

# **BULGARIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and conscience. Religious groups may worship without registering, but registered groups receive benefits. The constitution recognizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's "traditional" religion, and the law exempts the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) from registration. In April the Supreme Cassation Court convicted 13 Muslim leaders of spreading Salafi Islam, which the court ruled was an antidemocratic ideology. It sentenced one imam to one year in prison. In December the Pazardjik District Court convicted 14 Romani Muslims of supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, incitement to war, and spreading Salafi Islam. Thirteen received prison sentences, and one received a suspended sentence. In August the government granted registration to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. Muslim leaders said several municipalities denied permission to build new or rehabilitate existing religious facilities. The Office of the Grand Mufti said its attempts to litigate its recognition as the successor to the pre-1949 organization Muslim Religious Communities for the purpose of reclaiming properties seized by the former communist government had reached an impasse. Parliament passed legislation allowing religious groups to defer payment of outstanding revenue obligations for 10 years and providing for a six-fold increase in government funding for the BOC and the Muslim community. There were multiple court decisions invalidating local administrations' prohibitions on Jehovah's Witnesses' proselytizing activities; however, police in several municipalities continued to state the group could not distribute literature on the street or proselytize door-to-door.

According to a European Commission survey released in May, 20 percent of respondents said religious discrimination was widespread. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and Jehovah's Witnesses reported harassment and threats. Jehovah's Witnesses reported a further decrease in cases of assault and harassment but said some media misrepresent their activities. In February 200-300 people attended the Bulgarian National Union's annual march honoring Hristo Lukov, leader of a pro-Nazi organization in the 1940s. A number of officials spoke out against the march, and the Sofia municipality attempted to ban it, but a court overturned the ban. Jewish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concern about what they said was a continued increase of anti-Semitic speech in political rhetoric and in traditional and new media, as well as public manifestations of anti-Semitic symbols. Muslims and Jews reported incidents of vandalism of their properties.

High-ranking BOC prelates dismissed Pope Francis' calls for ecumenical unity during his visit in May, with Metropolitan Nikolai of Plovdiv saying, "It is not possible to unite the light and the darkness." The National Council of Religious Communities continued its efforts to promote religious tolerance.

The Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom met with the foreign minister and religious leaders during his visit to the country in May to discuss combating religious persecution, as well as the importance of religious freedom in combating violent extremism. The U.S. Ambassador supported civil society efforts to encourage tolerance and the manifesto against hate speech signed by the Council of Ministers. The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials regularly discussed cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and legislative initiatives restricting religious activities, including with representatives of the National Assembly, Directorate for Religious Affairs, Office of the Ombudsman, Commission for Protection against Discrimination, local governments, law enforcement and minority religious groups.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.0 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census (the most recent), 76 percent of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, primarily affiliated with the BOC. The census reports Muslims, the second largest religious group, are approximately 10 percent of the population, followed by Protestants at 1.1 percent and Roman Catholics at 0.8 percent. Orthodox Christians of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (AAOC), Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and other groups together make up 0.2 percent of the population. According to the census, 4.8 percent of respondents have no religion and 7.1 percent do not specify a religion. According to a report by the think tank Agency for Social Analyses released in April, 74 percent of individuals identify as Orthodox Christians, 10 percent as Muslims, 13 percent as atheists, and 3 percent are from other religious traditions.

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 and Turkey. Ethnic Turkish and Romani Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea coast. Some recent Romani converts to Islam live in towns in the central region, such as Plovdiv and Pazardjik. According to the census, nearly 40 percent of Catholics

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

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states freedom of conscience and choice of religion or no religion are inviolable, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the state shall assist in maintaining tolerance and respect among believers of different denominations, as well as between believers and nonbelievers. It states the practice of any religion shall be unrestricted and religious beliefs, institutions, and communities shall not be used for political ends. It restricts freedom of religion to the extent its practice would be detrimental to national security, public order, health, and morals, or the rights and freedoms of others. It states no one shall be exempt from obligations established by the constitution or the law on grounds of religious or other convictions. The constitution also stipulates the separation of religious institutions from the state and prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines, as well as organizations that incite religious animosity. The law does not allow any privilege based on religious identity.

