

BULGARIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government mostly respected religious freedom. The constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the “traditional” religion, exempting its branch in the country, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), from the court registration required for all other religious groups. Members of some minority religious groups expressed concern that the government did not proactively intervene to prevent societal abuses. Reports of intolerance by security services and local authorities continued.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Discrimination, harassment, and general public intolerance of some religious groups remained a persistent problem. Anti-Semitic incidents and vandalism against mosques and places of worship persisted.

The U.S. embassy regularly communicated with government officials and religious leaders to discuss and promote religious freedom, and facilitated dialogue among religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 7 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 76 percent of the population identifies itself as Orthodox Christian. Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism all hold a historic place in the country’s culture. Muslims are the second-largest religious group, estimated at 10 percent of the population. Groups that together constitute about 2 percent of the population include Catholics, Armenian Christians, Jews, evangelical Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and others. Nearly 12 percent of respondents did not identify with any of the above faiths. There are 126 registered religious groups in addition to the BOC.

Some religious minorities are concentrated geographically. Many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and “Pomaks” (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule) live in the Rhodope Mountains along the southern border with Greece. Ethnic Turkish and Roma Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea coast. Nearly 40 percent of

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Catholics live in and around Plovdiv. The majority of the small Jewish community lives in Sofia and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are widely dispersed but are more numerous in areas with large Roma populations. Approximately 80 percent of the urban population identifies as Orthodox Christian, compared with 62 percent of the rural population. Around 25 percent of the rural population identifies as Muslim, compared with over 4 percent of the urban population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The law allows private religious observance only if members of the religious group are the only persons present, and public religious observances only if they also are open to persons who do not belong to the sponsoring group.

The constitution stipulates that Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the traditional religion. The law establishes its branch in the country, the BOC, as a legal entity, exempting the BOC from the court registration that is mandatory for all other religious groups wishing to acquire national legal recognition. The law designates the Metropolitan of Sofia as the BOC's patriarch. The state provides funding for all registered religious groups.

To receive national legal recognition, groups other than the BOC must apply for official court registration, which generally is granted. The Council of Ministers' Directorate for Religious Affairs provides expert opinions on registration matters upon request of the court. All applicants have the right to appeal negative registration decisions to the court of appeals. The law does not require the formal registration of local branches of the registered groups, only that the branches notify local authorities of the national registration of their group.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines.

The law allows the publication of religious media and distribution of religious literature. Some municipal ordinances, however, require local permits for distribution of religious literature in public places.

Public schools at all levels offer an optional religious education course that covers Christianity and Islam. The course examines the historical, philosophical, and

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cultural aspects of religion and introduces students to the moral values of different religious groups. All officially registered religious groups can request that their religious beliefs be included in the course's curriculum.

The government does not permit religious headdresses in official photos for national identity documents. The law does not allow any privilege to be based on religious identity. The education ministry and most schools interpret that provision to ban the display of "religious symbols," including wearing the hijab, in public schools.

The country is an observer at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Government Practices

A number of religious groups complained that the government did not consistently enforce legal and policy protections of religious freedom.

Many Muslim leaders continued to complain of harassment from the security services, saying that the national security services brought in members of the community for questioning as a form of intimidation and to create conflict within the community. Jehovah's Witnesses also reported harassment from the local police in Kyustendil, claiming that on November 21, approximately 20 police officers entered the Kingdom Hall during the congregation's meeting and checked the identity cards of those present. The officers did not offer any explanation for their actions.

A trial in Pazardjik District Court against 13 Muslim leaders continued during the year. The defendants had been charged, in 2011, with participating in an illegal organization; spreading anti-democratic, pro-sharia ideology aimed at undermining the rule of law and basic human rights; and preaching intolerance and hatred of other religious groups during Friday sermons. The grand mufti's office continued to maintain the innocence of the defendants and labeled the proceedings an attack on religious freedom.

In October the Sofia Regional Court told the prosecution service it needed to rewrite an indictment against six persons. The individuals, including both Muslims and anti-Muslim protesters, had been charged in 2012 with hooliganism for their actions during the May 2011 assault by the protesters on Muslims attending Friday

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prayer in front of the Sofia mosque. The court said the prosecution service had committed procedural violations requiring correction before a trial could proceed.

In February the prosecution service filed a separate indictment on charges of hooliganism against another Muslim. At year's end the case was ongoing in the Sofia Regional Court.

A number of small political parties made references to religion in controversial statements on political issues. For example, in October Magdalena Tasheva, a member of parliament from the Ataka party, referred to refugees as "a private Muslim army, trained for terrorist activities from camps along the Turkish-Syrian border." The extreme nationalist party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization continued to organize protests in front of the courthouse in Pazardjik against the wearing of religious attire and the propagation of Islam.

In May in response to a student's 2012 complaint that she had been banned from attending school unless she stopped wearing a headscarf, the public Commission for Protection against Discrimination determined there had been no discrimination.

Some minority religious groups, including Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to complain of discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities, despite obtaining national registration from the Sofia City Court. Contrary to the law, some municipalities reportedly said the groups had to register locally.

In February the Burgas Municipal Council approved an amendment to the Ordinance for Preserving Public Order that prohibited door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. The Regional Governor of Burgas stopped the implementation of the amendment; however, after a change of government, the new regional governor allowed its implementation in September. The Directorate for Religious Affairs protested against the restriction and advised the affected religious groups to consider legal action.

Although the statute of limitations for restitution cases expired in 2013, a number of claims from the grand mufti's office remained outstanding. In September the deputy grand mufti reported there were 52 claims on 83 properties in the country, including 13 former mosques and a former Islamic school.

