

## BULGARIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

### Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and conscience. Religious groups may worship without registering, but registered groups receive certain benefits, including the right to receive state funding, operate schools and hospitals, and receive property tax exemptions. The constitution recognizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country’s “traditional” religion, and the law exempts the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) from registration. The retrial of 13 regional Muslim leaders charged with spreading Salafi Islam continued, as did the trial against 14 Romani Muslims charged with propagating antidemocratic ideology, inciting war, and aiding foreign fighters. In June the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled the government’s denial of a registration application by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community constituted a violation of religious freedom. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported continued assaults and harassment and a continuing campaign against them by members of the United Patriots coalition in the national assembly. Schools continued to ban the wearing of religious symbols. Minority religious groups reported increased local prohibitions on proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. The Muslim community reported difficulty in obtaining construction permits for new places of worship and restitution of property confiscated by the communist regime. Protestants and other minority religious groups reported discrimination by government officials. Jewish organizations expressed concern over the government’s failure to prosecute growing anti-Semitism on social media. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and minority religious groups expressed concern over proposals for legislation restricting religious activities. The government established the position of national coordinator for combating anti-Semitism and adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism.

Muslims, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses reported multiple cases of physical assaults, harassment, and threats against members of their communities. Protestant pastors reported harassment from Orthodox priests, who said the pastors represented “sects.” The Office of the Grand Mufti blamed the government for financial difficulties resulting in its inability to pay imams. Despite protests resulting in denial of official permission to stage the annual march honoring pro-Nazi World War II (WWII) figure Hristo Lukov, the march took place. Jewish NGOs expressed concern over the increase of hate speech and other manifestations of anti-Semitism. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, some media outlets

continued to misrepresent their activities and encouraged their harassment. Muslims, Jews, and Jehovah’s Witnesses reported incidents of vandalism against their property. Christian and Muslim groups held commemorative events to promote religious tolerance.

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed cases of religious discrimination, the harassment of religious minorities, and legislative initiatives proposing restrictions on religious activities in meetings with government officials, including in the Directorate for Religious Affairs, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Commission for Protection Against Discrimination, local government, and law enforcement. The U.S. Ambassador protested the march to commemorate Hristo Lukov, and the embassy issued a statement condemning hate speech and the incitement of violence. The Ambassador advocated tolerance and cited lessons from the Holocaust in speeches at public events and in meetings with religious groups and NGOs. The Ambassador discussed the restitution of historical property, draft legislation imposing restrictions on religious freedom, and other challenges facing the Muslim community with the grand mufti and the Kurdjali regional mufti. Embassy officials met with minority religious groups, including the Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, Catholic, Protestant, Armenian, and Jehovah’s Witnesses communities, to discuss their concerns over existing restrictions on their activities and proposals by political figures for further restrictions. In March the embassy cohosted a religious tolerance workshop, bringing together religious leaders, government officials, and NGOs. Also in March the Ambassador spoke on the importance of building on the country’s heritage of religious tolerance at a Tolerance and Mutual Understanding Day in Kurdjali.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 7.1 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 76 percent of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, mostly affiliated with the BOC. The census reports Muslims, the second-largest religious group, are approximately 10 percent of the population, followed by Protestants at 1.1 percent and Roman Catholics at 0.8 percent. Orthodox Christians from the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (AAOC), Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bahais, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, the Sri Chinmoy Center, the White Brotherhood, and other groups together make up 0.2 percent of the population; 4.8 percent of respondents said they had no religion, and 7.1 percent did not indicate a religion, according to the census.