The constitution names Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's traditional religion. The law establishes the BOC as a legal entity, exempting it from the court registration that is mandatory for all other religious groups seeking legal recognition.

The penal code prescribes up to three years' imprisonment for persons attacking individuals or groups based on their religious affiliation. Instigators and leaders of an attack may receive prison sentences of up to six years. Those who obstruct the ability of individuals to profess their faith, carry out their rituals and services, or compel another to participate in religious rituals and services may receive prison sentences of up to one year. Violating a person's or group's freedom to acquire or practice a religious belief is subject to a fine of between 100 and 300 levs (\$57-\$170). If a legal entity commits the infraction, the fine may range from 500 to 5,000 levs (\$290-\$2,900).

To receive national legal recognition, religious groups other than the BOC must register with the Sofia City Court. Applications must include: the group's name and official address; a description of the group's religious beliefs and service practices, organizational structure and bodies, management procedures, bodies, and mandates; a list of official representatives and the processes for their election; procedures for convening meetings and making decisions; and information on finances and property and processes for termination and liquidation of the group. The Directorate for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers provides expert opinions on registration matters upon the court's request. Applicants must notify the Directorate for Religious Affairs within seven days of receiving a court decision on their registration. Applicants may appeal negative registration decisions to the Sofia Appellate Court and, subsequently, the Supreme Cassation Court. The law does not require the formal registration of local branches of registered groups, only that branches notify the local authorities, and local authorities enter them in a register. Local branches are not required to obtain registration from the local court. The law prohibits registration of different groups with the same name in the same location. The Directorate for Religious Affairs and any prosecutor may request a court revoke a religious group's registration on the grounds of systematic violations of the law. There are 191 registered religious groups in addition to the BOC.

The law requires the government to provide funding for all registered religious groups based on the number of self-identified followers in the latest census (2011), on a scale of 10 levs (\$6) per capita to groups that comprise more than 1 percent of the population, and varying amounts for the rest.

Registered groups have the right to perform religious services; maintain financial accounts; own property such as houses of worship and cemeteries; provide medical, social, and educational services; receive property tax and other exemptions; and participate in commercial ventures.

Unregistered religious groups may engage in religious practice, but they lack privileges granted to registered groups, such as access to government funding and the right to own property, establish financial accounts in their names, operate schools and hospitals, receive property tax exemptions, and sell religious merchandise.

The law restricts the wearing of face-covering garments in public places, imposing a fine of 200 leva (\$110) for a first offense and 1,500 leva (\$860) for repeat offenses.

The law allows registered groups to publish, import, and distribute religious media; unregistered groups may not do so. The law does not restrict proselytizing by registered or unregistered groups. Some municipal ordinances, however, restrict the activities of unregistered groups to proselytize, including going door-to-door, and require local permits for distribution of religious literature in public places.

By law, public schools at all levels may, but are not required to, teach the historical, philosophical, and cultural aspects of religion and introduce students to the moral values of different religious groups as part of the core curriculum. A school may teach any registered religion in a special course as part of the elective curriculum upon request of at least 13 students, subject to the availability of books and teachers. The Ministry of Education and Science approves the content of and provides books for these special religion courses. If a public school is unable to pay for a religion teacher, it may accept financial sponsorship from a private donor or a teacher from a registered denomination. The law also allows registered religious groups to operate schools and universities, provided they meet government standards for secular education.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination is an independent government body charged with preventing and protecting against discrimination, including religious discrimination, and ensuring equal opportunity. It functions as a civil litigation court adjudicating discrimination complaints and does not charge for its services. The commission's decisions may be appealed to administrative courts. If the commission accepts a case, it assigns it to a panel and then reviews it in open session. If it makes a finding of discrimination, the commission may impose a fine of 250 to 2,000 leva (\$140-\$1,100). The commission may double fines for repeat violations. Regional courts may also try civil cases involving religious discrimination.

The law establishes an independent ombudsman to serve as an advocate for citizens who believe public or municipal administrations or public service providers have violated their rights and freedoms, including those pertaining to religion, through their actions or inaction. The ombudsman may request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals for terminating existing practices, refer information to the prosecution

service, and request the Constitutional Court abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional.

