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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000

BULGARIA

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There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Public opinion and periodic media articles continued to suggest a somewhat hostile and alarmist attitude toward nontraditional religious groups, although less frequently than in earlier years. Periodic episodes of government harassment of nontraditional religious groups continue to occur on an occasional basis, especially at the local and regional levels. The legislature considered several versions of a draft law on religion that caused concern among some religious and human rights groups, because of its potential to give the Government an intrusive and controlling role in the affairs of religious denominations. The final bill has not been voted on yet.

The U.S. Government has raised the issue of religious freedom repeatedly in contacts with government officials and Members of Parliament. The Ambassador and other embassy officers periodically have urged the Government to expedite registration of church groups, and on numerous occasions have pointed out problems with several aspects of the proposed law on religion under discussion in the Parliament.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice for some non-Orthodox religious groups. This restriction is manifested primarily in a registration process that is selective, slow, and nontransparent. The Government prohibits the public practice of religion by groups that are not registered.

The legal requirement that groups whose activities have a religious element register with the Council of Ministers remained an obstacle to the activity of some religious groups, such as the Unification Church and the Church of the Nazarene (which has tried repeatedly to register for over 5 years), prior to or in the absence of registration. Furthermore several municipal governments established local registration requirements for religious groups, despite the lack of clear legal authority to do so. In some cases, local

authorities used the lack of registration as a pretext for interference against some groups and employed arbitrary harassment tactics against others. During the period covered by this report, the ability of a few religious groups to conduct services or to spread their religious message freely came under occasional attack, both as a result of action by local government authorities and because of public intolerance. Although fewer instances were reported than in earlier years, sporadic reports of this nature persist.

The Constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the "traditional" religion. The Government provides financial support for the Eastern Orthodox Church, as well as several other religious communities perceived as holding historic places in society, such as the Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Jewish faiths. These groups generally benefit from a relatively high degree of governmental and societal tolerance.

Religious Demography

Official census statistics indicate that approximately 86 percent of citizens are Orthodox, 13 percent are Muslim, 1 percent is Catholic, and most of the remainder belong to a variety of Protestant religions. The country's Jewish community, with only a few thousand persons, constitutes less than 1 percent of the population and generally is well accepted and integrated into society. Some observers believe that this census gives disproportionate strength to the Orthodox Church, in part because reportedly many essentially nonreligious or anti-religious persons were listed as Orthodox by default. Muslim leaders claim that their adherents constitute as much as 20 percent of the population.

Some religious minorities are concentrated geographically. The Rhodope Mountains (along the country's southern border with Greece) are home to many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and Pomaks (Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam centuries ago under Ottoman rule). At the western extreme of the Rhodopes, there are greater numbers of Pomaks, and on the eastern end, more ethnic Turks. Muslim ethnic Turks and Roma 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. There are comparatively large numbers of Roman Catholics in Plovdiv, Assenovgrad, and in cities along the Danube River, as well as eastern rite Catholic communities in Sofia and Smolyan. Many members of the country's small Jewish community live in Sofia, Ruse, and along the Black Sea coast. However, Protestant groups are dispersed more widely throughout the country.

Although no exact data are available on attendance levels, most observers agree that evangelical Protestants tend to participate in religious services more frequently than other religious groups. Members of the country's Catholic community also are regarded as more likely than members of other faiths to regularly attend religious services.

For most registered religious groups there were no restrictions on attendance at religious services or on private religious instruction. A school for imams, a Muslim cultural center, university theological faculties, and religious primary schools operated freely. Bibles and other religious materials in the Bulgarian language were imported freely and printed on most occasions, and Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish publications were published regularly.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There were several incidents of harassment of Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses by police and local authorities. For example, in July 1999, police in Stara Zagora interrupted a Mormon church service, demanded that worshippers produce their identity documents, and recorded the names and identification numbers of everyone present. They also required that church leaders present registration papers and a contract for the use of the building, which the church representatives did not have with them. The police alleged that the Mormon church was not registered properly with the city authorities.

