



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **84.0%**
- Agnostics : **2.7%**
- Muslims : **12.3%**
- Others : **1.0%**

7,098,000

11,002 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution of Bulgaria^[1] upholds freedom of religion or belief in Articles 13 and 37, which establish protections for all religions, recognises the Eastern Orthodox Church as the “traditional religion” of the country, and bans the use of religion for violent or political ends.

These protections are codified in the Religious Denominations Act (*Durzhaven vestnik* n.120/29.12.2002), which provides measures for the legal recognition of religious denominations and communities. Registration is required for all groups if they want to engage in public worship; the one exception being the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, whose status as the traditional Church of the republic precludes the need to register.^[2] There are currently 156 registered religious groups.^[3]

According to Article 6 of the Religious Denominations Act, registration allows religious groups not only to worship in public, but also to rent or own land, hold a bank account, distribute religious material, share their beliefs in public spaces, establish and operate charities or other humanitarian organisations, run educational institutions, collect donations, and maintain connections with like-minded people and institutions abroad.^[4]

In the last few years, there have been attempts to reduce the rights of certain minority religious communities. A “burqa ban” targeting all face coverings in public was adopted by the National Assembly in September 2016 and schools have banned the wearing of all religious symbols, including the hijab and the cross.^[5] These measures have caused tensions with the Bulgarian Muslim community.

On 26th May 2017, a proposal was presented to the newly elected parliament, in particular by the far-right political coalition “United Patriots Front” and extreme nationalists, to change to the Penal Code so as to criminalise Islam. These groups blamed terrorism on radical Islam and equated Islam with ideologies such as fascism.^[6]

In early December 2017, Bulgarian lawmakers approved the first reading of the Bill to Amend and Supplement the Penal Code” (88 in favour, 22 opposed and 50 abstentions). If passed, the bill would criminalise “the propagation of radical Islam and coercing or inducing another [person] to wear clothing partially concealing or completely hiding the face”^[7] It would also impose jail terms of up four years and fines from 5,000 to 10,000 leva “for coercing or inducing another to wear clothing partially concealing or completely hiding the face through the use of threats, violence, coercion, public status or authority or by promising to give a benefit”.^[8]

In addition to these legislative changes, extreme nationalists in parliament are also preparing other changes to the Law of the Religions, which stipulates that preaching in churches and other religious temples should only be in the Bulgarian language.^[9]

Some local authorities persist in discriminating against particular minority religious groups. Much of this is due to the influence of right-wing movements such as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO) and the National Front of Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), and the relative effectiveness of their local level campaigning. As of the autumn of 2017, more than 40 municipalities featured such ordinances.^[10]

There have been several bans on proselytising on a local level, only to be overturned by higher courts due to their unconstitutionality. This has been a particular issue for Jehovah's Witnesses.^[11]

Incidents

Jehovah's Witnesses have reported abuse or harassment on several occasions in the past few years. Usually this is restricted to incidents involving the VMRO and NFSB or the local population. These two political parties have participated in campaigns targeting not just the Witnesses but all members of non-Eastern Orthodox Churches practising their faith in public.

In 2017 members of the VMRO harassed Witnesses in Elhovo, Mezdra, and other cities with total impunity. In Lom, Pernik, Popovo and Vratsa, Witnesses were the victims of further harassment or vandalism by unaffiliated members of the public.^[12]

The Muslim community in Bulgaria is increasingly concerned about hate-motivated incidents perpetrated against Muslims and Islamic holy sites, while acts of vandalism against mosques and sites for worship have become frequent^[13]

The Office of the Grand Mufti records incidents of hate crime against Islamic buildings and other centres.

On the night of 7th February 2017, unknown attackers vandalised a mosque in the town of Silistra. They fired a 5.5-millimetre air rifle into the security cameras and lighting fixtures of the mosque. Similar damage was noticed on the facade of the mosque. The Board of Trustees of the mosque filed a complaint with the police in Silistra

Another incident occurred in May 2017 against the mosque in Plovdiv.

