

NORTH MACEDONIA 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of North Macedonia is a parliamentary democracy. A popularly elected president is head of state and commander in chief of the armed forces. The unicameral parliament exercises legislative authority. Presidential elections were last held in 2019 and won by President Stevo Pendarovski. Parliamentary elections took place in July 2020 after a three-month delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In its July 2020 preliminary statement on the parliamentary elections and October 2020 final report, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights observed the elections were "generally administered effectively amid adjustments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but legal stability was undermined by substantial revisions to the electoral code and subsequent ad hoc regulations enacted during the state of emergency." The report characterized the elections as "genuinely competitive" despite politicians' limited ability to conduct outreach during the pandemic. Election day went smoothly.

The national police maintain internal security, including migration and border enforcement, and report to the Ministry of Interior. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were reports that members of the security forces committed abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: inhuman and degrading treatment and severe overcrowding in certain prison units; violence and threats of violence against journalists; serious government corruption; lack of accountability for gender-based and family violence; and crimes involving violence and threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons.

The government took steps to identify, investigate, prosecute, and punish officials who committed abuses or engaged in corruption.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

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

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

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

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

The constitution and laws prohibit such practices, but there were reports police abused detainees and prisoners and used excessive force. The government acted to investigate and prosecute legitimate claims. The Ministry of Interior's Professional Standards Unit (PSU) reported that during the first seven months of the year, it acted upon 30 complaints referring to use of excessive force by police officers. The unit deemed 16 of the complaints unfounded, dismissed 11 for insufficient evidence, and upheld three. In the latter three cases, the PSU filed criminal reports with the prosecutor's office against five police officers for "misconduct in the conduct of duty." The PSU ordered disciplinary procedures, seized the officers' weapons, and ordered them to undergo psychological and psychiatric evaluations. In one of the cases, on April 20, the PSU filed a criminal complaint against a police officer for excessive use of force during a sports event on March 26. The prosecutors indicted the officer, and on October 7, the court convicted him and administered a suspended six-month prison sentence and ban on carrying weapons. The Ministry of Interior reported the officer had returned to active duty but was reassigned to a position that did not require carrying a weapon.

As of August 25, the ombudsman had received 103 complaints against police alleging professional misconduct, especially by traffic police, and excessive use of force, an increase from 51 complaints received during the same period in 2021. In one case, a police officer from Kumanovo was convicted for a 2019 police

brutality case involving a woman who suffered bodily injuries and degrading treatment while being detained for suspicion of public intoxication. The ombudsman reported insufficient cooperation from the Ministry of Interior, especially regarding the increased number of citizen complaints regarding traffic police misconduct. According to the ombudsman, the ministry demonstrated bias in favor of police officers. As of August 20, an Organized Crime and Corruption Prosecutor's Office investigation against one police officer for unlawful arrest was pending. The office investigated another 70 police officers and prison guards for misconduct and indicted 12 defendants in eight separate cases. As of August 29, the office obtained convictions against five officers and levied fines against another two.

Impunity was not a significant problem in the security forces.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

In some locations, prison conditions were harsh due to severe overcrowding, food shortages, and inadequate sanitary conditions. Certain larger prison wards remained severely overcrowded, and the overall prison system remained understaffed, corrupt, and exposed inmates to inhuman and degrading conditions. Certain prisons struggled to provide basic health and educational support services or access to adequate food and clean water.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Overcrowding remained an issue, particularly in some wards of the Idrizovo prison, the country's largest facility. Some cells at Idrizovo had 16 to 19 inmates. The ombudsman report noted poor conditions in most of the other prisons, and overall lack of funding and understaffing of the corrections system. Access to potable water and sanitation remained a problem at the Kumanovo prison. By law all prisons are operated directly by the government. The ombudsman reported insufficient health care due to lack of medical staff and medications. Only five of 11 prisons have a full-time doctor available.

Juveniles faced a lack of educational and job skills training as well as overmedication, while there was inadequate accommodation of juvenile girls ages 14 to 16. Data showed as many as 58 percent of incarcerated juveniles were diagnosed with mental health issues.

A report from the European Committee for Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) report noted poor management, endemic corruption among prison staff, interprisoner violence, inadequate health care, and poor living conditions (particularly at Idrizovo). The report found advanced deterioration (crumbling walls, broken window frames and furniture, dangerous improvised electric wiring, holes in the floor and ceiling) and squalid hygiene (vermin infestation, piles of uncollected garbage in cells, and water penetration). The report also said prisoners remained confined in their cells for more than 23 hours per day with no activity apart from 30 to 45 minutes per day in courtyards lacking gym equipment.

Findings by the Helsinki Human Rights Committee and the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) at Idrizovo concurred with the ombudsman and the CPT and added that inmates in the high-security ward kept knives in their rooms, reportedly justified by the absence of an assigned dining area.

During the year (DES) reported 10 persons died in custody as of August 20. DES said nine of the deaths occurred following prolonged periods of ill health and one from COVID-19.

The Ministry of Justice's Directorate for Execution of Sanctions (DES) reported lack of staff as the second-largest problem after prison overcrowding, due to retirements and resignations. The Ministry of Finance did not approve DES' additional staffing request and did not allow DES to backfill positions left vacant due to retirements or voluntary departures.

The ombudsman noted, in general, authorities accepted his prison improvement recommendations but did not take sufficient action to duly implement them.

Administration: Authorities conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment, including those referred by the ombudsman. As of August 20, DES had received 94 notifications of the use of force against inmates by prison police. In all cases, the department found the officers acted in accordance with standard operating procedures. There was one case of excessive use of force against a prison guard under preliminary investigation by the Organized Crime and Corruption Prosecutor's Office.

Independent Monitoring: The law allows physicians, diplomatic representatives, and representatives from the CPT and the International Committee of the Red Cross access to pretrial detainees with the approval of the investigative judge. The government granted the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and MYLA unrestricted access to convicted prisoners. The ombudsman visited the country's prisons monthly and had full and unimpeded access to all prisons and detention facilities.

Improvements: DES reported significant renovations of accommodation, sanitation, medical assistance, recreation, rehabilitation, and energy supply facilities; improved safety features with state budget funds in Idrizovo, Skopje Shutka, Strumica, and Struga prisons, as well as improvements in the Stip and Prilep prisons. Gevgelija prison acquired a tractor for agricultural work engagement on a large land parcel owned by the facility.

The domestic external oversight mechanism led to greater prevention and sanctioning of prison staff misconduct including verdicts in misconduct cases.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court, as well as to receive compensation for unlawful detention. The government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law requires that a judge issue warrants for arrest and detention of suspects based on evidence, and police generally followed this requirement. The law prohibits police from interrogating suspects without informing them of their status and their rights and enabling them to obtain a lawyer. The law states prosecutors must arraign a detainee within 24 hours of arrest. A pretrial procedure judge, at the request of a prosecutor, may order detention of suspects for up to 72 hours before arraignment. Police generally adhered to these procedures. Authorities generally informed detainees promptly of the charges against them. Detention prior to indictment may last a maximum of 180 days. Following indictment, pretrial detention may last a maximum of two years.

There is a functioning bail system. In addition to bail, the law allows the substitution of pretrial detention with house arrest or other measures for securing defendants' presence at trial. Common measures include passport seizure, a prohibition on leaving one's place of residence, and an obligation to report to the court on a weekly basis.

The law allows defendants to communicate with an attorney of their choice, but defendants sometimes complained authorities did not provide sufficient time to consult with an attorney prior to arraignment.

The law provides advisory deadlines to avoid protracted criminal proceedings. Prosecutors should generally complete investigations within six months, although these deadlines can be extended to 12 months in more complex cases and 18 months in organized crime cases with a supervisor's consent. In practice, prosecutors sometimes exceeded those deadlines, citing lack of adequate resources or case complexity.

A June 24 report from the ombudsman showed only 5 percent of arrested, and no more than 15 percent of detained, persons used their right to a state-paid, court-appointed lawyer. The report said low education and socioeconomic status of the arrested and detained persons appeared to be leading reasons, plus not receiving timely and accurate advice from police. The ombudsman said police stations did not have any, or only outdated, rosters of government-paid, court-approved lawyers. The ombudsman reported the country overall lacks adequate legal and practical mechanisms to enable timely and efficient access to legal representation for indigent persons.

The PSU conducted all internal investigations into allegations of other forms of police misconduct. The unit has authority to impose administrative sanctions, such as temporary suspension from work, during its investigations. The unit may not take disciplinary measures, which require a ruling from a disciplinary commission, nor may it impose more serious criminal sanctions, which require prosecutorial action, but it may refer cases as appropriate.

