

BULGARIA 2014 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Bulgaria is a parliamentary democracy. The constitution vests legislative authority in the unicameral National Assembly (Narodno Sabranie). A coalition government headed by a prime minister led the country. Observers characterized the parliamentary elections in October 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. Authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The marginalization of the Romani minority remained the country’s most pressing human rights problem. Continued deterioration of the media environment and increase in media self-censorship due to corporate and political pressure 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 human rights problems included overcrowding and harsh conditions in prisons and detention facilities. There were also shortcomings in refugee integration processes and policies; long delays in the judicial system; reports of abuse of wiretapping; religious discrimination and harassment; violence and discrimination against women; violence against children; increasing online anti-Semitism; trafficking in persons; discrimination against persons with disabilities; discrimination against members of the Romani and Turkish ethnic minorities; discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons and persons with HIV/AIDS; and anti-Muslim demonstrations. 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. In addition, the prosecutor general issued a new directive releasing public prosecutors from the requirement to keep statistical data on prosecutions and convictions of employees at the Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for National Security.

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

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

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

The law allows police to use firearms only as a last resort and while doing everything possible to preserve the life of the person who is in danger. The law prohibits the use of firearms against nonviolent offenders who are not posing a threat.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances, abductions, or kidnappings.

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

The constitution and law prohibit such practices, but there were occasional reports of government officials employing degrading treatment. In 2012 the government passed legislation restricting the use of force by police to instances of absolute necessity and prohibits the use of force against minors, pregnant women, and nonviolent offenders.

In January the interior minister reported that out of 1,300 operations in the previous five years involving the use of force, 700 were without legal basis and 200 had no supporting documentation. According to a government report adopted January 23 on the execution of European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgments, despite the change in legislation, the number of cases related to use of force and weapons by police was growing, and the authorities did not conduct effective and comprehensive investigation of police violence cases. The prosecution service no longer keeps information regarding cases involving members of security services and resulting convictions, including cases of police violence. The Ministry of Interior submitted for prosecution one case of a police officer accused of excessive use of force during the antigovernment protests in July 2013. As of October the case was still pending at the Sofia Regional Court.

Police can detain persons for 24 hours without charging them. There were again some reports police on occasion arrested suspects for minor offenses and

physically abused them to force confessions, especially in cases involving Romani suspects.

In July the prosecution refused to prosecute the police officers involved in the September 2013 abuse and subsequent arrest of Alexandra Stoilova and Ivan Tsonev for hooliganism. In April the Sofia Administrative Court ruled the arrest had been illegal, and the Ministry of Interior imposed disciplinary sanctions on the police officers involved after discovering they had falsely accused Stoilova of tearing an officer's uniform. As of October Stoilova was facing trial.

In 2012 the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) visited the Burgas and Varna prisons. At the Burgas prison, the CPT reported receiving many allegations of physical mistreatment of inmates by prison staff, including slaps, punches, kicks, and beatings, and expressed concern over the "obvious deterioration" in conditions at the prison with respect to mistreatment compared with the previous CPT visit there in 2002. At the Varna prison, the CPT reported receiving some allegations of physical mistreatment of inmates, including punches, kicks, and truncheon blows. The CPT also noted the "totally unacceptable" practice of handcuffing prisoners to beds for extended periods. Of the 20 cases of such handcuffing recorded between 2010 and 2012, one inmate was handcuffed for 27 days, while 16 other inmates were handcuffed to beds for periods of between five and 18 days.

Human rights groups continued to report most detention facilities located outside large cities lacked access to adequate medical services, authorities did not have medical examinations performed on detainees following reports of police abuse, and officials rarely punished offending officers.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Conditions in most prisons were harsh, with inadequate toilet facilities, heating, and ventilation.

Physical Conditions: Overcrowding in some prisons remained a problem. As of October there were 8,153 prisoners, including 66 juveniles and 260 women, in the country's 13 prisons, which had a designed capacity of 8,763 inmates. In 2012 the government postponed until 2019 the legal requirement for a minimum living area of 43 square feet per prisoner. During its 2012 visit, the CPT found living space at the Varna prison "at best" approximately 22 square feet per prisoner and in some dormitories as low as 11 square feet. The situation at the Burgas prison was worse,

with each prisoner having less than 11 square feet of living space in many dormitories.

The daily food allowance was approximately four leva (\$2.50). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) received complaints about both the quality and quantity of food. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) expressed concern about severe overcrowding, unsanitary toilet and food preparation facilities, and inadequate medical services in detention centers and prisons, especially in the Burgas prison.

Many detention centers had cells lacking adequate access to natural light. As of October, 875 persons were in detention, including eight juveniles and 32 women. The government closed four of the smaller detention centers that it deemed not cost effective, reducing the total designed capacity of the centers to 1,787 persons in 584 cells.

Through September there were 14 deaths in prisons. Prisoners had access to potable water and adequate food, and there were no food shortages. There were no reports that conditions for female prisoners were worse than those for men. Most of the prison facilities dated from the early 1900s, and the government built the newest facility in 1983. During its 2012 visit to both the Burgas and Varna prisons, the CPT reported receiving many allegations of interprisoner violence and even witnessed such episodes. The CPT noted such violence was not surprising, considering the severe overcrowding and extremely low staffing levels at both facilities.

During the year the ombudsman conducted 35 inspections in police and judicial detention facilities, where they identified low sanitary conditions, poor furnishing, and overcrowding. The ombudsman stated the Justice Ministry had not complied with the majority of his previous recommendations.

The prison administration received complaints from prisoners about sanctions imposed on them, the poor quality of medical services, living conditions, and mistreatment by prison guards. To reinforce their protests, inmates frequently went on hunger strikes. Authorities held foreign prisoners serving longer terms in a separate prison in Sofia to provide them with easier access to consular services. NGOs claimed prisoners had no adequate protection against bad conditions, and even though they were able to sue the state and obtain compensation, conditions did not improve.