Some religious minorities are concentrated geographically. Many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and Pomaks (descendants of Slavic Bulgarians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule) live in the Rhodope Mountains along the southern border with Greece and Turkey. Ethnic Turkish and Romani Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea coast. Some recent Romani converts to Islam live in towns in the central part of the country, such as Plovdiv and Pazardjik. According to the census, nearly 40 percent of Catholics live in and around Plovdiv. The majority of the small Jewish community lives in Sofia, Plovdiv, and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are widely dispersed, but many Roma are Protestant converts, and Protestants are more numerous in areas with large Romani populations. Approximately 80 percent of the urban population and 62 percent of the rural population identifies as Orthodox Christian. Approximately 25 percent of the rural population identifies as Muslim, compared with 4 percent of the urban population.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states freedom of conscience and choice of religion or no religion are inviolable, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the state shall assist in maintaining tolerance and respect among believers of different denominations, as well as between believers and nonbelievers. It states the practice of any religion shall be unrestricted and religious beliefs, institutions, and communities shall not be used for political ends. It restricts freedom of religion to the extent that its practice would be detrimental to national security, public order, health, and morals, or the rights and freedoms of others. It states no one shall be exempt from obligations established by the constitution or the law on grounds of religious or other convictions. The constitution also stipulates the separation of religious institutions from the state and the formation of political parties along religious lines, as well as organizations that incite religious animosity. The law does not allow any privilege based on religious identity.

The constitution names Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's traditional religion. The law establishes the BOC as a legal entity, exempting it from the court registration that is mandatory for all other religious groups wishing to acquire legal recognition.

The penal code prescribes up to three years' imprisonment for participants in attacks on individuals or groups based on their religious affiliation. Instigators and

leaders of an attack may receive prison sentences of up to six years. Those who obstruct the ability of individuals to profess their faith or carry out their rituals and services or compel another to participate in religious rituals and services may be sentenced to up to one year in prison. Violating a person's or group's freedom of acquiring or practicing a religious belief is subject to a fine of between 100 and 300 levs (\$60 to \$180). If the infraction is committed by any legal entity, the fine can range from 500 to 5,000 levs (\$305 to \$3,050).

To receive national legal recognition, the law requires groups other than the BOC to register with the Sofia City Court. Applications must include: the group's name and official address; a description of the group's religious beliefs and service practices, organizational structure and bodies, management procedures, bodies, and mandates; a list of official representatives and the processes for their election; procedures for convening meetings and making decisions; and information on finances and property and processes for termination and liquidation. The Directorate for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers provides expert opinions on registration matters upon request of the court. Applicants may appeal negative registration decisions to the Sofia Appellate Court and, subsequently, the Supreme Cassation Court. The law does not require the formal registration of local branches of registered groups, only that branches notify local authorities of the national registration of their group. The law prohibits registration of different groups with the same name in the same location. There are 168 registered religious groups, in addition to the BOC.

The law requires the government to provide funding for all registered religious groups, although there is no legal requirement on how to allocate the funds among the groups. Registered groups have the right to perform religious services, own assets such as houses of worship and cemeteries, provide medical, social, and educational services, receive property tax exemptions, and participate in commercial ventures.

Unregistered religious groups may engage in religious practice, but they lack privileges granted to registered groups, such as access to government funding and the right to own property, establish financial accounts in their name, operate schools and hospitals, receive property tax exemptions, or sell religious merchandise.

The law restricts the wearing of face-covering garments in public places, imposing a fine of 200 levs (\$120) for a first offense and 1,500 levs (\$900) for repeat offenders.

The law allows registered, but not unregistered, groups to publish, import, and distribute religious media. The law does not restrict proselytizing by registered or unregistered groups. Some municipal ordinances, however, require local permits for distribution of religious literature in public places, and some municipalities have adopted local regulations that restrict proselytizing.

By law, public schools at all levels may, but are not required to, teach the historical, philosophical, and cultural aspects of religion and introduce students to the moral values of different religious groups as part of the core curriculum. A school may teach any registered religion in a special course as part of the elective curriculum upon request of at least eight students, subject to the availability of books and teachers. The Ministry of Education and Science approves and provides books for these special religion courses. If a public school is unable to pay for a religion teacher, it may accept financial sponsorship from a private donor or a teacher from a registered denomination. The law also allows registered religious groups to operate schools and universities, provided they meet government standards for secular education.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination is an independent government body charged with preventing and protecting against discrimination, including religious discrimination, and ensuring equal opportunity. It functions as a civil litigation court adjudicating discrimination complaints; its decisions may be appealed to administrative courts. If the commission accepts a case, it assigns it to a panel and then reviews it in open session. If it makes a finding of discrimination, the commission may impose a fine of 250-2,000 levs (\$150-\$1,200). The commission may double fines for repeat violations. Regional courts may also try civil cases involving religious discrimination.

