspect both the institutions and the new centers, uncovering malpractice and mistreatment of the children placed there. For example, in February the Minister of Education and Sciences fired the director of the correctional boarding school in Podem, following up on a State Agency for Child Protection recommendation that was based on the ombudsman's report of violence and harassment at the school. A follow-up surprise inspection by the ombudsman in September found that, despite the change in leadership, the staff continued to impose unsanctioned punishments and that there was violence among students.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/legal/compliance.html.

Anti-Semitism

The 2011 census indicated there were 1,130 Jews living in the country. Local Jewish organizations estimated the actual number at 5,000.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly on social networking sites and as comments under online media articles. Jewish organizations indicated that during the year there were no extreme acts of anti-Semitism but remained concerned over government inaction and political leaders' passivity in addressing minor and symbolic acts. They complained that the relevant authorities stopped paying attention to fan groups' displaying of Nazi symbols during soccer games or treated them as sports hooliganism instead of hate crimes. According to B'nai B'rith Bulgaria, there was pressure at high political levels to revise Holocaust history. Jewish organizations demanded an apology from *Sega* daily, which in September printed a page of Jewish humor that included offensive epithets and caricatures. Taking advantage of antirefugee attitudes, certain nationalist online outlets and paramilitary "migrant hunting" organizations spread allegations that the Jews were causing the refugee crisis.

In February the mayor of Sofia declined to approve a rally in honor of a World War II general, Hristo Lukov, known for his anti-Semitic views and pro-Nazi activities. While the decision did not stop the event, it did limit its attendance and scope.

On October 4, Dyanko Markov brought a lawsuit against journalist Yuliana Metodieva of the online human rights platform *Marginalia* after she described him as a “prominent anti-Semite” in her article, “Careful with Anti-Semites, They Can Sue You.” In February the Sofia City Court terminated a defamation suit filed in 2015 by Markov against the editorial staff and oversight council members of *Marginalia*. *Marginalia* had posted a declaration reacting to an invitation by “anti-Semitic Markov” to a European Parliament event showcasing him as “an unbreakable spirit” that opposed communism. According to the journalists, Markov was a member of the anti-Semitic organization Union of Bulgarian National Legions that supported the deportation of Jews during World War II.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, transportation, health care, the judicial system, and provision of other government services. The government did not effectively enforce these provisions. The government focused most of its efforts on providing disability pensions, social services, and institutional care but lacked sufficient funds to modify infrastructure and implement active policies to improve public awareness. Specialized medical commissions (TELK) assessed a person’s health status and degree of reduced working ability in order to determine whether that person had a disability.

NGOs criticized the government for lack of access for persons with disabilities to information and communications, noting that only one newscast was available with sign language interpretation and that authorities made no information available in Braille. According to the ombudsman, the government did not make enough effort to integrate persons with disabilities into society to allow them to lead independent lives. Societal discrimination against persons with disabilities persisted. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination reported receiving an increased number of complaints of accessibility and employment discrimination.

While the law requires improved access to buildings for persons with disabilities, enforcement lagged in some new public works projects as well as in existing, unrenovated buildings. NGOs asserted that the public transport infrastructure was

not adequately accessible, even some newly-built or renovated facilities, noting that underground passages that provide access to public transit platforms did not have elevators and that ramps were too steep. In June the Supreme Administrative Court confirmed a lower court's decision that the National Assembly discriminated against persons with disabilities by not providing adequate access.

The law promotes the employment of persons with disabilities, providing employers with subsidies covering 30 to 50 percent of the cost of insurance and the full cost of adjusting and equipping workplaces to accommodate them. According to a government report released in June, in 2015 the Agency for Social Assistance found jobs for 44 percent of those registered with permanent disabilities. NGOs criticized the TELK model and advocated for its replacement with an individual assessment of each person with disabilities' capacity to be a contributing member of society. They asserted that the system labeled persons with disabilities as "unfit for work" and ultimately subjected them to poverty. Over the past five years, the number of persons with disability pensions has tripled and the number of children with disabilities increased, according to the National Statistics Institute. NGOs alleged that the increase in both indicators did not result from deteriorating public health but rather from corruption in how the TELK system awards disability status, which is a prerequisite for individuals to receive benefits. There were reports of discrimination in labor and employment against persons with disabilities (see section 7.d.).

