

# Bulgaria

ENGLISH only

## Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, Vienna

14 and 15 April 2016

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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.

- The local authorities provide some assistance but generally fail to prosecute attackers or protect the victims.
- Some municipalities attempt to restrict the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. During June and July 2015, the municipalities of Burgas and Kyustendil issued fines to nine of Jehovah's Witnesses merely for sharing their faith with others in a peaceful manner.

## Societal Abuses and Discrimination

### Physical Assaults, Harassment, and Vandalism

- (1) **Burgas.** On 27 February 2016, two of Jehovah's Witnesses, Ms. Kotrla and Ms. Ivanchukova, were participating in their Christian ministry at block 67 B in Bratya Miladinovi, when a woman of about 55 to 60 years old opened the door and rudely ordered them out and closed the door. They left and went to the floor below. The same woman came down and saw them, and she started to scream in a loud voice. The Witnesses tried peacefully to explain what they were doing but she would not listen to them and continued screaming at them. They decided to leave the building. As they were going down, the woman pushed Ms. Kotrla on the shoulders, clearly with the purpose that she would fall. Ms. Kotrla told the woman more than once not to hit her, but the woman screamed even more and grabbed the personal belongings which Ms. Kotrla had in her hands. While going down, the woman kept on screaming and hitting Ms. Kotrla several times hard. While outside, once again she pushed Ms. Kotrla on the chest and banged the door.
- (2) **Burgas.** On 8 July 2015, three of Jehovah's Witnesses were preaching in a public area when SKAT TV reporters and a camera crew began harassing them and making slanderous accusations while filming. One of the reporters, Kevork Onnik Daduryan, placed their literature cart in the middle of the street in order to block free movement of pedestrians. Gincho Paskov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, asked the journalists to leave, but they continued their harassment. Mr. Daduryan slapped Mr. Paskov's hand when he tried to prevent Mr. Daduryan from taking the cart again.

Police officers arrived and issued an administrative violation to Mr. Paskov for allegedly conducting a religious meeting without conforming to regulations. On the same basis, the police officers issued a warning protocol to the other Witnesses but did nothing to help with the reporters who were harassing them. Mr. Paskov has submitted an objection to the citation issued to him and has filed a complaint regarding the police officers' failure to provide protection.

- (3) **Burgas.** On 17 April 2011, the meeting place of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Witnesses were attacked by a mob organised by the VMRO political party. Hooded men entered the property and started to attack the Witnesses verbally and physically. Using fists, feet, stones, a pot of flowers, and even throwing fireworks at the Witnesses and into the meeting place, they hit and kicked the Witnesses on their faces and body leaving them with injuries and bleeding wounds. During the attack, members of the crowd, including representatives of VMRO, shouted insults, pejoratively calling them "sectarians," "junk," "Jews," and yelling, "Because of you, children commit suicide!" "Die, die, die!, Junk!, We'll cut off your heads" and other slurs, insults and threats.

Unfortunately the intolerance and hatred did not stop there. The Kingdom Hall was attacked a number of times after the April 17 incident, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to set the building on fire.

As of April 2016, the case is still ongoing.

- (4) **Blagoevgrad.** On 4 April 2015, Mr. Georgi Atanasov was peacefully participating in the public ministry when Mr. Nikolai Ilchev Cherkezev approached him with a television crew and began asking provocative questions about the Witnesses' beliefs. When Mr. Atanasov refused to participate and tried to leave, Mr. Cherkezev grabbed Mr. Atanasov's arm and squeezed it to prevent him from leaving, bruising his arm, and then punched Mr. Atanasov in the left temple area. The police arrived on the scene and made an incident report.

On 14 April 2015, a judge of the regional court sent the case back to the Prosecutor's Office for an investigation of a crime motivated by religious hatred. The Prosecutor refused to initiate a pre-trial proceeding and canceled the case.

- (5) **Blagoevgrad.** A slander campaign and protests in Blagoevgrad against Jehovah's Witnesses continues since the autumn of 2014, fomented by VMRO and NFSB political party members Georgi Kostadinov, Nikolai Cherkezev, and Metodi Biraktarski.

On 25 March 2015, Top Presa news media broadcast slanderous statements made by Georgi Kostadinov and Nikolai Cherkezev about Jehovah's Witnesses.

On 8 April 2015, Georgi Kostadinov, Nikolai Cherkezev, and Metodi Biraktarski organized a protest in front of the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. The police arrived and issued warnings to the men not to violate the ordinance for public order. As a result of this and other protests, the Kingdom Hall has been vandalised several times.