The law establishes an independent ombudsman to serve as an advocate for citizens who believe that public or municipal administrations or public service providers have violated their rights and freedoms, including those pertaining to religion, through their actions or inaction. The ombudsman may request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals for terminating existing practices, refer information to the prosecution service, and request the Constitutional Court to abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional.

The penal code provides up to three years' imprisonment for forming "a political organization on religious grounds" or using a church or religion to spread

propaganda against the authority of the state or its activities. It prohibits the propagation or incitement of religious or other discrimination, violence, or hatred “by speech, press or other media, by electronic information systems or in another manner,” as well as religiously motivated assault or property damage. Either offense is punishable by imprisonment for one to four years and a fine of 5,000-10,000 levs (\$3,050-\$6,100), as well as “public censure.” Desecration of religious symbols or sites, including places of worship or graves, is punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 3,000-10,000 levs (\$1,850-\$6,100).

The law allows foreign members of religious denominations to obtain long-term residency permits.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## Government Practices

*Summary paragraph:* The retrial of 13 Muslim leaders charged with spreading an antidemocratic ideology (Salafi Islam, per the prosecution) continued at the Plovdiv Appellate court. The trial of 14 Romani Muslims on charges of propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war and aiding ISIS continued in Pazardjik District Court. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported continued assaults and harassment, including an ongoing media campaign against them, by members of the United Patriots coalition in the national assembly. Schools continued to ban the wearing of religious symbols, including the hijab and cross. Jehovah’s Witnesses and other minority religious groups reported an increase in the number of municipalities with ordinances restricting their activities, especially proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. The Muslim community reported difficulty in obtaining construction permits for new places of worship; its property restitution claims remained suspended, pending court review of whether the Office of the Grand Mufti was the rightful successor to confiscated properties. The ECHR ruled the government’s denial of registration of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community constituted a violation of the religious freedom clause of the European Convention on Human Rights. Jewish organizations expressed concern over the government’s failure to prosecute growing anti-Semitism on social media. NGOs and minority religious groups expressed concern over proposals for legislation restricting religious activities, including one that would criminalize “radical Islam.” The government established the position of national coordinator for combating anti-Semitism, and adopted the internationally accepted working definition of anti-Semitism.

At year's end, the retrial of Ahmed Mussa and 12 other Muslims charged with spreading Salafi Islam (which the prosecution characterized as an antidemocratic ideology), remained ongoing at the Plovdiv Appellate Court. In July 2016 the Supreme Cassation Court had vacated the guilty verdict against Mussa for preaching Salafi Islam and rescinded the administrative punishment against the 12 other Muslims, ordering the Plovdiv Appellate Court to retry the case.

In a separate case, the trial of 14 Romani Muslims, including Ahmed Mussa, on charges of supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, and propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war, remained ongoing at year's end at the Pazardjik District Court. Mussa, who had been in custody during the trial, was released on bail in November, while 12 other defendants continued to be under house arrest; the 14th defendant remained free, released on her own recognizance.

On June 15, the ECHR delivered a unanimous ruling that the Bulgarian government had violated Article 9 (freedom of religion) in light of Article 11 (freedom of association) of the European Convention on Human Rights by denying a registration application by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Rumen Metodiev, later joined by others, had first applied to register the group in 2007 and been denied by the Sofia City Court, following a negative report on the group by the government's Department of Religious Affairs. According to the ECHR, the government's report stated the Ahmadis were "known for their religious intolerance, refusal of modernity, and polygamy, and were regarded as a sect by Muslims." Metodiev appealed to the ECHR in 2008 after the Sofia Appellate Court and the Supreme Cassation Court upheld the denial. The ECHR decreed the government should pay Metodiev 4,000 euros (\$2,450) in damages. The ECHR ruled its finding of a violation constituted sufficient compensation for damages sustained by the other plaintiffs. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community remained unregistered at year's end.

Members of minority religious groups, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report cases where the government failed to prosecute individuals, particularly members of the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) political parties, for the assault and harassment of their members.

On July 19, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, IMRO party member and Vratsa Municipal Councilor Marin Tsvetkov approached two Jehovah's Witnesses on the street and tried to push over their cart containing literature. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, this was the ninth incident of harassment by Tsvetkov. The

Jehovah’s Witnesses said police spoke with Tsvetkov but took no other action after the incident.