The penal code provides up to three years' imprisonment for forming "a political organization on religious grounds" or using a church or religion to spread propaganda against the authority of the state or its activities.

The penal code prohibits the propagation or incitement of religious or other discrimination, violence, or hatred "by speech, press or other media, by electronic information systems or in another manner," as well as religiously motivated assault or property damage. Either offense is punishable by imprisonment for one to four years and a fine of 5,000 to 10,000 leva (\$2,900-\$5,700), as well as "public censure." Desecration of religious symbols or sites, including places of worship or graves, is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 3,000 to 10,000 leva (\$1,700-\$5,700).

Registered religious groups must maintain a registry of their clergy and employees, provide the Directorate for Religious Affairs with access to the registry, and issue a certificate to each clerical member, who must carry it as proof of representing the group. Foreign members of registered religious groups may obtain long-term residency permits, but for the foreign member to be allowed to conduct religious services during his or her stay, the group must send advance notice to the Directorate for Religious Affairs.

The law provides for restitution of real estate confiscated during the communist era; courts have also applied the law to Holocaust-related claims.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On December 10, the Pazardjik District Court ruled on a case against 14 Romani Muslims, sentencing their leader, Islamic preacher Ahmed Mussa, to 8.5 years in prison. Twelve defendants received prison sentences ranging from 12 to 42 months, and the only woman in the group received a two-year suspended sentence. The trial against Mussa and his followers began in 2016 on charges of supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, and propagating Salafi Islam, characterized by the government as an antidemocratic ideology, and incitement to war.

In April the Supreme Cassation Court rendered a final judgement in a separate case against 13 Muslim leaders, including Ahmed Mussa, upholding the Plovdiv Appellate Court's sentences of one year suspended and a 3,000 lev (\$1,700) fine for Sarnitsa Imam Said Mutlu; 10 months suspended and a 3,000 lev (\$1,700) fine for Pazardjik Mufti Abdullah Salih; and one year in prison for Ahmed Mussa, who will serve four years due to a prior three-year suspended sentence for spreading radical ideology. In its ruling, the court stated that in his Friday sermons, Mussa preached hatred against Christians, Jews, and all other non-Islamic religions. In 2012 the 13 Muslim leaders were charged with spreading Salafi Islam, which the lower court prosecution characterized as an antidemocratic ideology, and for membership in an illegal radical organization. The court levied fines on the other nine defendants ranging from 1,500 to 2,000 levs (\$860-\$1,100) and found one individual not guilty. In 2016 the Supreme Cassation Court had vacated the guilty verdict against Mussa and rescinded the fines against the 12 other Muslims, ordering the Plovdiv Appellate Court to retry the case.

In August the government granted registration to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, thereby respecting a 2017 judgement by the European Court of Human Rights that the government had violated the European Convention on Human Rights by denying the group's registration application.

In July the Smolyan Regional Court imposed a one-year suspended sentence, a 5,000 lev (\$2,900) fine, and public censure (notice of the punishment published or publicly displayed) on Efrem Mollov for propagating ethnic and religious hatred in his book, *Is There Future for Great Bulgaria or Why Pomak History Remains Hidden*. The court found the book distorted history by glorifying Pomaks at the expense of other citizens of the country.

In addition to the annual funding allocations, the government allotted 25.77 million levs (\$14.8 million) to the BOC and the Muslim community in accordance with legislation that passed in 2018 and entered into force during the year stipulating religious groups would receive 10 levs (\$6) per follower identified in the 2011 census if the overall number of followers of that religion exceeded 1 percent of the country's population. A rival group to the Muslim Denomination, the Muslim Sunni Hanafi Denomination led by Nedim Gendjev, stated that it was entitled to the government subsidy because "Sunni" is part of its name and the majority of Bulgarian Muslims identify as "Sunni." Evangelical Alliance representatives said Protestants were not treated fairly because even though their overall numbers exceeded 1 percent, they did not receive a matching amount in government subsidies, possibly because they were not represented in a single organization.