The prison administration estimated that 4.6 percent of the prison population was drug-dependent. Prison authorities experienced difficulties in limiting prisoner access to narcotics and other prohibited items.

Administration: There were reports of inadequate medical recordkeeping. By law prison medical facilities are part of the health system but administered by the Ministry of Justice, which oversees prisons. The BHC criticized this arrangement, claiming it creates a conflict of interest and a source of corruption since prison directors appoint the doctors, who are not subject to outside monitoring. The ombudsman also reported controversial and unregulated recordkeeping practices in detention centers. In September 2013 prosecutors charged two doctors with accepting a bribe from a prisoner to falsify a medical evaluation, enabling him to secure early release for outside medical treatment.

All prisoners have the right to work, and two days of work reduced the prison term by one day. The prison administration offered work to only a limited number of prisoners, and work was generally less available due to the economic crisis. Prisoners alleged the system for determining the type of work regime a prisoner received was corrupt and lacked oversight. Nonviolent offenders could receive probationary sentences, which allowed them to stay out of prison as long as they met the conditions of their probation. According to the Justice Ministry, probation was one of the reasons for the current reduction in prison overcrowding.

While prisoners in principle have the right to receive visitors, in most cases a lack of space to accommodate visitors limited the opportunities for visits. NGOs noted visits to the only prison for women caused undue hardship because of the travel time and expense. Prisoners of any religious group could hold religious observances.

Prisoners reported substandard conditions to the prison administration, national ombudsman, and court system. As of October prisoners filed 664 complaints with the prison administration, claiming improper sanctions, unjustified transfers to other facilities, lack of access to medical services or educational programs, poor conditions, and abuse by prison guards. The prison administration found 440 of those complaints unfounded, took relevant actions on 182, and found 42 to be outside its authority.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted monitoring of prisons by independent observers. From March 24 to April 3, a CPT delegation visited the country to assess the extent to which the recommendations made after previous

CPT visits had been implemented. Particular attention was paid to the treatment of persons in police custody, prison conditions, prison health care, and the treatment of juveniles in penitentiary establishments. While the CPT discussed preliminary results from the visit with authorities, its report was pending as of December.

Improvements: With funding from the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, the government was building a new detention center in Shumen and conducting improvements in six prisons to reduce overcrowding and improve living conditions.

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. 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. In 2013 the National Assembly passed a law transferring the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime from the Ministry of Interior to DANS, purportedly to limit the concentration of power and abuses. The National Intelligence Service is responsible for foreign intelligence, and the National Protective Service is responsible for the security of dignitaries, and both answer to the president. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the police and security services. The 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.

Muslim religious leaders continued to complain of harassment and intimidation by members of the security services, who periodically questioned them about religious radicalism and fundamentalism. There were reports security service members would question random Muslims about "why they go to the mosque."

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

While not legally required to do so, police normally obtained a warrant from a prosecutor 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, and 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 bail, and it was widely used.

The law provides for the right to counsel from the time of detention, and authorities generally ensured detainees had access to legal counsel no later than two hours after detention and that a lawyer had access to the detainee within 30 minutes of his or her arrival at the police station. The law provides government-funded legal aid for low-income defendants and defendants could choose from a list of public defenders the bar associations provide. 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. Citizens and NGOs complained that police arbitrarily arrested participants in the antigovernment protests that took place throughout the second half of 2013. In June the Sofia Administrative Court ruled that police arrested Teodor Kolev illegally. Police had asserted that Kolev behaved aggressively during an antigovernment protest in December 2013.

Pretrial Detention: Long delays awaiting trial remained a problem, and there was a large backlog of outstanding investigations. The number of indictments that judges returned for additional investigation significantly declined.

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 justification in the council's disciplinary decisions. As of August the council opened 26 new disciplinary cases and imposed sanctions in 13, including two dismissals, six demotions, and two reductions in pay.

Judicial and investigative backlogs remained a problem in larger jurisdictions, and long delays for criminal trials were common. Aiming to expedite slow investigations, in 2013 the National Assembly reestablished a procedure that allowed defendants to request court dismissal of the charges against them if the prosecution had not formally indicted them for more than two years in serious crime cases and one year in petty crime cases.

Trial Procedures

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 if necessary.

Juries are not used. 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. 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 ECHR.

Regional Human Rights Court Decisions

The country is subject to the jurisdiction of the ECHR. As of March the country had not complied with 372 ECHR decisions. There is a domestic mechanism for reviewing and compensating citizens who claimed violation of their right to a fair trial; the mechanism is intended to reduce the number of cases filed with the ECHR while at the same time providing a proportionate and quicker resolution. As of October the Ministry of Justice received 949 applications, accepted 528 for review, and offered remedies concerning 248 applications that totaled 440,984 leva (\$275,600). NGOs reported that the country continued to have a low rate of compliance with ECHR decisions.

f. Arbitrary 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. In June the committee in the National Assembly responsible for oversight of security services reported an increasing number of requests from the security services for access to electronic data traffic. In 2013 there were nearly 100,000 requests, and the courts granted 20,000 of them.

In April the ombudsman requested the Constitutional Court annul the legislative provisions obligating service providers to retain electronic communication data for up to 24 months. The ombudsman argued the provisions encroach on privacy and the EU Court of Justice had declared invalid the directive that was the basis for those provisions. As of October the Constitutional Court had not decided on the case. Also in April, 1,380 citizens complained to the Personal Data Protection Commission that political parties had abused their personal data, including them without permission as signatories in petitions for participation in European parliamentary elections. In July the Sofia City Court started a trial against former minister of interior Tsvetan Tsvetanov, accused of failure to exercise appropriate control over the ministry's wiretapping activities. As of October the trial was in progress.