Judges usually granted permission for attorneys to visit their clients in detention. Authorities did not practice incommunicado detention.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for autonomous and independent courts, but the government did not always respect judicial independence and impartiality. Instances of judicial misconduct, undue political and business pressure on judges, protracted justice, as well as inadequate funding and staffing of the judiciary continued to hamper court effectiveness and affected public confidence in the rule of law.

According to the Judicial Council, extremely low public confidence in the judiciary was due to significant judicial corruption; judges intentionally delaying trials or appellate review to enable the statute of limitations to take effect, especially in high-profile cases involving wealthy and influential businessmen or politicians; judges perceived as collaborating with defense attorneys for bribes or trading with influence; and conflict of interest combined with nepotism. The council said prosecutors showed professional misconduct and corruption via lax prosecutions and intentional over- or undercharging not supported by evidence.

Civil society and media reported on public frustration regarding an inequal justice system with impunity for those with money and connections. Jordan “Orce” Kamcev, once named by *Forbes* magazine in 2016 as the country’s richest individual, was released from Struga low-security prison on November 6 after serving a total of 14 months despite multiple sentences for corruption crimes. According to media, Kamcev secured his release from the prison after the court commuted his two one-year prison sentences and time served in preconviction detention.

The courts operated with significant delays, especially in high-profile corruption and multidefendant cases. The judiciary and the Public Prosecutor’s Office remained underfunded and understaffed, despite a slight increase in funding levels. As of August 30, the Supreme Court operated with only 15 of 28 justices.

As of August 18, the Judicial Council had received 302 citizen complaints alleging problems in judicial proceedings. The allegations involved biased or unethical conduct, procedural errors, recusals, and missed deadlines. As of August 18, the Judicial Council had not received any complaints by judges alleging threats or

case-related pressure.

As of August 30, the ombudsman had registered 13 citizen complaints requesting intervention in pending court cases. The complaints alleged violations of the right to trial in reasonable time; due process violations, including the right to fair trial; defense, i.e., equality of arms; the right to trial before an independent and impartial court; and denial of access to effective legal recourse. Several simply expressed discontent with case outcome. Upon review of the complaints, the ombudsman's office filed two motions with Civil Court Skopje requesting permission to appear in *amicus curiae* capacity in two cases pending before this court. The court's response was pending as of August 30. The review of the remaining complaints was pending as of August 31.

In April the Judicial Council President announced the launch of a new performance evaluation methodology for judge promotions. The June 30 entry into effect of the labor law amendments, which reduced the mandatory retirement age from 67 to 64, prompted the retirement of 50 judges of all levels as of August 20. As of August 30, the Academy for Judges and Prosecutors was in the final training stage for 30 candidates for judicial positions, who were expected to become eligible for junior appointments in late fall.

As of August 19, the Judicial Council dismissed five judges for unprofessional or reckless conduct. Of those, one was a Supreme Court justice, two were Appellate Court, and two were trial courts judges.

On November 29, Judicial Council President Pavlina Crvenkovska submitted her resignation from the president's position, citing a continuous smear campaign in the media against her, orchestrated by a group of judicial-business elite.

On December 19, the Judicial Council ordered an ad hoc review of Skopje Appellate Court judges for potential misconduct over significant delays in ruling on appeals in several high-profile corruption, illegal wiretapping, and misuse of public funds cases stemming from the 2008-15 illegal wiretaps. According to citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs) and legal analysts, the justice system was biased in favor of more wealthy defendants. According to a December poll by the International Republican Institute, only 4 percent of public respondents had full

confidence in the justice system, the lowest level of trust measured since the country's independence.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right.

Defendants sometimes complained of lack of adequate time and facilities to prepare their defense. Citizens continued to complain of insufficient civil enforcement practices, resulting in violations of citizens' rights.

In reaction to public outcry over lack of judicial transparency, on December 27, the Supreme Court issued a legal position advising the lower courts to publish not only final but also nonfinal judgments, especially in cases of public interest. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, courts continued to operate with delays.

For certain criminal and civil cases, there are judicial panels of three to five individuals, led by a professional judge. Lay judges assist in all cases where defendants face potential prison sentences of more than five years. Their involvement in cases created problems, particularly in cases of resignation or retirement. The retirements led to trials restarting, many of which were in advanced stages, and some of which involved alleged high corruption. High-profile trials and their appellate reviews were often prolonged on various procedural, health-related, or unexplained grounds. There were instances of courts delaying trials without sanctioning defendants who failed to appear in court without prior notification.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens had access to courts to submit lawsuits seeking damages for human rights violations. Individuals may file human rights cases in the criminal, civil, or administrative courts, and in the Constitutional Court, depending upon the type of human rights violation in question and its alleged perpetrator. Individuals may

appeal adverse decisions. The law provides the right to timely adjudication of cases and a legal basis to appeal excessive judicial delays to the Supreme Court. Individuals may appeal cases involving alleged state violations to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) after exhausting all domestic legal options. The government generally complied with ECHR decisions, but legal and factual impediments adversely affected timely and effective enforcement. Backlogs in some courts, especially at the Skopje Appellate Court, persisted, reportedly due to a shortage of judges and lay judges. Protracted trials and appellate reviews increased the risk the of statute of limitations making cases obsolete.

According to the ombudsman, 436 of the more than 3,000 human rights complaints citizens filed during the year concerned proceedings before the courts and enforcement agents.

Property Seizure and Restitution

The government has no specific laws or mechanisms in place related to the resolution of Holocaust-era claims by foreign citizens, but citizens may still seek property restitution via civil proceedings. The government made significant progress on resolving Holocaust-era claims, including for foreign citizens. In February the President of the Jewish Community expressed his satisfaction with the restitution of Jewish property. Advocacy groups reported a small number of foreign citizens still sought restitution. Foreign citizens may apply for restitution in civil proceedings.

In May the government allocated approximately \$6.1 million in bonds to compensate citizens whose denationalization claims were approved in 2021.

Despite progress in religious property restitution, religious communities complained of slow court proceedings. The Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia (IRC) continued to claim the government failed to provide appropriate and timely restitution for property seized during the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, often alleging this was due to the high value of objects taken. Among the disputed property was the Husamedin Pasha Mosque in Shtip that was nationalized in 1955. The IRC claimed the government prevented it from regaining rightful ownership of the mosque complex. The

ownership of the Harabati Baba Teqe compound in Tetovo – the seat of the unregistered Bektashi Community (Tetovo), which in February celebrated 484 years since its establishment – continued to be disputed.

The ombudsman noted major difficulties and procedural oversights in denationalization cases and ascribed delays to lax work by the Ministry of Finance’s denationalization commission, as well as ineffective collaboration with the Administrative Court and other government agencies. The 2000 Denationalization Law stipulated the denationalization procedure as “urgent” in nature.

Members of 36 families in Ohrid staged a protest in April, claiming authorities had failed to properly compensate them for land parcels nationalized by the state in 1957.

The Department of State’s *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act* report to Congress, released in 2020, can be found on the Department’s website: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

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

The constitution and the law prohibit such actions, and there were no reports that the government failed to respect those prohibitions. The law prohibits the possession, processing, and publishing of any content, including wiretapped conversations, that violates the right to privacy involving personal or family life. Although there was a Council for Civilian Oversight of Wiretapping, it was still not functional as of September 14.

On December 16, the Skopje Appellate Court announced it overturned the 12-year prison sentence against the former Administration for Counterintelligence and Security director Sasho Mijalkov and another six of his former associates in the former Special Prosecutor’s Office-initiated “Target-Fortress” trial for orchestrating and conducting massive illegal wiretapping of approximately 20,000 persons between 2008 and 2015. The appellate court ruling, pending before the court for more than 18 months, cited substantive errors in law in the court of first

instance verdict and remanded the case to the Skopje Criminal Court.

Also, on November 25, the Skopje Appellate Court announced it overturned the April 2021 eight-year prison conviction against Mijalkov and three of his former associates in the “Treasury” trial initiated by the Special Prosecutor’s Office, and remanded the case to the Skopje Criminal Court. This appellate ruling came 18 months after the Skopje Criminal Court convicted Mijalkov and his associates of a \$900,000 fraudulent scheme involving the procurement of wiretapping equipment for the Ministry of Interior in 2010 from a United Kingdom-based company.

According to legal experts, the appellate court’s delays in ruling on both appeals increased the risk of statute of limitations taking effect on some of the charges during retrial and undermined public trust and expectations for accountability for the massive illegal wiretapping scandal.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right.

According to the Association of Journalists of (North) Macedonia (AJM); however, the government demonstrated a lack of capacity to effectively sanction violations of journalists’ rights and protect their safety. In November the Skopje Public Prosecutor’s Office (PPO) confirmed it had appointed a prosecutor to serve as a contact person in connection with cases involving journalists and monitor cases in which journalists appear as the damaged parties, witnesses, or offenders.

