

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN  
ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S  
CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL  
WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

**OSCE Human  
Dimension  
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# Bulgaria

Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria enjoy a measure of freedom to worship and generally are able to carry out their religious activities undisturbed. They have not experienced any difficulties with the registration of new congregations by the local municipalities in the places where their activity has been newly established. However, the Witnesses continue to suffer numerous instances of harassment motivated by religious hatred.

- ✎ **In general** local police officers and prosecutors provide assistance, but they fail to prosecute the perpetrators based on religious hatred.
- ✎ **Municipalities** continually attempt to amend ordinances so as to restrict the religious activity of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- ✎ **The political parties** VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) and NFSB (National Front of Salvation of Bulgaria) actively seek to ban Jehovah's Witnesses. They use their influence to create ordinances that forbid door-to-door religious evangelizing, the use of literature carts, or sharing the Bible's message with people in the streets.
- ✎ **Jehovah's Witnesses** are pleased to see that the slander in the media has declined this year, though some continue with "yellow journalism."

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## Societal Abuses and Discrimination

### PHYSICAL ASSAULTS, HARASSMENT, AND VANDALISM

1. **Burgas. On 23 June 2017** a court satisfied a civil claim that Jehovah's Witnesses had filed against perpetrators of mob violence in 2011. Recognizing the mob had inflicted "light bodily harm," the court ordered six of the seven perpetrators to pay legal costs.

**On 17 April 2011**, this mob, organised by the VMRO political party, attacked a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. They kicked and hit attendees, leaving them with injuries and bleeding wounds. During the attack, members of the crowd, including representatives of VMRO, shouted insults and threats. The Kingdom Hall was vandalized a number of times after this incident, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to set the building on fire.



## Burgas

On 17 April 2011, a mob, organised by the VMRO political party, attacked a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Burgas Prosecutor's Office reached a settlement with seven of the eight perpetrators charged, fining each of them BGN 200 (EUR 102). However, the Prosecutor's Office terminated the penal proceedings against the leader of the mob, Mr Georgi Drakaliev.

The Witnesses filed civil claims against the perpetrators on behalf of their legal entity and five Witnesses. While they are encouraged to see that the courts have satisfied one claim, as noted above, the other civil claims against the perpetrators are ongoing.

**2. Elhovo. On 14 September 2016**, Jehovah's Witnesses were sharing the Bible's message using a literature cart in a shopping street when a man asked whether they had obtained permission for this activity. The man angrily said that he belongs to the Political Party VMRO. He threatened that if the Witnesses did not leave, he and others from VMRO would attack them in a manner similar to the Burgas attack of **17 April 2011**. The Witnesses submitted a complaint to the police.

**3. Mezdra. On 29 September 2016** Mr. Ilchev from the VMRO approached two of Jehovah's Witnesses, Ms. Buchvarova and Mr. Salonpää, who were sharing the Bible's message using a literature cart in the market place. When he started to harass them, the Witnesses phoned the police. However, instead of protecting them, the police cited Ms. Buchvarova for violating a local ordinance.\*

**On 13 October 2016**, Ms. Buchvarova received a huge fine for BGN 500 (USD 298 or EUR 256), which is equivalent to around two and a half months' average rent for the area. She appealed the fine, which was annulled by the Regional Court on **27 December 2016**.

**4. Sofia. On 1 October 2016** Mr. Presa and Ms. Ivanova, both Jehovah's Witnesses, were inviting people in a residential building to a Bible based talk. On the top floor of the building, Mr. M. Beher took the tract, looked at it, and threw it in Mr. Presa's face. Mr. Beher began shouting and spitting at them while chasing them out of the building. He kept pushing Ms. Ivanova as he forced them down the stairs, continuing to spit at them and shouting "faster, faster!" He then punched Mr. Presa in the back of the neck.

Once out of the building Mr. Presa and Ms. Ivanova joined two other Witnesses. Mr. Beher came back, shouting and spitting at them. While waiving his fist in Ms. Ivanova's face, he threatened to "knock out her teeth" when he sees her again. He then punched her in the neck. As the Witnesses left the area, he kept following them while shouting "Disgusting sectarians!" At the next traffic light, he threw a bottle of water on them.

\* Ordinance No. 1, (4) "Carrying out religious propaganda . . . on streets, or in squares, markets and other public places in the populated areas in the territory of Mezdra Municipality while outside the designated places for religious services or meetings by means of selling or giving out free printed materials —brochures, pamphlets, books and the like."