The country's infrastructure did not provide persons with disabilities adequate access to education, health care, and community-level social services. Individuals with mental and physical disabilities often were housed in institutions located in remote areas, which separated them from the rest of society, made the hiring of qualified staff difficult, and limited access to medical assistance. According to the National Statistics Institute, approximately 18 percent of students with special education needs were enrolled in 64 "special schools" while the rest attended mainstream schools. Those studying in the special schools received diplomas that higher-level learning establishments did not recognize as qualifying them for further education. The education system also provided students with disabilities with "mixed" education combining mainstream courses with specifically designed courses based on the needs of individual students. According to Eurostat data, 45 percent of children with disabilities with specific education needs dropped out of school; NGOs blamed the high dropout rate on the school system not providing for their specific education needs. According to NGOs and the State Agency for Child Protection, the prevailing practice of considering childhood disability a medical

issue, the lack of an inclusive social environment, and insufficient support infrastructure encouraged institutionalization.

Despite some incremental improvements, conditions in the country's 79 institutions for persons with mental, physical, and sensory disabilities remained poor. NGOs criticized the government for not moving toward an inclusive, community-oriented model of education, socialization, and health care for persons with disabilities. They also criticized the deinstitutionalization process, which moved large numbers of children and adults with disabilities from large residential institutions to small group homes but preserved the institutional approach to care.

The law provides specific measures for persons with disabilities to have access to the polls, including mobile ballot boxes. NGOs noted that most buildings used as polling stations, including schools and kindergartens, continued to be inaccessible, which made those specific measures pointless. The Central Electoral Commission admitted that gaps in the law and bad planning prevented mobile ballot boxes from responding to all requests during the November 6 presidential election and referendum.

The Interagency Council for Integration of Persons with Disabilities was responsible for developing policies to support persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, through its executive agency for persons with disabilities, was responsible for protecting the rights of such persons and worked with government-supported national representative organizations to that end. Some NGOs criticized the model, suggesting that, instead of meeting formalistic criteria such as territorial representation and membership size, the government should announce competitive and transparent tenders for which NGOs could bid. They also insisted that funding for providing services should be separate from funding for advocacy and capacity building. They remained concerned that incentives prioritize obtaining national representation over effective advocacy and that the lack of transparency regarding financial and other support to the national representative organizations affected those organizations' independence.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

According to the 2011 census, there were 325,345 Roma in the country, or less than 5 percent of the population, and 588,318 ethnic Turks, or approximately 9 percent of the population. Observers asserted these figures were inaccurate, since more than 600,000 persons did not answer the census question about their ethnic

origin, and officials did not conduct a proper count in most Romani communities but rather made assumptions or failed to include figures for Roma altogether.

Societal discrimination and popular prejudice against Roma and other minority groups remained a problem. According to NGOs, despite Roma integration policies included in numerous official documents, such as the *National Roma Integration Strategy of 2011*, the government had no will, capacity, or resources to implement those policies. NGOs claimed that there were successful inclusion practices at the local level, but the government failed to adopt them at the national level. The media described Roma and other minority groups with discriminatory, denigrating, and abusive language. Nationalist parties such as Ataka and the Patriotic Front based their political campaigns on strong anti-Roma, anti-Turkish, and anti-Semitic slogans and rhetoric.

