



Bulgaria

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the law prohibits the public practice of religion by unregistered groups. The Constitution also designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the "traditional" religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious 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 7.7 million. The majority of citizens, estimated at 85 percent, identify themselves as Orthodox Christians. 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. Academic research estimated that up to 40 percent of the population is atheist or agnostic. Official registration of religious organizations is handled by the Sofia City Court; it reported that 12 new denominations were registered between February 2006 and February 2007, bringing the total number of registered religious groups to 85 denominations in addition to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC), an increase of more than 15 percent.

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. While clear statistics were not available, 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 citizens 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 Eastern Rite Uniate 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.

Foreign missionaries from numerous denominations are active in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the law prohibits the public practice of religion by unregistered groups. The Constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity, represented by the BOC, as the "traditional" religion, and the Government provided preferential 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 faiths.

The 2002 Denominations Act requires all religious groups other than the Orthodox Church to register in the Sofia City Court, which is also responsible for maintaining the national register of such groups. The act allows only legally registered groups to perform public activities outside their places of worship. Article 36 of the act punishes "any person carrying out religious activity in the name of a religion without representational authority."

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. In contrast with previous periods, the Directorate became more transparent and more responsive to denominations' concerns during the period covered by this report. All applicants have the right to appeal negative registration decisions to the Court of Appeals. Denominations reported a general improvement in the registration process since the court took over this responsibility in 2003. 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. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that their branches had to wait up to 2 years before they could successfully register locally in Dimitrovgrad, Veliko Tarnovo, and Smolyan. These complaints were less frequent than in previous periods.

Article 8 of the act allows the courts to punish 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.

Concerns that the 2002 Denominations Act would make it hard for small religious denominations to register and function did not fully materialize. While the Council of Europe's 2003 review of the Act highlighted that the provisions for registration remained ambiguous, most religious groups reported that they successfully registered. However, some remained concerned that the act does not specify the consequences of failure to register or outline any recourse if a competent court refuses to grant registration.

Representatives of some evangelical Protestant churches reported problems in holding public meetings, particularly in the Dobrich and Varna municipalities.

The 4-year legal dispute surrounding leadership of the Muslim community remained unsettled, in part due to conflicting court decisions. In January 2006 the City Court issued official certificates of registration to rival Islamic parties in the dispute--to Nedim Gendzhev on January 25 and to Mustafa Alish Hadji on January 26. This allowed both sides to claim legal recognition and control of community funds. Previously, the Sofia City Court attempted to resolve the issue in May 2005 by formally registering Mustafa Alish Hadji as Chief Mufti. Rival Muslim leader Nedim Gendzhev then filed an appeal, and in December 2005, the Sofia Appellate Court ordered Gendzhev's registration as leader.

The 2002 Denominations Act 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. The Jubilee Campaign Report maintains that the law effectively outlaws the Bulgarian Orthodox "Alternative Synod" and makes it unlikely that the Alternative Synod would be recognized as a separate religious organization from the BOC.

The case of the Bulgarian Orthodox "Alternate 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. There were no developments in several smaller cases involving property disputes between the Orthodox Church and the Alternative Synod.

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 multidominational Protestant seminary, and 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.

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 confessions. All officially registered religious confessions 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

While the state of religious freedom improved for some "nontraditional" groups, other groups continued to face limited discrimination and antipathy from local authorities, 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 does not require formal local registration of denominations, although some municipalities claimed that it does.

Some municipalities, such as Rousse, Shumen, Pleven, Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, and Kurdzhali, had local ordinances curtailing religious practices that have not been changed to conform to the 2002 Denominations Act. In most cases, these ordinances were not strictly enforced, although Mormon missionaries were prevented from distributing religious pamphlets in Plovdiv and Pleven.

The Ahmadi Muslim Organization reported that Blagoevgrad authorities obstructed its members' right to practice. On December 8, 2006, the local public prosecutor brought a case against the Ahmadi community for carrying out religious activities without proper national registration. The group resorted to registering as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) after its attempt to register as a religious group nationally was denied in 2005. The prosecution challenged the group's NGO status, claiming that the Ahmadis went beyond NGO boundaries by proselytizing and holding religious meetings. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period. Public Prosecutor Maria Zoteva of Blagoevgrad reportedly opposed the community, noting that it had already been denied registration and implying that the community was not an acceptable religion.

The Ahmadi community reapplied for national registration with the Sofia City Court, attempting to register as the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. By law the Sofia City Court may request the opinion of the Religious Confessions Directorate (under the Council of Ministers), which may ask for the Chief Mufti's input. The Muftiship seemingly would not consent to any outside group registering as Muslims. The court case was pending at the end of the period covered by this report. The expert statement of the Religious Directorate, released May 8, 2007, stated that the name Ahmadiyya Muslim Community was problematic because the court should not be involved in a theological dispute as to whether Ahmadis are Muslims. Additionally, the Directorate stated 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.

Some local governments restricted certain forms of proselytizing. In Plovdiv local officials restricted Jehovah Witnesses from much of their proselytizing activity. Special regulations forbid public preaching; a church has the right to preach only in its own place of worship, otherwise individuals risk sanctions. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that police in Veliko Tarnovo required missionaries to present proof of registration before they could preach publicly. One member said that municipal police often stopped Jehovah's Witnesses who were conducting missionary activity, asked them to show their identity papers, and warned them to stop their activity. Unlike in previous periods, no missionaries reported being arrested or fined for proselytizing.

