



Bulgaria

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; it prohibits religious discrimination but designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the "traditional" religion. Laws executing these provisions are ambiguous, giving scope to arbitrary decisions with respect to public practice of religion by unregistered groups.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the central Government during the period covered by this report, but there were increased reports of intolerance from local authorities.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Discrimination, harassment, and general public intolerance, particularly in the media, of some religious groups remained an intermittent problem.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 42,855 square miles and a population of 7.6 million. The majority of the population, estimated at 85 percent, identifies itself as Orthodox Christian. Muslims comprise the largest minority, estimated at 13 percent; other minorities include Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Gregorian-Armenian Christians, and others. Among the ethnic Turkish minority, Islam is the predominant religion. Official registration of religious organizations is handled by the Sofia City Court which as of February 2008 has registered 96 religious groups in addition to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), compared to 85 in February 2007.

Some religious minorities were concentrated geographically. The Rhodope Mountains (along the country's southern border with Greece) are home to many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and "Pomaks" (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule). Ethnic Turkish and Roma Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast of the country, primarily in and around the cities of Shumen and Razgrad, as well as along the Black Sea coast. More than half of the country's Roman Catholics are located in the region around Plovdiv. Many members of the country's small Jewish community live in Sofia, Rousse, and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are dispersed more widely throughout the country. Evangelical Protestant groups have had success in attracting converts from among the Roma minority, and areas with large Roma populations tend also to have some of the highest percentages of Protestants.

According to a 2005 report of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, only 50 percent of the six million persons who identify themselves as Orthodox Christians participate in formal religious services. The same survey found that 90 percent of the country's estimated 70,000 Catholics regularly engage in public worship. Approximately 30 percent of Catholics belong to the Byzantine Rite Catholic Church. The majority of Muslims, estimated to number 750,000, are Sunni; 50,000 are classified as Shi'a. The Jewish community is estimated at 3,500 and evangelical Protestants at 50,000. The report also noted that more than 100,000 citizens practice "nontraditional" beliefs. (Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Catholicism are generally understood to be "traditional" faiths.) Forty percent of these "nontraditional" practitioners are estimated to be Roma.

Statistics reported by the Council of Ministers Religious Confessions Directorate reported slightly different figures, listing nearly 1 million Muslims and 150,000 evangelical Protestants, as well as 20,000 to 30,000 Armenian Christians and approximately 3,000 Jews.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion. Article 5 of the 2002 Denominations Act allows religious beliefs to be practiced privately when carried out by a member of the religious community in the presence only of persons belonging to it, and in public when it is open also to persons not belonging to the respective religious community. Ambiguous wording gives scope to arbitrary decisions with respect to public practice of religion by unregistered groups. Article 36 of the act punishes "any person carrying out religious activity in the name of a religion without representational authority." Article 8 of the act allows the courts to punish registered religious organizations for a variety of offenses by banning their activities for up to 6 months, banning the publication or distribution of publications, or canceling an organization's registration. Some concerns remain that the 2002 Denominations Act does not specify the consequences of failure to register.

The Constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity, represented by the BOC, as the "traditional" religion, and the Government provided financial support to it, as well as to several other religious communities perceived as holding historic places in society, such as the Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Jewish religious groups.

The 2002 Denominations Act requires all religious groups other than the Orthodox Church to register in the Sofia City Court and designates the Metropolitan of Sofia as the patriarch of the BOC. The law prohibits any group or person who has broken off from a registered religious group from using the same name or claiming any properties belonging to that group. Religious observers argued that this provision effectively outlawed the Bulgarian Orthodox "Alternative Synod." The case of the "Alternative Synod," filed after the 2004 forceful eviction of the movement's priests from churches, was pending before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) at the end of the reporting period.

The Council of Ministers' Religious Confessions Directorate, formerly responsible for registration of religious groups, provides "expert opinions" on registration matters upon request of the Court. The Directorate also ensures that national and local authorities comply with national religious freedom legislation. The Directorate was generally responsive to denominations' concerns.

Denominations reported a general improvement in the registration process since the Court took over this responsibility in 2003. All applicants have the right to appeal negative registration decisions to the Court of Appeals.

