

Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

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Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria enjoy a measure of freedom to worship and generally carry out their religious activities without disturbance. However, the Witnesses suffer numerous incidents of assaults and harassment motivated by religious hatred.

- Local authorities provide some assistance but generally fail to prosecute attackers or protect the victims.
- Some municipalities amend ordinances in an attempt to restrict the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- The VMRO and NFSB nationalist political parties actively seek to ban Jehovah's Witnesses. In addition to using the media to slander the Witnesses, they use their influence to create ordinances forbidding door-to-door religious evangelizing, use of literature carts, and speaking to people in the streets.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination**Physical Assaults, Harassment, and Vandalism**

- (1) **Burgas.** On **17 April 2011**, a mob organised by the VMRO political party attacked the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. Attendees were kicked and hit, 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 attacked a number of times after this incident, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to set the building on fire.

The Burgas Prosecutor's Office reached a settlement with seven of the eight perpetrators charged, fining each of them BGN 200 (EUR 102).¹ However, the Prosecutor's Office terminated the penal proceedings against the leader of the mob, Mr Georgi Drakaliev. As of **April 2016**, civil claims against the perpetrators are ongoing.



(2) **Shumen.** On **30 July 2016**, Jérémy Petit, a French citizen residing in Bulgaria, offered an invitation to a convention of Jehovah's Witnesses to a young man sitting on a public bench. The man reacted angrily and pushed Mr Petit's literature folder out of his hands. When Mr Petit bent over to get his folder, the man kicked him in the head. Mr Petit fell, hit his head on the ground, and was unconscious for at least seven minutes.

He suffered an injury to his left eyeball, bruising and swelling of the eyelids due to mucosal bleeding, bruising of the radix nasi and the right eyelid, a lacerated contusion at the left occipital bone, and a brain concussion. The perpetrator was arrested, and the victim is pressing charges against him.



Jérémy Petit,
after the assault

Defamation

- (1) The newspaper *Vseki Den* wrote an article about the **30 July 2016** attack on Jérémy Petit, with the title "A Man of Shumen Beats an Agitator of Jehovah's Witnesses." The article contained several false and derogatory assertions and indicated that Mr Petit was beaten because he was agitating people.
- (2) For years, SKAT TV has circulated throughout the entire country slanderous statements about Jehovah's Witnesses, both on television and on the Internet. On **22 July 2016**, Nadia Lilova, journalist for SKAT TV, encouraged the people of Stara Zagora to alert municipal officials when they see Jehovah's Witnesses "agitating" people.
- (3) On **18 May 2016**, the newspaper *Konkurent* published slanderous statements about Jehovah's Witnesses.
- (4) On **27 March 2016**, in the newspaper *Trud*, a member of Parliament, Atanas Stoyanov, wrote that Jehovah's Witnesses are a dangerous sect and falsely stated that they are prohibited in numerous countries of the EU.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

On **14 March 2016**, amendments and supplements were made to Bulgaria's Law of Religion. If these go into effect, they will seriously restrict the activity and worship of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religions in Bulgaria.

Municipal Ordinances Restricting Religious Activity

In recent months, municipalities throughout Bulgaria have made amendments to ordinances, varying in their reach and intent, to interfere with the manifestation of religious belief. The amended ordinances unlawfully restrict religious activity, in contradiction of rights guaranteed by Bulgaria's Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

The VMRO and NFSB political parties go further, actively trying to ban Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria. They use the media to slander the Witnesses, and use their political influence to change ordinances to stop the Witnesses' door-to-door religious activity, use of a literature cart, and speaking to people on the streets.

Partial List of Municipalities With Ordinances Restricting Religious Activities

(1) Belene	(9) Kazanluk	(17) Rakitovo
(2) Brusartsi	(10) Karlovo	(18) Stara Zagora
(3) Burgas	(11) Krichim	(19) Harmanli
(4) Varna	(12) Kyustendil	(20) Haskovo
(5) Devnya	(13) Perushtitsa	(21) Shumen
(6) General Toshevo	(14) Pleven	(22) Chirpan
(7) Gurkovo	(15) Popovo	
(8) Kavarna	(16) Razgrad	

The municipal ordinances are framed to restrict peaceful manifestation of religious belief.