NGOs accused the government of being unwilling to address anti-Roma attitudes and hate speech. According to an Open Society Institute survey presented in July, Roma were most frequently the target of hate speech, comprising 92 percent of cases. In July the Commission for Protection against Discrimination imposed a 1,000 lev (\$560) fine on the Ataka newspaper's chief editor and the author of two articles for using offensive language when writing about Roma committing crimes. NGOs criticized the decision for failing to recognize that the deliberate portrayal of Roma as criminals equated to ethnic stereotyping of criminality. Politicians and prominent opinion makers continued publically to espouse racist and xenophobic opinions. In June member of parliament, leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, and coleader of the Patriotic Front Krasimir Karakachanov stated that whole regions of the country suffer from the aggression of the "gypsies [who are] marauding, beating, robbing, and raping old people on a daily basis." In March mathematics professor and frequent participant in television talk shows Mihail Konstantinov said that migrants from Syria and Iraq were not refugees but criminal offenders who "require different treatment" because they are a "different biological species" "brought up in a completely different way, with different values, if you could call them values."

The lack of prosecutions for hate crimes remained a problem, as did short and suspended sentences. On November 5, 30 year-old Ivan Nikolov killed an elderly Romani couple in their home in Pazardjik. After his arrest, Nikolov told authorities he had been inspired by a video of a patriotic song posted on social media and decided that the video was calling on him to "go out and kill gypsies." As of December, the investigation was in progress and Nikolov remained in custody.

On July 11, the Pazardjik Regional Court approved a plea bargain giving 24-year-old Angel Kaleev a suspended 11-month sentence for ethnically motivated assault. On April 18, Kaleev beat a 17 year-old Rom, Mitko Yonkov, after Yonkov told him that they were equal, despite their different ethnicities. Kaleev filmed the attack himself and posted it online.

Many Roma continued to live in appalling conditions. According to a 2013 government-commissioned survey, the average Romani home was only 28 square meters (330 square feet), yet 55 percent had more than five occupants and only 4 percent had legally documented ownership. The survey further found that 28 percent had no electricity, 34 percent had no water supply, and 62 percent had no sewer connection. Several municipalities, including Stara Zagora, continued to initiate proceedings to demolish illegally built houses occupied by Roma without providing adequate alternative shelter to the occupants. In July the Stara Zagora municipal government proceeded with the eviction of approximately 150 persons and the demolition of their 26 dwellings built illegally on both municipal and private land. The mayor asserted the persons evicted were not local residents and had recently settled from other places and therefore the municipality had no commitment to them.

In May a fight between three ethnic Bulgarians and four Roma in Radnevo resulted in the ethnic Bulgarians' being hospitalized in serious condition and the Roma arrested and charged with attempted manslaughter. The fight sparked anti-Roma protests that demanded the demolition of all illegal dwellings in the city. The protesters, joined by football fans, clashed with police who had arrived to guard the Romani neighborhood, and most of the women and children residents left out of fear. Many human rights organizations condemned the demolitions, accusing authorities of only focusing on Romani dwellings despite the great number of other illegal buildings throughout the country. According to the Equal Opportunities Initiative Association, authorities did not apply an equal standard to demolitions, evicting Roma from their sole residences and demolishing the home, but razing mostly secondary, nonresidential structures such as fences or garages when owned by ethnic Bulgarians. The organization also criticized the government for failing to ensure adequate protections or to provide alternatives for those left homeless and alleged that the forced evictions were intended to harass the Romani population.

The law prohibits ethnic segregation in multiethnic schools and kindergartens, but allows segregation of whole schools. Romani children often attended de facto

segregated schools where they received inferior education. According to NGOs, 75 percent of Roma students studied in a segregated environment. There were cases of ethnic Bulgarian students departing desegregated schools, thereby effectively resegregating them. The law requires that schools develop integration programs targeting students from vulnerable groups to prevent early dropouts and introduces standards for intercultural education.

NGO projects aimed at lowering the dropout rate among Romani students resulted in rates that in most places were less than 1 percent for elementary school students (first to fourth grade). Retaining Romani students beyond the age of 12 remained a problem for the government, which also lacked effective programs for reintegrating students who had dropped out. In July the Minister of Education and Sciences reported to the National Assembly that only 1 percent of Romani children enrolled in first grade completed 12th grade and that only 12 percent completed fifth grade. A UNICEF report in February listed early marriage as one of the main factors for dropping out of school, noting that 54 percent of married underage Romani girls have only elementary or lower-level education. Many students were demotivated and dropped out of school early due to a hostile or indifferent school environment. According to a 2015 Roma Education Fund assessment, 25 percent of teachers believed that Romani students should study in segregated schools and 20 percent were convinced that children from different ethnic backgrounds had different abilities.