On July 15, 1999, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses was required to pay approximately \$250 (500 leva) because of his participation in a June 1998 Bible study meeting in Plovdiv, which was deemed unlawful because Jehovah's Witnesses was an unregistered

denomination. Jehovah's Witnesses alleges that the accused man and his lawyer were not present for the hearing at which the fine was imposed because the venue was changed without notice, and they therefore arrived 5 minutes late for the proceedings. Two other members of Jehovah's Witnesses who have been ordered to pay approximately \$250 (500 leva) fines for similar offenses still await a final determination on their cases.

In December 1999, police in Pernik interrupted a meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses. The police examined and recorded the identity documents of those present, and warned that such meetings should not be held in the future. The group was cited for violation of a city ordinance.

In April 2000, several Mormon missionaries in Plovdiv were challenged by police while distributing literature and were required to go to the police station. They were charged with distributing brochures without a license.

In April 2000, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses was refused entry into the country by border police, reportedly on the grounds that she had been deported from the country in 1997 for practicing her then-unregistered faith.

A number of religious groups have complained that foreign-national missionaries and religious leaders experience difficulties in obtaining and renewing residence visas in the country; the issuance of residence visas appears to be subject to the whim of individual authorities.

The Ministry of Education initiated a course on religion in the high school curriculum beginning with the 1998/1999 school year. The original plan called for a world religion course that avoided endorsing any particular faith; however, members of other religions, especially ethnic Turkish Muslims, maintain that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church receives privileged coverage in the textbooks. The religion course is optional and is not available at all schools. The Ministry of Education has cooperated with the chief mufti to initiate a pilot program of optional Islamic education classes in primary schools. If the pilot program is successful, the program purportedly would be made more broadly available in the school system.

At the Department of Theology of Sofia University all students are required to present an Orthodox Church baptismal certificate, and married students must present an Orthodox marriage certificate, in order to enroll in the Department's classes. These requirements make it impossible for non-Orthodox students to enroll in the Department.

The Government has committed to eliminating its military construction and transportation battalions, and has begun the phaseout process, which is expected to take 2 more years. Turkish and Roma minorities, who predominantly are Muslim, traditionally have been conscripted into these special work battalions, rather than being assigned to regular military units, to fulfill their mandatory military service requirements. Despite the phaseout of these units, the underlying discrimination issue remains unresolved. Ethnic and religious minorities continue to be conscripted into forced labor in military work units, while simultaneously remaining essentially barred from the professional military officer corps.

In March 1999, a schoolteacher in Gabrovo who is a member of a Pentecostal church resigned from her job. She claimed that she was intimidated into resigning as a result of her religious beliefs. She has filed two lawsuits, one for violation of contract and a second for libel. She received a favorable ruling on the first case, and the second remains pending.

There were no indications that the Government discriminated against members of any religious group in making restitution to previous owners of properties that were nationalized during the Communist regime. The Government has supported in principle the need for restitution, although actual progress apparently has stalled on two lucrative commercial properties believed to belong rightfully to the Jewish community. The Orthodox Church and the Muslim community each claim significant numbers of

properties currently held by the Government, although the validity of some of these claims may be open to dispute.

The Government refused to recognize an alternative Patriarch elected by supporters in 1996, and the schism that opened in the Orthodox Church in 1992 continued, despite the death of this alternative Patriarch in April 1999. The Government nevertheless encouraged the feuding factions to heal their prolonged rift. To date, these efforts have not been successful.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

In March 2000, two members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Turgovishte were detained briefly by police and charged with disruption of public order under a city ordinance because of their public proselytizing.