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, about deterioration of the media environment due to corporate and political pressure that, combined with the growing and nontransparent concentration of media ownership and distribution networks, gravely damaged media pluralism.

The International Research and Exchanges Board's (IREX) 2013 media sustainability index indicated a further decline in the media's editorial and financial independence and management practices. IREX noted the "nontransparent media ownership and the huge concentration of media outlets within a few conglomerates remain the weakest feature of Bulgarian media." It highlighted the increased politicization of the media, stating they had "abandoned their functions as providers of objective news and played an active role in political battles." During the year the media market saw further concentration of media ownership. NGOs noted an increased concentration of online media as a trend in economic consolidation as well as achieving political influence. Reports of intimidation and violence against journalists persisted.

Freedom of Speech: Individuals criticized the government without official reprisal. In rural areas offering fewer employment opportunities, however, individuals were more hesitant to criticize local governments.

In September, 37 public and private media journalists formed an early response network to act against violations of journalist rights as well as overt and covert censorship. Their first case was obtaining legal aid for Ivan Bakalov, owner and editor of online outlet e-vestnik, who was facing legal action for slander from the owner of Investbank over his 2011 publications on the banking system.

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. According to NGOs, hate speech was becoming a somewhat more common form of expression not just for xenophobic politicians, but also in societal confrontations, and paid "trolls" populated forums and social media of all media outlets, targeting political

opponents with racist and xenophobic comments. As of October there were no convictions for hate speech.

Press Freedoms: The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views. The laws restricting “hate speech” also applied to material appearing in the print media. The process of media consolidation continued, with larger groups acquiring more online outlets. 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 April unknown persons burned the car of political interviewer Genka Shikerova. Her car had previously been set on fire in September 2013. As of October the investigation into both incidents did not revealed the perpetrators and was suspended. In September, two television crews--one from bTV and the other from TV7--were subject to intimidation and physical attacks while doing investigative reports on telephone fraud schemes and drug distribution, respectively. Eventually the authorities identified some of the attackers, took them into custody, and indicted them.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Journalists continued to report privately about their and others’ exercising self-censorship, editorial prohibitions on covering specific persons and subjects, and the imposition of a political point of view by corporate leadership. The Bulgarian Association of Cable and Communication Operators stated that self-censorship had turned into the rule rather than the exception.

In January members of parliament from the ultranationalist party Ataka forced their way into the studios of private television broadcaster NovaTV and attempted to attack physically the participants in a live program who had criticized Ataka’s leader, Volen Siderov.

Libel Laws/National Security: Libel is legally punishable. Usually the courts interpreted the law in a manner favoring journalistic expression. Journalists’ reporting about corruption or mismanagement prompted many defamation cases brought by politicians, government officials, and other persons in public positions. In January the Supreme Court of Cassation rejected the appeal of online outlet *Vseki Den* and upheld the Sofia Appellate Court’s verdict imposing a fine for libel against the outlet for a publication mentioning by name a politician who was featured in the book, *Secrets of the Gay Elite 2*.

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 International Telecommunication Union statistics, approximately 55 percent of the population used the internet in 2013.

The security services could access electronic data with judicial permission when investigating cyber and serious crimes. NGOs criticized gaps in the law that allow the prosecution service to request such data directly from the service providers without proper authorization.

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.

Throughout 2013 antigovernment protests in Sofia, which peaked at more than 20,000 protesters, took place without restriction and in a generally peaceful manner. Nevertheless, on several occasions protesters and police clashed, resulting in minor injuries to eight protesters and two police officers. There were reports that police arbitrarily detained protesters as a form of intimidation.

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 endanger national unity; promote racial, national, or religious hatred; violate the rights of citizens; or seek 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. NGOs may not engage in political activity.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/rpt/.

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.

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. After the difficulties the government experienced with increased numbers of asylum seekers in the fall and winter of 2013, the government completed renovations in the newly opened refugee accommodation centers, improving living conditions, increasing their capacity from 1,230 to 6,000, and eliminating overcrowding. The State Agency for Refugees hired additional staff, which made for faster (within 20-30 days) processing of refugee applications and issuance of documentation. According to NGOs, numbers of interpreters for Arabic, Farsi, and Kurdish were insufficient. The ombudsman criticized the practice of detaining families with children in closed facilities.

In July the government completed installing a 19-mile fence along its border with Turkey, hoping to achieve better control in a forested area where video surveillance had been ineffective and to channel refugees towards official border

checkpoints. Human rights NGOs expressed concern that the government viewed refugees 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 refugees to countries where their lives or freedoms would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Human Rights Watch and Bordermonitoring Bulgaria published reports detailing accounts of forceful pushbacks involving several hundred asylum seekers. The UNHCR expressed concern the additional 1,500 police deployed at the border to guard against illegal border crossers did not receive proper training in handling asylum seekers and that their constant rotation limited the effectiveness of the training they received.

Refugee Abuse: Human Rights Watch and Bordermonitoring Bulgaria alleged that violence against asylum seekers, including beating and humiliation, took place at the border. Other local NGOs expressed concern over the accuracy of those reports, and while they acknowledged having knowledge of cases of violence against asylum seekers, they did not believe there was a systematic policy to apply violence. Authorities refused to investigate the allegations. The State Agency for Refugees further accused NGOs of organizing riots and strikes in the reception centers.

Extreme nationalist parties used antirefugee rhetoric in their political campaigns. Negative coverage of the refugees appeared in some media, claiming they were mostly criminals and terrorists and creating negative stereotypes that encouraged societal intolerance. In April approximately 150 villagers in Rozovo (population 1,000) protested against three Syrian refugee families consisting of 17 persons who had rented a house in their village, forcing them to leave. The villagers claimed they feared for their lives and property as well as sexual violence perpetrated by the refugees. Similarly, in September parents of the students in the village of Kalishte protested against the inclusion of 10 Afghani and Somali refugee children in their school, fearing infections and possible conflicts between the children.

