

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS IN BULGARIA

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S CHRISTIAN WITNESSES  
For the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw, 26 September to 7 October 2011

### **BACKGROUND**

Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in Bulgaria since 1888. They were legally registered as a religious association in Bulgaria in 1938, and the Christian Association of Jehovah's Witnesses was registered in Bulgaria on July 17, 1991. After several changes to national law, they were re-registered on October 6, 1998. Today, more than 5,000 persons attend their Bible-based meetings. Jehovah's Witnesses enjoy freedom of worship in Bulgaria, but are increasingly concerned about the discriminatory actions of local authorities and lack of response from the federal authorities.

### **RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

<b>2011 - Present</b>	<b>Burgas</b>	<b>Oppressive Law on Religious Organizations</b>
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The Municipality Council of Burgas passed an updated Regulation for the Protection of Public Order on the territory of the Burgas Municipality, **July 21, 2011**. This regulation directly affects the free expression of religious beliefs of all, but targets the denomination of Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, the updated law prohibits "propaganda at the homes of citizens without their specific consent, expressed in advance" and prohibits "religious campaigning on the streets of the town by means of spreading free printed materials." The new provisions are in violation not only of national law but of European Convention standards. The Directorate of Denominations expressed his objections before the law was passed and the District Governor of Burgas, Konstantin Gebenarov, has rejected the new law. The municipality's response is unclear.

<b>2011 - Present</b>	<b>Varna</b>	<b>Restriction from Building House of Worship</b>
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The city continues to obstruct a building project for a house of worship.

**Building Permit:** Although the city issued a building permit for the construction on July 7, 2005, community discriminatory behavior, bias on the part of the mayor, and strong pressure and propaganda from the VMRO political party halted the construction as early as July 2007. Alleged technical problems were corrected, yet the mayor refused to rescind his order to stop construction. As a result, a lawsuit was filed against the mayor. On December 7, 2010, the Varna Administrative Court ruled that the mayor's actions were illegal, obligating him to renew the building permit. The mayor has not complied. In response, application was made **July 19, 2011**, to the Varna Administrative Court requesting a sanction of the Varna Municipality.

**Zoning:** In a separate lawsuit, community opposers to the same building project filed a petition to annul the zoning change, granted in 2001, which permits the building of a church. After the Supreme Administrative Court in Sofia ruled in favor of the opposers on April 19, 2010, application was made to the ECHR.

**ABUSES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

<b>April 17, 2011</b>	<b>Burgas</b>	<b>Illegal Protest/Mob Attack/Assault</b>
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The VMRO political party, together with fans of two major football teams in Burgas, organized a protest against Jehovah’s Witnesses and invited many journalists, though the protest was not approved by the Burgas Municipality. In advance of the event and the protest, one of the Burgas Congregation elders went directly to the Burgas Police Department on April 16, 2011, to request protection but the threat was not taken seriously. On the evening of **April 17, 2011**, the local congregation (including women, children, and elderly ones) was peacefully gathered at their Kingdom Hall to for the annual commemoration of Christ’s death, when about 60 protesters in hooded jackets and dark sunglasses, and waving VMRO flags, violently attacked the attendants at the entrance of the Kingdom Hall. They forcefully broke the entrance door of the auditorium, threw large rocks, firecrackers and smoke candles while shouting insults. The Witness attendants blocking the entrance were repeatedly pummeled with blows. Many of those in attendance called the police immediately but the police were slow to respond. Five attendants were sent to the hospital emergency ward with injuries, including concussions and a broken nose requiring surgery. The five victims have filed two private criminal complaints with the Burgas Prosecutor. Eight individuals have been charged with criminal offences, including Mr. Georgi Drakaliev, leader of the VMRO Burgas, for their participation in the religiously motivated mob attack.

The Kingdom Hall in Burgas was attacked a number of times after the April 17 incident, and an attempt was made to set the hall on fire. VMRO members continue to make slanderous comments about Jehovah’s Witnesses and threaten further violence against them until VMRO achieves their goal of seeing the Witnesses banned in Bulgaria.

