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U.S. Department of State

Bulgaria Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997

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BULGARIA

Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic ruled by a democratically elected government. Following his election victory in late 1996 in the country's second direct presidential elections, President Petar Stoyanov of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was inaugurated in January and began a 5-year term of office. At the beginning of 1997, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), heir to the Communist Party, and two nominal partners governed in a coalition. Widespread political unrest caused by a worsening economic crisis culminated in crippling nationwide strikes and daily antigovernment protests in January and early February. Under mounting popular pressure, the BSP-led Government agreed in early February to hold early elections in April, in which the UDF-led coalition won an absolute majority in National Assembly. UDF leader Ivan Kostov was chosen as Prime Minister. The judiciary is independent but continued to suffer from corruption and structural and staffing problems.

Most internal security services are the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, which exercises incomplete control of the police, the Central Service for Combating Organized Crime, the National Security Service (civilian intelligence), internal security troops, border guards, and special forces. The change of government brought a change in leadership and management of most of these services, in some cases replacing security officials involved in the notorious State Security Organization (known as DS) and its repressive activities during the pre-1989 Communist regime. Both before and after the change in government, some members of the police force committed serious human rights abuses.

The post-Communist economy continued to be heavily dependent on money-losing state enterprises, although the growing private sector now accounts for about 45 percent of economic activity, and

privatization is accelerating. Most people are employed in the industrial and service sectors; key industries include food processing, chemical and oil processing, metallurgy, and energy. Principal exports are agricultural products, cigarettes and tobacco, chemicals, and metal products. The transformation of the economy to a market-oriented system was retarded by continued political and social resistance. Slow progress in the privatization of the large Communist-era state enterprises was a major reason for economic stagnation in 1996. The failure to implement structural reforms led to an economic collapse in 1996 and early 1997. The financial system stabilized after a brief hyperinflationary period after the switch to a caretaker government, but gross domestic product continued to decline through most of the year. The new Government announced its commitment to an accelerated privatization program. The service and consumer goods sectors in private hands continued to be the most active. The new Government introduced a currency board and implemented fiscal and monetary austerity, budget and staff cuts, and radical economic restructuring. The 1996 economic crisis affected the employment of ethnic minorities disproportionately. The annual per capita gross domestic product of \$1,130 provides a relatively low standard of living.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens, but problems remained in some areas. Police used unwarranted lethal force against suspects and minorities in some cases. Security forces beat suspects and inmates and at times arbitrarily arrested and detained persons. Government control of the police is not sufficiently complete to ensure full accountability. This results in a climate of impunity and inhibits government attempts to end police abuses. Conditions in some prisons are harsh, and pretrial detention is often prolonged. The judiciary is underpaid, understaffed, and has a heavy case backlog; corruption also exists. Constitutional restrictions on political parties formed on ethnic, racial, or religious lines effectively limit participation for some groups. Both the Government and private citizens continued to obstruct the activities of some nontraditional religious groups. Discrimination and violence against women remain serious problems, and some women are victims of trafficking and forced prostitution. Societal mistreatment of Roma is a serious problem. The limited social service system does not adequately assist homeless and other vulnerable children, notably Romani children. Further, security forces harass, physically abuse, and arbitrarily arrest and detain Romani street children.

The National Assembly passed legislation, initiated by the new Government, to open the dossiers created by the former state security services to inspection both by a government commission and by private citizens. The Socialist opposition opposed the law and challenged its legitimacy in the Constitutional Court; the Court, however, upheld its main provisions.

The new Government placed a high priority on combating crime and corruption.