In August the Supreme Cassation Court vacated the Sofia Appellate Court’s 2015 decision upholding the challenge of former Grand Mufti Nedim Gendjev to the legitimacy of the 2011 extraordinary conference, which had elected Mustafa Alish Hadji as Grand Mufti. At year’s end Gendjev continued to pursue a court challenge of Hadji’s election, which a regular Muslim conference confirmed in 2016.

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination and most schools continued to interpret the law denying privileges based on religious identity as banning the display of all religious symbols in public schools, including wearing hijabs or displaying crosses.

The government stated it would continue to work closely with groups representing Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism, each of which it recognized as holding a historic place in the country’s culture.

The national budget allocated a total of 5 million levs (\$3.1 million) for the construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses, including: 3.76 million levs (\$2.3 million) for the BOC; 360,000 levs (\$221,000) for the Muslim community; and 50,000 levs (\$30,700) each for the Roman Catholic Church, AAOC, and the Jewish community. The budget distributed 80,000 levs (\$49,000) among 15 other registered denominations that had applied for funds to the Directorate for Religious Affairs. The directorate stated its goal was to make sure denominations that had not received funds previously received funding if they applied. The government’s budget also allocated 450,000 levs (\$276,000) for the maintenance of religious facilities of national importance, 50,000 levs (\$30,700) for the publication of religious books and research, and 15,000 levs (\$9,200) to the National Council of Religious Communities. The budget kept 135,000 levs (\$82,800) in reserve, including 15,000 levs (\$9,200) for updating the electronic register and digital database of religious facilities in the country.

Minority religious groups reported at least 40 municipalities, a nearly 70 percent increase compared with 2016, had ordinances prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. Among these municipalities were the regional cities of Haskovo, Kurdjali, Kyustendil, Pazardjik,

Pleven, Ruse, Shumen, Siliстра, Sliven, Stara Zagora, Turgovishte, Varna, Vratsa, and Yambol.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, reported many municipalities had ordinances restricting their religious activities, including ones preventing them from expressing their religious convictions in public and carrying out what the ordinances termed “religious agitation on city streets” by distributing free printed materials, and from visiting individuals at their homes, which was often characterized as “religious propaganda.” They cited multiple instances in which police fined, threatened, warned, or issued citations to individual Jehovah’s Witnesses for violating these ordinances. For example, on July 19, two police patrol officers stopped two Jehovah’s Witnesses who were talking with people on the street in Obzor and told them their activity was illegal, threatening to arrest them if they continued.

Sometimes municipalities imposed fines on individual Jehovah’s Witnesses even though the city ordinances did not include restrictions on religious activities. Municipalities levied 10 fines on Jehovah’s Witnesses, who appealed nine of them, of which the courts annulled eight. For example, on June 23 and July 7, Sofia municipal officials issued citations for unauthorized commercial activity to Jehovah’s Witnesses distributing religious literature, imposing a 100 lev (\$61) fine for violating the regulations for public sports, culture, and other mass events. On November 24, Sofia Administrative Court annulled the June fine; an appeal of the July fine was pending at year’s end.

Representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses reported recommendations by the Directorate for Religious Affairs or by the ombudsman against municipal restrictions on religious activities had no effect. Jehovah’s Witnesses challenged eight of the ordinances in administrative courts and won all eight cases. The courts ruled the ordinances had violated the country’s constitution, declaring the ordinances null and void. Municipalities appealed three of the eight cases; the appeals were pending at year’s end. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Asenovgrad municipality revoked its restrictions on door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature after learning about court decisions revoking ordinances in other localities.

Muslim representatives continued to report a lack of cooperation from authorities on the restoration and maintenance of historic mosques, such as the Makbul Ibrahim Pasa in Razgrad, that the Ministry of Culture managed as national cultural monuments.

Muslim community leaders reported the municipality of Gotse Delchev continued to withhold issuance of a construction permit to build a mosque, maintaining the plot remained zoned for a shopping center. They also said the Sofia municipal government continued to withhold permission to build a second mosque in Sofia on the grounds that the application for a building permit remained incomplete. In August IMRO declared it would oppose any attempts to build a new mosque in Sofia, which it said would “alter the skyline of the city as a capital which stands up for its history and values.” There were no reports of further developments in either case by year’s end.