Freedom of Expression: The law prohibits speech inciting national, religious, or ethnic hatred and provides penalties for violations. Individuals may criticize the government publicly or privately.

On November 17, parliament unanimously adopted the Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, which introduced significant reduction to fines for media outlets, and journalists in defamation lawsuits.

Media outlets and reporting continued to be largely divided along political lines, but the number of independent media actively expressing a variety of views without overt restrictions continued to increase. Laws restricting speech inciting national, religious, or ethnic hatred also cover print and broadcast media, publication of books, and online newspapers and journals. The Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination and CSOs reported a significant surge in “hate speech,” including in social and some traditional media.

On April 5, the ECHR ruled in favor of *Fokus* weekly newspaper editor Jadranka Kostova and journalist Vlado Apostolov’s 2016 application alleging violation of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The ECHR found the domestic civil courts violated the journalists’ right to freedom of expression in a 2014 defamation case won by the then director of the Administration for Security and Counterintelligence, Sasho Mijalkov.

Central government advertising on commercial channels is banned, but local government advertising is not. The state continued to subsidize print media. In December 2021, following an open call, the government allocated approximately 33,000,00 denar (\$570,000) to 11 print media outlets to cover part of the 2021 printing and distribution expenses.

The Media Ethics Council continued to work on promoting self-regulation. As of August 16, the council had received 48 complaints of unethical reporting and fake news, which was 50 percent lower than the number received in the same period in 2021. Nearly 63 percent of the complaints were related to unethical reporting, with approximately 17 percent for editorializing and 6 percent for hate speech.

Seasoned journalists and media leaders expressed concerns regarding intensifying Russian malign influence and disinformation, primarily through the growing presence of Serbian media in the country.

Violence and Harassment: There were cases of alleged threats and harassment against journalists during the year.

On October 25, masked men violently attacked blogger Zoran Bozinovski in front of his home in Bitola. Bozinovski, well-known for his blog *Burevesnik*, which focused on high-level corruption and political scandals, was left with an injured

nose, a swollen eye, and head injuries. As of October 31, the identity of the attackers was not known.

As of August 15, the AJM had received eight complaints from journalists, including police summoning journalists to “informative interviews,” preventing journalists from carrying out their duties, threats and insults received while on duty, and inappropriate conduct of central and local government officials or political party members. On May 16, police summoned a journalist to an “informative interview,” reportedly acting upon a complaint filed by a Ministry of Justice official who was implicated in the piece. The AJM, the Independent Union of Journalists, and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights condemned the case and requested appropriate action from authorities. The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice opened internal investigations concerning the conduct of the involved officers and the official who filed the complaint. In late July, however, the Ministry of Justice dismissed the disciplinary review, citing lack of grounds.

As of August 15, the PPO reported receiving three criminal complaints involving journalists. One case involving threats on Twitter was dismissed after the account disappeared; one case resulted in a conviction with a suspended sentence for a person attempting a physical attack with an axe against a journalist; the third case resulted in a written police warning about threatening journalists.

According to the Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analytics September survey, 80 percent of surveyed women journalists were often the target of online harassment, including threats and online bullying. In most instances, the harassment was related to stories published by those journalists.

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.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and the law provide for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

c. Freedom of Religion

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

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these related rights.

A “state of crisis,” imposed in August 2015, continued in force for border areas adjacent to Greece and Serbia. It had been extended by parliament every six months, most recently on June 29. The state of crisis was scheduled to remain in effect until December 31. The state of crisis allows the government additional authorities to regulate the entry and transit of migrants and deploy additional resources as needed, including military forces.

According to a report by MYLA, the number of irregular migrants held in the transit centers had grown each year since 2019. Unaccompanied children on average spent 29 days at the Vinojug transit center. While at the transit center, they received medical assistance and language and art classes in an improvised classroom. An April 2022 media report, however, cited dilapidated and inhuman conditions specifically at Vinojug.

A total of 1,924 persons were temporarily accommodated in transit centers in the first eight months of the year. As of August 31, 36 migrants remained in the country's two border transit centers of the 16,709 individuals identified as irregularly transiting the country between January 1 and August 12.

In-country Movement: According to the ombudsman, the Ministry of Interior made arbitrary decisions to restrict freedom of movement, including in cases involving unaccompanied minors. The ombudsman said the practice of arbitrary detentions in the Vinojug transit center continued, without individual decisions issued to the detainees providing case-specific elaboration on detention grounds, period of detention, and instructions about their rights. The ombudsman did not report any complaints to his office alleging restricted freedom of movement.

There were no in-country movement restrictions for residents, nor for any person under the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), although the lack of personal identification documents (such as an identification card, birth certificate, etc.) by stateless persons often made them unable to exercise their right to freedom of movement.

Migrants did not have freedom of movement while in the transit centers or the reception center for smuggled foreigners, nor was a formal removal or readmission procedure established. MYLA noted a lack of safeguards for review of asylum applications de facto constituted restrictions to freedom of movement, especially when foreign migrants were placed in detention centers. MYLA noted the law empowered administrative rather than judicial authorities to effectuate those restrictions, thereby seriously undermining migrants' and asylum seekers' freedom of movement.

Foreign Travel: Issuance of Convention Travel Documents to those granted refugee status and Travel Documents to persons granted subsidiary protection are regulated by law; however, these documents were not machine-readable and therefore not compliant with International Civil Aviation Organization standards. The UNHCR office in Skopje, however, did not report any instances of holders of such documents being unable to travel outside of the country.

Citizenship: Several resident ethnic Albanians' citizenship applications were pending resolution. An estimated 750 Roma were still assumed to be noncitizens, despite persistent efforts of the state to regulate their status, according to CSOs. According to the Ministry of Interior, citizenship requests of 2,657 long-term residents were still being reviewed by the Agency for National Security. The majority of these were unable to obtain citizenship in the period following the country's independence from the former Yugoslavia, due to lack of awareness of relevant bureaucratic processes, or because they were deemed a threat to national security – until recently a discretionary right of the Minister of Interior.

The ombudsman monitors the implementation of the Law on Citizenship, including amendments adopted in July designed to facilitate granting citizenship to undocumented persons who were residents in the country before its independence in 1991. The ombudsman did not report receiving any complaints during the year

alleging unjustified delays in citizenship applications.

In May ethnic Albanian opposition parties criticized the slow progress in the implementation of the Law on Citizenship. They alleged the Ministry of Interior delayed review of citizenship applications beyond the legally set six-month deadline and requested applicants to submit additional documents not required by the law. The law was amended in July 2021 to provide long-time residents additional avenues to obtain citizenship, after ethnic Albanian opposition parties claimed more than 7,000 ethnic Albanians resident in the country had been unjustly denied the right to citizenship.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

The Center for Social Work appointed guardians to detained unaccompanied children in the transit centers but took no additional measures for alternative accommodation or any other specific child protection measures.

The government issued identity documents to recognized refugees and persons under subsidiary protection, but authorities frequently delayed issuance of identity documents to new asylum seekers. Once issued, these identity documents often did not contain a personal identification number, which in turn limited individuals' access to several government services, including education and social welfare programs.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. All persons granted international protection have access to the same social protection services as nationals, but integration was a challenge in absence of a coherent approach.

UNHCR assessed asylum processes continued to improve, and previous concerns regarding a practice of arbitrarily denying access to asylum seekers had been

addressed. UNHCR reported, however, that the mechanism for adjudicating refugee status failed to provide basic procedural guarantees and proper determinations as prescribed in the law.

As of September, MYLA recorded 94 asylum seekers, but none was granted a refugee status or subsidiary protection status. All asylum requests registered in the country were processed through the Reception Center for Foreigners.

The country's legal framework provides for procedural safeguards and review during the asylum procedure. MYLA noted, however, a lack of safeguards for seeking protection, as well as unlawful practice of returning (pushbacks) migrants to neighboring countries outside of formal procedure. The country did not send back any migrants to countries with inadequate protections, only to neighboring countries. Lack of access to territory and asylum procedures hindered refugees' use of legal remedies to challenge the lawfulness of the action.

There were several disputes concerning the application of some safeguards, including at the judicial level. For instance, although legally permissible, in practice the court continued to refuse all hearing requests made by asylum seekers. In similar fashion, the administrative courts continued to avoid ruling on the merits of asylum applications, despite having the requisite authority. Instead, they routinely returned cases to the Ministry of Interior for further review, which resulted in the ministry endorsing its initial decisions.

UNHCR and partner organizations had limited access to migrants accommodated in the two temporary transit centers close to the border. Protection information was not always made available to individuals in the centers. The 2022 European Commission Report noted lack of proper protection-sensitive profiling and referral to national protection mechanisms of all persons identified as needing international protection or having other protection. On April 5, the ECHR ruled that North Macedonia did not violate the human rights of five Syrian, two Iraqi, and one Afghan national by ordering their immediate return to Greece after they illegally crossed into North Macedonia in 2016, as part of larger groups.