The national budget allocated 5.5 million leva (\$3.2 million) for the construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses compared with 5 million leva (\$2.9 million) in 2018. This included 4.1 million leva (\$2.4 million) for the BOC; 460,000 leva (\$264,000) for the Muslim community; and 70,000 leva (\$40,200) each for the Catholic Church, AAOC, and the Jewish community. The budget allocated 120,000 leva (\$68,900) for other registered religious groups that had applied for funds to the Directorate for Religious Affairs, and as of July the directorate had distributed 58,000 leva (\$33,300) among seven groups. The government's budget also allocated 350,000 leva (\$201,000) for the maintenance of religious facilities of national importance, 60,000 leva (\$34,500) for the publication of religious books and research, and 40,000 leva (\$23,000) to support interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and the prevention of discrimination. The budget kept 160,000 leva (\$91,900) in reserve.

In March the National Assembly passed legislation allowing religious groups up to 10 years to pay back outstanding revenue obligations incurred before December 31, 2018. This benefitted the Muslim Denomination, which owed 8.1 million leva (\$4.7 million), and the BOC, which owed 160,000 leva (\$91,900). The ruling Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) Party had proposed completely forgiving the debts, but the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party opposed the move. The amendment specified that state-provided subsidies could not be used to repay the debts.

Jehovah's Witnesses said the legal requirement for reporting to the government the names and contact information of all clerics violated the freedom of nondeclaration of religious affiliation guaranteed by the constitution.

Minority religious groups reported dozens of municipalities, including the regional cities of Kyustendil, Shumen, and Sliven, continued to have ordinances prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. Several municipalities, including Kyustendil and Sliven, prohibited unregistered religious groups from conducting any religious activities. During the year, however, the municipalities of Varna and Vratsa revoked their restrictions on unregistered religious groups following a court order, and the Pleven municipality lifted its restrictions voluntarily.

Jehovah's Witnesses said that, as a result of the group's pursuing successful lawsuits in the past two years, fewer municipalities had ordinances restricting their religious activities, including preventing them from expressing their religious



convictions in public by distributing free printed materials, which the ordinances termed “religious agitation on city streets,” and from visiting individuals at their homes, which the ordinances characterized as “religious propaganda.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses continued, however, to report instances in which police or local government officials fined, threatened, warned, or issued citations to individual Jehovah’s Witnesses for violating these ordinances. They said in some instances municipalities acted as a result of citizen complaints and imposed fines or otherwise restricted Jehovah’s Witnesses’ street activity even though city ordinances did not specifically prohibit the activity. Courts generally annulled these fines when Jehovah’s Witnesses appealed them.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that on January 5 in Kyustendil, two police officers approached three Jehovah’s Witnesses while they were talking to others about their faith using a portable literature cart. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the officers asked the group to show its permit for the cart, even though such a permit is not required by law. Because the group did not have a permit, the officers took the cart. The group returned later in the day with another literature cart. A municipal security officer seized the second cart and its contents. After the group filed a complaint with the prosecutor’s office, the prosecutor concluded the Jehovah’s Witnesses had not committed a criminal offense and ordered the return of the carts and literature.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that on April 5, a police officer and three municipal clerks approached three Jehovah’s Witnesses who were sharing their faith with persons on the street in Turgovishte, issued them a notice for violating the regulation banning religious “advertising,” and threatened to fine them if the municipality continued to receive complaints about their activity.

In August the Supreme Administrative Court determined that a Shumen municipality ordinance restricting proselytizing violated the country’s constitution and declared it null and void. As of year’s end, the municipality had not complied with the court decision. The Supreme Administrative Court in 2018 ruled similar ordinances in Stara Zagora and Kyustendil municipalities restricting proselytizing were unconstitutional and revoked them, but these municipalities had not complied with the court’s decision as of year’s end.

In May the government allocated 500,000 levs (\$287,000) in funding for construction of a BOC church in Varna, and the Sofia Municipal Council allocated 204,500 levs (\$117,000) for repair and construction of three BOC churches and one AAOC church.

In December the Supreme Administrative Court confirmed a lower court's ruling in favor of the Catholic Church's appeal of a property tax assessment issued by the Sofia municipality, which had declined to recognize the religious status of two monasteries located in the municipality, treating them instead as taxable residential buildings.