Roma were subject to discrimination in employment and occupation (see section 7.d.).

Access to health services continued to be a problem for Roma. A 2013 government survey estimated that 30 percent of Roma had not signed up with a general practitioner (i.e., lacked health insurance) and 79 percent had no access to a dentist. In addition, the quality of medical care given to Roma was very low. The survey further found that two-thirds of Roma did not qualify for social security, which would affect their future retirement and access to health and social services. The National Network of Health Mediators continued to operate as a successful model of partnership with the national and local governments for addressing lack of Romani access to health services. As of September, local authorities employed more than 130 health mediators appointed to full-time positions in 72 municipalities to work with high-risk and vulnerable groups.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, but the government did not effectively enforce this prohibition.

While reports of violence against LGBTI persons were rare, societal discrimination, particularly in employment, remained a problem. Most LGBTI persons did not reveal their sexual preferences to their families for fear of losing relationships with their loved ones. NGOs stated that it was common for persons suspected of being gay to be fired, and such individuals were reluctant to seek redress in court due to fear of being identified as belonging to the LGBTI community.

On June 18, the ninth annual LGBTI pride parade took place in downtown Sofia. As in previous years, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued a statement “resolutely opposing the attempts to present and establish such a sinful tendency as the norm in our society, as a reason for pride and a role model.” The municipal councilors from Ataka and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization called upon the mayor of Sofia to ban the parade as it was a “political rally with political goals that violates traditional Bulgarian values, morality, and decency and is a provocation to family values.” The parade attracted approximately 2,000 participants, but the municipality allowed an antipride counterevent of approximately 100 participants to proceed at the same time, with a route overlapping the pride parade at a few spots. In one incident, two men snuck into the pride parade and tried to rip one participant’s rainbow flag out of his hands. Three antipride protesters intimidated a couple leaving the party held after the march, one of whom used pepper spray for self-protection. Four persons, including the couple, were detained briefly by police at the police station, and pride organizers claimed police did nothing to protect the couple as they left, despite taunts and threats by a group of antipride demonstrators who had gathered outside.

HIV and AIDS Societal Stigma

According to the national program for HIV prevention and control, “despite the enormous medical progress in HIV treatment little has been achieved in terms of overcoming the stigma and discrimination [associated with HIV]. Negative societal attitudes have a strong impact on persons with HIV/AIDS. The HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination are the main challenges for the social reintegration of persons with HIV and place a significant barrier to receiving the necessary treatment, care, and support.”

There were reports that patients with HIV/AIDS faced inadequate conditions in medical facilities and discrimination from doctors, who refused to provide treatment out of fear of contracting the disease. Patients typically did not contest these incidents in court because of the social stigma attached to having HIV/AIDS. Nearly one-fifth of HIV-positive patients reported hiding their condition in order to receive emergency medical care or avoid transfer to a specialized unit where they might receive inadequate help.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

In the morning of October 27, two men assaulted the president of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Krasimir Kanev in downtown Sofia. Kanev suffered minor injuries. Many human rights organizations and individuals stated the incident was the consequence of an atmosphere that permitted widespread hate speech and was conducive to violent acts and called on authorities to identify and punish the perpetrators as soon as possible. As of November, an investigation was underway.

A series of antimigrant protests took place in October and November throughout the country. On October 7, more than 300 persons participated in a protest march in Sofia against “illegal migrants.” The protestors shouted “Die, refugees,” “Bulgaria, wake up,” and “Bulgaria for Bulgarians” and demanded that the government resign. Some of the participants told the media that asylum seekers loitering around the reception centers would throw stones at passing cars, were a threat to Bulgarian women and children, and that they feared that Sofia could turn into a “Baghdad in the Balkans.” On October 9, reacting to rumors that the government intended to build a refugee camp in Samokov, local residents protested on the central square expressing “concern for their security and their living.”