Catholic community leaders complained about the Sofia municipality’s refusal to recognize the religious status of a monastery there, treating it instead as a residential building and imposing taxes that otherwise would be waived.

The Office of the Grand Mufti reported there had been no progress by year’s end with regard to its claim, lodged with the Sofia City Court, for succession to the properties of pre-1940s Muslim religious communities seized by the communist government. Pending court review of who the rightful successor to the confiscated properties was, the government continued to hold all restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti in suspension.

The government did not restitute any properties to the Catholic Church during the year. The Church reported authorities had returned approximately 50 percent of the properties for which it was seeking restitution since the restitution law entered into force in 1992.

According to the United Evangelical Churches (UEC) – a group representing nine individual Protestant churches and three unions of Pentecostal, Baptist, and Congregational churches – the Chitalishte Union, a government-supported association of educational and cultural community centers throughout the country, prohibited its member cultural centers from renting their premises to Protestants for their religious activities because the union regarded them as “sects.”

In April the Kurdjali Administrative Court overruled the denial by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination of a complaint filed by Muslims about the failure of public kindergartens, schools, and hospitals to offer menu choices without pork in their eating facilities. The Ministry of Health and the Kurdjali Municipality had supported the commission’s position that health considerations should guide the dietary choices offered in those institutions. The court stated the

commission had failed to document any negative health-related consequences of replacing pork with other meat and ordered the commission to review the case again.

The government continued to permit religious headdresses in official photos for national identity documents as long as both ears and one centimeter (2/5 of an inch) of hair were visible.

The local lodge of Jewish service organization B'nai B'rith made multiple statements to the media that leading politicians in the three political parties comprising the United Patriots coalition had carried out anti-Semitic acts and appointed to public service individuals professing neo-Nazi views. On May 17, Deputy Regional Development Minister Pavel Tenev resigned after a picture of him saluting a wax statue of a Nazi officer in a Paris museum nine years earlier was circulated on social media. Deputy Prime Minister Valeri Simeonov defended Tenev, commenting that, as a student in the 1970s, he himself had visited the Buchenwald concentration camp and might have taken “fun-poking pictures” there. Similar pictures of Ivo Antonov, head of a directorate at the Ministry of Defense, giving a Nazi salute in front of a German tank surfaced on May 18, but they did not result in his resignation. Antonov issued a public apology, and the defense minister refused to fire him despite the prime minister’s request to do so.

Jewish organizations reported the government declined to prosecute individuals or organizations for propagating anti-Semitism online, despite evidence collected by the police. For example, in December the group National Resistance, led by Blagovest Asenov, posted on its Facebook page a statement reading in part, “The Jews have done much evil to mankind, but the beginning … was the murder of Christ! … they have … been the greatest supporters of debauchery and evil … they have served as Satan’s edge against man and the Christian people.”

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the campaign mounted against them by the NFSB and the IMRO, two members of the United Patriots coalition, continued throughout the year. For example, in January in Elhovo, in February in Mezdra, and in July in Vratsa, IMRO members questioned the right of Jehovah’s Witnesses missionaries to distribute literature and threatened them, in one case telling the missionaries no one would “be able to save you.”

Deputy Prime Minister Krassimir Karakachanov, who also served as the minister of defense and as the leader of IMRO, stated in several public interviews there should be a law prohibiting foreign financing of religious denominations and

restricting the ability of foreigners to engage in religious activities in the country. He also proposed that the High Islamic Institute train imams according to a government-approved curriculum. The leaders of many religious groups, including Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Armenian Orthodox, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, all expressed concern over Karakachanov’s proposed restrictions.

On December 6, the national assembly passed on first reading a bill submitted by the United Patriots coalition amending the penal code to criminalize “radical Islam.” The draft amendments defined radical Islam as an ideology calling for establishing a caliphate, enforcing the rule of sharia, or forcing Islamic religious principles and norms on others. Muslim leaders and NGOs criticized the proposal, saying it stigmatized and discriminated against Muslims as well as religious faith in general. At year’s end, the proposal was pending a second reading in the national assembly, required before becoming law.

