
News from Bulgaria

June 1990

Election Report

HELSINKI WATCH FINDS SIGNIFICANT VIOLATIONS IN PRE-ELECTION PROCESS; CALLS ON BULGARIAN GOVERNMENT TO ENSURE FREE AND FAIR ELECTORAL CONDITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

On June 10, Bulgaria will hold its first free election in fifty years. The Bulgarians will elect a 400-member Grand National Assembly that will sit for approximately one-and-one-half years to write a new constitution and to act as the country's main legislative body. The Bulgarians have selected the West German two ballot system, whereby 200 members will be selected from single-member election districts on the basis of direct election and 200 members from multi-member districts on the basis of proportional representation. In those single member districts where no candidate receives over 50 percent of the vote, there will be runoff elections on June 17. Helsinki Watch recently sent two representatives to Bulgaria to monitor pre-election conditions.¹

Between May 22 and June 3, Helsinki Watch visited numerous cities, including Kurdzhali, Sliven, Pernik, Trun and Velingrad, and surrounding villages. Helsinki Watch met with local government officials, party activists and voters. With the permission of the Minister of National Defense, Dobri Dzhurov, Helsinki Watch visited a military barrack in Sliven and interviewed soldiers and officers. We also met with Procurator General Eftim Stoimenov and the Chairman of the Central Election Committee, Zhivko Stalev.

Helsinki Watch concludes that there are significant human rights violations in the pre-election process, particularly in the provinces. These violations include:

¹The Helsinki Watch representatives who went to Bulgaria are Theodore Zang, Jr., staff counsel to Helsinki Watch, and Laura Sherman, an attorney and consultant to Helsinki Watch.

- o** intimidation of voters by local government and Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) officials;
- o** a general atmosphere of fear of violence and economic reprisal;
- o** improper use of public resources by the BSP;
- o** government manipulation of Gypsies and military conscripts.

Helsinki Watch believes that the lack of information and understanding about human rights in Bulgaria and the fear and uncertainty that are legacies of the communist totalitarian regime contribute to an environment that is not conducive to free political expression. Helsinki Watch calls on the government and the BSP to ensure free electoral conditions and to remedy any defects in the electoral process; they have a special obligation to do so because of their responsibility for past abuses and their control of the system.

INTIMIDATION OF VOTERS

Bulgarian society is tense and emotions are high as Bulgaria approaches its first free elections in decades. The tensions are exacerbated by numerous instances of physical and psychological violence, sometimes perpetrated by local government officials and other times by party activists. Members of the BSP are not immune from attack. Helsinki Watch interviewed many opposition supporters who expressed the belief that the BSP is not entitled to the same protection as other parties, a view that runs counter to the international legal principle that protection should be afforded equally to all political parties.

Government officials and BSP supporters target uninformed voters such as pensioners and villagers for intimidation, rather than political activists. Examples of intimidation of voters by local officials include the following:

- o** In Trun, Boris Petrov Gotsev, an elderly supporter of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), an umbrella organization comprising more than a dozen opposition organizations, received a letter from the chairman of the municipal council raising his rent by 59 percent, a day after he had a reception in his apartment for UDF supporters. Mr. Gotsev was the only resident of his housing complex to receive a rent increase.
- o** In Pernik, Methodi Jordanov Methodiev reported that he was visited at his home on May 23 by Stanka Grigorova Trendafilova, an official in the mayor's office. She informed him that the UDF banner flying from his roof was illegal. She threatened to arrest him if he did not remove the banner and warned him that he would be unable to vote in the election if he did not do so.

A number of opposition activists employed in state-run enterprises have been threatened by superiors with the loss of their jobs as a result of their political activities:

- o** Sylvia Stoymanova Topalova, a worker at the Factory for Heavy Machine Building in Radomir and a member of the local coordinating council of UDF, was informed in late May that she would be fired in spite of her perfect work record.
- o** Evgenie Chervenkov, a UDF activist in Pernik, was warned that he would lose his job after he had requested a one-month leave of absence to work on the UDF campaign.
- o** In Velingrad, the headmaster of a restaurant management school threatened the teachers with dismissal if they did not join the BSP. As a result, according to one of the teachers, 10 of the 24 teachers at the school joined the BSP.