Access to Basic Services: Asylum seekers had access to basic services but complained of being unable to support themselves on the government-allotted 65 leva (\$41) per month stipend for food and medicine as they waited for decisions on their applications.

Durable Solutions: In 2013 the country joined the EU resettlement program but froze its participation after the increased inflow of asylum seekers in the fall of 2013.

Temporary Protection: The government provided humanitarian protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees. As of September the government provided protection to 1,663 persons.

Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution and law provide citizens the ability to change their government through free and fair elections, which they exercised through elections based on universal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: The preliminary conclusions of the election observation mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) found the early parliamentary elections in October in compliance with the fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. The report noted, however, accusations of vote buying and controlled voting had increased the distrust of voters in politics and politicians. It also noted the use of “racist, xenophobic, and inflammatory rhetoric” throughout the election campaign. Transparency International Bulgaria highlighted increased tendencies of individuals in positions of influence to pressure voters to vote in a certain way, such as employers, informal community leaders, and creditors.

The law prohibits campaigning in languages other than Bulgarian. ODIHR 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 the election rules and to participate effectively in the election process. On October 1, the Central Electoral Committee imposed fines on four politicians of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, including its leader, Lutvi Mestan, for campaigning in Turkish.

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

In the first nine months of the year, prosecutors filed 62 cases and pursued 12 prosecutions, and the courts convicted 10 persons for election-related violations. During the campaign in September for parliamentary elections, the prosecution service opened 53 investigations into election-related fraud and issued warnings to 930 persons who received money to vote for a particular party.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The law requires a political party to have 2,500 members to register officially. Even though the constitution does not allow for the establishment of political parties along ethnic lines, this prohibition did not appear to weaken the role of some ethnic minorities in the political process, and a number of parties represented various ethnic minority groups.

Participation of Women and Minorities: As of November there were 50 women in the 240-seat National Assembly, including the speaker, one deputy speaker, and chairs of four of the 22 standing committees. Six of the 21 ministers in the government, including two deputy prime ministers, were women.

There were 33 members of minority groups in the National Assembly: 28 ethnic Turks, three Pomaks (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule), and two Roma. There was one ethnic Turkish minister in the cabinet. While the ethnic Turkish minority enjoyed fair representation, Roma were underrepresented, particularly in appointed leadership positions. Ethnic Turks, Roma, and Pomaks held elected positions at the local level.

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 often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. There were widespread reports of government corruption during the year. Corrupt practices included bribery, conflict of interest, elaborate embezzlement schemes, procurement violations, and influence trading.

Corruption: In April the Sofia City Court convicted the chairman of the Commission for Preventing and Identifying Conflict of Interest, Filip Zlatanov, to three and one-half years in prison for abusing his authority. The court convicted Zlatanov of closing a case against the president and preventing two other high-level officials, the head of the Financial Supervision Commission and the chief

auditor of the Audit Office, from defending themselves and appealing the decisions of the Conflict of Interest Commission.

As of October the trial against a former member of the National Assembly, Dimitar Avramov, for complicity in bribery continued in the Sofia City Court.

At least 320 entities at both the national and local levels have responsibilities related to combating corruption. DANS has a mandate to investigate corrupt activities of high-level government and other officials. The Center for Prevention and Combating Corruption and Organized Crime is responsible for analyzing, planning, and developing anticorruption solutions and policies. A permanent committee in the National Assembly is responsible for reviewing legislative initiatives, referring corruption-related reports to law enforcement and other relevant authorities, and monitoring government agencies. An independent commission is responsible for preventing and identifying conflict of interest. NGOs stated that the government lacked sustainable anticorruption mechanisms, and the European Commission criticized the anticorruption agencies for “lacking coordination, independence, and external oversight.” According to NGOs, government agencies did not collaborate systematically with them, but rather on a project-by-project basis.

In April the National Assembly adopted amendments to the Public Procurement Act aiming to increase transparency in public procurement procedures. The new provisions require contracting authorities to make procurement documentation available for downloading as well as to publish all procedures, assessments, evaluations, and contracts on their websites.

In its annual report, the Center for the Study of Democracy indicated a record-high level of corruption, with 29.3 percent of the adult population (1.9 million citizens) reporting experiencing corruption when dealing with the government. This figure stood in sharp contrast with the results reported by enforcement authorities. Underreporting as well as legal and procedural limitations on the use of such methods as sting operations, plea bargaining, and cooperating with witnesses made it difficult to pursue corruption cases. From January to September, the prosecution service opened investigations in 724 new cases and submitted 287 prosecutions to court involving 364 persons, and the courts convicted 172 persons and acquitted 40. Even though those rates marked an approximately two-fold increase in the rates compared with the same period in 2013, the European Commission stated that “...[d]issuasive sanctions for corruption have not yet been applied.”

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 levs (\$940). According to the National Audit Office, 34 of more than 7,000 officials required to do so by law did not submit their annual declarations by the statutory deadline.

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 processing fees. There are administrative sanctions for noncompliance and an appeal mechanism for review of disclosure denials. NGOs complained that the government did not implement the law effectively and equally. The courts allowed greater access to government information, but the government selectively complied with these decisions. NGOs insisted on the need for a central independent body to oversee the 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 were increased cases of societal antihuman rights and anti-NGO rhetoric. Some political parties and civic movements argued for closing down certain NGOs because they obtain funding from foreign donors. In January the National Revenue Agency carried out an extraordinary financial audit of the BHC, which the BHC perceived as harassment. The prosecution service had ordered the audit based on a report by the political party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, which the BHC had previously criticized over its xenophobic and racist rhetoric.