In May President Rumen Radev, continuing his predecessor’s tradition, hosted an iftar attended by religious leaders, politicians, academics, diplomats, and refugees. At the iftar, Radev told the participants different ethnic and religious backgrounds did not divide the country but enriched and further developed its identity.

In May the country advanced its status in the IHRA from observer to liaison. Pursuant to its application for full membership, on October 18, the government designated Deputy Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev as National Coordinator for Combating Anti-Semitism, and adopted the IHRA’s working definition of anti-Semitism. Meeting with the Israeli Ambassador in November, Georgiev said authorities would continue to sanction manifestations of anti-Semitism “with all necessary severity,” adding that “such actions are not inherent to the Bulgarian people.” Also in November the foreign ministry issued a statement denouncing anti-Semitic acts and intolerance after vandals posted anti-Semitic graffiti on two Soviet Army monuments.

A Holocaust education program trained 20-25 history teachers annually, based on a 2016 memorandum between the Ministry of Education and Israel’s Yad Vashem. In the fall an interagency committee began working with textbook publishers on updating content related to the Holocaust and the history of Jews in the country.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

*Summary paragraph:* Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mormons reported multiple cases of physical assaults, harassment, and threats. Two teenage girls attacked the wife and daughters of the deputy grand mufti. Protestant pastors reported harassment from Orthodox priests, who said the pastors represented “sects.” The Office of the Grand Mufti blamed the government for financial difficulties resulting in its inability to pay imams. Despite protests resulting in denial of official permission to stage the annual march honoring Hristo Lukov, the march took place. Jewish NGOs expressed concern manifestations of anti-Semitism had become accepted as routine. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, some media outlets continued to misrepresent their activities and encouraged their harassment. Acts of vandalism against Muslim, Jewish and Jehovah’s Witnesses places of worship continued. Christian and Muslim groups held commemorative events to promote religious tolerance.

Mormons reported 22 instances of physical assault and harassment of missionaries in Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Pleven, Sliven, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, Plovdiv, and Sofia. For example, on January 26, in Plovdiv, a man physically assaulted two Mormon missionaries and yelled at them, swearing at them as they ran away. Mormon representatives said police did not identify the attackers in any of these incidents and in some cases may have decided the incidents were not worth pursuing.

On June 27, in a supermarket parking area, two teenage girls attacked Deputy Grand Mufti Biralli Mumun Biralli’s wife and two daughters, hitting, kicking, spitting, and shouting abuse at them. The Mufti’s wife was wearing an Islamic headscarf. The regional prosecutor’s office charged the perpetrators with hooliganism and placed them under the monitored supervision of an inspector of juveniles. The High Muslim Council condemned the attack, stating it was a consequence of negative, anti-Muslim rhetoric by the media and politicians, including in the national assembly. IMRO deputy chairman Angel Djambazki defended the teenagers, stating they were the victims and the Muslims had attacked them first. The prosecution was still preparing the case at year’s end.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported six cases of physical assault and threats in Pernik, Vratsa, Popovo, Elhovo, Mezdra, and Lom. Although police responded to their complaints, Jehovah’s Witnesses stated prosecutors closed all six cases due to lack of evidence.

The UEC reported some Orthodox Christian chaplains pressured prison directors to restrict the access of “sectarian” Protestant chaplains to the prison population.

Protestants reported some Orthodox Christian priests called on police to take action against Protestant pastors because, they said, the pastors represented “sects.”

In July the Sri Chinmoy Center won the court case it had initiated against Desislava Panayotova, Director of the Center for Religious Research and Consultations and Chief Editor of the webpage of the BOC’s Holy Synod, for discrimination. The Sofia Regional court ordered Panayotova to pay a 700 lev (\$430) indemnity for persuading concert hall managers in Sofia not to stage the center’s concerts on the grounds it was a “sect” and instructed her to refrain from such actions.

On June 20, the regional prosecution in Shumen indicted a man for a 2016 assault on a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. After initially placing the suspect under house arrest and then releasing him pending further investigation, authorities charged him with hooliganism and assault for inflicting multiple bruises and a concussion on the Jehovah’s Witness after the latter had invited the suspect to one of the group’s conventions. At year’s end, the trial was continuing.