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The police never requested testimony from the three of the four Witnesses involved. The prosecutor refused to initiate criminal proceedings, stating that it could not be established whether “violence of a general nature” had been committed—even though the Forensic Medical Office had established that Ms. Ivanova had indeed been punched in neck. The prosecutor based his conclusion on the testimony of Mr. Beher’s family.

- 5. Elhovo. On 7 January 2017**, a Witness couple, Mr. and Ms. Koval, were sharing the Bible’s message in the centre of town using a literature cart. Around 10:30 a.m., Mr. T. Bordinyashki asked the Witnesses if they had obtained permission from the mayor to place a stand with literature there. They explain that they were not engaged in a commercial activity.

Mr. Bordinyashki then became very aggressive. He told them that they have to leave and that he “does not want any foreigners around.” Apparently trying to intimidate Mr. and Ms. Koval, he said that he holds a position of authority in the VMRO in Burgas and claimed he organized the protest [mob] against Jehovah’s Witnesses in Burgas on **17 April 2011**.

The Kovals submitted a complaint to the Police Department.

- 6. Lom. On 15 January 2017**, several boys and girls in their late teens disrupted a Christian meeting in Lom. They placed a waste bin and snow at the building entrance, banged on the door, and shouted that they intended to disturb “illegal meetings.” One of the attendees locked the door but the group forced their way in. The Witnesses called the police, but by the time two police officers arrived the teenagers had already left. The Witnesses filed a complaint with the police on **17 January 2017**.

- 7. Mezdra. On 23 February 2017**, Y. Podgórní, I. Podgórní, and N. Mixer were sharing the Bible’s message using a literature cart in the market place. Mr. T. Ilchev from the VMRO phoned the police when he saw the Witnesses. He threatened the Witnesses, saying: “Be good, take your ‘pseudo-literature’ and get out of here. I am personally warning you that I will have just a little bit more patience with you, just a little bit, and then the time will come when no one here will be able to save you. Believe me, this time will come.”

He then left before the police arrived. The police officers were friendly, and after the Witnesses showed them a court decision proving their rights, they allowed the Witnesses to continue their activity.

- 8. Pernik. On 23 April 2017**, before a Christian meeting of Jehovah’s Witnesses began, 13 individuals distributed flyers speaking against Jehovah’s Witnesses near the Kingdom Hall entrance. Four or five of the group entered the building and left flyers there. They were asked to leave the meeting hall, and most of them continued distributing flyers to passers-by on the street. However, four of them stayed in Kingdom Hall and listened respectfully to the meeting. The Witnesses reported the incident to the police.

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**9. Popovo. On 11 July 2017,** unknown individuals vandalised the meeting place owned by Jehovah's Witnesses for the third time in nine months. In broad daylight, they threw eggs and stones at the building, particularly at the main entrance door. The police officers who responded were kind and recommended the Witnesses install video surveillance equipment.

**10. Vratsa. On 19 July 2017,** Mr. M. Tsvetkov approached Mr. Podgórni and Mr. and Mrs. Salonpää who were sharing the Bible's message using a literature cart. He asked Mr. Salonpää whether they had approval to do so and then tried to push the cart over.

This was the ninth time that Mr. M. Tsvetkov harassed the Witnesses. (In a previous encounter with Ms. and Mr. Salonpää, he said that he hates them because of the complaint submitted to the police against him.)

Mr. M. Tsvetkov became very angry when Mr. Salonpää started to film the incident, and when Mr. Podgórni said that he would phone the police, Mr. Tsvetkov grabbed about 20 religious brochures and threw them in the trash bin. The Witnesses did not report this incident to the police.

## DEFAMATION

For years, SKAT TV has circulated slanderous statements about Jehovah's Witnesses to the entire country, both on television and on the Internet. On 25 January 2016 the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination found SKAT TV and two of its journalists guilty of deliberately spreading false information about Jehovah's Witnesses and encouraging violence against them.

SKAT TV and the journalists appealed the decision, but on **31 October 2016** the Burgas Administrative Court rejected the appeal. The defendants then appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court. On **5 January 2017** the Supreme Administrative Court rejected the appeal but also refused to grant the Witnesses' request for pecuniary damages and a public retraction. The Witnesses are considering further appeals on this aspect of the case.