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 for terminating existing practices, refer information to the prosecution service, and request the Constitutional Court to abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional. As of October the ombudsman

received 3,693 complaints of violations of citizens' rights and freedoms. The majority of complaints concerned the quality of public utility and telecommunication services, social assistance programs, and property problems, including forced evictions. Authorities sometimes acted in response to recommendations from the ombudsman.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) 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

The law prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, gender, disability, social status, and sexual orientation but not language. Societal discrimination continued, particularly against ethnic minorities, LGBT persons, and persons with disabilities. Trafficking in persons continued to be a problem.

The government investigated complaints of discrimination, issued rulings, and imposed sanctions on violators. The law allows individuals to pursue a discrimination case through the court system or through the CPD. As of October the CPD received 526 complaints, most of them concerning allegations of discrimination based on personal status and disability, particularly with regard to employment. The commission found discriminatory practices in 375 cases and imposed fines totaling 18,950 leva (\$11,800) on violators. In 2013 courts completed 34 discrimination proceedings granting full remedy in six cases and partial remedy in six cases, rejecting six claims, and terminating 16 cases.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape, and authorities generally enforced its provisions when violations came to their attention. The penal code does not criminalize rape, including statutory rape, if it is followed by marriage. 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 EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) report released in March, 23 percent of women in the country had suffered physical and/or sexual violence from their partners and 29 percent had experienced either physical, sexual, or emotional violence in their childhood. 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. As of October the prosecution service filed 192 rape cases and pursued 59 prosecutions, and the court sentenced 59 persons. The State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) stated that investigation and prosecution of statutory rape had increased since 2010. As of October the prosecution service opened 629 criminal proceedings for statutory rape and prosecuted 450 persons, and the courts convicted 388 persons. In March more than 500 male participants joined the second “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes” event in Sofia to raise awareness about domestic violence and sexual assault.

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 the court 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 (\$3,125). In 2013 courts received 2,837 new cases and issued 1,223 protective measures. The law requires the government to adopt an annual action plan to prevent and protect against domestic violence and requires the government to fund it.

A domestic NGO operated a free 24-hour hotline for women in crisis, funded through a six-month government grant. As of October the hotline had worked with 1,137 clients, including 613 victims of domestic violence and eight victims of sexual violence. The hotline operator expressed a concern that the inconsistency and uncertainty in funding support had caused it to interrupt its 24-hour availability and could lead to a discontinuation of the line altogether. Other NGOs provided short-term protection and counseling to victims in 17 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 operational costs. Women’s rights organizations continued to insist the government lacked strong gender equality and domestic violence policies, despite the annual action plans encouraging gender equality.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): There is no express provision in the law that prohibits FGM/C. There were no reports of such practices concerning women.

Sexual Harassment: The law identifies sexual harassment as a specific form of discrimination rather than as 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. According to the FRA report, between 9 and 11 percent of women in the country have suffered sexual harassment. As of October the CPD received four complaints of sexual harassment.

Reproductive Rights: The government generally respected the right of couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children; to have the information and means to do so; and to attain the highest standard of reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. Women generally had good access to contraception and skilled attendance during childbirth and to prenatal care, including essential obstetric and postpartum care. Women in poor rural areas 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 with the same rights as men, including equal pay for equal work, women faced some discrimination in economic participation and political empowerment. The gender pay gap continued to rise, according to Eurostat, and in 2012 it was 14.7 percent compared with 13 percent in 2011 (also see section 7.d.). Women were also underrepresented in government; approximately 11 percent of mayors were women. Some Romani communities followed patriarchal traditions that restricted women. The National Council on Equality between Women and Men, headed by the minister of labor and social policy under the Council of Ministers, was responsible for safeguarding the rights of women. Primarily a consultative body, the council has responsibility for promoting cooperation and coordination among NGOs and government agencies. In May the government made a decision to appoint gender equality coordinators in each agency represented on the council.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship derives from one's parents. Children were registered immediately upon birth in the country. Children born to asylum seekers

could not be registered until the mother received either refugee or humanitarian status.

Education: Public education is compulsory to the age of 16 and free through the 12th grade, but authorities did not effectively enforce attendance requirements. School dropout rates were disproportionately high among the Romani population.

According to the National Statistical Institute, 17,553 children (2.3 percent of those enrolled) dropped out of school in 2013. The Education Ministry estimated the number of dropouts at 3,844. NGOs considered both figures inaccurate and estimated the actual number of dropouts to fall between these figures.

Child Abuse: Violence against children continued to be a problem. According to the SACP, in the first nine months of the year, there was a slight decrease in the number of reported child abuse cases compared with the previous few years. In 2013 the SACP worked on 1,384 new cases of violence, down from 1,454 in 2012. While the short-term trends possibly indicated a decrease in violence against children, data collected over the previous 10 years indicate both physical violence and sexual violence increased as a proportion of the total. Physical violence increased from 24 percent in 2004 to 38.2 percent of all cases and had become the most prevalent form of violence. While not as prevalent, the proportion of cases of sexual violence more than doubled from 7 percent to 15.4 percent during the same period. The home continued to be the location where violence was most prevalent (71.6 percent), while 9 percent of cases occurred on the street, 5.4 percent in school, and 4.6 percent in a public location. According to the Animus Association Foundation, discussion of sexual violence against children remained a social taboo.

In February the National Network for Children accused the government of not taking appropriate action after discovering grave violations of children's rights in correctional facilities in Straldja, Dragodanovo, and Varnentsi. Prompted by volunteers, in September 2013 the SACP inspected the facility in Straldja and uncovered cases of physical violence, sexual violence, and poor health care and nourishment. As of November there was an investigation by the prosecution. In November 2013 the SACP requested the closing of the facility in Straldja; as of October the government was still working on the relocation of the children. According to the National Statistical Institute, 1,937 children were victims of serious crimes in 2013, up from 1,777 victims in 2012.