A Muslim conference held on April 19, 2008, re-elected Mustafa Alish Hadji as Chief Mufti. The conference followed a December 2007 Supreme Court of Appeals decision to uphold the annulment of the conference that previously elected him as illegitimate. This ruling effectively reinforced the denomination's statutes from 1996 and reinstated rival Islamic leader Nedim Gendzhev, who initially contested Hadji's election. Referring to a provision in the 1996 statutes, the Sofia City court granted the request of more than 1,000 members of the denomination's local branches to convene a national conference. On April 21, 2008, the court registered Hadji as Chief Mufti despite the rival group's allegation of judicial corruption and document forgery.

Some local branches of nationally registered denominations continued to experience problems with local authorities who insisted that the branches be registered locally, despite the fact that the 2002 Denominations Act does not require local formal registration of denominations.

For most registered religious groups, there were no restrictions on attendance at religious services or on private religious instruction. Two BOC seminaries, a Jewish school, three Islamic schools, the university-level Islamic Higher Institute, a Muslim cultural center, a multidenominational Protestant seminary, and two university theological faculties operated freely. Bibles, Qur'ans, and other religious materials in the Bulgarian language were imported or printed freely, and religious publications were produced regularly.

The Government observes Orthodox Christmas and Easter as national holidays. In addition, the Government respects the holidays of non-Orthodox religious groups, such as Muslim, Catholic, Jewish, Evangelicals, and Baha'i, and grants their members non-working days.

Schools offer an optional religious education course that covers Christianity and Islam. The course examines the historical, philosophical, and 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. While the Ministry provides the course material for free to students, religious education teachers participating in the program are funded directly from municipal budgets.

The Office of the Chief Mufti also supports summer Qur'anic education courses.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Some "nontraditional" groups faced increased discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain localities, despite successfully registering through the Sofia City Court. Article 19 of the 2002 Denominations Act states that nationally registered religious groups may have local branches. The law requires notification, although some municipalities claimed that it requires formal local registration. Hence some municipal regulations, although softened, prohibited distribution of religious literature by groups that were not locally registered. There were renewed reports of actual enforcement of these rules in Pleven and Plovdiv.

In April 2008, the Blagoevgrad District court revoked the Ahmadi Muslim Organization's registration as a nongovernmental organization (NGO). The group resorted to registering as an NGO after it was denied national registration as a religious group in 2005. The prosecution challenged the group's NGO status, claiming that the Ahmadis went beyond NGO boundaries by proselytizing and holding religious meetings.

On November 21, 2007, the Sofia appellate court upheld the city court's decision rejecting the Ahmadi community's re-application for national registration under the name "Ahmadiyya Muslim Community." In rendering its decision, the Sofia City Court requested the opinion of the Religious Confessions Directorate, which consulted with the Chief Mufti's office. The Muftiship seemingly would not consent to any outside group registering as Muslims. The Directorate's expert statement held that registration of the Ahmadis would "lead to the rise and institutionalization of a very serious dissent in the Muslim community," and to the spread of an interpretation of Islam that is not traditional in the country. The appellate court's decision precluded further recourse in domestic courts and the group planned to file a complaint with the ECHR.

On April 9, 2008, the City of Burgas sent a letter to all Burgas schools instructing them to warn students to be alert to the mobilizing of nontraditional religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Evangelical Pentecostal Churches, which the city described as the most prominent and dangerous sects. In the letter, authorities claimed that these groups attracted followers through manipulation, offers of money, clothing and food, as well as free movie screenings. They further maintained that the activity of these groups threatened the unity of the Bulgarian nation and exposed it to religious confrontation. The Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Hall in Burgas was vandalized on two occasions during the same week. The Mormons also reported facing hostility, including public insults and stones thrown at their place of worship, following the distribution of the letter.

Some local governments restricted certain forms of proselytizing. On March 17, 2008, the Mormons complained to the Ombudsman of reoccurring hostility from the local authorities in Pleven and Plovdiv. The Mormons reported a number of incidents where the missionaries were banned from engaging in conversations about their religion and distributing materials in public places.

On August 29, 2007, Blagoevgrad police detained five Jehovah's Witnesses for questioning. Police issued the five written warnings not to preach from house to house, which was considered a disturbance of public order.

In 2007 Jehovah's Witnesses faced limitations on their proselytizing activity in Plovdiv, where regulations forbid public preaching, and Veliko Turnovo, where police required two missionaries to present proof of registration before they could preach publicly. The police officers issued a written citation and warned the two to discontinue their public preaching or face serious consequences. In May 2007, police stopped and

questioned a 14-year-old Jehovah's Witness preaching with an adult companion in Gorna Oryahovitsa. Representatives of some evangelical Protestant churches reported obstruction to holding public meetings from the local authorities in the Dobrich and Varna municipalities. No missionaries reported being arrested or fined for proselytizing.