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of workers to form and join independent trade unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination, provides that workers may receive up to six months’ salary as compensation for illegal dismissal, and provides for the right of the employee to demand reinstatement for such dismissal. Workers alleging discrimination based on union affiliation can file complaints with the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, which had received six such complaints as of September.

There are some limitations on these rights. The law prohibits employees of the Ministries of Defense and Interior, the State Agency for Intelligence, the National Protection Service, the courts, and prosecutorial and investigative authorities (collectively regarded as “judiciary” under the law) from striking. These employees are able to take the government to court to ensure due process in protecting their rights.

In July the National Assembly passed amendments giving other public service employees the right to strike, with the exception of senior public servants, such as directors and chief secretaries. The law also affected transport workers’ right to strike by limiting their ability to organize their administrative activities and formulate their programs. Although the law effectively prohibits police from striking, in March police protested in several cities against planned Interior Ministry reforms that reduced the amount of retirement compensation and annual leave for new recruits. Trade unions stated the legal limitations on the right to strike and the lack of criminal liability for employers who delay salary payments are contrary to the constitution. When employers and trade unions reach a collective agreement at the sector level, they must obtain the agreement of the minister of labor to extend it to cover all enterprises in the sector. The law prohibits public servants from engaging in collective bargaining.

Resources, inspections, and remediation efforts were generally adequate. Union leaders, however, stated the government did not effectively enforce the labor law. They complained that court proceedings for reinstatement of unfairly dismissed workers often took years and that fines of 250 to 2,000 leva (\$140 to \$1,100) in discrimination cases and compensation of up to six months’ gross remuneration for cases of unlawful dismissal were not strong deterrents to antiunion discrimination, especially for large or highly profitable enterprises. They also claimed the law does not effectively protect against interference by employers in trade union activities.

Authorities generally respected freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively. Trade unions continued to report cases of employer obstruction, harassment, and pressure on employees, including relocation, firing, and demotion of union leaders and members. Labor unions also alleged that some employers failed to bargain in good faith or to adhere to agreements. Union leaders noted those employers who tried to force new employees to sign a declaration renouncing any union activity discontinued the practice after union leaders published their names. Judicial and administrative procedures were adequate in settling claims. The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria

reported that employers broke the law and eroded the value of collective bargaining by letting nonunion members take advantage of the provisions in the collective agreement.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor. The government lacked sufficient resources to cope with the growing number of cases of international labor trafficking, while labor inspectors lacked sufficient training to identify cases of forced labor. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, the country's institutions focused exclusively on human trafficking cases and failed to identify and prosecute cases of severe labor exploitation unless it fell under trafficking. The government, through its central and local antitrafficking commissions, held forced labor prevention campaigns and training sessions for law enforcement and volunteers. Penalties for violations range from two to 15 years in prison and were sufficiently stringent to deter violations. Law enforcement officials, however, did not have adequate capacity to investigate forced labor cases, and investigations took a long time. Victims successfully removed from forced labor situations had a high risk of being re trafficked because there were no long-term remediation programs.

There were some reports of families or criminal organizations subjecting children to forced work (see section 7.c.). According to the Agency for Fundamental Rights, "children and adults with disabilities are forced into street begging and petty theft." As of October, the National Antitrafficking Commission reported four cases of trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced labor, noting a significant decrease from 2015. NGOs claimed government mechanisms for identifying victims among at-risk groups, such as asylum seekers, were not sufficiently robust.

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law sets the minimum age for employment at 16 and the minimum age for dangerous work at 18. The government considered occupations hazardous for children if they are beyond their physical or psychological abilities; expose them to harmful agents or radiation; have a harmful effect on their health; take place in extreme temperature, noise, or vibration conditions; or expose children to hazards which they cannot comprehend or avoid due to their incomplete physical or

psychological development. To employ children under the age of 18, employers must obtain a work permit from the government's General Labor Inspectorate. Employers can hire children under the age of 16 with special permits for light work that is not risky or harmful to the child's development and does not interfere with the child's education or training. 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.