Safe Country of Origin/Transit: UNHCR noted that, based on the absence of Kosovo on North Macedonia's list of safe countries of origin, the subsidiary

protection for individuals who fled Kosovo would be terminated by authorities, with those remaining only “tolerated” in the country and left in legal limbo with no access to any fundamental rights.

Refoulement: As of September 10, UNHCR recorded no instances of inappropriate pressure or forceful returns of asylum seekers or refugees to unsafe countries. Nonetheless, MYLA reported instances of authorities returning migrants to the neighboring countries from where they entered (mostly Greece, sometimes Serbia) without any formal legal process or proper assessment of their needs. In the first six months of the year, MYLA recorded 10,728 cases of returns outside of the formal procedures. Most migrants volunteered to return to Greece, but some, reportedly, were forced to return against their will, and without due process.

Abuse of Migrants and Refugees: A 2022 European Commission report noted that, while the country played a constructive role in the management of mixed migration flows, the contingency plan to manage large migratory flows was not yet in place. The report noted that lack of proper protection-sensitive profiling and referral to national protection mechanisms of all persons identified as needing international protection or having other protection needs remained a concern, and it recommended registration of migrants to be carried out in a systematic manner and to improve protection-sensitive profiling needs. The report reiterated that those in irregular movement remained the target of organized criminal groups engaged in smuggling of migrants, who were subjected to extortion and various forms of abuse. UNHCR reported incidents of smugglers using violence against migrants and others with whom they were traveling. There were also reports of border guards acting violently toward migrants.

A multisector system and standard operating procedures were in place to provide protection to vulnerable individuals from gender-based violence, including procedures for processing vulnerable categories of foreign nationals, dealing with unaccompanied and separated children, and providing treatment to victims of trafficking. There were reports of sexual and gender-based violence against migrants, allegedly by smugglers and, in some instances, border guards at transit crossings. UNHCR and the European Commission noted the system needed strengthening to ensure universal and systemic application of the procedures,

especially regarding case identification.

Freedom of Movement: According to UNHCR, authorities continued to detain individuals intercepted while traveling through the country without documentation. The grounds for detention decisions were often arbitrary. As a rule, individuals are supposed to be detained only until their identity can be established. They were routinely detained after identification, however, to prevent them from departing the country prior to providing legal testimony against their smugglers. The average detention period of asylum seekers during the year was 15 days.

As of mid-August, there were 295 Afghan evacuees and 3,316 Ukrainians in the country. The government issued Afghans temporary, one-year visitor permits. Their movement outside of designated hotels in Skopje, however, was limited by the government for security reasons. Ukrainian refugees did not have similar movement restrictions.

Employment: There are no restrictions on refugees' ability to work, and the law allows asylum seekers whose asylum procedure is not completed within nine months to apply for a work permit. Recognized refugees and persons under subsidiary protection with work permits were able to access the active labor market.

Nonetheless, refugees faced practical difficulties, such as language barriers and a lack of procedures for recognizing skills or validating foreign diplomas. By law a foreigner needs to have a unique identification number assigned to be issued a work permit. Although asylum seekers have the legal right to apply for a work permit nine months after applying for asylum, they have no right to be assigned a unique identification number until asylum is granted. Consequently, an asylum seeker has the right to work but is unable to exercise it. Cases sometimes remain pending for two to three years. Effective access to sufficient work enabling self-reliance remained difficult.

Durable Solutions: The law provides for naturalization of refugees residing in the country under preferred conditions. Individuals under subsidiary protection may naturalize after eight years of legally residing in the country.

According to MYLA, more than 100 refugees or persons under subsidiary

protection had thus far applied to be naturalized. As of August, five refugees or persons under subsidiary protection applied and three were granted citizenship.

UNHCR continued to assist rejected asylum seekers from Kosovo whom the government allowed to stay in the country. The government issued them provisional identification documents to secure access to services. One refugee from Kosovo was naturalized and two of the approximately 200 individuals who remained in the country from the 1999 conflict in Kosovo returned to Kosovo with UNHCR assistance.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (hereafter Ministry of Labor) provided integrated, durable solutions with the support of UNHCR for 138 refugees who applied for integration into the country. The ministry provided social assistance, housing assistance, and access to education, health care, and the labor market. An additional 85 persons continued to receive social assistance, housing assistance, and access to education, health, and support to access the labor market.

Temporary Protection: The government can provide subsidiary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees. The state provided temporary visitor permits to more than 750 Afghan evacuees. None had been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection status because no one had yet applied for such status.

In March the government decided to accept Ukrainian citizens forced to leave their country due to Russia's unprovoked reinvasion. Ukrainian citizens are issued temporary residence for humanitarian reasons. As of mid-August, approximately 346 persons had been issued such residence.

According to UNHCR, as of December 386 Ukrainians individuals had been approved for a one-year stay in the country for humanitarian reasons. They did not have automatic access to rights. According to reports, there were an estimated 4,000 Ukrainians in the country who had taken advantage of the visa-free regime between the two countries. From February 24 to December 26, there were 27,786 entries and 21,464 exits of Ukrainian citizens registered. Most of those individuals stayed the legally allowed 90 days in the country but without a designated protection status or right to work.

The country also hosted nine persons from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and the DRC

with subsidiary protection status.

f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Despite having no national policy document specific to internally displaced persons (IDPs), the government generally observed the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Only six persons registered as IDPs, according to the State Election Commission's July 2020 voters' list, although the full report of the 2021 census was not available at year's end.

The government supports the safe, voluntary return, resettlement, or local integration of IDPs in line with its Social Protection Plan. The government did not deny any humanitarian or international organizations access to IDPs. Permanent housing remained a problem for IDPs, although the government covered their monthly rent.

g. Stateless Persons

The country lacks a comprehensive, official data collection system and statistics on the number of stateless persons in its territory. The absence of a formal statelessness determination procedure hindered effective determination whether those persons are de jure stateless or may hold citizenship of another country formerly part of Yugoslavia.

UNHCR registered 519 persons with undetermined citizenship or without birth/civil registration documents. According to consolidated statistics from the government, UNHCR, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), there were 238 persons registered as habitual residents with undetermined nationality and at risk of statelessness, residing in the country since the dissolution of former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991.

According to the Ministry of Labor, approximately 584 persons remained de jure legally stateless since they lacked birth or personal name registration documents. Children born in the country to stateless persons have access to birth registration and certification. They are considered nationals, provided they reside legally or permanently in the country for at least six years. Barriers to universal birth and civil registration continued to disproportionately affect minority groups, including

Roma, Ashkali, and Balkan-Egyptians.

Implementation of the 2020 Law on Persons Unregistered at the Birth Registry continued to lag. Of the estimated 732 Roma without identity documents, 320 applicants had received birth certificates and 115 had obtained temporary identity documents as of August 15. The inability to collect all required documents due to complex administration, discrimination, poverty, and overall marginalization of Roma impeded obtaining birth registration documents and regulating their civil status. The temporary personal documents those persons were issued pending full registration impeded access to government-paid health care and exercise of their right to social protection, education, and employment. Systemic problems with government databases hindered inclusion of those persons due to the specific identification number. The design of temporary identity documents exposed persons to stereotypes and discrimination before various institutions' administrative officials. The Ministry of Labor believed most individuals lacking both civil registration and documentation were Romani children at risk of statelessness.

In mid-September following a 12-year legal battle, Valentin Rakip, age 20, born and raised in North Macedonia, officially became a citizen after managing to get a birth certificate in 2017. For 12 years, Rakip struggled to get access to basic rights, including education, health care, employment, or freedom of movement outside the country. The legal limbo that left Rakip without citizenship was because his mother, a Serbian national, did not register him or his siblings' births, and his father, a citizen of North Macedonia, did not acknowledge paternity.

Stateless persons could not benefit from legal employment and did not have access to the courts or governmental services. There were no reports of physical violence against stateless persons because of their lack of identity documents, but they were not able to access rights for which an identity document and a personal identification number are required (e.g., health insurance, education, social assistance, etc.). According to the Ministry of Health, stateless persons with any kind of identity document had access to the COVID-19 vaccine.