- (1) **Burgas.** Article 4 (5) of the Ordinance for Preservation of Public Order in the Territory of Burgas Municipality forbids “religious agitation on the streets of the city by means of the distribution of free printed materials—brochures, leaflets, books and the like.”
- (2) **Kavarna.** On **1 March 2016**, amendments were made to Ordinance No.1. Art. 8, which now states: “(1) It is forbidden to express publicly religious convictions by representatives of religions that are not registered under the Law for Religions or while not adhering to the requirements of the Law for Meetings, Gatherings and Manifestations. (2) It is forbidden to carry out religious propaganda at the homes of citizens without explicit advance agreement expressed on the part of the latter. (3) It is prohibited to carry out religious agitation on the city streets by means of distributing free printed materials—brochures, pamphlets, books and the like. (4) Upon violation of the preceding paragraph guilty persons will be punished with a fine in the amount of BGN 100 to BGN 500 [EUR 51-EUR 255]. (5) A repeat offense by the guilty persons is punishable with a fine in the amount of BGN 1,000 to BGN 2,000 [EUR 511-EUR 1023].”
- (3) **Shumen.** The Municipal Council of Shumen accepted proposed amendments to the Ordinance for Maintaining and Preserving Public Order in the Shumen Municipality, with Ref. o. 81, dated 28 February 2016. It reads as follows: “Religious propaganda at the homes of the citizens is prohibited.” This new law went into effect on **14 March 2016**.
- (4) **Stara Zagora.** On **31 March 2016**, additional provisions were inserted in the municipality’s ordinance regarding activity of religious communities. Article 25 specifies that (1) public religious displays that disturb the public peace, morale, and traditions are prohibited, (2) carrying out religious propaganda at the homes of citizens without an explicit advance approval by the latter is forbidden, and (3) it is forbidden to carry out religious agitation on city streets by giving out free printed materials—brochures, pamphlets, books, and the like.
- (5) **Vratsa.** On **16 July 2016** the Vratsa municipality put into effect an ordinance (similar to the one in Stara Zagora) that interferes with manifestation of belief.

A growing number of municipalities have begun enforcing these ordinances and attempt to fine the Witnesses for sharing their beliefs, as reported below.

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) **Burgas.** On **21 January 2016**, Mr Strahov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, was in a public area, using a mobile cart to display publications of Jehovah's Witnesses. Police officers arrived and asked if Mr Strahov had a permit to carry out this activity. One of the officers issued a citation, and on **2 March 2016**, the Burgas Municipality issued a fine of BGN 500 (EUR 255) to Mr Strahov. The Burgas Regional Court later cancelled the fine for technical reasons.

Between **March and June 2016**, six other Witnesses received fines between BGN 50 and BGN 100 (EUR 25 and EUR 51) under the same ordinance.