The Office of the Grand Mufti and regional Muslim leaders said several municipalities, including Sofia, Stara Zagora, Razgrad, and Haskovo, had declined on nontransparent grounds Muslim requests to build new or to rehabilitate existing religious facilities. According to Grand Mufti Hadji, local officials in Stara Zagora threatened to bring a court action against the grand mufti's office if it pursued its plan to build a multipurpose center, including a prayer house, on land purchased by the local Muslim community. According to former Razgrad mayor Valentin Vasilev, the national government provided a 2,374,836 lev (\$1.4 million) grant for renovation of the landmark Makbul Ibrahim Pasa Mosque, which in turn justified the local government's intention to convert the mosque into an Islamic museum and tourist attraction rather than allow it to be a functioning mosque. The mayor stated that constructing a prayer house would provoke local ethnic and political tensions. The Razgrad mufti said he would continue to negotiate with the newly elected mayor to reopen the mosque.

The Office of the Grand Mufti said its attempts to litigate its recognition as the successor to the pre-1949 organization Muslim Religious Communities for the purpose of reclaiming properties seized by the former communist government had reached an impasse. According to the Office of the Grand Mufti, the office had complied with the Supreme Cassation Court's instruction to file a legal claim instead of a registration application, which it had attempted in the past, but the Sofia City Court refused to proceed with the case, stating that the claim could only be brought against another religious group. Pending a court decision on who was the rightful successor to the Muslim Religious Communities, the government continued to suspend action on all restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti.

According to media reports, on October 7, parents disrupted classes in schools in Sliven, Tropolchane, Karnobat, Yambol, Sungurlare, and Sofia and took their children home to prevent their rumored removal by social services, which the parents said could occur if the government passed a new draft child protection strategy. Critics of the draft law said it could provide the government with more authority to remove children from their families. Prime Minister Boyko Borissov

and Minister of Education Krasimir Valchev accused some evangelical and other Protestant pastors of spreading the false rumor. The Minister of Education said, “We cannot say for certain who was the source of misinformation... Not all pastors from the region were involved, but we heard reports. We still don’t know if they are Evangelicals or Protestants.” In a public declaration, the United Evangelical Churches (UEC) – a group representing nine individual Protestant churches and three unions of Pentecostal, Baptist, and Congregational Churches – expressed “great bitterness” regarding Prime Minister Borissov’s and Minister Valchev’s statements and deplored any negative aspersions cast on the reputation of any of the nine entities in the UEC. The UEC denied any involvement of its members and said Protestant pastors played a positive role in enhancing the social and educational status of their Roma congregations.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), both members of the United Patriots coalition, did not continue what they said was a negative media campaign against the group, a development which the Jehovah’s Witnesses said was likely due to their successful lawsuits against those political parties. In March the Supreme Cassation Court reversed a lower court judgment and imposed fines on seven IMRO members, including IMRO regional leader Georgi Drakaliev, for instigating and participating in an attack on the Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Hall in Burgas in 2011 in which several worshipers were injured.

Souvenirs exhibiting Nazi insignias continued to be widely available in tourist areas around the country. B’nai B’rith stated that local governments lacked political will to deal with the problem.

In May President Rumen Radev and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ekaterina Zaharieva hosted religious leaders representing the six groups on the National Council of Religious Communities, together with politicians, academics, and diplomats, at iftar receptions, where they highlighted tolerance and interfaith dialogue. In April Zaharieva hosted a Passover dinner for local and regional members of the Jewish community, a variety of other religious leaders, civil society representatives, politicians, and diplomats from member countries of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

The national public school elective curriculum continued to provide three religious studies programs: one for Christianity, one for Islam, and one for all religions as ethical systems.

In September the first Jewish school opened in Sofia in more than 20 years, funded by the Ronald S Lauder Foundation and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. The new school builds on the Lauder Foundation's previous work sponsoring Hebrew and Jewish studies curriculum through the public 134th School Dimcho Debelyanov.

History teachers continued to receive training on the Holocaust, based on a 2016 memorandum between the Ministry of Education and Israel's Yad Vashem. In February, as part of Sofia municipality's City of Tolerance and Wisdom program, Shalom, the umbrella organization of Jews in the country, and the NGO Marginalia hosted a workshop on enhanced methods of teaching the Holocaust for 22 history teachers from Sofia schools.