The National Assembly passed a law on alternatives to military service in October 1998, which entered into force on January 1, 1999. Under this new law, alternative service is now 2 years, more than twice as long as military service. (Conscripted military service has been reduced to 9 months for most recruits, while university graduates are to serve just 6 months.) Reportedly, several individuals currently are serving in an alternative civilian capacity in lieu of military service, although human rights observers complain that procedures for invoking this alternative as a conscientious objector are unclear. Among those already performing alternate service is Krassimir Savov, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses previously imprisoned for refusing mandatory military service, who was released from prison by presidential pardon in March 1999. There were no new reports of incarcerations on religious grounds during the period covered by this report.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government generally has encouraged greater religious tolerance since early 1998 by generally seeking to promote greater understanding among different faiths. However, while the observance of religious freedom has improved for some nontraditional groups, other groups have faced official disfavor and been disadvantaged by the Government's persistent refusal to grant registration. Other church groups have obtained registration from the national Government, but continue to face some discrimination and antipathy from many local governments. The national Government has not sought to dissuade local governments from abiding by these municipal government decisions, which appear to fall into a gray area of the law. Burgas, Plovdiv, and Stara Zagora are among the municipalities that have prompted the greatest number of complaints of harassment of nontraditional religious groups. Some observers note with concern a tendency by certain municipalities to enact regulations that may be used to limit religious freedom if a perceived need arises. For example, a regulation passed by Sofia municipality in February 1999 forbids references to miracles and healing during religious services, a provision that many fear may be employed as a pretext to ban or interrupt services by charismatic evangelical groups. The regulation cites a Communist-era law dating from 1949, which is technically still in effect, and which forbids foreigners from proselytizing and administering religious services in the country. Other municipalities have enacted similar regulations. The 1949 law also has been criticized in its own right as an outmoded potential impediment to free religious activity. However, despite the law's continued technical validity, foreign missionaries can and do receive permission to proselytize in the country.

A new law on religion currently is being developed in Parliament. Several variations have been introduced and are under discussion by parliamentarians. As written, the bills that have been put forward contain a number of provisions that potentially could infringe on religious freedom, and tend to grant the central Government a controlling role in overseeing religious groups. However, there are indications that some of these problems may be mitigated through the consultation process during which the final draft language is prepared (see Section III).

Forced Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between religious communities generally were good; however, discrimination, harassment, and general public intolerance of nontraditional religious minorities (primarily newer evangelical Protestant groups) remained an intermittent problem. Strongly held suspicion of evangelical denominations among the Orthodox populace is widespread and pervasive across the political spectrum and has resulted in discrimination. Often cloaked in a veneer of "patriotism," intolerance of the religious beliefs of others is extremely common. Such mainstream public pressure for the containment of "foreign religious sects" inevitably influences policymakers. Nevertheless, human rights observers agreed that such discrimination has lessened somewhat over the last 2 years as society has appeared to become more accepting of a least some previously unfamiliar religions.

Certain religions, including both groups denied registration and those officially registered, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, faced discriminatory practices prior to registration in late 1998, as did other groups, which, despite full compliance with the law, were greeted with hostility by the press, segments of the public, and certain government officials. However, this problem continued during the period covered by this report, and is more pervasive, affecting more than just one group.

In August 1999, the Mormon Church in Burgas suffered vandalism when stones were thrown through two of the church windows. In October 1999, in Kotel a group of youths who claimed to be activists of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) political party chased a representative of the Lutheran Church and his family from the home in which they were staying. In December 1999, the Zion Christian Church in Stara Zagora was vandalized with hate graffiti.

Non-Orthodox religious groups continued to be affected adversely by periodic negative media coverage. A variety of media outlets drew lurid and inaccurate pictures of the activities of Non-Orthodox religious groups. For example, the Open Bible Fellowship church was accused of being financed by drug and gun smuggling profits. Members of the press commonly accuse nontraditional religious groups of promoting suicide, drug use, and the breakup of families.

In May 2000, in Maritsa volunteer workers representing the Christian Unity Foundation were beaten, one severely, when they attempted to conduct a scheduled screening of a documentary-style film on the life of Jesus Christ. The film itself was stolen from their car. The attack was carried out by six to eight youths, under the apparent direction of a local Bulgarian Orthodox priest.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy regularly monitors religious freedom in ongoing contacts with government officials, clergy, lay leaders of minority communities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's). Embassy officers have met with Orthodox clergy from both sides of the schism, with the chief mufti of the Muslim community, with religious and lay leaders of the Jewish community, as well as with the leaders of numerous Protestant denominations. During the period covered by this report, the Embassy was particularly active in engaging the Government on its proposed new law on religion, which remains pending in the Parliament (see Section I). The Ambassador, embassy officers, and a visiting State Department official from the Office of International Religious Freedom met with a diverse cross-section of relevant government officials and Members of Parliament to advocate a liberal approach to religious freedom under the new law. Embassy officers have maintained close contact with human rights and religious groups to remain attuned to their concerns about the proposed law. The U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also raised the issue of a liberal approach to religious freedom under the new law with Bulgaria's OSCE ambassador.

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