

MUSLIM DENOMINATION IN BULGARIA
(Grand Mufti's Office in the Republic of Bulgaria)

Address: 1301 Sofia, 27, Bratia Miladinovi Str.; phone: +359 2 9816001, fax: +359 2 9803058;
e-mail: info@grandmufti.bg; web: www.grandmufti.bg

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLEMENTATION MEETING OF THE ODIHR/OSCE
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Written statement to working session 6: Freedom of religion or belief

The OSCE participating States confirmed that they will recognize and respect the right of the individual to profess and practice, alone and in community with others, religion or belief in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience.

During the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) process, the commitment to freedom of religion or belief was further elaborated upon and developed to become the most detailed and complete provision pertaining to religion or belief among international human rights instruments. A series of meetings and conferences on issues related to the promotion of respect and understanding have underscored the importance of upholding freedom of religion or belief in the fight against intolerance and discrimination.

Though the participating States reaffirmed that efforts must be made to promote freedom of religion or belief, many individuals, religious or belief communities still face problems in practising their religion or belief throughout the OSCE region due to the lack of implementation of commitments related to freedom of religion or belief undertaken by participating States, in particular by Bulgaria. Although the Legislation in Bulgarian ensures the right to freedom of religion or belief and the community enjoys freedom of religion and faith, Muslim community of Bulgaria is increasingly concerned about the discriminatory actions of local authorities and officials and lack of response from the central authorities.

Muslim denomination (Grand Mufti's Office) in the Republic of Bulgaria is an autonomous organization unites Bulgarian citizens professing Islam. Through the Grand Mufti's Office the religious life of Muslims in the country is getting organized and controlled. The activities of the denomination are according to the statutes, adopted on 12 February 2012 and the Religious Denominations Act passed in 2002 by the National Assembly. Freedom of religion and belief and their inviolability are the constitutional rights of Bulgarian citizens.

Although the rights of confession are legally regulated, in fact there is negligence of the legislation and the commitments related to the freedom of religion and belief, as well as hindrance of preaching and teaching of a religion by some personal actions – police officers or public servants.

An example is the inspection of the Police in a course for Quran in the residential district

Orlandovtzi in Sofia during the Holy month Ramadan in August 2013. The police demonstratively interrogated the teacher before the students, whether he teaches something illegally and unlawfully that gave students a shock and fright. On account of this case the lease for the office where the courses took place was dissolved by the owner of the office. The owner was affected too. The pretext of the owner was that he was constrained because of the pressure of the police.

Another similar case of instilling fear happened in August 2013 in the residential district Botunets in Sofia when the imam of the Masjeed was subjected to interrogations without notice and grounds before the lessor.

These practices force the clergymen to resign their positions or renounce their obligations.

Other harsh experiences are: the impediment of study of the Religion Islam in a public school in Stara Zagora as an optional subject in school year 2011-2012, although a sufficient number of applications from the parents. Applications were turned down by the director of the school. Still, the Muslim students do not study the optional subject of Religion Islam in state and municipal schools in Stara Zagora region.

Grand Mufti's Office annually organizes summer courses for Quran and basic religious knowledge in order to absorb the absence of the subject of Islam. The study of religion is a fundamental constitutional right of every Bulgarian citizen, but unfortunately we are witness to a conduct of law enforcement officers and public servants who, through their actions avert the natural course of this process.

This situation disturbs the Muslim denomination in Bulgaria, which is trying to serve the needs of the Muslims in the country.

Such acts are in violation of the freedom of religion and belief and cause inciting hatred on religious grounds and obstruct the right of every person to choose their beliefs. These actions leave a negative impression in the people's minds about Muslims, hence a negative attitude against the Muslims.

In this respect we encourage the National authorities to:

1. Implement effectively the commitments to freedom of religion or belief and anti-discriminatory legislation;
2. Address these issues for their employees, so that they are more careful and sensitive when the subject of their work is religions or beliefs of the citizens;
3. Urge on educational institutions to use the Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, co-published by OSCE, UNESCO and CoE;

We call upon the OSCE/ODIHR:

1. To monitor the process of implementation of commitment to freedom of religion and belief in Bulgaria;
2. OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief to have a greater role in the work of the OSCE on further implementation of the freedom of religion or belief in all participating States.