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.

During the first nine months of the year, helpline counselors carried out 13,307 consultations. Less than 4 percent of the reports concerned cases of abuse, and only 1 percent concerned physical violence, accompanied in almost all cases by emotional abuse. Hotline administrators referred 331 cases of children at risk to the child protection administration. NGOs expressed concern that in many cases social workers, guided by conflicting legislation, preferred to send a child out of an abusive home into an institution rather than remove the abusive parent.

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 2013 there were 385 marriages of girls under 18, or 1.8 percent of the total number, which continued an increasing trend since 2009, when the figure was 0.6 percent. NGOs reported that child marriage was a pervasive problem in Romani communities that resulted in school dropouts, early childbirths, poor parenting, and spreading poverty.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): There is no express provision in the law that prohibits FGM/C, and there were no reports of such practices concerning children.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The penal code provides for two to eight years' imprisonment and a fine of 5,000-15,000 levs (\$3,125-\$9,375) for forcing children into prostitution, as well as three to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000-20,000 levs (\$6,250-\$12,500) for child sex trafficking. 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 levs (\$5,000).

Institutionalized Children: Authorities placed children in institutions regardless of varying types and degrees of disability. Between September 2013 and March, the government closed seven institutions as part of a plan to close all institutions by 2025 and replace them with alternative, community-based care. As of October the government operated 103 institutions, including 50 for parentless children, 29 for those needing medical and social care, and 24 for children and youth with physical disabilities. The number of institutionalized children further declined from 3,592 in July 2013 to 3,550 as of July. Approximately 25 percent of the children remaining in institutions had disabilities. According to the SACP, an estimated 50 percent of institutionalized children were Roma. The BHC 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 the institutions, uncovering numerous malpractices and mistreatment of the children placed there. In August an inspection of the institution in Knyazhevo, Sofia, revealed serious violations of the established regulations and recordkeeping after an 18-month-old child disappeared from the institution.

The government continued implementing its deinstitutionalization program after developing individual deinstitutionalization plans for each child. Between September 2013 and October, authorities removed 492 children from institutions and relocated the majority of them to family-type centers, with a smaller number, approximately 10 percent, accommodated in protected housing. As of August the SACP successfully completed 1,737 cases of children either reintegrated with their families, adopted, or placed in foster care, and prevented the abandonment of 626 children. An interagency working group was developing a standard for dedicated government funding of foster care. The ombudsman identified a disconcerting trend of children returning from family-type centers to their original institutions. The SACP stated that poverty and the lack of sufficiently developed alternatives to institutionalized care, in addition to the insufficient number of needs-based services for disabled children, hampered successful deinstitutionalization.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For country-specific information see travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/english/country/bulgaria.html.

Anti-Semitism

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

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to appear commonly on social networking sites and as comments under online media articles. Jewish organizations remained concerned over the government's passivity in addressing hate crimes, particularly hate speech, and complained website administrators no longer deleted anti-Semitic comments. Social media users and online publications alleged that Jews instigated the crisis in Ukraine in order to profit from the conflict.

In February the Interior Ministry and the prosecution service did not give approval for a rally in honor of a World War II general known for his anti-Semitic views and pro-Nazi activities, and the municipal government in Sofia banned the event. Despite the prohibition, approximately 300 persons gathered and marched briefly in downtown Sofia under tight security provided by the police, who decided, in order to avoid escalation, not to take action against the marchers.

Anti-Semitic graffiti appeared at the Central Synagogue in Sofia in June. The police arrested four youths in connection with the incident, and as of November the prosecution was conducting pretrial proceedings.

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, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, and the provision of other government services. The government did not effectively enforce these provisions. The government focused most of its efforts on providing various social services but lacked sufficient funds to modify the infrastructure and implement active policies to improve public awareness. NGOs criticized the government for a lack of access for persons with disabilities to information and communications, noting only one newscast was available with sign language interpretation and that authorities made no information available in Braille. Societal discrimination against persons with disabilities persisted.

While the law requires improved access to buildings for persons with disabilities, enforcement of the law lagged in some new public works projects as well as in existing, unrenovated buildings. NGOs filed complaints with the CPD over the inadequate accessibility of a renovated Sofia tramline, asserting that underground passages that provide the only access to the platforms did not have elevators and that ramps were too steep.

The law promotes the employment of persons with disabilities, providing employers with subsidies covering 30 to 50 percent of insurance benefits and the cost of adjusting and equipping workplaces to accommodate persons with

disabilities. Enforcement was poor, and employers did not feel motivated to hire disabled persons, citing inaccessible public infrastructure, low level of education, and lack of sufficient funding for workplace modification. According to the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, 10 percent of persons with disabilities earned an income (also see section 7.d.).

The country's infrastructure did not provide persons with disabilities adequate access to education, health care, and social services. Individuals with mental and physical disabilities were often separated from the rest of society and housed in institutions located in remote areas, which inhibited the hiring of qualified staff and hampered access to timely medical assistance. Children with disabilities studying in segregated schools received diplomas that higher level learning establishments did not accept as qualifying them for further education. According to Eurostat data, 45 percent of children with disabilities with specific education needs dropped out of school. NGOs reported students with disabilities, such as children with autism, generally dropped out because the school system could not provide for their specific education needs. The SACP stated the prevailing practice of considering child 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. In 2013 the Ministry of Education and Science conducted a two-week training course on developing useful skills, orientation, and mobility for students, parents, and teachers of students with sensory disabilities attending mainstream schools.

The law provides specific measures for persons with disabilities to have access to the polls, including mobile ballot boxes. According to the OSCE/ODIHR preliminary election observation mission statement on the October early parliamentary elections, disability advocates questioned the accessibility of polling stations.