- (2) **Sandanski.** On **1 June 2016**, two of Jehovah's Witnesses, R. Guliev and V. Vasilev, were summoned to the police station. They were informed that a complaint had been made by Atanas Stoyanov, a VMRO member of Parliament. Mr Guliev was asked to write an explanation. When Mr Guliev requested a copy of the complaint, the police officer became very angry and said that it was forbidden. The police officer threatened to arrest and beat Mr Guliev. Another police officer also claimed that it was forbidden to give Mr Guliev a copy of the complaint. The Witnesses understood that the complaint was against the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- (3) **Silistra.** Police Inspector Hamdi ordered Jehovah's Witnesses to stop using the literature cart in their public religious activity or they would receive a fine. The Witnesses went to the municipal office, where Chief Inspector Valeri Velikov explained that the Witnesses do not have the right "to distribute their opinion." He claimed that the Bulgaria Constitution only applies to generally accepted communication and not to sharing religious beliefs in public, whether using a cart on the street or doing so in an organized way from house to house.
- (4) **Stara Zagora.** On **16 February 2016**, two of Jehovah's Witnesses, Titus Schäfer and Stela Stoyanova, were sharing their religious beliefs on Yuriy Venelin Street. Two police officers and an officer of the Municipal Security arrived and checked their documents. The police officers were not sure whether a permit was required but nonetheless issued Mr Schäfer a warning, accusing him of violating the general order.
- (5) Based on an ordinance that entered into force on **28 April 2016**, four Witnesses—E. Kovach, J. Reich, M. Becker, and I. Perri—each received a citation from the police merely for peacefully sharing their faith with their neighbours.
- (6) **Vratsa.** On **26 March 2016**, two of Jehovah's Witnesses, P. Vladimirova and H. Mixer, were sharing their faith by exhibiting religious publications on a mobile cart in Macedonia Square. Marin Tsvelinov, a municipal officer, threatened the Witnesses, saying that he would gather football hooligans who would return with bats. He also said that they would go to the place where the Witnesses meet "to destroy this sect" so that the Witnesses would no longer exist in Vratsa. He took two of the books and threw them on the ground. When Mrs Mixer attempted to record the incident, he grabbed her cell phone, threatened to break it, and deleted the recording. A few days later, Mr Tsvelinov wrote a slanderous newspaper article about Jehovah's Witnesses.

Interference With Freedom of Assembly

Petrich. On **23 March 2016**, about 50 persons were present at the Hotel Bulgaria as the Witnesses held the annual Memorial of Christ's death. A group of about ten persons from the political party VMRO, including Kiril Stoykov and Stoyan Bozhinov, constantly interrupted the meeting and refused to leave.

On **28 March 2016**, two police inspectors promised that they would warn the members of VMRO not to cause the Witnesses any problems either as individuals or at the Kingdom Hall.

Positive Developments

- (1) **Plovdiv.** The City Council did not accept amendments to the Ordinance of Public Order and Security submitted by the political party VMRO to prohibit the "sect Jehovah's Witnesses."
- (2) **Sofia.** On **2 June 2016**, three inspectors approached Witnesses who were using a mobile literature cart and respectfully requested evidence of permission for that activity. On **15 July 2016**, the Witnesses in Sofia received approval to continue this activity for the month of August 2016.
- (3) **Kyustendil.** The Administrative Court cancelled six criminal decrees and fines of up to BGN 800 (EUR 409) issued to Witnesses for participating in their religious activity. The court reasoned that "the Applicant is held liable for an act, which by its essence represents the exercise of her right to religious freedom guaranteed to her by *the Constitution* and the *LRA* [Law of Religious Acts]." The court determined that the ordinance "contradicts the enactment of a higher power [the Constitution and the LRA] and therefore, ... the act of a higher power shall be applied."
- (4) In January 2015, Jehovah's Witnesses learned that the mayor of Kyustendil, Mr Paunov, had decided unilaterally to change the registered classification of their place of worship, prohibiting it from being used as either a lecture hall or a prayer house.
On **3 May 2016**, the Kyustendil Administrative Court satisfied the Witnesses' appeal and cancelled as unlawful the mayor's order against their house of worship.
- (5) On **25 January 2016**, the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination ruled that the Bulgarian channel SKAT TV and two journalists had deliberately spread false information about Jehovah's Witnesses. After explaining that the right to freedom of expression is subject to restrictions that prevent hostility, the Commission ordered them to pay almost the maximum fine. Jehovah's Witnesses are pursuing several other similar cases.

Religious Freedom Objectives

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Bulgaria to:

- (1) Ensure that law-enforcement authorities provide appropriate protection against physical assaults on Jehovah's Witnesses and acknowledge acts of religious hatred
- (2) Protect the right to manifest one's religious beliefs individually and jointly with others
- (3) Strike down discriminatory municipal ordinances that restrict peaceful religious expression
- (4) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to build houses of worship without interference or discrimination
- (5) Hold responsible those who slander others in the public media and incite religious hatred

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.

Visit the Newsroom at jw.org or scan the QR code to learn about legal developments and human rights affecting Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria.



¹ Exchange rate of .51121 BGN/Euro on 16 September 2011