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# Restrictions on Religious Freedom

## MUNICIPAL ORDINANCES RESTRICTING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

As of September 2017, at least 40 municipalities have ordinances that unlawfully restrict the peaceful manifestation of religious beliefs and contradict rights guaranteed by Bulgaria's Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights. The VMRO and NFSB political parties use their influence to enact ordinances aimed at stopping door-to-door religious activity, the use of literature carts, and speaking to others about one's beliefs in public areas.

**Local authorities design these municipal ordinances specifically to restrict the peaceful manifestation of religious belief.**

## POLICE AND MUNICIPAL INTERFERENCE WITH MANIFESTATION OF BELIEF

For the most part, individual police officers deal with Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully when they find them engaged in their lawful religious activity. At times, however, police interfere with the Witnesses' manifestation of belief, citing violations of local ordinances.

- 1. Stara Zagora. On 4 October 2016**, two of Jehovah's Witnesses living in Stara Zagora, Ms. Jorgova and Ms. Becker, were sharing the Bible's message using a literature cart. Two municipal officers approached them and said that, since the women live in Stara Zagora, they must abide by the ordinance that prohibits their religious activity. One of the Witnesses received a written notice of a violation and was later fined BGN 400 (USD 238 or EUR 205). She appealed the fine, which was canceled by the Regional Court on **19 May 2017**. In total, the police issued six fines to six different Witnesses in Stara Zagora between 20 June and **4 October 2016**. All fines were ultimately canceled.
- 2. Karlovo. On 5 November 2016**, Mr. Moorhouse and Mr. Stratiev (who are Jehovah's Witnesses) were sharing the Bible's message when they were harassed by Mr. Andonov, a local municipal councillor, along with other members of the National Front of Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB). Mr. Andonov filmed the Witnesses, even though they explicitly asked him to stop. He said that Jehovah's Witnesses do not have the right to preach and that he is their enemy and will do everything in his power to obstruct their activity. Mr. Andonov threatened to call the police and have Mr. Moorhouse and Mr. Stratiev locked up.

When the police arrived, they told the Witnesses to come to the police station. While they were there Mr. Yankov arrived. He is another member of the City Council and a member of VMRO. The Witnesses learned that Mr. Andonov had filed a complaint against them. No written notices of violations were issued.

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## List of Municipalities With Ordinances Restricting Religious Activities

1. Belene
2. Belogradchik
3. Botevgrad
4. Chepelare
5. Chirpan
6. Dimitrovgrad
7. Elhovo
8. Gorna Oryahovitsa
9. Gotse Delchev
10. Gurkovo
11. Harmanli
12. Haskovo
13. Kazanluk
14. Kurdzhali
15. Kyustendil
16. Lyaskovets
17. Maritsa
18. Mezdra
19. Omurtag
20. Panagyurishte
21. Pazardzhik
22. Perushtitsa
23. Peshtera
24. Pleven
25. Popovo
26. Radomir
27. Rakitovo
28. Ruse
29. Samokov
30. Sandanski
31. Shumen
32. Silistra
33. Sliven
34. Straldzha
35. Stara Zagora
36. Targovishte
37. Tutrakan
38. Varna
39. Vratsa
40. Yambol

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**3. Balgarevo.** During March 2017, two of Jehovah’s Witnesses were sharing the Bible’s message with their neighbours in the village. A priest saw them and called the police and the chairman of the Kavarna City Council. In the presence of the priest, the chairman told the Witnesses that they had no right to preach from door to door due to an ordinance adopted in March 2016. He warned that the Witnesses would be prosecuted if they again shared their beliefs in the village.

The ordinance was appealed before the Administrative Court in Dobrich. **On 10 July 2017** the Court annulled the article of the ordinance prohibiting the Witnesses’ ministry.

**4. Gorna Oryahovitsa. On 24 March 2017,** Jehovah’s Witnesses were standing in the market with a literature cart having obtained the market manager’s consent. An officer of the municipality approached and showed them a document that said that they had no right to be there.

The officer was quite animated and did not let the Witnesses speak in their defence. He repeated twice “The Orthodox Church has its churches and so do you. You should perform these sorts of activities in your place.” After which, he ordered them to leave the market. The Witnesses complied and left.

**5. Stara Zagora. On 7 April 2017,** Ms. Reich and Ms. Drozd were sharing the Bible’s message in a residential building, inviting people to a religious meeting commemorating the death of Jesus. On exiting the building they met two police officers who demanded to see their IDs and copied information from them. At the same time three municipal officials arrived. They said that Stara Zagora has an ordinance that forbids preaching and offering religious literature. They issued a written notice of a violation to Ms. Reich, the second such incident in 10 months.