The Interagency Council for Integration of Persons with Disabilities was responsible for developing the policy supporting 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 existing model, suggesting that instead of meeting formalistic criteria, such as territorial representation and membership size, the government should tie subsidies to these organizations' achievement of policy objectives. They remained concerned the incentive structure prioritizes obtaining national representation over effective advocacy and the lack of transparency regarding financial and other support to the national representative organizations affected those organizations' independence.

The government continued implementing its two-year (2013-14) action plan designed to introduce measures for improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities, preventing discrimination, and encouraging their active participation in society.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

According to the 2011 census, there were 325,345 Roma in the country, less than 5 percent of the population, and 588,318 ethnic Turks, less than 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 either made assumptions or failed to include Romani figures altogether.

Societal discrimination and popular prejudice against Roma and other minority groups remained a problem. The media described Roma and other minority groups using discriminatory and abusive language. Extreme 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. In April a prosecutor terminated the investigation into the 2012 complaint that a press article in the *Novinar* newspaper by Kalin Rumenov incited racial and ethnic hatred and racial discrimination, concluding there was no crime. In June, after a devastating flood hit the Varna neighborhood of Asparuhovo, killing 13 persons and destroying many houses, local municipal council member Kostadin Kostadinov blamed the Romani inhabitants for the disaster, calling them "parasites" and "inhuman scum" that do not deserve "to inhabit our civilization." Human rights activists filed hate speech complaints against Kostadinov and Rumenov, who had used similar language on the subject in a Radio Darik Varna program. As of November the prosecution was conducting an inquiry into the case.

In April a group of six or seven skinheads got out of a trolley bus and beat unconscious a black French citizen standing with friends at a stop in Sofia. The authorities identified the perpetrators and, as of October, were prosecuting them for assault. Human rights NGOs criticized the authorities for their unwillingness to take into account the racist and xenophobic aspects of the crime and to prosecute the perpetrators for racially motivated attack, which carries a heavier penalty.

In March prosecutors indicted four persons accused of planting a bomb in front of a Romani cafe and club in Sandanski. The bomb killed Malin Iliev, who picked up a bag containing it while opening the cafe. As of October the trial was proceeding at the Blagoevgrad District Court.

Romani NGOs that left the government-run National Council on Ethnic and Integration Affairs in April 2013 to protest the lack of progress on Roma integration claimed the government had not changed its attitude of neglect and they therefore would continue not to collaborate with the council.

Many Roma continued to live in appalling conditions. The 2011 census indicated that 55 percent lived in overcrowded urban neighborhoods. NGOs estimated 50 to 70 percent of their housing was illegally and inadequately constructed, often without proper water supply and sewerage. Many municipalities continued to initiate legal proceedings to demolish illegally built houses. In July the city of Stara Zagora demolished 55 illegal Romani houses and announced plans to demolish 300 more, although as of November no additional houses were demolished. The operation resulted in clashes between the police and inhabitants, who barricaded themselves in their houses and refused to leave. NGOs condemned the demolition, stating the municipality had destroyed the inhabitants' only homes. The houses had been built more than 15 years earlier, and the residents had registered utility bills and identification cards to these illegal addresses. The mayor stated the municipality had provided the Roma with options to either apply for municipal housing or build new legal houses elsewhere on municipal land.

Romani children often attended de facto segregated schools where they received inferior education. There were cases of ethnic Bulgarian students departing desegregated schools, thereby resegregating them. NGOs criticized the national Roma integration strategy for not providing specific school desegregation measures and not ensuring the necessary financial support for such measures. 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

challenge for the government, which also lacked effective programs for reintegrating students who had dropped out. According to a 2013 government survey, 14.8 percent of Roma completed secondary school, 44.7 percent completed primary school (first to seventh grade), and 15.5 percent never completed any level of education.

Romani access to health services continued to be a problem and in some cases was subject to discrimination. A 2013 government survey estimated 30 percent of Roma had not signed up with a general practitioner (i.e., lacked health insurance), and 78.8 percent had no access to a dentist. In addition the quality of medical care given Roma by medical personnel and social workers was very low. 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 October there were 130 health mediators appointed to full-time positions in 72 municipalities to work with high-risk and vulnerable groups.

After the Central Electoral Committee announced the names of the newly elected members of parliament in the October early general elections, there were protests in four towns, Dupnitsa, Kyustendil, Yambol, and Gabrovo, against the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party members who had won seats in those constituencies. The protesters claimed they did not wish to have members of the “Turkish party” representing their regions.

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 LGBT persons were rare, societal discrimination, particularly in employment, remained a problem. Most LGBT persons did not reveal their sexual preferences to their families due to fear of the relationship being severed. NGOs stated it was not uncommon for persons suspected of being gay to be fired, and such individuals were reluctant to seek redress in the courts due to fear of being openly identified as belonging to the LGBT community. In April, Judge Lilia Ilieva from the commercial division of the Sofia City Court denied registration of a new LGBT foundation on the ground that there was no need for such an organization because there was no discrimination against LGBT persons.

On July 5, the seventh annual LGBT pride parade took place in downtown Sofia. Once again the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued a statement demanding cancellation of the event. The parade attracted approximately 500 participants and occurred largely without incident. For the first time, an active politician, Viktor Lilov of the Reformist Bloc, spoke at the opening of the parade, and media coverage of the event was largely positive. Police provided sufficient security in the vicinity of the parade and in the wider area, which effectively deterred aggressive behavior by skinheads and others who traditionally caused some problems. Protestors held an anti-LGBT event on June 21, which drew approximately 50-70 demonstrators.