Acts of intimidation and violence by individual party supporters occur with great frequency and contribute to

the atmosphere of fear:

- o One widespread abuse is the dissemination of rumors among pensioners that they will lose their pensions if the UDF wins the election. Almost all of the persons interviewed by Helsinki Watch had heard of such threats or had received them directly.**
- o The destruction of party posters and campaign materials is also widespread. A UDF supporter in Velingrad reported that someone had broken the glass of his second floor window and removed the UDF poster pasted inside the window.**
- o Dima Georgieva Zidarova, a BSP supporter, told Helsinki Watch that on May 29 someone painted a swastika and the words "Death" and "Hitler is Life" on her mailbox. She reported the incident to the police, but they did little to find the perpetrator.**
- o On the evening of May 24 in the town of Jardzilovtsi, seven or eight houses occupied by known UDF supporters were defaced with red paint.**

Helsinki Watch has received reports of violence against individuals:

- o In Shumen, Julian Petkov, a UDF supporter, was shot to death on May 31 by an off-duty military officer. The shooting may not be politically motivated, but is considered so by many in the opposition.**
- o Jordan Petkov, a 79-year-old BSP supporter, was beaten by two middle-aged men after he refused their request to distribute UDF posters in his neighborhood. Mr. Petkov was hospitalized for a few days as a result of the beating.**
- o A UDF rally in Samokov on June 3 was disrupted by BSP supporters throwing rocks and eggs at the UDF candidate. A car carrying representatives of the Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections was also hit by rocks and eggs as it was leaving the rally.**

Press reports often heighten tensions:

- o An article in the June 2 issue of the UDF paper, *Democratsiya*, reported that "the murdered are all from the UDF." The deaths reported in the article included those resulting from a car accident on a wet road, which was probably not politically motivated.**

INEQUALITY OF RESOURCES

The BSP maintains a significant advantage over the opposition parties as a result of its historically-close relationship with the government. It has access to office space, materials, and telecommunications equipment that is not available to other parties. In many cases, opposition parties have been handicapped by the government's failure to allocate resources in a swift and equitable manner. Opposition parties that do not belong to the UDF are at a particular disadvantage. Examples of these problems include the following:

- o While the UDF and the BSP have 20 minutes of television time three times a week, parties such as the Social Democratic Party (non-Marxist) will receive only three minutes of television time during the entire campaign.**

- o In Velingrad, the UDF requested office space in January but did not receive any until the end of April. The space consists of a few rooms on the second floor of a building, while the BSP has a multi-story building on the main pedestrian thoroughfare.
- o In Kurdzhali, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, a political party, also requested office space from the government in January. In early May, it received two small rooms. The BSP headquarters in Kurdzhali are located in a multi-story building.
- o In Gotse Delchev, the UDF applied for office space but has not received it. The UDF club is located in a tent, pitched in front of the municipal council office. It has no telephone.

MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC RESOURCES

The BSP continues to take advantage of public resources to promote its candidates. As reported by Helsinki Watch in its *News from Bulgaria* (March 1990), the BSP enjoys a number of advantages, such as access to a larger quantity of newsprint and economic data. At the same time, the government has used its control of public resources to place the opposition at a disadvantage. If the government and the BSP are to demonstrate their commitment to a free electoral system that promotes multi-party participation, they must observe a complete separation between party and state. Examples of the misuse of public resources include the following:

- o At the military barracks in Gorna Banya, a poster identifying the future of Bulgaria with socialism hangs on the wall of the conscripts' recreation room. The commanding officer, when asked about the appropriateness of the poster in light of the depoliticization of the military, stated that it had been supplied by the ministry of defense.
- o In Velingrad, UDF officials reported that regular bus service between villages was stopped during scheduled UDF meetings, while local government officials provided buses to the BSP for its rallies.
- o In Trun, Grigor Simov Bozhilov, local coordinator for the UDF, told Helsinki Watch that on two occasions the electricity was turned off during UDF television programs.
- o General Dobri Dzhurov, the Minister for National Defense and the BSP candidate in Troyan, campaigns in his uniform. Minister of the Interior, Atanas Semerdzhiev, a BSP candidate in Velingrad, uses a state helicopter to fly to campaign rallies. The use of state symbols and resources in this campaign is particularly inappropriate given the lack of political culture and the unsophisticated nature of the voters who may not be able to distinguish between the BSP and the state.
- o In Velingrad, a teacher at a restaurant management school reported that the BSP took advantage of the BSP membership of the school's headmaster to use students as bartenders, cooks, and waiters at the BSP club. Helsinki Watch learned that local residents can buy items such as chocolate not sold elsewhere in Velingrad at the BSP club, sales characterized by the UDF club leader as "buying votes by selling produce."

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST GYPSIES AND CONSCRIPTS

Gypsies and conscripts are isolated from the rest of the population and are particularly susceptible to intimidation by the authorities. Helsinki Watch has learned of the following improprieties:

- o A soldier serving in Plovdiv told Helsinki Watch that the officers in his barracks who formerly provided political education continue to manipulate the conscripts. They also use the threat of withdrawal of home leave to influence voting. Officers who have discovered that a conscript is involved in opposition politics have punished him for some other reason, such as disrespect for officers or untidy appearance. The conscript from Plovdiv told Helsinki Watch that on April 23, 27 and 29 and on or about May 2, he sent letters to one of the groups in the UDF, but none of his letters arrived.**
- o Soldiers in the military do not have equal access to political information. They are not permitted to subscribe to newspapers other than the army newspaper, *Narodna Armiya*.**
- o Grigor Simov Bozhilov, the local UDF coordinator in Trun, told Helsinki Watch that the BSP has taken particular advantage of the Gypsies. The Gypsies have historically been dependent on the BSP, in its former incarnation as the Bulgarian Communist Party, for food and jobs. A 26-year old Gypsy in Trun told Helsinki Watch that the BSP spreads rumors that Gypsies will lose their apartments if the UDF wins the elections and that they will also lose their pensions. Helsinki Watch has also received reliable information that in Stara Zagora, BSP members have beaten Gypsies who expressed support for the UDF.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to assure a free and fair election on June 10 and thereafter, Helsinki Watch urges the Bulgarian government and all of the Bulgarian political parties to encourage voters to renounce violence and all forms of intimidation. The government and the BSP have a special obligation in this respect because of their history of violating human rights.

Helsinki Watch has the following specific recommendations:

- o The office of the Procurator General must vigorously and impartially investigate alleged incidents of violence and other human rights violations committed in connection with the elections. A special unit should be created to perform this function.**
- o The new National Assembly should establish an ombudsman's office to investigate human rights abuses, including those connected with elections.**
- o The new National Assembly must immediately set a date for prompt local elections so that municipal officials can be selected by the voters.**

Other Recent Helsinki Watch Reports on Bulgaria

News from Bulgaria, **March 1990**

Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Expulsion of the Bulgarian Turks, **October 1989 (66 pages)**

This edition of *News from Bulgaria* was written by Theodore Zang, Jr., staff counsel to Helsinki Watch and Laura B. Sherman, an attorney and consultant to Helsinki Watch. This edition is a publication of the U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, a non-governmental human rights organization founded in 1979 to monitor domestic and international compliance with the human rights provisions of the 1975 Helsinki accords. Its Chairman is Robert L. Bernstein; its Vice Chairmen are Jonathan Fanton and Alice H. Henkin; its Executive Director is Jeri Laber; its Counsel is Lois Whitman; its Research Director is Catherine Fitzpatrick; its Washington Representative is Catherine Cosman.

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