<b>Ongoing</b>	<b>Nationwide</b>	<b>Harassment</b>
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Members of the State Security (SANS) continue to call repeatedly on foreign Witnesses in Pazardjik, Plovdiv, and Yambol to inquire about the organization. The interrogations, although held in a friendly tone, are very unpleasant. SANS has the responsibility to protect the country from threats of anti-social behavior against fundamental human rights and the freedom of her citizens. It is a matter of concern that SANS views non-traditional religions as a possible threat.

<b>2010 - Present</b>	<b>Nationwide</b>	<b>Libel</b>
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On **Friday, June 4, 2010**, the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses filed a “Signal” with the Commission for Protection from Discrimination against the VMRO Political Party. It addresses only a small portion of the harmful and outright lies VMRO leaders and party members have expressed in the media and elsewhere throughout the country. As a result of these actions the general public developed prejudice and negative attitude toward Jehovah’s Witnesses – a legally registered denomination in our country and in the rest of the European Union. On March 30, 2011 the Commission decided to leave the Signal without consideration, wrongly minimizing VMRO’s actions as mere a theological dispute. An appeal was filed with the Sofia Administrative Court, but that was dismissed on **August 22, 2011**. An appeal is now being filed with the Supreme Administrative Court.

**POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

<b>February 2011</b>	<b>Haskovo</b>	<b>Religious Intolerance</b>
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A 15-year-old Witness was subjected to a classroom discussion based on a textbook, approved by the Ministry of Education, which labels Jehovah's Witnesses as a sect. By means of this textbook pupils are taught that sects are dangerous and have a detrimental effect on the society. A letter has been submitted to the Minister of Education, who reassured Witnesses that the textbook shall be corrected and submitted to the Ministry of Education for further evaluation and approval. A revised textbook will be used in the 2011/2012 school year.

<b>2010 - 2011</b>	<b>Simitli</b>	<b>Sanction</b>
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On Monday, November 15, 2010, two of Jehovah's Witnesses were preaching from door to door in the town of Simitli. Two police officers showed up and told them that a resident of an apartment building had felt disturbed and called the police. They issued an Order stating that the Witnesses had disrupted the public peace and violated the Law on Denominations and the rights of other citizens. They also told the Witnesses that they did not have the right to preach without having local registration in the town of Simitli. After this incident, on March 14, 2011, the Director of the Directorate of Denominations sent a letter to the Police Chief in Simitli informing him clearly of the rights of a legally registered denomination in Bulgaria. The letter also confirmed that the Witnesses' activity is "*not commercial or advertising*" and "*cannot be qualified as activity regulated by the Law for Public Gatherings, Meetings and Manifestation*." This is one of several occasions when the Directorate of Denominations, Ombudsman in Bulgaria and other government officials have openly protected the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses.

**SOCIETAL ABUSES AND DISCRIMINATION**

<b>2010 - Present</b>	<b>Montana</b>	<b>Assault</b>
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When leaving a woman who expressed interest in their Bible message, two of Jehovah's Witnesses were brutally attacked by the woman's son. One of the Witnesses was so severely beaten that she lost consciousness, having suffered a concussion. A criminal complaint has been filed regarding the **December 27, 2010**, attack.

**RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OBJECTIVES**

Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria and worldwide call upon the government of Bulgaria to:

- (1) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses, without interference or harassment, to build houses of worship, hold worship services, and share information from the Bible with others.
- (2) Sanction those who use the media as a vehicle for baseless slander.
- (3) Stop the aggression by political elements such as the VMRO and ATAKA parties against the legally registered and peaceful religious minority of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- (4) Inform governmental agencies about the rights of minority religious denominations in Bulgaria as well as the potential repercussions of governmental officials and/or public servants spreading false, slanderous and discriminatory information.