HIV and AIDS Societal Stigma

Persons with HIV/AIDS faced societal stigma and discrimination. There were reports patients faced inadequate conditions in medical facilities and discrimination due to some doctors' refusal 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 status in order to receive emergency medical care or avoid transfer to an unspecialized unit where they might receive inadequate help. The government-run HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Program cooperated with more than 50 NGOs and 21 local governments in 19 stationary and 17 mobile clinics for anonymous free testing, and with 35 health prevention centers working with vulnerable groups around the country.

Society stigmatized women who were diagnosed and treated for sexually transmitted diseases.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

The Association of Soccer Fan Clubs, joined by members of extreme nationalist groups, local mayors, and Bulgarian Orthodox Church clergy, organized a series of demonstrations around the country in front of the courthouses where the courts were hearing Muslim property restitution cases. In February approximately 2,000 anti-Muslim protesters attacked the central mosque in Plovdiv and threw stones and pyrotechnic devices. They clashed with the police, resulting in six injuries. The police detained 120 persons; the court convicted 11 of them for hooliganism.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of workers to form or 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 16 such complaints as of October.

There are some limitations to these rights. The law prohibits employees of the Ministries of Defense and Interior, 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 as a means of ensuring due process in protecting their rights. The Civil Service Act provides for the right of other public service employees to strike, but they can do so only by wearing or displaying protest symbols or signs, without stopping work. The law also limited transport workers' right to strike. Trade unions stated that 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 denies public servants the right to collective bargaining.

Resources, inspections, and remediation efforts were generally adequate. Union leaders, however, stated that the government did not effectively enforce the labor law. Penalties for violations of the labor law range from 50 to 200 leva (\$31 to \$125), which unions said was insufficient to deter violations. Union leaders complained court proceedings for reinstatement of unfairly dismissed workers often took years and were not a strong deterrent to antiunion discrimination. The law does not effectively protect against acts of interference by employers in trade union activities.

Authorities generally respected freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively. Unions operated independently of the government and political party interference. 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 employers refused to engage in bargaining over wages and delayed conclusions to collective agreements leaving workers without agreements for years.

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 accurately cases of forced labor domestically. 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 did not, however, 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 retrafficked because there were no long-term remediation programs.

There were some reports families or criminal organizations subjected children to forced work (see section 7.c.). As of the beginning of December, the government identified 20 cases of trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced labor, compared with 44 in 2013. NGOs claimed the government mechanisms for identification of 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. 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 all companies seeking and holding

child work permits and applying sanctions regarding child labor in the formal sector.

Employment of children without a work permit is a criminal offense and is punishable by up to six months in prison. Even so, child labor occurred during the year.

The General Labor Inspectorate reported a slight increase in child employment compared with 2013, mainly due to a slower economy and tightened requirements. As of October the inspectorate granted 1,769 requests for employment of children ages 16 and 17. The inspectorate granted 67 requests for work permits for children under the age of 16. In 2013 the inspectorate uncovered 23 cases of illegal child employment and referred 18 cases 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 about their effects, 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 included heavy physical labor and labor on family tobacco farms, a significant health hazard. In September the authorities prohibited a video that violated the legal prohibition against using children for political campaigning.

The government continued to report a declining trend in the number of children detained by police for vagrancy and begging. As of July police had identified 808 child runaways and vagrants. Many observers believed adults exploited these children. Police placed 38 of the children apprehended in protective custody for up to 24 hours and sent 55 to crisis centers for longer periods. Subsequently, authorities sent 31 children to government-run institutions. Police referred four cases of parents suspected of exploiting their children for begging to a prosecutor.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination in employment with regard to nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, race, color, age, 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 in general, discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to gender, disability, and minority status (see section 6).

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. A 2013 government survey estimated the unemployment rate among adult Roma at 44.8 percent and 68.1 percent of Roma remained outside the social security system.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

The national minimum wage was 340 leva (\$212) per month. In March the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria issued a report stating 23.2 percent of households (more than 1.6 million individuals) lived with an income per family member that was under a poverty line, which it set at 211 leva (\$132). The government has set the official poverty line at 286 leva (\$179).

The law provides for a standard workweek of 40 hours with at least one 24-hour rest period per week. The law prohibits excessive compulsory overtime. The law prohibits overtime work for children under the age of 18, pregnant women, and women with children up to age six. The law stipulates that the 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 Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria criticized the legislative provision for calculation of 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 jeopardy to 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 (\$940 to \$9,400), which, according to the trade unions, failed to act as a deterrent. Besides fines, penalties may include administrative provisions, such as suspension of operations and termination of employment of those responsible for the violation. As of November the General Labor Inspectorate conducted more than 44,000 inspections of companies totaling 1.5 million workplaces, identifying close to 209,000 violations and imposing various sanctions, including collecting 9.7 million leva (\$6.1 million) in fines. The General Labor 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 the media announce a planned labor inspection campaign.

The government annually adopts an updated national program for occupational safety and health, which outlines the goals and priorities in these areas. The General Labor Inspectorate is responsible for monitoring and enforcement of occupational safety and health requirements. In January the government established 28 regional offices of the General Labor Inspectorate with a view to increasing the number of inspectors as well as inspection coverage. As of October there were 428 labor inspectors. Of all inspections, 41 percent involved violations of safety and health requirements. Enforcement was generally less effective in the state sector than in the private.

Legal protections or government inspections did not cover informal workers in the significant grey-market economy. In October the Association of Industrial Capital reported the informal economy had decreased from 42.2 percent in 2010 to 32.3 percent at that time.

In the first six months of the year, there were 1,258 work-related accidents. The General Labor Inspectorate noted violations related to equipment and technology safety were the most common causes of occupational accidents.

Conditions in some sectors, particularly the destruction and disposal of ammunition, construction, mining, chemicals, and transportation, continued to pose risks for workers. As of July there were 35 work-related deaths, mainly in the construction sector. In October an explosion at Videx AD's explosives factory near Gorni Lom killed 12 workers and three managers during landmine disposal.