In July 2007 the Sofia City Council published its unanimous decision to support the residents of the Mladost area in opposing the construction of a meeting hall for the Jehovah's Witnesses and urging the government to legislate stricter control of nontraditional religious groups.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that local authorities obstructed the construction of a meeting house in Varna; after a long battle, they gained permission to begin construction in June 2007. After construction began, city officials issued three citations halting all work. The Jehovah's Witnesses claimed compliance with the requirements, but the city refused to allow work to resume and levied an additional fine. In November 2007 the Varna Administrative Court ruled that the work stoppage by the City of Varna was legal because the foreman, a Jehovah's Witness, lacked a legitimate labor contract. All charges against the foreman were ultimately dropped, after a series of police interrogations and reported police harassment. The Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the Varna Administrative Court decision to the Supreme Court and are waiting for communication of the Court's ruling from April 22, 2008.

The country's entry into the European Union on January 1, 2007, lifted visa restrictions for EU citizens, making it significantly easier for EU-member missionaries to work in the country. There were no reports of foreign missionaries being denied visas.

At a press conference on June 5, 2008, an Orthodox priest from Burgas called for the expulsion of two Mormon missionaries, whom he labeled "intruders" interrupting the service and distributing religious literature in the church. The missionaries claimed they were invited to observe the service and left when they understood they were not welcome. Although no steps were taken to expel the missionaries, the reported incident sparked a series of negative press reports.

On February 15, 2008, two Mormon missionaries were attacked in Sofia reportedly by the relatives of a boy who was invited to attend the Sunday Mormon church service. One missionary suffered injuries to his head and a broken hand. Police identified one of the perpetrators and the investigation against him was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

In February 2008 the Commission for Protection against Discrimination rejected the discrimination complaint filed by three Muslim students from Devin alleging that the school principal had discouraged them from wearing headscarves in classes even though the school had no uniform requirements. The Commission found insufficient evidence to confirm the principal's reported warnings. The case follows an August 2006 decision by the Commission to uphold the ban on headscarves imposed by a school in Smolyan that did require school uniforms.

There were no indications that the Government discriminated against members of any religious group in restitution of properties that were nationalized during the communist period. However, the BOC, Catholic Church, Muslim community, Jewish community, and several Protestant denominations complained that a number of their confiscated properties had not been returned.

The Jewish community reported difficulties in recovering some restituted buildings, including a hospital in central Sofia and a former rabbi's house in Varna. After the Government formed a special commission in 2006 to review seven outstanding claims of the Jewish community, the commission's report, presented to the Prime Minister in October 2006, found that the community had valid claims and recommended that alternate property be identified to turn over to Shalom, the organization representing the country's Jewish community, to replace a synagogue and rabbi's residence in Varna. With respect to a Sofia hospital restituted to Shalom in 1997 and leased to a state hospital, the Commission suggested speeding the process of finding suitable quarters for the hospital and transferring six rooms of the existing hospital to Shalom. Despite the Government's recommendation, the hospital's management, which ceased rental payment in 2002, has neither transferred the rooms to Shalom nor has agreed to a date for vacating the premises in the future. The commission chose not to review the controversial 2005 court decision on the Rila Hotel, which held that the expropriation procedure was properly executed by the Communist government and that the community was not legally

entitled to any further compensation.

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

Military law does not allow religious groups to conduct any activity on military premises and prohibits ministering at any level within the armed forces; however, military personnel can attend religious events outside the barracks.

Minority religious groups complained they had no access to television to broadcast religious services or programs. There were no reports of 2007 incidents of religious-based discrimination against media broadcasts. A number of religious groups broadcast radio programs: the Orthodox Radio Sion and the Christian Radio Svetlina are aired via Internet; the Seventh- Day Adventists broadcast daily a one-hour program in Bulgarian on its world radio "Voice of Hope;" the Evangelical trans-world radio also broadcasts a daily program in Bulgarian.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Alternative Orthodox Synod continued to await a decision from the ECHR on the case related to the 2004 forceful expulsion of its members from their parishes.