In June the Office of the Grand Mufti reported it had stopped paying imams for their services because it needed to divert the funds to support three Muslim secondary schools in Momchilgrad, Shumen, and Ruse after the Turkish Diyanet had withdrawn financial support for the schools due to actions taken by the Bulgarian caretaker government in power from January to May. The country’s caretaker government had alleged Turkish interference in the election campaign and expelled several Diyanet representatives from the country. Due to the diversion of its funds to the schools, the effects of accumulated taxes and other debts to the treasury, and a government freeze on some of the denomination’s assets due to unpaid taxes, the Office of the Grand Mufti did not have the funds to pay the imams, many of whom had begun to look for work abroad. In August Grand Mufti Mustafa Alish Hadji asked the national assembly to pass legislation providing sufficient government funding for all religious denominations in the country in order to ensure their normal and independent operation.

In February the NGOs Organization of Jews in Bulgaria Shalom and B’nai B’rith called for a ban of the annual march by nationalists, scheduled for February 18, to honor Hristo Lukov, who headed the pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions prior to and during WWII. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and other NGOs also issued statements against the march, and opponents of the march staged a small protest on February 12. Sofia

Mayor Yordanka Fandakova again canceled the permit for the march on the grounds it would pose a risk to public order, but she granted permission for supporters to gather at Lukov’s memorial plaque. Despite the prohibition, the Bulgarian National Union, a political party, organized a march in downtown Sofia, in which more than 1,000 people participated under police scrutiny. Prior to the march, police detained eight would-be marchers for inebriation and carrying dangerous objects but later released them without pressing charges.

Shalom stated there were no incidents of anti-Semitic violence during the year but that it remained concerned about an increase in the number of nonviolent anti-Semitic acts. B’nai B’rith reported it found anti-Semitic rhetoric was increasingly accepted as normal. Both NGOs stated authorities had stopped paying attention to fan groups displaying Nazi symbols during soccer games or treated these incidents as sports hooliganism instead of hate crimes. They stated souvenirs with Nazi insignias were widely available in tourist areas around the country. In September Shalom, with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote to the Mayor of Nesebur, Nikolay Dimitrov, asking him to take measures against the sale of such souvenirs and informing him of possible sanctions. The mayor initiated an inspection of all souvenir stalls in the municipality, but the inspections did not identify any legal violations. Authorities, however, warned the vendors against selling such articles. In January following B’nai B’rith’s intervention, the country’s largest chain bookstore, Helikon, publicly apologized and stopped selling copies of *Mein Kampf*.

Other Christian denominations cited what they believed was continued BOC disparagement. They referred to a 2016 BOC declaration stating there were “no other churches, but only heresies and schisms,” that, by claiming to be churches, were committing theological, dogmatic, and canonical mistakes.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported libel in the media had declined, but certain media outlets continued to regularly misrepresent their activities and beliefs. They stated reporters from the SKAT TV cable television company continued to harass them, accusing Jehovah’s Witnesses of criminal acts and encouraging their viewers to report the Jehovah’s Witnesses to police each time they came across any members of the group. On January 5, the Supreme Administrative Court confirmed the Burgas Administrative Court’s October 2016 decision to reject SKAT TV’s appeal against a ruling of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The commission had levied a 2,000 lev (\$1,200) fine on SKAT and a 1,200 lev (\$735) fine on two of its journalists for spreading false information and making comments constituting discrimination against Jehovah’s Witnesses.

A study released in April by the Alpha Research polling agency, conducted with the support of the New Bulgarian University and funded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, reported on the results of a survey of 1,200 individuals in 2016 who had self-identified as Muslims in the 2011 census. According to the survey, 57.3 percent of respondents supported use of the secular legal system, while 0.7 percent favored use of sharia law to settle disputes. Another 16.6 percent said disputes should be settled by God or Allah, and 12 percent said by the imam or mufti. The survey found 53.5 percent of respondents opposed wearing a *niqab* or burqa in public, while 1.6 percent said a woman should always wear one. Fifty-one percent of respondents considered religion an important part of their lives; 20 percent said they were devout, while 70 percent reported they were “more religious than not.”