The citizenship law does not discriminate on any grounds and provides safeguards in case of voluntary renunciation. Nonetheless, cumbersome and complex

administrative procedures on delayed birth registration remained one of the main causes of statelessness in the country. Access to birth registration and civil registration documents remained highly bureaucratic, costly, and insensitive to the specific needs of undocumented persons. Advocacy groups said the legal framework was ambiguous regarding required evidence for civil and late-birth registration, leaving decisions to the arbitrary discretion of civil servants.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Early parliamentary elections were held in 2020. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) report on the elections concluded, “The early parliamentary elections were generally administered effectively amid adjustments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but legal stability was undermined by substantial revisions to the Electoral Code and subsequent ad hoc regulations enacted during the state of emergency.” The report also noted, “The campaign, although negative in tone, was genuinely competitive and participants could deliver their messages despite limitations on traditional outreach” and “election day proceeded smoothly, despite technical challenges in publishing results and concerns related to voter registration.” A popular election for president was held in two rounds in 2019. The OSCE/ODIHR report after the second round of elections concluded, “in the well administered...presidential election, continued respect for fundamental freedoms allowed voters to make an informed choice between candidates.” The report also noted shortcomings in campaign rules reflected broader deficiencies in the electoral law, and the transparency of campaign finance was lacking due to incomplete reporting.

Political Parties and Political Participation: There were few restrictions on forming or joining political parties, which were subject to the same laws as ordinary citizens. While membership in a political party was not mandatory, there was an active patronage system in the country through which parties conferred

special benefits and advantages to their members. The primary opposition VMRO-DPMNE party accused the government of continuing these practices, alleging party membership overrode educational and professional qualifications prescribed by law for public administration positions. Political party finance lacked transparency, according to credible CSOs and State Audit Office reports.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit the participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. The law requires gender diversity in each political party's candidate list for parliamentary and municipal elections; at least 40 percent of a party's candidates must be of the lesser-represented gender. As of August 31, a total of 49 of the 120 (40.83 percent) members of parliament were women, and four women served as ministers in the prime minister's 20-member cabinet. Two of the 81 mayors were women.

Members of smaller ethnic minority groups continued to complain of inequitable representation within government and discriminatory practices that excluded them from political participation. As of August 31, there were 32 ethnic Albanian members of parliament, including the speaker of parliament, and two Bosniaks, two Serbs, three Turkish, one Romani, one Vlach, and one Jew. These numbers generally reflected the country's diversity, but the ombudsman reported Roma remained underrepresented in public administration. The ombudsman reported improvement in the equitable representation of minority ethnic communities in public administration but not at the managerial level. The exceptions were ethnic Albanians, the largest nonmajority community, who participated in the government at the ministerial level.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for conviction of corruption by officials. The government generally implemented the law, but there were significant reports of officials engaging in corruption. The government was the country's largest employer, and NGOs stated the government's dominant role in the economy created opportunities for corruption. Public polling consistently cited corruption as

one of the top concerns for citizens.

Corruption: As of August 15, the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) received 357 complaints alleging corruption, primarily concerning public institutions' disposition with properties, public procurement, the cadaster office, the judiciary, and the health sector. The SCPC reviewed another 11 cases on its own initiative. Based on its review, SCPC filed 10 motions with the PPO requesting criminal prosecution for alleged misuse of public funds against former and current central and local government officials, including five sitting mayors. The motions were pending review before the PPO as of August 31.

The SCPC separately filed requests with the government, the Agency for Agriculture Development, and the Ministry of Defense recommending disciplinary, misdemeanor or criminal charges against at least eight mid- and senior-level government officials for four separate instances of violations of the government ethics code, the Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest, and the Crimes Code. The request to the Agency for Agriculture Development was dismissed due to the statute of limitations taking effect, and the remaining were pending review.

The SCPC issued 365 misdemeanor fines against public-sector officials and senior-level employees, including for failing to submit mandatory financial statements and failing to report public-sector employment of relatives. Of those, 220 paid their fines within the deadlines, and the rest were subject to collection procedures. Seven requests the SCPC filed in 2021 requesting criminal prosecution of local and central government officials were pending before the PPO in various stages of review as of August 31.

Numerous trials involving serious corruption continued or were concluded, including against former government officials.

On June 8, the Skopje Criminal Court sentenced in absentia the former Prime Minister and former VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski to six years in prison for abuse of power through illegal use of funds for construction of VMRO-DPMNE's headquarters. The court found that between July 2012 and August 2016, Gruevski and an associate used their official positions to illegally finance

and build new party headquarters, pocketing \$2.4 million in the process. The court issued an order to confiscate VMRO-DPMNE's Skopje headquarters and 30 party offices across the country. Gruevski was also convicted in absentia in two additional cases that included fraud, money laundering, and abuse of official position.

In July Sasho Mijalkov (VMRO-DPMNE), was issued a three-year prison sentence based on a guilty plea for criminal conspiracy and illegally acquired wealth. Mijalkov began serving a three-year prison sentence in August at a low-security "open prison." Mijalkov changed his legal residency to allow him to serve time at the open prison. Jordan "Orce" Kamcev, a former associate of Mijalkov, also changed his residence to serve his sentence at the same open prison. The Ministry of Justice established a working group to draft amendments to the Law on Execution of Sanctions to prevent future instances of what has become known as "prison tourism."

Section 5. Governmental Posture Toward International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The ombudsman and the Commission for Prevention of and Protection against Discrimination (also known as the Antidiscrimination Commission) worked to protect citizens from infringement of their rights by public institutions, reduce discrimination against minority communities and persons with disabilities, promote equitable representation in public life, and address abuses of children's rights.

As of August 31, the Antidiscrimination Commission received 128 complaints. The commission found discrimination in 29 cases, most of intersectional discrimination. The public perceived the commission as independent and its operations efficient and complementary to the ombudsman's work

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: Rape of a person, regardless of gender, including spousal rape, is illegal but laws were poorly enforced. Penalties for rape range from one to 15 years' imprisonment. Domestic violence is illegal but was a persistent issue. Penalties range from six months to five years' imprisonment for lower-level offenses and one to 10 years' imprisonment for crimes resulting in grave or permanent bodily injury. Offenders could receive up to life imprisonment if their actions resulted in the death of their victim. Additionally, courts may impose fines. The law was enforced in cases where survivors pressed charges, but many did not. The ombudsman characterized the courts' sentences against convicted offenders as "overly lenient" and said they did not contribute to a reduction and elimination of severe forms of domestic violence nor provide sufficient protection to survivors.

From January to June, the Ministry of Labor registered 662 survivors of domestic violence, of which 463 were women, and 83 children. In June the ministry launched an awareness campaign on gender-based violence.

As of August 31, the ombudsman had received three complaints regarding domestic violence and referred them to the Ministry of Interior for further inquiries. According to the ombudsman, in most instances police responded to domestic violence incidents in a timely manner; however, survivors' frequent reluctance to report attacks to authorities enabled impunity.

Public prosecution offices received 625 criminal complaints related to gender-based violence, of which 222 were rejected. The Skopje Criminal Court ruled on 45 gender-based violence cases, of which 21 ended with final verdicts stipulating a conditional sentence.

Media and CSOs reported a woman and her father in Gostivar allegedly experienced repeated acts of domestic violence by the woman's former partner, a police officer. Reportedly, there were six separate cases pending against the attacker, and the appellate court in at least two instances reversed the court of first

instance verdicts citing various grounds and ordered retrials. Media broadcast video of an alleged violent incident against the woman and her father in a courthouse corridor, filmed by the court's security cameras. For the latter, the court sentenced the attacker to a four-month prison sentence and his complicit father, a former police officer, to a suspended sentence, and the other cases remained pending before the court.

The government funded 12 regional centers for survivors of domestic violence. A CSO financed and managed an additional center. In cooperation with the civil society sector, the central government operated three of the centers, and a local government one center in cooperation with CSOs. The government, through the Ministry of Labor, also funded nine specialized counseling centers for survivors, but also for perpetrators of domestic violence. The government fully funded eight of those centers. A local government founded and cofunded another center, managed by a CSO. Additionally, an NGO operated a hotline in the Macedonian and Albanian languages and ran two crisis centers to provide temporary shelter for survivors of domestic violence.

The ministry's national free SOS line for survivors of domestic violence continued to operate throughout the year. The SOS line and the campaign provided round-the-clock, accurate, timely, and confidential assistance, including information on survivor protection, available services, and telephone counseling to survivors of gender-based and domestic violence.

Sexual Harassment: The law prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace of both men and women and provides a sentencing guideline of three months to three years in prison for violations. When victims pursued legal remedies, the government effectively enforced the law. Nonetheless, sexual harassment of women in the workplace remained a problem, and victims generally did not bring cases forward due to fear of publicity and possible loss of employment.