In November the country became a full member of the IHRA. Deputy Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev served as the national coordinator for combating anti-Semitism.

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

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU-member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 20 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Bulgaria, while 62 percent said it was rare; 65 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 93 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 80 percent said they would be with an atheist, 79 percent with a Jew, 69 percent with a Buddhist, and 75 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a "love relationship" with an individual belonging to various groups, 90 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 71 percent if atheist, 62 percent if Jewish, 49 percent if Buddhist, and 48 percent if Muslim.

In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism in December 2018 in each EU-member state. According to the survey, 64 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in Bulgaria, and 50 percent did not know whether it increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who felt that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 16 percent; on the internet, 12 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism,

15 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 15 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 18 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 16 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 14 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 12 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 12 percent.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ reported societal attitudes towards the Church improved. Representatives said there were only a few minor instances of harassment of missionaries in Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, and Sofia during the year, compared with at least 13 instances of physical assault and harassment in 2018. Church representatives, however, said police sometimes refused to accept incident reports from victims. On September 19, Church representatives in Stara Zagora reported that a group of four young persons had threatened two missionaries with a weapon, claiming to have tracked the missionaries' movements.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on August 6, a man verbally abused their members who were proselytizing in the street in Dobrich, and threatened to call police and media. A member of the Vazrazhdane political party, Miroslav Donchev, joined the abuser. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, Donchev accused the group of "stealing people's possessions, being a dangerous sect, and jeopardizing members' lives by refusing blood transfusions." Donchev threatened to summon more people and inflict physical violence on the Jehovah's Witnesses present unless they "disappear[ed]."

On February 15, media reported the Bulgarian National Union organized a rally with 200-300 participants in Sofia in honor of Hristo Lukov, leader in the 1940s of an anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi organization, the Union of Bulgarian National Legions. The government, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions denounced the rally. Sofia mayor Yorkanka Fandakova again banned the rally, but the Sofia Administrative Court again overturned the ban, as it had for the last few years. On the same day, the Council of Ministers purposefully hosted senior government officials, municipal leaders, intellectuals, civil society leaders, and diplomats from IHRA member countries. The group signed a manifesto against hate speech and vowed to protect public spaces from hatred and intolerance and to enhance public sensitivity to any acts of racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and discrimination.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly on social networking sites, in online media articles, and in the mainstream press. Anti-Semitic graffiti, such as swastikas and offensive inscriptions, appeared regularly in public places. Shalom cited increasing manifestations of anti-Semitism in the form of speech and imagery

on social networks, marches and meetings by far right and ultranationalist groups, and periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments.

In May Shalom criticized one of the popular dailies, *24 Hours*, for publishing ahead of Orthodox Easter an article blaming Jews for the death of Jesus Christ. The organization also accused the author of the article, Rosen Tahov, of instilling intolerance and inciting religion-based hatred.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported there were fewer negative characterizations in media than in prior years, but some local online media outlets continued to regularly misrepresent the group's activities and beliefs. On April 1, the online media site *Provaton* criticized the Suvorovo Municipality for renting its sports facility to Jehovah's Witnesses. *Provaton* described the Jehovah's Witnesses as a "Satanic sect" and "organized crime group that robbed lonely and unstable persons of their property and encouraged them to commit suicide so that afterwards the sect's gurus could perform Satanic rituals to ensnare the souls of the deceased." In March the Supreme Cassation Court overturned a 2017 decision of the Burgas Appellate Court and levied a 3,000 lev (\$1,700) fine on SKAT TV and its program host Valentin Kasabov for spreading false information and making derogatory comments about Jehovah's Witnesses.

According to Jewish community leaders and the Office of the Grand Mufti, incidents of vandalism continued, including painted swastikas, offensive graffiti, and broken windows in their respective places of worship. For example, on July 2, unidentified individuals desecrated the historic Kursunlu Mosque in Karlovo with Nazi symbols, including the swastika, and offensive inscriptions. On July 4, an unidentified person broke the front door windows of the Office of the Grand Mufti in Sofia. A spokesperson for the grand mufti called the act "a typical hate crime." In January a man threw stones at the synagogue in Sofia and broke several windows. Police subsequently identified the man and detained him; however, police concluded he was mentally unstable and did not press charges.

