

@CHAPTER = BULGARIA

Due to the rapidly changing configuration of Eastern Europe, Bulgaria -- a country that has traditionally received little attention in Washington -- suddenly became one of the focal points of the Bush administration's foreign policy. The administration closely tracked human rights practices in Bulgaria, and frequently criticized the government for its human rights policies. Bulgaria was initially grouped with three other holdouts against change in the eastern bloc: Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Romania. The strongest criticism was reserved for Bulgaria's treatment of its Turkish minority, members of which were expelled by the thousands throughout May and June. Somewhat belatedly, the administration also focused on Bulgaria's persecution of a small core of human rights activists. In the latter part of the year, it became clear that these activists could attract significant domestic support and could eventually become an independent political force in Bulgaria. The U.S. embassy in Sofia deserves special praise for its diligent efforts to keep in touch with human rights activists despite persistent government efforts to isolate them. Now, when recent events in Bulgaria, including the removal of Party leader Zhukov, hold the promise of new freedoms and democracy for all Bulgarian citizens, the U.S. embassy and the administration should continue to be vigilant while encouraging the institutionalization of democratic freedoms through legislative reform.

On several occasions during the summer of 1989, the administration condemned Bulgaria's persecution of its Turkish minority. These Turks have faced a harsh assimilation campaign since 1984 intended to eradicate their cultural and religious identity. The campaign gained visibility in late May, when tens of thousands of Turks took to the streets in the northeastern and southeastern provinces to demonstrate against assimilation. Police and soldiers violently suppressed the demonstrations. Scores of Turks were reportedly killed and hundreds of others were injured. On May 24, several days after the first reports of the demonstrations appeared in the Western press, the State Department denounced Bulgaria's crackdown. In a brief statement, a spokesperson deplored Bulgaria's "blatant use of force in attempting to silence the long repressed ethnic Turkish minority." During the June Helsinki follow-up meeting on human rights -- part of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe ("CSCE") -- Ambassador Morris Abram and other U.S. delegates singled out Bulgaria for having one of the worst human rights records in the eastern bloc.

In the weeks that followed, reports of beatings, arrests and expulsions of Turks continued to reach the West. As Bulgaria forced thousands of Turks out of the country, the administration took a series of measures to express its disapproval. These measures seemed intended to send a warning signal to Bulgarian authorities, but did not disrupt relations in any significant fashion. The administration should have acted more forcefully in the wake of such large-scale repression; nevertheless, the United States was generally more critical of Bulgaria's policies than was any other Western democracy.

According to State Department sources, in a June 5 meeting with Bulgarian Ambassador Velichko Velichkov which had been requested by the Bulgarian embassy in Washington, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger raised U.S. concerns over the Turkish issue. The State Department also expressed its displeasure to the Bulgarian ambassador and other embassy officials on at least two other occasions in June. The same month, the State Department instructed the U.S. embassy in Sofia to make a formal inquiry into the treatment of ethnic Turks under the newly established CSCE mechanism for bilateral discussion of human rights violations.

The administration also gingerly used U.S. trade relations with Bulgaria to

gain leverage on the Turkish issue. On June 12, the State Department cancelled a series of official meetings that a deputy trade minister from Bulgaria was to have with Department officials. Although the administration deserves praise for this symbolic gesture, it is unclear why the meeting was scheduled in the first place, given Bulgaria's five-year-old policy of persecuting its Turks. Had the May demonstrations by the Turks not taken place and thrust the issue into the spotlight, it appears that the administration would have been willing to conduct business as usual.

On June 26, the White House issued a somewhat tardy though strongly worded statement on Bulgaria's treatment of the Turks. The statement noted that in the last month "over 60,000 people have either fled or been forcibly expelled from Bulgaria to Turkey -- many with nothing more than the clothes on their backs"; and it attributed the mass migration to "the Bulgarian Government's systematic denial of basic human rights to its Turkish minority." The White House went on: "We deplore Bulgaria's blatant violations of the human rights of its citizens, rights which Bulgaria has committed itself to protect as a signatory of the Helsinki accords and other international agreements. We urge the Government of Bulgaria to cease these violations and to allow for the orderly emigration of those ethnic Turks who desire to leave.

During July and August, tens of thousands of additional Turks were pressured to leave Bulgaria. As this occurred, the administration began to focus on ways in which to assist the refugees, most of whom were resettling in Turkey. On July 3, President Bush telephoned Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal to express his concern about the forced departures and reportedly offered economic assistance to Ozal to help resettle the new refugees. On August 11, after more than 250,000 Turks had fled Bulgaria, a State Department spokesperson called upon Bulgaria to "provide an orderly departure with dignity and personal property for those who wish to leave Bulgaria." A foreign aid bill, not yet enacted as of this writing, includes \$10 million in refugee assistance to Turkey to assist it in resettling the Bulgarian Turks.

When the number of refugees reached 310,000, the United States, on August 29, recalled its ambassador to Bulgaria, Sol Polansky, for consultations. This, the strongest reaction to date, was intended to register U.S. concern over the ongoing abuses. On the day the recall was announced, a State Department spokesman explained that the general worsening of repression against ethnic Turks rather than any specific incident led to the move.

In 1990, the administration should continue to protest the treatment of the ethnic Turks, but should also focus on human rights abuses against Bulgaria's Pomak minority. Although fewer in number than the Turks, the Pomaks are subjected to similar human rights abuses. Bulgarian Muslims, the Pomaks are generally denied the right to practice their religion or to use their Islamicized names. They are frequently harassed and persecuted by police and security forces. As of this writing, Pomaks who have requested passports have been denied them, even though under Bulgaria's new passport law any citizen (with certain well-defined exceptions) who applies for a passport has the right to obtain one. The administration should press the Bulgarian authorities to ensure that Pomak passport applications are processed in the same manner as applications from other citizens.

Until a CSCE meeting on the environment convened in Sofia in late October, the State Department paid insufficient public attention to the plight of a small but growing number of individuals who engaged in independent activities. Since January 1988, a number of independent groups have formed in Bulgaria to address such issues as human rights, the environment, religious freedom, and broader citizen participation in the political process. Members of these groups have

had to endure varying degrees of persecution, ranging from job dismissal or expulsion from the country to imprisonment. As we indicated in last year's report, we would like to see the administration condemn human rights violations against these individuals more forcefully and more openly, and as soon as it learns of them. We note that in August, a State Department spokesman said that the United States would "continue to seek every opportunity" to express its concern over the problems of "individual Bulgarian human rights activists." However, aside from several speeches made at various CSCE conferences, we are aware of no public statements until the October meeting that actually extended strong support to Bulgarian human rights activists; at most the administration gave the persecution of these activists only cursory mention. Finally, in October, after several human rights activists were reportedly threatened with criminal charges for meeting with delegates to the CSCE environmental conference, the head of the U.S. delegation, Richard Smith, told the forum:

"We are especially disturbed by reports that individuals have been harassed, threatened with expulsion and now may face criminal charges for their involvement in this gathering. We hope that these recent reports are not true and that Bulgarian citizens concerned with the environment -- or any other issue for that matter -- will be able to act upon their rights and freedoms this week and in the future.

We applaud the efforts of the U.S. embassy in Sofia to keep abreast of independent groups and their activities. During a fact-finding mission to Bulgaria, three representatives of Helsinki Watch were invited to a reception at Ambassador Polansky's residence to meet with a "Who's Who" of the independent movement in Bulgaria. In what should be a model program for other embassies, U.S. embassy staff members attend public events sponsored by independent groups to monitor the ability of these groups to engage in activities without harassment.