While municipalities such as Burgas, Plovdiv, Pleven, Pernik, Stamboliyski, Haskovo, and Targovishte had decrees prohibiting the offering of religious literature "on the streets and at the houses of citizens" or allowing religious literature only from the religious group registered by the municipality, during the reporting period some of these decrees were changed or softened.

Jehovah's Witnesses were rarely stopped while engaging in preaching activity; however, on May 24, 2007, police stopped and questioned a 14-year-old Jehovah's Witness preaching with an adult companion in Gorna Oryahovitsa. A local newspaper published an article accusing the group of breaking the law by using underage children to distribute "religious propaganda."

On April 25, 2007, police stopped two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Veliko Tarnovo and asked them to produce proof

that they had the right to preach publicly. The police officers wrote a protocol and warned the two to discontinue their public preaching or there would be serious consequences.

Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that local authorities obstructed the construction of a meeting house in Varna; after a long battle, they gained permission to begin construction on May 7, 2007. After the municipality blocked the construction, the group took the case to court and won the lower court decision and the appeal. They reapplied to have the permit verified in March 2007, and after new complaints and a new refusal to grant permission to begin construction, the survey was finally verified on May 7, 2007.

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. In contrast with previous years, there were no reports of foreign missionaries being denied visas.

Local political and religious leaders in the Smolyan area alleged that local education authorities discouraged female students from wearing headscarves in public schools. An NGO filed a complaint with the Commission Against Discrimination (CPD) stating that the local policy effectively banned headscarves. While there is no formal national policy on religious symbols in schools, the Commission decided in August 2006 that school uniform requirements did not discriminate against female Muslim students.

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. For example, the Catholic Church reported that the Government was less responsive than in previous periods, with the courts refusing to restitute a few properties.

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 the Government either return the properties to the community or find comparable properties as compensation. 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 Government and Shalom were working on resolving all outstanding restitution cases at the end of the period covered by this report.

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. One Protestant radio group was given a broadcast in 2002, but as of 2006 it had not been allocated a frequency. The case was taken to the Supreme Court.

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 European Court of Human Rights 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. Protestant pastor Pavel Hristov, head of the Bulgarian Missionary Network, reported that in the town of Djebel, a church which failed to apply for a tax declaration in time was closed by the local court. The pastor claimed that the ethnic Turkish authorities were searching for an excuse to move against the church.

In July 2005 a Jehovah's Witness was fined by Plovdiv authorities for "distributing brochures with religious content," but on July 17, 2006, the Plovdiv District Court dismissed the penalty upon appeal. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that no members were fined for distributing religious literature during the period covered by this report.

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.

Anti-Semitism

Dimitar Stoyanov, a member of the extremist political party Ataka and a new Member of the European Parliament as of January 1, 2007, stated that he opposed the "Jewish establishment" and was quoted saying, "There are a lot of powerful Jews, with a lot of money, who are paying the media to form the social awareness of the people. They are also playing with economic crises in countries like Bulgaria and getting rich."

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 85 in 2007.

Some religious denominations reported that the Religious Confessions Directorate had become more active in assuring that national and local authorities respect and promoted religious freedom and that the national government was more receptive to their concerns. For example, 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 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. While human rights groups reported that societal discrimination against "nontraditional" religious groups continued to gradually lessen, it was not uncommon for the media to disseminate negative and derogatory stories about such groups. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) reported a slight improvement with media, but 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 reported several cases of mosque desecrations. On May 3, 2007, pigs' heads were hung on two mosques in Silistra. In late July 2006, a swastika was drawn on the wall of the mosque in Kazanluk; police identified the perpetrators as five teenagers who were part of a group of soccer fans spraying graffiti on buildings, apparently without political or ethnic motives. On July 26, 2006, the Kazanluk mosque was set on fire by a torch thrown through a window. On July 18, 2006, a window of the Banyabassi Mosque in Sofia was broken, and the door of a mosque in the town of Aytos was defaced with paint. The Chief Mufti's Office expressed concern that while the vandals were usually apprehended, they rarely received legal penalties or punishments. The National Assembly adopted a declaration condemning the escalating threats to religious tolerance and ethnic peace.

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 Ataka party 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. On the request of the Sofia mayor, the Chief Mufti's Office promised to turn down the volume "if [it] exceeded the permitted limit."

In November 2006 some newspapers published articles alleging that the Ahmadi Muslims were terrorists and asserting that letting Ahmadis register was a threat to national security.

The investigation into the 2005 desecration of Turkish graves in Haskovo by three teenagers was ongoing at the end of the reporting period, and a case regarding the cancelled traineeship of a young female Jehovah's Witness student was pending in the Supreme Administrative Court.

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 with government interference in the BOC schism and with reports of discrimination against "nontraditional" religious organizations. Embassy representatives met with various religious groups and government entities regarding the restitution of properties and with Muslim leaders regarding Islamic extremism and the Muslim leadership dispute.

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