During his May 5 visit to the country, *The New York Times* reported Pope Francis met with BOC leader Patriarch Neophyte, but the Orthodox hierarchy ordered its priests not to worship with the pope. *Ecumenical News* reported that following Pope Francis' call for religious unity and his appeal for the care of migrants, BOC Metropolitan Nikolai of Plovdiv dismissed the papal visit as political and criticized the pope's efforts to improve ties between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. Local news source *Pod Tepeto* quoted Metropolitan Nikolai as telling a local congregation, "The goal of [the ecumenical movement] is to unite all the religions

around Rome, so that when the Antichrist comes, the pope will welcome him and through him, all who are coming along with him...How can everyone unite? It is not possible to unite the light and the darkness.”

On February 15, Taner Veli, the regional Mufti of Plovdiv, hosted the fifth annual Tolerance Coffee event, commemorating a 2014 attack on the local Cumaya Mosque. Representatives of the Christian and Jewish communities, local government officials, foreign diplomats, and representatives of civil society attended the event, intended to improve relations among religious groups.

The National Council of Religious Communities, whose members include representatives of Bulgarian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities, continued its efforts to promote religious tolerance. It served as a platform for the largest religious groups to organize joint events and defend a common position on religious issues, such as certain legislative proposals, anti-Semitic actions, and acts of defacement. On September 19, in partnership with Sofia municipality, the council held the fourth Festival of Religions, organizing a concert by performers from different religious communities and a tour of different places of worship in Sofia. In April the council conducted an interfaith discussion in Belitsa.

A Muslim scholar from the High Islamic Institute who participated in a 2018 Department of State-funded exchange program on religious pluralism in Philadelphia applied his U.S. experience by organizing several events aimed at bringing together different religious communities. From September 25 to September 27, he partnered with the Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership to provide a workshop in which imams and Christian clergy from the whole country shared common values, goals, and challenges.

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

On May 9, the Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom met with Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaharieva and with leaders of the BOC, the Muslim community, the Catholic community, the United Evangelical Churches, the Armenian community, the Jewish community, and representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ to discuss the importance of religious freedom in combating violent extremism and religious persecution. He also visited an Orthodox cathedral as well as Sofia’s synagogue and mosque to promote religious tolerance and appreciation of diverse faiths.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued discussions with representatives of the National Assembly, Directorate for Religious Affairs, Office of the Ombudsman, Commission for Protection against Discrimination, local government administrations, and law enforcement agencies about cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and legislative initiatives restricting religious freedom. The Ambassador discussed religious tolerance during an iftar hosted by President Radev in May and a Passover dinner hosted by Foreign Minister Zaharieva in April.

On February 15, the Ambassador spoke about the importance of tolerance and expressed support for the manifesto against hate speech signed at the Council of Ministers; the embassy amplified the message on Facebook.

Embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, National Council of Religious Communities, Office of the Grand Mufti, Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Catholic, Protestant, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish communities to discuss religious independence from the state and problems faced by religious groups, including legislative changes potentially restricting the freedom to practice their respective religions. An embassy official participated in a forum on "Authentic Religious Identity and Sustainable Peace" organized by the interfaith group Forum for Interreligious Dialogue and Partnership. Embassy officials also met with human rights groups, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Marginalia, Amalipe, Inforoma Center, Sofia Security Forum, and academics to discuss these issues.

The Ambassador continued to meet with Shalom and B'nai B'rith representatives to discuss the need to counter anti-Semitism and hate speech. In speeches at the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the saving of the country's Jewish population and at a Shabbat dinner in March, the Ambassador spoke about the lessons of the Holocaust and the need for tolerance of different religious communities. The embassy used social media to disseminate the Ambassador's remarks.

The Ambassador discussed religious tolerance during an Eid-al-Fitr reception hosted by Grand Mufti Hadji in June. In August and September the Charge d'Affaires met separately with Patriarch Neofit, Grand Mufti Hadji, and representatives of the Jewish community to discuss tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and bilateral cooperation. In September the Charge d'Affaires discussed with



Kurdjali Regional Mufti Beyhan Mehmed the situation of the local Muslim community and its role in interfaith and ethnic community dialogue.