**6. Sandanski. On 1 June 2017,** Mr. Ruso and Mr. Avramidis were participating in their Christian ministry in a residential building. As they left the building, a man approached stated that he was a police officer, and asked to see their ID cards. After this two other police officers arrived. The officers claimed that Bulgarian law forbids the Witnesses’ activity, including the distribution of religious literature.

**7. Sofia. On 23 June 2017,** municipal officers approached three of Jehovah’s Witnesses—V. Dede, A. Dede, and Y. Vanchev—who were participating in their Christian ministry using a literature cart. Officer Kostadin Kuzmov issued a written notice of a violation to V. Dede for violating Art. 23 (1) of “Ordinance No 1 for Public Order and Preservation of Municipal Property in the Territory of the Sofia Municipality,” even though the Witnesses explained that their activities are in no way commercial. **On 3 August 2017,** the Sofia Municipality fined V. Dede.

**8. Ihtiman. On 30 June 2017,** Mr. and Mrs. Calini and A. Petsholdt were sharing the Bible’s message with residents when they met Mrs. Lazarova



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from the municipality and Mr. Velichko from the police. The officers asked to see the written authorization allowing the Witnesses to stand on the street with a literature cart. When the Witnesses presented the authorization, the officers also wanted proof that Jehovah's Witnesses area registered religion. After this the officers asked for the Witnesses' ID cards and copied their personal details.

**9. Sofia. On 7 July 2017**, Mr. and Ms. Ciccone were sharing in their Christian ministry with a literature cart. At about 4:00 p.m., municipal officers approached them. Initially, they only compiled an "official report," but later officer K. Nikolov also issued a written notice of a violation based on Article 23 (1) of Ordinance No 1 for Public Order and Preservation of the Municipal Property in the Territory of the Sofia Municipality. On **3 August 2017**, the Sofia Municipality fined D. Ciccone.

**10. Obzor. On 19 July 2017**, a Witness couple, Mr. and Mrs. Schmitz, invited people of Obzor to the annual Regional Convention in Sofia. They did not ring door bells or call people out of their homes but only talked with those who were outside in their gardens or walking on the street. When they were about to finish for the day, a police car stopped and two police officers requested to see their documents. The officers said that their activity is illegal in Obzor and that if they see them doing it again they would be held in police custody for 24 hours.

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## Positive Developments

- **Plovdiv. On 9 December 2016**, Mr. Delgo (one of Jehovah's Witness) received a written notice of a violation for engaging in public evangelizing. He objected before the Plovdiv Municipality and on 19 December 2016 he received a letter from the municipality admitting that he had not violated any law and cancelling the written notice of a violation.
- **Burgas. In decisions from October and November 2016**, the Burgas Regional Court vindicated Nikolai Stoyanov and other Witnesses who had been charged with violating a municipal ordinance while engaged in religious activity. The Court determined that the ordinance violated Bulgaria's constitutional guarantees and its international commitments to religious freedom.



# Example of a Municipal Ordinance that Restricts the Religious Activity of Jehovah's Witnesses

## **VARNA**

Public Order Ordinance, Art. 5 “(1) Public displays of religious beliefs by representatives of religions that are not registered under the Law for Religions are prohibited. (2) Public expression of religious beliefs by representatives of properly registered religions in places designated for religious services or meetings is free, as long as it does not violate other regulations connected to preserving public order. (3) Public expression of religious beliefs by representatives of properly registered religions outside can take place according to the requirements and in the order of the Law for Meetings, Gatherings and Manifestations. Fine in the amount of 50-300 BGN.” (Dec. 819 – 8(14)/19.12.2012)

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF BULGARIA:

- Ensure that law-enforcement authorities provide appropriate protection against physical assaults on Jehovah's Witnesses and acknowledge acts of religious hatred
- Prosecute vandals and hooligans who attack houses of worship and who harass and harm worshippers
- Protect the right to manifest one's religious beliefs individually and jointly with others
- Strike down discriminatory municipal ordinances that restrict peaceful religious expression
- Hold responsible those who slander others in the public media and incite religious hatred

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Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Bulgarian government.

**For more information:** Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at [generalcounsel@jw.org](mailto:generalcounsel@jw.org).



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