



# B U L G A R I A

Cup & Cross Ministries International

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## **Bulgaria: Religious Freedom Report**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice for some non-Orthodox religious groups. These restrictions are 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.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In contrast to earlier practice, there were no reported instances during the period covered by this report of any direct government, police, or societal harassment against religious workers or worshippers during the practice or propagation of their faith. The Parliament refrained from enacting a proposed draft law regulating religious denominations, which had created serious religious freedom concerns. However, there was a trend during the period covered by this report toward the enactment of new ordinances in a number of cities aimed at severely curtailing religious freedom rights.

Relations between the major religious communities generally were amicable; however, public opinion and periodic media articles continued to suggest a somewhat hostile and alarmist attitude toward nontraditional religious groups, although there were fewer manifestations of this sentiment than in earlier years.

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 pointed out problems with several aspects of the proposed law on religion previously under discussion in the Parliament.

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

The country has a total land area of 42,855 square miles and its population is approximately 8.3 million. Official census statistics from December 1992, the latest available, indicate that almost 86 percent of citizens are Orthodox Christians, 9.5 percent are Muslim, 1 percent are Catholic, and most of the remainder belong to a variety of Protestant faiths. 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 lists a disproportionately high number of members of the Orthodox Church, in part because many essentially nonreligious or antireligious persons reportedly were listed as Orthodox by default. Muslim leaders claim that their adherents constitute up to 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 (descendants of 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. Eastern Rite Catholic communities are located 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. While clear statistics are not available, evangelical Protestant church groups have had particular success in attracting numerous converts from among the ethnic Roma minority, and these churches tend to be the most active denominations in predominantly Roma-inhabited areas.

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.

### **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice for some non-Orthodox religious groups. The Constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the "traditional" religion. The Government provides financial support for the Eastern Orthodox Church, as well as for 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.

For most registered religious groups there were no restrictions on attendance at religious services or on private religious instruction. Four Islamic schools (including a university-level Muslim divinity school), a Muslim cultural center, a multi-denominational Protestant seminary, university theological faculties, and religious primary schools operated freely. Bibles and other religious materials in the Bulgarian language were imported or printed freely, and Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish publications were published regularly.

The Government restricted religious freedom through its registration process that is selective, slow, and nontransparent. The Government prohibits the public practice of religion by groups that are not registered.

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 continued to face some discrimination and antipathy from many local governments. The national Government has on some occasions, but not systematically, stopped local governments from enforcing restrictive municipal government decisions, which appear to fall into a gray area of the law. Burgas and Plovdiv are among the municipalities that have reported the greatest number of complaints of harassment of nontraditional religious groups. Some observers note with concern a tendency by certain municipalities to enact preemptive 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 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.

The legal requirement that groups whose activities have a religious element must register with the Council of Ministers remained an obstacle to the activity of some religious groups, such as the Unification Church, the Sofia Church of Christ, and the Church of the Nazarene (which has tried repeatedly to register for over 6 years). Furthermore, several municipal governments including those of Burgas, Plovdiv, Pleven, and Gorna Oryahovitsa have, within the period covered by this report, established local registration requirements and/or adopted other restrictive laws curtailing the free practice of religious activities, often in contravention of the country's constitution and international law. These laws, variously, have imposed bans on such things as distribution of religious literature, proselytizing in public, references to faith-healing, preaching to minors without parents' express permission, and holding of prayer services at facilities not registered with the municipal authorities. Some municipal ordinances have also imposed intrusive financial reporting requirements that apply specifically to church organizations. It is not yet clear, however, if all of these new provisions are being actively enforced by local authorities. By the end of the period covered by this report, the local registration requirements were suspended by the governors of the regions where they were passed, and legal proceedings were initiated to formally invalidate the requirements. Despite these new institutional and procedural barriers, there were no reported incidents during the period covered by this report of street-level harassment of religious groups by the authorities, as was seen in previous years.

Parliament deliberated extensively during the year on a proposed new law regulating religious organizations. The various proposals, including the final version adopted by the relevant committee, contained numerous provisions and ambiguous passages of serious potential concern, and would have given the Government a controlling role in overseeing the activities of religious groups. Final action on the draft bill was deferred pending a review and comment from the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe's commentary criticized numerous aspects of the draft law and the parliamentary term ended without a final vote on the bill.

A government licensing commission denied without explanation approval for a new nondenominational Christian radio station "Glas Nadezhda" ("Voice of Hope"), despite the support of the Government's Directorate of Religious Affairs. Several sources reported that the unofficial position of commission members was that non-Orthodox Christian groups should not be allowed to have a radio station, at least until the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has one of its own. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church gave no indication of any interest or intent to establish a radio station.

In April 2001, officials of the Studentski Grad (Student City) district of Sofia refused to allow the showing of a documentary-style film on the life of Jesus, after written application was made for the screening. Notwithstanding regulations that prescribe a written reply, the official simply advised organizers that he would not allow such a film to be shown in his district at Easter time.

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. New amendments to the Law on Foreign

Persons, which went into effect on May 1, 2001, have created problems for foreign national missionaries and religious workers in Bulgaria. The revised law has no visa category which explicitly applies to missionaries or religious workers, and rules for other categories of temporary residence visa (such as self-employed or business-owner) have been tightened in ways that seem to make it more difficult for religious workers to qualify. This problem has been exacerbated by the fact that key government institutions have not yet developed implementing regulations or procedures to handle their new responsibilities under the law, despite the fact that the new law is in force.

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. Optional Islamic education classes in primary schools are being conducted on a pilot basis.

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 abolished the construction and transportation battalions, to which ethnic and religious minorities previously were assigned in order to segregate them from the regular military forces. The conscript troops of the military are now integrated; however, the professional officer corps contains few members of ethnic or religious minority groups.

Several court decisions have been handed down in the March 1999 case of the Gabrovo schoolteacher who claimed she was forced to leave her position because of her Pentecostal Christian faith. In June 2000, she won a ruling that expunged a letter of reprimand from her personnel record after the court ruled that the reprimand was improper, and she was awarded a modest compensation. In July 2000, an appeals court upheld a lower court ruling that rejected the schoolteacher's libel charge against several media outlets for coverage she considered defamatory in describing the circumstances under which she resigned. An appeal remains pending before the Supreme Court of Cassation. In September 2000, she lost the case in which she alleged that she was forced to resign under duress, for lack of evidence to support the allegation.

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 period. 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.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

Relations between the major religious communities generally were amicable; 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 common. Such mainstream public pressure for the containment of "foreign religious sects" inevitably influences policymakers. Nevertheless, human rights observers agreed that such discrimination has gradually lessened over the last 3 years as society has appeared to become more accepting of at least some previously unfamiliar, "non-traditional," religions.