While employment of children without a work permit is a criminal offense punishable by up to six months in prison, violations occurred.

The General Labor Inspectorate reported an increase in child employment, mainly due to a lack of qualified workers and an anticipated increase in job openings in the tourist industry. As of September, the inspectorate granted 2,328 requests to employ children who were 16 or 17 and 67 requests to employ children under the age of 16. As of August, the inspectorate uncovered 36 cases of illegal child employment and referred them to the prosecution service. The prosecution service refused to prosecute such cases, asserting they were insignificant offenses posing a minor public threat.

The government continued programs to eliminate the worst forms of child labor, mounted educational campaigns, and intervened to protect, withdraw, rehabilitate, and reintegrate children engaged in the worst forms of child labor.

NGOs continued to report the exploitation of children in certain industries (particularly small family-owned shops, textile production, restaurants, construction businesses, and periodical sales) and by organized crime (notably for prostitution, pickpocketing, and the distribution of narcotics). In addition to child sex trafficking, the worst forms of child labor present in the country included heavy physical labor and labor on family tobacco farms, a significant health hazard.

The government continued to report a declining trend in the number of children detained by police for vagrancy and begging. As of October, police had identified 1,177 child runaways and vagrants. Many observers believed adults exploited these children. Police placed 209 of the apprehended children in protective custody for up to 24 hours and sent 181 to crisis centers for longer periods.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination in employment and occupation with regard to nationality, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, race, color, age, social origin, language, political and religious beliefs, membership in trade unions and civil society organizations, family and marital status, and mental or physical disabilities. Although the government effectively enforced these laws generally, discrimination in employment and occupation occurred across all sectors of the economy with respect to gender, disability, and minority status. According to the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, the majority of discrimination complaints received throughout the year were related to employment, predominantly with regard to unfair treatment under collective bargaining agreements. Union leaders stated the government did not effectively enforce the labor law. They complained that court proceedings often took years and fines were not strong enough deterrents to antiunion discrimination. The government funded programs to encourage employers to overcome stereotypes and prejudice when hiring members of disadvantaged groups, such as persons with disabilities. In October a lawyer told the media he received complaints that some companies hire women only if they sign declarations that they will not become pregnant for at least two years. According to NGOs, for work in the same position, men received 20 percent higher pay than women in the private sector and 5 percent more in the public sector and those gaps increased with workers' age.

The law prohibits overtime work for pregnant women. Persons with disabilities and women with children up to the age of six may work overtime at the employer's request if they provide written consent. According to Eurostat, the pay gap between women and men was 13.4 percent in 2014.

Workplace discrimination against minorities continued to be a problem. General public mistrust, coupled with their low level of education, made locating work more difficult for Roma.

According to a 2013 government-commissioned survey, the average income in Romani communities was 71 percent lower than the national average, mostly due to high unemployment and prevalence of low-skilled workers. The survey found that 34 percent of Roma depended on social security, living off social assistance, disability compensation, and pensions. It also found that 18 percent of Roma could not find a job because of their ethnic background.

The law requires the Interior Ministry, DANS, and the State Agency for Technical Operations to allot 1 percent of their public administration positions for persons with disabilities. Enforcement was poor, however, and employers did not feel

motivated to hire persons with disabilities, citing inaccessible public infrastructure, low levels of education, and lack of sufficient funding for modifying workplaces. NGOs criticized the system of evaluating persons with disabilities based on the degree of their lost ability to work, which effectively prohibited many persons with disabilities who are able to work from having a job. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination reported receiving an increased number of complaints of employment discrimination. The Agency for Persons with Disabilities estimated that 10 percent of persons with disabilities earned an income. In 2015 the law was amended to rescind the government's authority to grant preferential public procurement contracts to specialized enterprises and cooperatives employing persons with disabilities. The privilege was rescinded because many employers fictitiously hired persons with disabilities in order to win a contract. NGOs reported that the amendment hurt companies that actually did employ persons with disabilities, and as a result the number of employed persons with disabilities decreased.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The national minimum wage was 420 levs (\$235) per month. In September the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria issued a report stating more than 22 percent of citizens lived under the poverty line, which it defined as 326 levs (\$182) per month. The government set the official poverty line at 300 levs (\$168). According to the National Statistics Institute, 22 percent of the ethnic Bulgarian population in 2015 lived in poverty, while among the Turkish population the poverty level was 36.4 percent, and among the Romani population, 67.2 percent. Among workers with a secondary education, 15.6 percent of Turks and 18.1 percent of the Roma lived in poverty, compared with 5.8 percent of ethnic Bulgarians. Ethnicity made no difference in the poverty rates of workers with less than a secondary education.