As of August 20, the Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination reviewed a total of 101 complaints and decided that 51 were legitimate and merited response. Of these, the commission found discrimination based on affiliation with marginalized groups, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, disability, family, marital status, and health condition.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Women from rural areas had limited access to family planning counseling and gynecological services. Romani women faced barriers to accessing family planning counseling and gynecological services due to discrimination, high poverty levels, as well as limited numbers of family doctors and gynecologists in their communities. In March less than a year after the opening of a primary care outpatient gynecological practice in the largest Romani community, Shuto Orizari, the only medical specialist retired, and the practice closed. Approximately 20,000 predominantly Romani women, of whom 8,000 were at reproductive age, struggled to access medical care and family planning services in other municipalities. Institutions lacked capacity to address this matter, but medical services providers also displayed a lack of interest to work with the Romani community due to stereotypes and prejudice. On November 10, the Ministry of Health reopened the outpatient gynecological practice in Shuto Orizari following the signing of a contract with a licensed medical provider and local CSO Romalitico, which funded a position for a nurse.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Emergency contraception was available as part of clinical management of rape. State health centers accepted all persons who sought medical attention, including patients with complications from abortion. There were three centers for survivors of sexual violence, in Skopje, Kumanovo, and Tetovo; during the year, the centers were integrated with and funded by the state hospitals in each city. A shelter in Skopje for trafficking victims provided reproductive health care.

Discrimination: Women have the same legal status as men under family, religious, personal status, and nationality laws, as well as laws related to labor, property, nationality, inheritance, employment, access to credit, and owning or managing businesses or property, but they experienced discrimination in the economy. The laws were effectively enforced. In certain communities, the practice of men directing the voting or voting on behalf of female disenfranchised women family members. Women are unable to work in the same industries as men, and there is no legal mandate stipulating equal pay for equal work.

The Ministry of Labor, with the support of the OSCE, developed e-modules for nondiscrimination and promotion of equality. The government launched a capacity-building program for nondiscrimination and equality that included 200 public sector employees.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The country has civil and criminal laws and affirmative action regulations to protect members of racial or ethnic groups from violence and discrimination. The constitution and laws refer to ethnic minorities as communities. The State Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination (Anti-Discrimination Commission) effectively enforced the civil antidiscrimination laws. The enforcement of the criminal law, however, was lax. In December Kumanovo Basic Court's misdemeanor judge fined the Kumanovo Interior Department and three affiliated police officers for failing to comply with the commission's corrective recommendation that the accused, in presence of their supervisor, apologize to the plaintiff for discriminating against him on political belief grounds.

Roma reported widespread societal discrimination. According to the Ombudsman's Office, Roma remained underrepresented in the civil service and other state and public institutions, while other smaller ethnic communities remained underrepresented at the managerial level. NGOs and international experts reported employers often denied Romani applicants job opportunities, and some Roma complained of lack of access to public services and benefits. The Anti-Discrimination Commission reported at least three cases of discrimination against the Roma, of which two regarded access to potable water, and one regarded segregation of Roma students in a school. The commission issued public warnings and imposed corrective measures. The ombudsman received complaints from NGOs alleging discrimination against the Roma on various grounds. The ombudsman advised the relevant government institutions to take mitigation measures and prevent future discrimination. According to credible reports, there was also significant police mistreatment against the Roma community. Roma neighborhoods were often raided by police without observing required procedures. Instances of police brutality occurred frequently but remained unsanctioned due to ineffective investigations.

On May 30, the Skopje Criminal Court issued a one-year prison sentence against a police officer for “mistreatment in the conduct of duty” of a Roma person. Albeit seen as relatively lenient, the sentence was also viewed as significant progress in comparison to prior court precedent of issuing suspended sentences for comparable offenses.

On June 26, a swimming pool in Skopje allegedly discriminated against a young Roma girl by not allowing her access to the premises.

On October 27, in a case brought by the European Roma Rights Centre, the Basic Court in Skopje II ruled that the Ministry of Health discriminated against Romani minors with drug addiction problems by not providing them with treatment or rehabilitation. Access to adequate housing remained a systemic problem for the Roma. Even in instances where the government provided housing for the Roma, non-Roma residents refused to live in the same neighborhoods due to societal prejudice. In March residents of a neighborhood in Kichevo signed a petition against the construction of government-funded housing for indigenous Roma. The Kichevo mayor condemned the petition as racist behavior, but the construction of the housing remained halted.

Children

Birth Registration: The law determines citizenship primarily by the citizenship of the parents. It also allows orphans found in the country to obtain citizenship, unless authorities discover before the orphan reaches the age of 18 that his or her parents were foreigners. The government automatically registers the births of all children in hospitals and medical institutions, and the law requires that parents register the births of all children born in other places, including those born at home, with magistrate offices within 15 days of birth. Some Romani families delayed the registration of newborns, making it difficult for them to access educational, medical, and other benefits later in life due to lack of proper identity documents.

Education: The law provides for primary education in the Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, and Bosnian languages, and for secondary education in Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish. Romani and Vlach children in some primary

education schools are offered an elective subject studying their native languages and cultures. The number of minority students who received secondary education in their native language continued to increase.

Discrimination against Roma school-age children via segregation continued. Credible reports stated that local school authorities and local communities, often at insistence of non-Roma students' parents, resisted changing segregation practices, at Roma students' disadvantage. CSOs reported practices of local authorities pressuring Roma students' parents to enroll them in schools in areas with a predominant Romani population; when in same schools with other non-Roma, Roma students were often put in different classrooms. According to reports, some of those practices were also due to some Roma students being unable to speak languages other than Romani. According to the Balkan Barometer public opinion poll, 25 percent of the population was not comfortable with their children going to school with Romani children.

In December the European Court of Human Rights ruled against North Macedonia in two 2020 cases for segregation targeting young Roma students. According to the ruling, two public primary schools in Bitola and Shtip segregated Roma students by placing them in a Roma-only school and in Roma-only classes, respectively. The court ruling cited findings by the ombudsman and the Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination.

Child Abuse: There are laws against child abuse, and penalties for conviction include fines, imprisonment, and closure of businesses. Child abuse was a problem in certain areas. The government operated a hotline for domestic violence, including child abuse. The Ministry of Interior registered 83 street children who were forced by their parents or other adults to beg, wash cars, or sell small items. All 83 children were referred to day care centers for children at risk.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age for marriage is 18. A court may issue a marriage license to persons between the ages of 16 and 18 if it finds them mentally and physically fit for marriage. Early and forced marriage occurred in the Romani community and, to a much lesser extent, in some Albanian and other communities. The Ministry of Labor documented early marriages, in which one or both parties were ages 16 or 17. According to local CSOs, the early

and forced marriages among the Romani community accounted for 15-20 percent of the total number of early and forced marriages in the country, showing progressive decline compared with previous years.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law prohibits all forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children and provides penalties of 10 to 15 years in prison for violations. The law prohibits child pornography and provides penalties of five to 15 years in prison for violations. Authorities enforced the law. The minimum age for consensual sex is 16.

The country had an online registry, searchable by name and address, of convicted child traffickers and sex offenders listing photographs, conviction records, and residential addresses. Offenders could ask authorities to remove them from the register 10 years after they completed their sentence, provided they did not commit a new offense.

As of September 1, the registry listed a total of 299 offenders (13 women and 286 men), eight of whom were sentenced during the year. As of September 1, 172 had been released from prison and the rest were serving prison sentences of between two and 20 years.

Institutionalized Children: There were no children with disabilities in large institutions. All were housed in 35 small group homes with five to six children per home and 24-hour oversight by social workers and childcare providers.

The ombudsman reported some group homes for high school-age disabled children had inadequate living conditions and recommended authorities take remedial measures by improving conditions or transferring the children to other homes.

Orphans younger than three were placed in foster homes. The Ministry of Labor promoted child foster care by recruiting new and supporting existing foster families. The ministry opened three new centers for foster care support.

An educational correctional facility for juveniles operating since 2020 housed 16 juveniles during the year.

Antisemitism

The Jewish community assessed that approximately 200 Jewish persons resided in the country. The community reported no violent acts against its members, but observers reported a significant increase in antisemitic speech and incidents compared with the previous year. Jewish children were reportedly bullied for their Jewish identity during the escalation of conflict in Gaza, or due to conspiracies related to the war in Ukraine.

In February approximately 30 traveling Lev Tahor Jewish Orthodox sect members were forced to move to Ohrid due to physical attacks, threats, and other forms of harassment. A group of protesters stoned the group's temporary residence in Kumanovo, and another group of protesters in Ohrid gave the hotel owner a 24-hour ultimatum to evict the group. The Lev Tahor group eventually left North Macedonia for Greece, at the expiration of their 90-day temporary stay, in early May.

In an open letter on February 22, the Jewish community said it was shocked by the “incredible” and “unprecedented” antisemitism and xenophobia against the members of the Lev Tahor group, especially by calls to “set the hotel on fire along with the Jews in it,” which caused “fear and anxiety” among the members of the Jewish community. The Jewish community urged authorities to take measures against the instigators and for journalists to be “extremely cautious” with their reporting about the group. As of November 10, there were no reports authorities took any measures against the instigators.

Police in Ohrid announced criminal charges against a woman for hate speech on social media, which the Anti-Discrimination Commission deemed an antisemitic incident comprising elements of discrimination.

