

THE INSTITUTE on Religion & Public Policy



Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report: Religious Freedom in Bulgaria

Executive Summary

(1) In Bulgaria, the constitution provides for religious freedoms only to groups that have been registered with the state. Although the country has come a long way in upholding religious freedom since the fall of Communism,, religious discrimination in Bulgaria continues with authorities sometimes preventing minority believers from practicing or propagating their faith. There has also been a rise in religious intolerance, especially with the emergence of ultra- nationalist groups like the Ataka Party.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

(2) Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights, and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world

Introduction to the Legal Status

(3) According to Article 6 of the 1991 Bulgarian Constitution, "All citizens shall be equal before the law. There shall be no privileges or restriction of rights on the grounds of race, nationality, ethnic self-identity, sex, origin, religion, education, opinion, political affiliation, personal or social status, or property status." Furthermore, Article 37 on the Freedom of Religion and Belief categorically states that "The freedom of conscience, the freedom of thought, and the choice of religion and of religious or atheistic views are inviolable. The state shall assist in the maintenance of tolerance and respect among the believers from different denominations, and among believers and non-believers."

(4) The Constitution also designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity represented by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as the "traditional" religion. For religious communities to fully exercise their faith in the public sphere, the 2002 Denominations Act requires all religious groups other than the Orthodox Church to register in the Sofia City Court or to face punishment for "carrying out religious

activity in the name of a religion without representational authority." Assisting the Court in providing 'expert opinions' regarding registration is The Council of Ministers' Religious Confessions directorate, which formerly was responsible for the registration of religious groups. The Directorate also is charged with ensuring that national and local authorities comply with protecting the constitutional right to religious freedom.

Instances of Official Discrimination

(5) Since 2003, when the Sofia City Court assumed the responsibility for registration of religious groups, there has been general satisfaction among various denominations regarding their issues and concerns. However, some groups are concerned that the 2002 Denominations Act does not specify the consequences for not registering with the Court, nor does it outline any recourse if permission for becoming registered is denied by the Court. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee has expressed concern that the requirements of registration constitute an infringement on freedom of religion. Some evangelical Protestant churches have reported problems in holding public meetings in Dobrich and Varna. Conflicting court decisions have also left unresolved the four-year legal dispute between rival Islamic religious leaders as to who would be considered the Chief Mufti and control community funds.

(6) There have been complaints by some non-traditional groups that municipalities in Bulgaria such as Rousse, Shumen, Pleven, Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad and Kurdzhali had local ordinances curtailing religious practices of the local branches of registered groups. Article 19 of the 2002 Denominations Act, however, permits registered religious groups to have local branches freely engaging in religious activities. While in most cases the ordinances were not strictly enforced, Mormon missionaries were prevented from distributing religious pamphlets in Plovdiv and Pleven. Also, Blagoevgrad authorities prevented members of the Ahmadi Muslim Organization from practicing their faith in that municipality on the grounds that it was an unregistered religious group., The Grand Mufti of Bulgaria does not recognize the Ahmadi organization is a religious group not recognized by the as being Muslim.

(7) Jehovah's Witnesses reported a few instances of discrimination. On April 25, 2007, police stopped two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in Veliko Tarnovo and asked them to produce proof that they had the right to preach publicly. The police officers warned the two to discontinue their public preaching or there would be serious consequences. Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that local authorities obstructed the construction of a meeting house in Varna. Permission was finally granted in May 2007 after the group took the case to court.

(8) While there were Orthodox chapels or churches in all prisons, prison officials acknowledged difficulties in meeting the special requirements of other believers, particularly Muslims' dietary restrictions and requirements for places to pray.

Sectarian Instances of Discrimination and Violence

(9) The Alternative Orthodox Synod, a breakaway group from the official Bulgarian Orthodox Church, is awaiting a decision from the European Court of Human Rights in a 2004 case relating to the forcible expulsion of its members from their parishes.

(10) Protestants have said that heavily Muslim areas with a majority ethnic Turkish population sometimes place restrictions on their worship. Protestant pastor Pavel Hristov, head of the Bulgarian Missionary Network, reported that in the town of Djebel, a church which failed to apply for a tax declaration in time was closed by the local court. The pastor claimed that the ethnic Turkish authorities were searching for an excuse to move against the church.

(11) Another example of anti-religious bias comes from Dimitar Stoyanov, a member of the extremist political party Ataka and a Member of the European Parliament. In January 2007, Stoyanov commented that "There are a lot of powerful Jews, with a lot of money, who are paying the media to form the social awareness of the people. They are also playing with economic crises in countries like Bulgaria and getting rich." The Ataka Party also launched a campaign to silence the speakers on the Sofia Mosque, claiming that the invitation to prayer was disturbing persons in the capital's central area.

(12). The VMRO, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, attempted unsuccessfully to disrupt a large gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses on April 28 and 29, 2007, in the city of Dobrich, and the municipality allowed the organization to go on with the event. A few weeks prior, on April 2, 2007, the VMRO succeeded in preventing a religious gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses in Varna, forcing cancellation of their contract with the Palace Cinema. Preceding an April 28-29 gathering, local media publicized VMRO views on Jehovah's Witnesses. The media cited the VMRO's comments and opinions about "antisocial practices" of Jehovah's Witnesses, their demands that the municipality stop the meeting, and threats to gather "members and sympathizers" as a sign of protest. After intervention from the Religious Confessions Directorate, the municipality of Dobrich provided Jehovah's Witnesses with enough police protection to assure that the event was not disrupted.

(13) Perhaps the most disturbing example of societal discrimination is the anti-religious slant adopted by various affiliations of the Bulgarian media. It is not uncommon for these media outlets to disseminate negative and derogatory stories about non traditional religious groups. While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) reported a slight improvement with media, the

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report numerous print and broadcast media stories with negative, derogatory, and sometimes slanderous information about their activities and beliefs.

(14) The post-9/11 era has also witnessed an ascendancy of sectarian incidents against the Muslim community. The case against three teenagers for the 2005 desecration of Turkish graves in Haskovo is still unresolved. The Chief Mufti's Office reported several cases of mosque desecrations. On May 3, 2007, pigs' heads were hung on two mosques in Silistra. On July 26, 2006, the Kazanluk mosque was set on fire by a torch thrown through a window. On July 18, 2006, a window of the Banyabassi Mosque in Sofia was broken, and the door of a mosque in the town of Aytos was defaced with paint. The Chief Mufti's Office expressed concern that while the vandals were usually apprehended, they rarely received legal penalties or punishments.

Positive Trends

(15) Despite initial fears that the 2002 Denominations Act would restrict religious organizations other than the Bulgarian Orthodox Church from operating freely, the numbers of groups that have registered with the Sofia City Court have increased from 36 in 2003 when the Court was created to 85 in 2007. Some religious denominations have also lauded the Directorate of Religious Confessions for becoming more active in assuring that local and national authorities comply with the constitutional norms on religious freedoms. Furthermore in recognition of the escalating threats to religious tolerance and ethnic peace by anti-Islamic groups, the Bulgarian National Assembly has adopted a declaration condemning these acts.

Conclusion

(16) The 1993 Bulgarian Constitution has come a long way from its past record of religious intolerance. While recognizing its traditional link to the Bulgarian Orthodox church, the country has taken strides to recognize and support the activities of those religious groups that have registered with the Sofia City Court. What Bulgaria must guard against is the increasing atmosphere of anti-Islamic bias that has arisen in the post-September 11 era. More importantly its media must lead the way in refraining from exercising its freedoms to pillory religions that it 'perceives' as threats to the nation.