The law provides for a standard workweek of 40 hours with at least one 24-hour rest period per week. The law also provides for paid holidays and annual leave. The law prohibits excessive compulsory overtime. The law prohibits overtime work for children under the age of 18. Persons undertaking continuing education may work overtime at the employer's request if they provide written consent. The law stipulates that premium pay for overtime cannot be less than 150 percent of standard pay during workdays, 175 percent during weekends, and 200 percent during 12 official holidays. The law limits the amount of overtime a worker may work to 150 hours per year. The law allows for one-day labor contracts for unskilled jobs in agriculture. The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of

Bulgaria criticized the law's provision for calculating accumulated working time, noting that it gave employers a way to abuse overtime requirements and thus hire fewer workers.

A national labor safety program, with standards established by law, provides employees the right to healthy and nonhazardous working conditions. Workers can remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in this situation.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy is responsible for enforcing both the minimum wage and the standard workweek. The law penalizes labor violations with fines ranging from 1,500 to 15,000 leva (\$840 to \$8,400), which according to trade unions failed to act as a deterrent. Besides fines, penalties may include administrative provisions, such as suspending operations and terminating the employment of those responsible for the violation. As of September, the General Labor Inspectorate conducted nearly 33,000 inspections of companies covering nearly 1.3 million employees, identifying close to 124,000 violations and imposing various sanctions, including collecting 5.4 million leva (\$3 million) in fines. The inspectorate stated that many employers would replace civil contracts with the required labor contracts, which comply with all of the provisions of the law for full-time employment, as soon as a planned labor inspection campaign was announced in the media.

The government annually adopts a program for occupational safety and health, which outlines goals and priorities in these areas. The General Labor Inspectorate, which has 28 regional offices, is responsible for monitoring and enforcing occupational safety and health requirements. Persons who violate safety and health regulations can be subject to a fine of 100 to 500 leva (\$56 to \$280), employers to a fine of 1,500 to 15,000 leva (\$840 to \$8,400), and employing officials to a fine of 1,000 to 10,000 leva (\$560 to \$5,600). As of January, there were 347 labor inspectors. Of the violations identified by the inspectorate, 50 percent involved safety and health requirements. According to the Labor Inspectorate, its activity in the past several years has resulted in increased compliance, with 84 percent of inspected companies in compliance with occupational safety and health requirements, but enforcement was generally less effective in small- and medium-sized companies than in big ones.

Legal protections or government inspections did not cover informal workers in the significant grey-market economy. In September a Center for the Study of

Democracy survey estimated that 17.2 percent of the labor force worked in the grey economy, but many of those employees received undeclared payments above their official wages and only 1 or 2 percent worked without a proper employment contract. The Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association stated the grey economy represented a little more than 31 percent of gross domestic product and its relatively large share of the economy was mostly due to administrative interference in the employment market.

Conditions in some sectors, particularly destruction and disposal of ammunition, construction, mining, chemicals, and transportation, continued to pose risks for workers in those sectors. In the first six months of the year, there were 1,431 work-related accidents. Equipment and technology safety violations were the most common causes of occupational accidents. The government strictly enforced the law requiring companies to conduct occupational health and safety risk assessments and to adopt measures to eliminate or reduce any identified risks. Some 96 percent of the companies inspected in 2015 had such risk assessments.

As of July, there were 33 work-related deaths, mainly in the construction and manufacturing sectors. In May, two workers were killed in an accident at the gunpowder-processing workshop of an arms manufacturing plant.