Protestants said that heavily Muslim areas with a majority ethnic Turkish population sometimes place restrictions on their worship. A Protestant church in Djebel, which failed to apply for a tax declaration in time, was closed in 2007 by the local court reportedly in an excessive action by the local authorities against the church.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Despite initial fears that the 2002 Denominations Act would hamper religious organizations' ability to operate freely, the number of groups registered with the Government increased from 36 in 2003, when the Sofia City Court took over this responsibility, to 96 in 2008.

A Protestant group, the Bulgarian Chaplaincy Association, gained legal status on February 23, 2007. The association represents approximately 120 Protestant pastors and individuals mainly affiliated with the Church of God and Assemblies of God but also includes Baptists and Lutherans.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

Relations between different religious groups generally remained civil and tolerant; however, discrimination, harassment, and public intolerance of some religious groups remained an intermittent problem. There were renewed reports of societal discrimination against "nontraditional" religious groups as well as negative and derogatory media stories about such groups. The Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report numerous print and broadcast media stories with negative, derogatory, and sometimes slanderous information about their activities and beliefs.

The Chief Mufti's Office continued to report cases of mosque desecrations. On March 11, 2008, a mosque in

Dobrich was temporarily closed because of a bomb threat. Police officers searched the premises and reported that no explosive device was found. On February 16, 2008, graffiti saying "Turks, die" was found at the entry to the Office of the Chief Mufti. During the year the mosque in Pleven was vandalized with swastika graffiti at least ten times. In December 2007 the windows of the mosque in Kazanluk were broken after it was torched in 2006. In May 2007 pigs' heads were hung on two mosques in Silistra. There were no reports of prosecutions in that incident or in a number of 2006 incidents, including the breaking of a window of the Banyabasi Mosqui in Sofia and the defacement of a mosque in Aytos with paint. The Chief Mufti's Office expressed concern that, while the vandals were usually apprehended, they rarely received legal penalties or punishments.

VMRO, a fringe political party, attempted unsuccessfully to disrupt a large gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses on April 28 and 29, 2007, in the city of Dobrich, and the municipality allowed the organization to go on with the event. A few weeks prior, on April 2, 2007, the VMRO succeeded in preventing a religious gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses in Varna, forcing cancellation of their contract with the Palace Cinema. Leading up to the April 28-29 gathering, local media outlets publicized VMRO views on Jehovah's Witnesses, citing the group's comments about the antisocial practices of Jehovah's Witnesses, their demands that the municipality stop the gathering, and threats to gather "members and sympathizers" as a sign of protest. After intervention from the Religious Confessions Directorate, the municipality of Dobrich provided Jehovah's Witnesses with enough police protection to assure that the event was not disrupted.

The extreme nationalist political party Ataka continued to publish anti-Semitic material in its newspaper, on its Web site, and on its cable television mouthpiece Skat. In January 2007 Ataka's deputy chair and Member of the European Parliament Dimitar Stoyanov stated that he opposed the "Jewish establishment" and accused "powerful Jews" of "paying the media to form the social awareness of the people."

In October 2007 the Ataka party re-launched a campaign to silence the speakers on the Sofia Mosque, claiming that the invitation to prayer was disturbing persons in the capital's central area. In 2006, at the request of the Sofia mayor, the Chief Mufti's Office promised to turn down the volume "if [it] exceeded the permitted limit."

In August 2007, the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination ruled in a case regarding the cancellation of the traineeship of a young female student, who was a member of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Commission ruled that the manager of the company had engaged in direct discrimination on the basis of religion and warned the manager to refrain from similar discriminatory actions in the future.

The investigation into the 2005 desecration of Turkish graves in Haskovo by three teenagers was ongoing at the end of the reporting period, but it appeared unlikely that the perpetrators would be punished.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy regularly monitored religious freedom in contacts with government officials, Members of Parliament (MPs), clergy and lay leaders of religious communities, and NGOs.

Embassy officers met with Orthodox leaders and clergy, senior and local Muslim leaders, religious and lay leaders of the Jewish community, and leaders of numerous Protestant and "nontraditional" denominations. During the period covered by this report, the Embassy remained closely engaged with government officials, MPs, religious organizations, and NGOs concerning the 2002 Denominations Act. The Embassy also remained concerned about reports of discrimination against "nontraditional" religious organizations. Embassy representatives met with various religious groups and government entities regarding the restitution of Jewish properties and with Muslim leaders regarding Islamic extremism and the Muslim leadership dispute.

Released on September 19, 2008

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