In March former national public service MRTV journalist Emilija Geleva spread antisemitic and anti-West conspiracy theories on portals and social media by claiming the “Nazis” that Russian President Putin was fighting in Ukraine were American Jews in the sitting U.S. administration, including Secretary Blinken.

In late February a Skopje-based imam accused Ukrainian President Zelenskyy of colluding with the Jews against the Palestinians, possibly due to Zelenskyy's

Jewish origins. The IRC took disciplinary action against the imam.

The Jewish community and the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from North Macedonia issued a joint press release condemning the naming of a Bulgarian Cultural Center in Bitola after Vancho Mihailov, a known fascist and Nazi collaborator. They said the center's opening on April 16 – Shabbat and the first day of Passover – was an act of insult and Holocaust denial. In October citizens protested in response to the continued naming of businesses for Nazi collaborators like Mihailov or Tsar Boris III, including the opening of a “Tsar Boris III” club in Ohrid. In November parliament adopted amendments to the laws on political parties and citizens' associations to ban the registration and operation of those that carry the names and symbols or espouse, encourage, or approve intolerance, hate, fascist ideology, Nazism, National Socialism, and the Third Reich.

The Jewish community complained that its 2017 initiative for an amendment to the criminal code that would criminalize antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, or the glorification of the Nazi and fascist symbols had yet to be adopted.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: No laws criminalize consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults.

Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons: Violence against members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community remained a problem. CSOs reported authorities continued to fail to adequately investigate and prosecute instances of violence against community members.

The Skopje Basic Public Prosecutor's Office reported 12 criminal complaints involving LGBTQI+ victims. As of August 31, it rejected two on procedural

grounds or for lack of evidence, with the remaining cases pending preliminary review outcome. According to the PPO, only one other prosecution office reported having received a criminal report involving an LGBTQI+ victim. The case was pending. CSOs noted at least two physical assaults against activists, which were reported to police.

An LGBTQI+ person, who was also president of a local LGBTQI+ CSO, said they were the subject of hate-based, physical attacks on three separate occasions. They filed three criminal complaints to the authorities, supported with evidence of physical injuries and video of at least one of the attackers. CSOs joined the individual's appeal to authorities to fully investigate the attacks and punish the perpetrators in line with the law. The Helsinki Human Rights Committee requested the Strumica Basic Prosecutor's Office duly investigate the attack, which occurred in its jurisdiction.

On November 30, the Skopje Basic Public Prosecutor's Office announced it had filed an indictment against a man from Skopje on charges of hate-motivated violence against a member of the LGBTQI+ community. The charges stemmed from a 2019 incident that resulted in serious bodily injury of the LGBTQI+ activist. The trial was pending before Skopje Criminal Court as of December 20.

On November 28, the Strumica Basic Court sentenced one person to six months in prison for a hate-motivated physical assault against the activist. The assault left the victim with multiple injuries in the neck, chest, stomach, and left arm. CSO Subversive Front reported it submitted 65 criminal complaints for hate speech and inciting violence against LGBTQI+ persons. The CSO said prosecution offices were slow to respond to complaints. As of September 5, the authorities dismissed 20 of those complaints, and the review of the remaining 45 was pending.

Subversive Front submitted 15 criminal complaints for hate speech before the Ministry of Interior for further inquiry, including one complaint against a local police officer who harassed an LGBTQI+ person.

According to CSOs, nine LGBTQI+ persons had received safe house shelter as of September 5. The majority were forced to leave their homes by their families due to their sexual orientation, with some subject to physical violence. The prolonged

COVID-19 pandemic forced LGBTQI+ persons to return to homophobic and unsafe homes, resulting in increased family violence and risk of homelessness.

Discrimination: The constitution and law prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. When victims filed complaints, the government generally enforced the law, but prosecution of violence against LGBTQI+ individuals was slowly gaining pace. The antidiscrimination law explicitly provides for protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in education, employment, housing, and health care; the criminal code sanctions serious cases of hate speech and induced coercion, harassment, public mockery, or violence based on sex, gender identity, affiliation with a marginalized group “and other types of belief.” The statute envisions minimum of one and maximum of five-year prison sentences, with harsher penalties for offenders acting in official capacity or causing large-scale violence against individuals or damage to property.

CSOs reported an increased in transphobic and homophobic speech during the year. The LGBTQI+ community remained marginalized, and activists supporting LGBTQI+ rights reported numerous incidents of societal prejudice. The Commission for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination reported LGBTQI+ persons and their supporters were the most frequent victims of discrimination, especially in traditional and social media. As of June 30, the commission found discrimination based on sexual orientation in 15 cases and on gender identity in 14 cases.

The Helsinki Human Rights Committee reported a surge in derogatory and violent speech against the LGBTQI+ community in social and traditional media before and after the Skopje Pride Parade. The committee filed three criminal complaints for hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity, all pending as of August 31.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: Coalition Margini reported that 20 persons requested alteration of sex/gender markers in personal documents, of which at least 13 successfully completed the procedure, reportedly enabled by the administrative services’ affirmative application of the existing laws. In March the government withdrew from parliament proposed draft amendments to the Law on

Civil Registry, which included provisions regulating legal gender recognition. The intention of the proposed amendments was to introduce a streamlined procedure for legal gender recognition aligned with the ECHR ruling in the case X v. North Macedonia. The ECHR said the country lacked a law explicitly allowing alteration of a person's sex/gender marker status in the civil status register.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically

Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals: There were no reports of involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices specifically targeting LGBTQI+ individuals. There were allegations that so-called conversion therapy was practiced, and activists confirmed there were such cases, but they explained that information regarding specific cases rarely reached them. Activists reported psychologists and other educational professionals in schools often asked LGBTQI+ students to conform to heteronormative standards and to act in accordance with the roles expected of the gender they were assigned at birth.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:

The country did not have any formal restrictions on those speaking out on LGBTQI+ issues nor the ability of LGBTQI+ organizations to legally register or convene events, such as Pride festivities.

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities could not access education, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis. The constitution and law protect the rights of persons with disabilities (physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities), including their access to education, employment, health services, information, communications, buildings, transportation, the judicial system, or other state services, but these legal requirements were not enforced effectively. A separate law governs the employment of persons with disabilities and supplements the labor law. The law requires persons with physical or mental disabilities to obtain approval from a government medical commission to serve in supervisory positions in the private and public sectors. Disability experts maintained this requirement violated the right to equal treatment and employment based on merit.

There were no reports of violence, harassment, or intimidation targeted at persons

with disabilities.

The government does not have a strategic framework regarding the rights of persons with disabilities nor an action plan for effective implementation of the comprehensive strategy on deinstitutionalization. Persons with disabilities and their families experienced stigmatization and segregation due to entrenched prejudice and lack of information.

As of September 15, two weeks after the start of the academic year, high school students with disabilities did not have access to government-paid education assistants. In early September parents and CSOs called on authorities to adopt pending legislation as soon as possible to enable the Ministry of Labor to provide this service, especially as secondary education is mandatory under the law.

The ombudsman conducted periodic visits to group and foster homes for children with disabilities. As of August 31, the ombudsman reviewed 15 complaints alleging violations of disabled persons' rights, of which eight concerned children. Most of the complaints alleged violations of the right to education due to lack of access to public education or education assistants. The ombudsman recommended the Ministry of Labor and other relevant authorities take remedial action.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, persons with disabilities continued to be marginalized and their needs were not addressed, according to NGOs and the ombudsman. COVID-19 information and vaccine application web sites were not provided in formats accessible to persons with sensory disabilities, and most COVID-19 testing facilities were inaccessible for persons with physical disabilities.

The Helsinki Human Rights Committee reported that in September, the Skopje Civil Court ruled the government and the State Election Commission had directly discriminated against persons with disabilities by failing to provide them with access to some polling stations, effectively denying them the right to vote. The court ordered the authorities to make the necessary changes before the next elections.

The law establishes accessibility standards for new buildings; existing public structures should have been made accessible for persons with disabilities by the

end of 2015. NGOs reported many public and government buildings and other structures, including shelters for victims of violence, did not comply with the law. NGOs also reported companies were able to skirt the law by paying bribes to avoid the excess costs of including accessibility features in new construction.

Although all buses purchased since 2013 by the government for Skopje should have been accessible to persons with physical disabilities, in practice many buses remained inaccessible due to insufficient maintenance, a lack of training, and the failure to sanction drivers who refused to extend ramps. Public transportation remained largely inaccessible outside of Skopje.

