

# BULGARIA

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the “traditional” religion, exempting it from having to register in court as required for all other religious groups. There were some concerns that the government did not proactively intervene to prevent societal abuses. There also were continuing reports of intolerance from police and local authorities during the year.

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

The U.S. government promoted religious freedom in the country as part of its overall policy to uphold human rights and facilitated dialogue between religious groups from both countries.

## Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2011 census, 76 percent of the population identifies itself as Orthodox Christian. Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism are generally understood as collectively holding a historic place in the country’s culture. Muslims comprise the largest minority, estimated at 10 percent of the population. Groups that in total constitute about 2 percent of the population include Catholics, Armenian Christians, Jews, evangelical Protestants, and others. There are 114 registered religious groups in addition to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC).

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” (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule). Ethnic Turkish and Roma Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea

coast. Nearly 40 percent of the country's Catholics are located in and around Plovdiv. The majority of the small Jewish community lives in Sofia and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are more widely dispersed throughout the country but are more numerous in areas with large Roma populations.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and laws protect religious freedom.

The law allows private religious exercise only if members of the religious community 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, represented by the BOC, is the traditional religion. The law designates the Metropolitan of Sofia as the BOC's patriarch and establishes the BOC as a legal entity, exempting it from court registration mandatory for all other religious groups that wish to acquire national legal recognition. The state budget allocated three million levs (\$1.98 million) for registered religious groups. Of the total, 2.3 million levs (\$1.52 million) was allocated for the BOC, 180,000 levs (\$119,126) for the Muslim community, 40,000 levs (\$26,472) for the Armenian Apostolic Church, 30,000 levs (\$19,854) for the Jewish community, and 40,000 levs (\$26,472) for other registered denominations.

To receive national legal recognition, denominations must apply for official court registration, and generally it is granted. The Council of Ministers' Religious Confessions Directorate, formerly responsible for the registration of religious groups, 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 denominations, but in the past some municipalities insisted that branches register locally. Some concerns remained that the act does not adequately specify the consequences of failure to register.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines, but there were concerns that some parties exploited religious problems for political purposes.

The law allows the publication of religious media and the distribution of religious literature. However, some municipal ordinances require local permits for distribution of 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 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 government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. In addition, the government respects the holidays of non-Orthodox religious groups, including Muslim, Catholic, Jewish, evangelical Christian, and Baha'i, and grants their members leave upon request.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The spokesman for the Office of the Chief Mufti complained of continued harassment from the security services intending to intimidate Muslim leaders. There were allegations that authorities brought in imams and muftis repeatedly for questioning as a form of intimidation.

For example, in February a former mufti was arrested at night in his home for failing to respond to a court summons which he asserted had never been served.

In December authorities began indictment proceedings against 12 Muslims whose homes and offices were raided by police and officers of the State Agency for National Security in October 2010 for allegedly undermining the constitutional order. The Chief Mufti's Office continued to maintain the innocence of the 12 individuals and labeled the ongoing proceedings as an attack on religious freedom.

Contrary to the law, some municipalities restricted certain forms of proselytizing and prohibited the distribution of religious literature, even by groups that were registered locally. There were continuing reports of restrictions being enforced in

Haskovo, Rousse, and Pleven. The Directorate for Religious Affairs stated both local governments and uniformed police were unfamiliar with the provisions of the 2002 act and needed training.

There were no indications that the government discriminated against members of any religious group in the restitution of properties nationalized during the communist period. The statute of limitation for restitution cases was extended until 2013 to ensure religious groups have enough time to file claims.

In October the Supreme Cassation Court upheld the restitution of the Jewish community's hospital building, ending a long string of appeals spanning over a decade.

In July the Supreme Administrative Court confirmed the order of the deputy mayor of Burgas to destroy a mosque's half-finished minaret that, according to the authorities, was a separate building and needed an additional construction permit. The court decision is final, and the Muslim denomination was required to pay for the minaret's destruction.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim communities reported problems obtaining construction permits for new prayer houses and mosques. For example, the Muslim community of Blagoevgrad reported that for many years the local government ignored their repeated applications for a permit to renovate their mosque.

In April the Sofia Appellate Court overturned the lower court's refusal to register Mustafa Hadji as the legitimate Chief Mufti of the Muslim denomination, which officially ended the longstanding leadership dispute with Nedim Gendzhev.

Some groups continued to face discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities, despite obtaining national registration from the Sofia City Court. The law allows nationally registered religious groups to have local branches. The law requires only that the branches notify local authorities of their national registration, but some municipalities claimed that they required these religious groups to also obtain formal local registration.

### **Government Inaction**

The government did not enforce legal and policy protections of religious freedom consistently.

Missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) reported instances of police failure to respond on their behalf to incidents of apparent harassment. For example, in May members of the church reported that two police officers in Burgas refused to intervene when Mormon missionaries reported they had been manhandled by a TV crew from an extreme nationalist cable channel.

The Jewish community expressed concern over the lack of public and official reaction to anti-Semitic incidents.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

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

Relations between religious groups generally remained tolerant and collaborative, especially within the Religious Communities Council which, without BOC participation, discussed and defended common positions with the government. However, discrimination, harassment, and public intolerance of some religious groups remained intermittent problems. There were continuing reports of societal discrimination against some religious groups. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to express concern about allegedly slanderous media reports that purportedly misrepresented their activities and beliefs. Mormons continued to report that they experienced harassment by the media, and in particular from ultranationalist SKAT TV, in Burgas and Varna.

Muslims continued to report cases of mosque desecration. For example, vandals smashed mosque windows in Silistra and Yambol, and drew swastikas and insults on the mosques in Pleven Silistra and Blagoevgrad, as well as the Chief Mufti's office.

The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) persisted in its harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses. In April VMRO leaders mobilized a group via Facebook to attack Jehovah's Witnesses in their kingdom hall in Burgas. The members of the group threw stones and stormed the entrance of the house of worship where over 100 people, including women and children, were attending services. Five Witnesses required hospitalization.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. government promoted religious freedom in the country as part of its overall policy to uphold human rights. The U.S. embassy regularly monitored religious freedom through contacts with government officials, members of parliament, clergy and lay leaders of religious communities, and nongovernmental organizations. During the year, the U.S. government organized a visit to the United States of five Muslim leaders who participated in a religious tolerance program. At the same time, a U.S. Muslim speaker visited with several Muslim communities in the country for a discussion on religious freedom in both countries.