In March the National Assembly issued a unanimous declaration related to the 70th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews and in tribute to the victims of the

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Holocaust, marking the first time Bulgaria's legislature had expressed regret that Bulgarian authorities did not prevent the deportation of more than 11,000 Jews to death camps from regions under Bulgarian control during World War II.

The state budget allocated 4 million leva (\$2.8 million) for registered religious groups. Of the total, 3.08 million leva (\$2.2 million) were allocated for the BOC, 230,000 leva (\$161,857) for the Muslim community, 35,000 leva for the Roman Catholic church (\$24,631), 35,000 leva (\$24,631) for the Armenian Apostolic Church, 30,000 leva (\$21,112) for the Jewish community, 50,000 leva (\$35,186) for other registered denominations, 40,000 leva (\$28,149) for publication of religious books and research. Another 500,000 leva (\$351,865) will remain in reserve, including 50,000 leva (\$35,186) for creating a register of all religious facilities in the country.

Government Inaction

The Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim communities continued to report problems obtaining construction permits for new prayer houses and mosques. The local government in Gotse Delchev continued to ignore the Muslim community's application for a permit to construct a mosque. The Kyustendil municipality continued to obstruct the building of a Jehovah's Witnesses house of worship. The Sofia municipal government continued to withhold permission for building a second mosque in Sofia, even though the existing one was so small that worshippers had to pray outside on the sidewalk during Friday and holiday prayers. Jewish organizations expressed concern over the government's passivity in addressing hate crimes (particularly hate speech) and complained that website administrators no longer deleted anti-Semitic comments.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Relations between religious groups generally remained tolerant and collaborative, especially within the interfaith Religious Communities Council, a non-profit organization, which discussed and defended common positions with the government. However, discrimination, harassment, and public intolerance of some religious groups remained persistent problems.

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Mormons reported several instances of harassment and physical assault of missionaries by young men in Burgas, Pleven, and Stara Zagora. No charges have been filed.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to complain that media reports misrepresented their activities and beliefs, in particular reports by the ultranationalist SKAT TV cable company headquartered in Burgas.

In January Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the neighbors of a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses living in Kazanluk threw stones at his home at the instigation of a local pastor.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Mormons, and the grand mufti's office continued to report desecration incidents. In January vandals spray-painted graffiti on the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall in Varna. In May vandals spray-painted graffiti on the Mormons' rented church building in Shumen. In October vandals threw stones at the mosque in Kazanlak, breaking three windows. In November the Jewish community reported that vandals stole nine gravestones from the Jewish cemetery in Sofia. Jewish community leaders continued to express concern over increasing incidents of anti-Semitism in social media and online forums.

In June Jewish groups reported that ultranationalists used an anti-Semitic image of an older man in a beret, a stereotype of an older Jewish man, in anti-LGBT Pride posters placed around Sofia that featured the slogan, "To keep children from obscenity." In November media commentators noted that the founding of a new political party, the Nationalist Party of Bulgaria, had come on the eve of the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht. Jewish organizations viewed this new party as a threat because of the date it was founded and its xenophobic statements.

Social media users accused a prominent American of ordering the antigovernment protests that began in June, alleging that he had financed the nongovernmental organizations that had been active in the protests, while making frequent references to his Jewish heritage.

In July rap artist Mihail Mihailov ("Misho the Slap") criticized the former finance minister in a live television interview, calling him "Jewish vermin." There was no immediate reaction from the interviewing reporter, nor was there a response from the government condemning this incident. Mihailov stated in a subsequent apology that his comment was a cliché.

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In February nearly 1,000 persons marched in downtown Sofia in a rally, organized by the far-right Bulgarian National Union, to honor Hristo Lukov, a World War II general known for his anti-Semitic views and pro-Nazi activities. There were no reports of overt expressions of anti-Semitism at the rally.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly communicated with the Directorate for Religious Affairs and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination regarding religious freedom, discrimination cases, and construction of new places of worship. The Ambassador met with the Holy Synod, the grand mufti, and the High Israelite Spiritual Council, and attended the enthronement of the new patriarch to discuss religious freedom and continue U.S. engagement with their respective communities. Embassy representatives met frequently with leaders of the Jewish community, the grand mufti's office, the Mormons, evangelicals, and the Jehovah's Witnesses to discuss infringements on freedom of religion, outreach activities, and proposed changes in legislation. The Ambassador discussed religious freedom and tolerance in a meeting with the mayor of Burgas.

In March the Ambassador and embassy representatives attended the events in Sofia and Lom celebrating the 70th anniversary of the saving of Bulgarian Jews.

Embassy representatives met with some of the Muslim defendants standing trial in Pazardjik and attended one of the hearings to view the proceedings. Embassy representatives visited the Muslim community in Kochan and visited the regional muftis of Haskovo, Kardjali, Smolyan, and Gotse Delchev to learn about local religious relations, property disputes, and the local communities. In July the Ambassador hosted an iftar at her residence, attended by the grand mufti, members of the Muslim community, representatives of other faiths, and an official from Sofia municipality. In November the Ambassador and embassy representatives visited the mosque in Chepintsi, met with the regional muftis of Kardjali and Gotse Delchev, and met with the abbot at St. George Orthodox Monastery near Hadzhidimovo to learn about challenges encountered by the local communities in exercising their religious beliefs. In November the Ambassador spoke at a B'nai B'rith anniversary event, where she noted that anti-Semitism remains a problem in Bulgaria and praised B'nai B'rith's efforts in raising awareness and urging accountability.

An embassy representative participated in an event in Sofia discussing religious tolerance with young leaders of the Jewish community. The embassy funded the

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travel of six young Muslim leaders to the United States for a program on minority rights advocacy.