The Ministry of Education and Science made efforts to provide suitable support to enable children with disabilities to attend mainstream schools, but a lack of funding and qualified education assistants negatively affected students. The law mandates inclusion of children with disabilities in regular/mainstreamed schools and envisions transforming “special” schools into resource centers for teachers, parents, and students. Nonetheless, most schools remained unprepared to implement the law and continued to struggle to provide appropriate support to children with disabilities. Most schools remained inaccessible for persons with physical disabilities and lacked wheelchair accessibility ramps, accessible toilets, and elevators. Many students with disabilities continued to attend separate schools.

Advocates reported improvements for children with autism, as there was more mainstream acceptance of their presence in schools, where they were often accompanied by teaching assistants.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

Social stigma and discrimination against persons with HIV and AIDS remained a problem.

The Ministry of Health did not prioritize persons living with HIV for COVID-19 vaccination, despite CSOs’ written request. The prolonged pandemic exacerbated systemic problems of social exclusion, limited access to public services and justice, and inadequate protection from discrimination and violence against persons with HIV. CSOs supporting persons with HIV, in cooperation with the Clinic for

Infectious Diseases, provided free distribution of antiretroviral therapy to all HIV patients in need, and particularly to those living outside Skopje.

In late March 14 CSOs working on HIV prevention programs raised concerns regarding a 40 percent cut to the Ministry of Health's budget for HIV prevention programs. According to CSO HERA, the drastic funding cut increased the risk of HIV infection and death. According to credible sources, one-third of persons with HIV in North Macedonia were unaware they had the virus.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides the right of workers to form and join independent unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and provides for reinstatement of workers fired for union activity. The law requires federated unions to register with the Ministry of Labor and with the State Central Registry.

The law covers all workers legally employed by employers that are duly registered with the government and does not discriminate against foreign workers or migrants who are legally employed in the country. The Ministry of Labor's State Labor Inspectorate (SLI) did not receive any complaints regarding violations of the right to union organization and freedom of association. Nonetheless, workers often feared reprisal and refrained from filing direct complaints. Some workers had unions file complaints on their behalf.

Trade unions are based on voluntary membership, and activities are financed by membership dues. Approximately 22 percent of employees, mostly in public administration, were union members. Union representatives, except a few branch unions, claimed they were generally not free from the influence of government officials, political parties, and employers.

A court of general jurisdiction may terminate trade union activities at the request of the registrar or competent court when those activities are deemed to be "against the constitution and law." There are no nationality restrictions on membership in trade unions, although foreign nationals must have a valid work permit and be employed

by the company or government body listed on the permit. Although legally permitted, no unions operated in the free economic zones.

Government enforcement resources and remediation were inadequate. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those of other laws involving the denial of civil rights. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays. In unionized sectors, the government effectively enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers. Due to the absence of unions in some sectors, there were no reports of government enforcement of laws respecting their establishment or operation. Penalties were regularly applied in segments controlled by the SLI. In April the Independent Union of Teachers organized a strike, demanding a salary increase and full implementation the collective bargaining agreement. Three weeks later, the government agreed to a 12 percent salary increase and the strike was put on hold. In June police associations, health-care workers, municipal employees, and others participated in a strike over a pay dispute, leaving essential services running with emergency staffing levels.

The government and employers did not always respect freedom of association, the right to strike, and the right to collective bargaining. Unions cited the law's "exclusionary" provision, which allows employers to terminate up to 2 percent of workers from collective bargaining negotiations during a strike. Collective bargaining is restricted to trade unions representing at least 20 percent of the employees and employers' associations that represent at least 10 percent of the employers at the level at which the agreement is concluded (company, sector, or country).

A complaint received by the SLI in 2021 from the Confederation of Free Trade Unions alleging the Ministry of Labor failed to respond to its application to be recognized as a representative union with authority to negotiate collective bargaining agreements was pending resolution. The ministry reported it denied the application because it failed to demonstrate the confederation met the legally required threshold for workforce representation.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The constitution and law prohibit all forms of forced or compulsory labor. The law prescribes imprisonment, which applies to violations of forced labor laws or for the destruction or removal of identification documents, passports, or other travel documents. The government effectively enforced the law in most cases. There were reports of trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation. Penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other serious crimes.

Women and girls were subjected to forced labor within the country in restaurants, bars, and nightclubs. Foreign workers transiting the country were subjected to forced labor in construction and agricultural sectors. There were instances in which women and children were subjected to forced labor, such as peddling small items in restaurants and bars, and sexual exploitation. Some Romani children were subject to forced begging, often by relatives (see section 7.c.).

The SLI conducted regular inspections to verify compliance with labor laws, issued warnings and fines, and sanctioned businesses. The government did not operate a hotline, but the Ministry of Interior managed an application to report various offenses, including trafficking; the application received three trafficking-related reports. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

Labor laws and regulations generally prohibit discrimination based on race, sex, gender identity, color, disability, health status, political opinion, religion, age, national origin, language, or social status. The law does not specifically address discrimination based on HIV or other communicable disease status but refers to the

health status of employees. The government did not always enforce the laws effectively, although penalties for violations were commensurate with those of other laws related to civil rights. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

Data from the national employment agency showed that due to low participation in the education system, particularly in higher education, Roma generally had difficulties finding jobs in the formal economy. On April 7, the Ministry of Labor announced that the government had introduced a 5 percent quota for Roma inclusion in the labor market until 2024.

Women's wages were lower than those of men, and few women occupied management positions. Under the law, women are prohibited from working in certain "high risk" and "physically demanding" positions in the mining and construction industries. The government made efforts to prevent discrimination in hiring and access to the workplace for persons with disabilities.

According to a CSO analysis released in 2020, women on average earned 15 percent lower salaries than those of men.

The ombudsman received three complaints alleging workplace discrimination based on political belief. The ombudsman found one complaint was partially founded and dismissed the remaining two for lack of evidence.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The law sets a minimum wage in all sectors, which was below the poverty income level. The Economic Social Council, in which unions, employers' associations, and the government are equally represented, negotiated the minimum wage. The law establishes a 40-hour workweek with a minimum 24-hour rest period, paid vacation of 20 to 26 workdays, and sick leave benefits. Employees may not legally work more than an average of eight hours of overtime per week over a three-month period, or 190 hours per year. According to the collective agreement for the private sector between employers and unions, employees in the private sector have a right to overtime pay at 135 percent of their regular rate. In addition, the law entitles employees who work more than 150 hours of overtime per year to a bonus of one month's salary.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law outlines fundamental principles on prevention of occupational injuries, occupational diseases, and work-related illnesses, and complies with international standards and practices. Employers are responsible for assessing risks their employees face on the job. The law requires employers to appoint an occupational safety and health (OSH) officer or contract a licensed company to implement OSH standards. As of November 2021, the Ministry of Labor had issued 55 licenses to OSH companies. Penalties for OSH violations were generally commensurate with those for similar crimes, such as fraud or negligence, but were rarely enforced.

Workers have the legal right to remove themselves from situations endangering their health or safety without jeopardy to their future employment. Nevertheless, employees did not always exercise this right, reportedly based on fear of losing their jobs due to the high unemployment rate.

In December 2021, the government adopted a new strategy for safety and health in the workplace and a new action plan for OSH, which sets guidance, activities, and measures for how to achieve better implementation and enforcement of the OSH system.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The SLI and the State Inspectorate for Technical Inspection are responsible for implementing pertinent laws. The total number of labor inspectors was adequate to investigate violations of labor law, but inspectors were not appropriately distributed throughout the country. Labor inspectors have the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. Distribution of inspectors, however, made it difficult to enforce compliance. The SLI has an OSH department with three regional offices, but they were understaffed and lacked adequate training and modern equipment. Minimum wage, hours of work, and OSH standards were sometimes enforced, and penalties were sometimes applied against violators.

During the year the SLI filed complaints against businesses for nonpayment of minimum wage, benefits, and overtime, often on Sundays. Violations in wage and overtime were most common in the textile, construction, railroad, and retail sectors. Many employers hired workers without complying with the law, and small retail businesses often required employees to work well beyond legal hourly

limits. In 2021, the SLI found 129 employment rights violations involving salaries and benefits as well as work performance. The SLI issued 120 warnings and nine orders for mitigation measures and endorsed one settlement.

As of June 30, the SLI received 63 complaints related to OSH. For each documented irregularity, SLI imposed reprimands or temporary closures and oversaw compliance with implementation of its decisions. Through June, the SLI registered four fatal workplace injuries: two in manufacturing, one in construction, and one in the electricity supply sector. These incidents resulted in misdemeanor or criminal charges against the decedents' employers. Construction, manufacturing, wholesale trade, catering, mining and quarrying, and transportation and storage were the riskiest areas in the labor market.

Informal Sector: The informal sector of the economy was estimated to account for approximately 40 percent of the overall economy. Many workers in the informal sector were male and included young persons as well as retired persons working in the agricultural sector. After agriculture, construction and commerce were assumed to have the most informal workers. OSH standards were not enforced in the informal sector.