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jewish community leaders, and the Office of the Grand Mufti, there were incidents of vandalism, such as painted swastikas, graffiti, and broken windows, in their respective places of worship. For example, on May 28, suspected soccer hooligans threw beer bottles and waste containers at the mosque in Sofia while shouting offensive words about Muslims and Islam. On July 11, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported unidentified individuals threw eggs and stones at their meeting place in Popovo. Also in July residents in Sofia’s Orlandovtsi neighborhood hung pigs’ heads on the fence of the construction site of a residential building owned by the Office of the Grand Mufti, protesting it would become a “sanctuary for radical Islamists.” In September unknown individuals toppled and broke tombstones in the Jewish cemetery in Sofia. At year’s end, police had not made arrests in any of the incidents of vandalism.

In February Taner Veli, the Regional Mufti of Plovdiv, hosted the third annual Tolerance Coffee event, commemorating a 2014 attack on the local Cumaya Mosque. Representatives of the Christian and Jewish communities, local government officials, foreign diplomats, and civil society members attended the event.

On October 30, the UEC organized a commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The event was cosponsored by Sofia municipality and funded by the National Council of Religious Communities, a government-supported nonprofit group with the goal of promoting religious tolerance and comprised of representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities. The council originally received the funds from the government for its annual Festival of Religions but transferred them to the UEC. More than 3,000 people participated in the

commemoration, which presented the history of the Reformation, as well as the development of Protestantism in the country.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials continued discussions with representatives of the Directorate for Religious Affairs, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, local government administrations, and law enforcement agencies about cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, the denial of construction permits for new places of worship, and legislative initiatives restricting religious freedom. A senior embassy representative discussed religious tolerance during the iftar hosted by President Radev in May.

In January the Ambassador joined with other concerned foreign ambassadors to write to Sofia Mayor Fandakova to protest the planned march in honor of Hristo Lukov. In February the embassy released a statement in response to the march, condemning hate speech, xenophobia, and incitements to violence.

Embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the National Council of Religious Communities and the Office of the Grand Mufti, as well as leaders of the Mormon, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholic, Protestant, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish communities, human rights groups, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Marginalia, Inforoma Center, and Sofia Security Forum, and academics to discuss problems religious communities faced, including proposed legislative changes potentially restricting the freedom to practice their respective religions.

The Ambassador continued to meet with Shalom and B’nai B’rith to discuss the need to counter anti-Semitism and hate speech. In speeches at the commemoration of the 74th anniversary of the saving of the country’s Jewish population in March, at a Tolerance and Mutual Understanding Day event in Kurdjali on March 31, and at a Shabbat dinner in June, the Ambassador spoke about the lessons of the Holocaust and the need for tolerance of different religious communities.

On November 20, the Ambassador met with Grand Mufti Mustafa Alish Hadji to discuss tolerance and the Muslim denomination’s financial challenges, as well as proposed legislative restrictions on religious practices.

On March 14-16, the embassy co-hosted a religious tolerance workshop with the Commission for Protection against Discrimination to promote dialogue between civil society and government representatives and to discuss the situation of minority religious communities. Approximately 80 representatives from all major religious groups, NGOs, government, media, and other groups participated. Workshop sessions included an overview of the legal framework and history of religious freedom, safeguarding religious freedom in the context of national security, protecting against religious discrimination, promoting models for good governance, engaging religious communities, advocating religious freedom, and measuring religious discrimination and hate crimes. Officials from the Departments of State, Justice, and Homeland Security in Sofia for the workshop also met with government officials and NGOs to discuss government practices on religious freedom, tolerance education, enforcement against hate crimes and training for law enforcement, and the desire for increased engagement on Holocaust issues.

On March 30-31, the Ambassador visited Kurdjali to participate in the Kurdjali Tolerance and Mutual Understanding Day, organized by the Olga Lengyel Institute. The event gathered approximately 600 students and their teachers from 15 high schools, who had participated in a national essay contest on saving Bulgaria's Jews during World War II. During his remarks, the Ambassador cited the country's history of religious tolerance and the importance of preserving and strengthening that heritage.

On March 31, the Ambassador met with Kurdjali Regional Mufti Beyhan Mehmedov to discuss the restitution of historical property, the provision of appropriate menu choices in schools for Muslim schoolchildren, and other challenges facing the local Muslim community.