On 3 July 2015, Jehovah's Witnesses submitted a complaint against the three men for slander and displays of religious hatred.

On 17 November 2015, the Prosecutor's Office decree refused to initiate criminal proceedings and cancelled the appeal.

- (6) **Sofia.** On 18 March 2015, two of Jehovah's Witnesses were sharing the Bible's message with residents in Sofia. Mr. Mateev became angry and used a large stick to strike one of the Witnesses, Mrs. Georgieva, on the shoulder. He cursed at her and chased her and her

companion from the apartment block. Mrs. Georgieva sought medical care for her injury and on 24 March 2015, submitted a complaint to the Prosecutor's Office.

### Defamation

On 25 January 2016, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (Commission) found the Bulgarian cable television channel SKAT TV and two of its journalists "spread unfounded information" and made damaging comments that constituted religious discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses. This is a significant victory for Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria inasmuch as SKAT TV has circulated slanderous statements for years about this peaceful religious minority.

Time and again, television programs have grossly insulted the religious beliefs and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, in 2011 journalists from SKAT TV made slanderous statements about the Witnesses in a malicious and deliberate attempt to harm their activity. Not only were these programs broadcast on television throughout the entire country, they were also posted on the Internet. In a systematic way, SKAT TV has used slander to lead viewers to believe that Jehovah's Witnesses are guilty of terrible acts.

Jehovah's Witnesses face similar issues with other media outlets in Bulgaria, and the Commission's recent decision will serve as a warning to them not to repeat baseless hate speech. Jehovah's Witnesses are pursuing several similar cases of irresponsible journalism.

### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

#### Municipal Ordinances

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. These 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. In addition to using the media to slander the Witnesses, they use their influence to change ordinances to stop door-to-door religious canvassing, use of a literature cart, and speaking to people on the streets.

#### Partial List of Municipalities with Ordinances Restricting Religious Activities

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

(22) Chirpan

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 by citing violations of local ordinances.

- (1) **Burgas.** Between April and October 2015, police officers issued administrative violations to four of Jehovah's Witnesses for publicly sharing their religious beliefs. The fines were based on Article 4(5) of *the Ordinance for Preservation of Public Order in the Territory of Burgas Municipality*: "Religious agitation is prohibited on the streets of the city by means of the distribution of free printed materials."

The Witnesses filed written objections to the administrative charges, but the Burgas deputy mayor, Krassimir Ivanov Stoichev, imposed fines of 50 lev (25 euros) to each one of them for their religious activity. The Witnesses appealed the fines and the Burgas Regional Court dismissed the charges for lack of evidence that an offence had been committed.

- (2) **Kyustendil.** On 11 April 2015, six of Jehovah's Witnesses were peacefully sharing the Bible's message when police officers charged them with violation of a local ordinance on religious activity. The Witnesses filed written objections to the charges and filed appeals against the fines of 800 lev (409 euros).

The court agreed that these fines were wrongly charged and that the bylaw in Kyustendil (Article 19(4) of *the Ordinance* prohibits the performance of religious agitation in the streets by giving away free printed materials) "contradicts laws of a higher power namely, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Constitution of Bulgaria and the Law for Religion." The court continued, "Simply distributing written religious materials outside places of worship alone in itself cannot be declared and accepted as a violation of public order."

### Interference With Freedom of Assembly

**Panagyurishte.** On 19 March 2015, the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Panagyurishte received written notice from Mayor Nikola Belishki that the hall they had previously agreed to rent to the congregation for the Memorial of Christ's death was no longer available. The written notice explained that approval to use the hall had been revoked because citizens in the municipality initiated a petition and the mayor wanted to avoid any potential conflicts. According to media outlets, Orthodox priest Atanas Manolov initiated the petition and collected signatures. The Witnesses secured another facility for the event.

### Denial of Zoning Permits

**Kyustendil.** During 2013 and 2014 the Mayor of Kyustendil and the Chief Architect refused to issue a building permit for a change in classification to Jehovah's Witnesses. Mr. Paunov, mayor of Kyustendil Municipality, made discriminatory statements to the local and national media and declared, "I simply will not issue a building permit." In a *News7* television news report entitled "Kyustendil Takes a Stand Against the Sect," he stated: "They do not have a registration

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at this address in order to have a prayer house. I, in general, promise them that in Kyustendil they will not have a prayer house.”

As of April 2016, the case is still ongoing.

### **Jehovah’s Witnesses respectfully request the government of Bulgaria to:**

- (1) Ensure that law enforcement authorities provide appropriate protection against the 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 Bulgaria 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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