On 28th May 2017, the second day of Ramadan, football fans attacked and vandalised the Sofia mosque with beer bottles and drink cans. They verbally attacked Muslims outside the mosque. Nearby policemen were accused of failing to respond to pleas for assistance.

Though there have been several anti-Semitic incidents in Bulgaria in recent years, often linked to the growing popularity of the far right, these remain largely contained. Such incidents have taken several forms: marches and demonstrations by neo-Nazis and other hate groups, and acts of vandalism against synagogues, cemeteries and other Jewish community

buildings. In September 2017, several headstones were pushed to the ground at a Jewish cemetery in Sofia^[14] The violence was condemned by leading government officials and pledges made to arrest the perpetrators.

The annual Lukov March through Sofia every February commemorates Bulgaria's alliance with Nazi Germany and the assassination of Hristo Lukov, the leader of Bulgaria's pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic Union of Bulgarian National Legions, during the Second World War. They have been held for the past three years despite a municipal ban^[15]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Bulgaria is an Orthodox-majority country, where large religious minority groups have faced constant intolerance. Posing the greatest threat to religious tolerance in Bulgaria is the current rise in far-right sentiment and activism fuelled by the VMRO and the NFSB. This is exacerbated by the recent migrant crisis, and the preferential treatment shown to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Social discrimination has made it increasingly difficult for minority religious groups to carry out their activities peacefully.

Despite these setbacks, Bulgaria has made some progress in boosting its law enforcement agencies and courts to deal with hate crimes and other forms of discriminatory behaviour.^[16]

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Bulgaria's Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2007, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bulgaria_2007.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bulgaria_2007.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 14th March 2018).

[2] 'Religious Denominations Act', (Durzhaven vestnik n.120/29.12.2002), Legirel, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, <http://www.legirel.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article540&lang=fr>, (accessed 28th March 2018).

[3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Bulgaria', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 19th March 2018).

[4] See the full list of rights, see Legirel, op. cit.

[5] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op. cit.

[6] 'Bulgaria: Anti-Muslim policies and incidents', Human Rights Without Frontiers International, 27th June 2017, <http://hrwf.eu/bulgaria-anti-muslim-policies-and-incidents/>, (accessed 14th March 2018).

[7] 'Parliament criminalizes propagation of radical Islam on first reading', BTA Bulgarian News Agency, 6th December 2017, <http://www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/1704807>, (accessed 13th March 2018).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Office of General Counsel at World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, Religious freedom concerns: Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/340956?download=true> (accessed 19th March 2018).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid, OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Warsaw: Bulgaria, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, (accessed 27th March 2018). In Elhovo on 7th January 2017 and in Mezdra on 23rd February 2017, members of the VMRO harassed Witnesses, and in the second case, reported them to the police. See Office of

General Counsel at World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, op. cit.

[13] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op. cit.

[14] 'Bulgarian foreign ministry condemns vandalism in Sofia Jewish cemetery', Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 18th September 2017, <https://www.jta.org/2017/09/18/news-opinion/world/bulgarian-foreign-ministry-condemns-vandalism-in-sofia-jewish-cemetery>, (accessed 14 March 2018).

[15] 'Neo-Nazi rally held in Bulgarian capital despite municipal ban', Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 21st February 2017, <https://www.jta.org/2017/02/21/news-opinion/world/neo-nazi-rally-held-in-bulgarian-capital-despite-municipal-ban>, (accessed 14th March 2018); 'Bulgarian neo-Nazis march in honour of WWII general', Times of Israel, 18th February 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bulgarian-neo-nazis-march-in-honor-of-wwii-general/>, (accessed 19th February 2018).

[16] Understanding anti-Semitic hate crimes and addressing the security needs of Jewish communities, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/317166?download=true>, (accessed 15th March 2018).