

BULGARIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and conscience for believers and nonbelievers, regardless of denomination, and states all religious practice shall be unrestricted. The law allows individuals to practice their religion freely as long as the religious group is registered. The constitution recognizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's "traditional" religion, and the law exempts the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) from the registration requirement. An appellate court in July convicted one Muslim leader for preaching Salafi Islam and hatred of other religious groups. In December the Pazardjik District Court dismissed the government's October indictment of 14 Roma Muslims for propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war and aiding foreign fighters. At year's end, 12 of the Roma Muslims remained in custody. Some minority religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas) continued to report harassment by the government and incidents of physical assault, harassment, and hostile rhetoric by members of nationalist political parties and said the government failed to prosecute religiously motivated attacks against their members. Minority groups also reported discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities. Schools banned the wearing of the hijab and crosses, and some local governments continued to deny requests to construct new mosques or repair old ones.

Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hare Krishnas reported physical assaults targeting members of their communities. Protests against the Muslim community's pending restitution claims continued. Jewish organizations expressed concern over hate speech and commemoration of World War II figures associated with Nazism. Muslims, Jews, and Jehovah's Witnesses reported incidents of vandalism against their places of worship.

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed discrimination cases and the construction of new places of worship with government officials. It maintained an active dialogue with religious leaders. The Ambassador and Charge d'Affaires advocated for tolerance in meetings with religious leaders. Embassy officials discussed infringements of religious freedom with minority religious groups, especially the Jewish, Muslim, Mormon, evangelical, and Jehovah's Witness communities.

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Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 7.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 76 percent of the population identifies itself as Eastern Orthodox Christian, mostly the BOC. Muslims, the second-largest religious group, are estimated at approximately 10 percent of the population. Protestants are 1.1 percent of the population, followed by Catholics at 0.8 percent. Orthodox Christians from the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (AAOC), Jews, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, and others make up 0.2 percent of the population, while 4.8 percent of respondents said they had no religion and 7.1 percent did not indicate a religion.

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 Roma Muslims also live in large numbers in the northeast and along the Black Sea coast. 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, and Protestants are more numerous in areas with large Roma populations. Approximately 80 percent of the urban population identifies as Orthodox Christian, while 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 and 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, public health and morals, or the rights and freedoms of others and 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

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institutions from the state and prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines. 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 national 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 can 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 for compelling another to participate in religious rituals and services can 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 leva (\$56 to \$167). If the infraction is committed by any legal entity, the fine can range from 500 to 5,000 leva (\$278 to \$2,782).

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 have the right to appeal negative registration decisions to the Sofia Appellate Court. The law does not require the formal registration of local branches of registered groups, only that the branches notify local authorities of the national registration of their group. There are 145 registered religious groups in addition to the BOC.

The law requires the government to provide funding for all registered religious groups. Registered groups have the right to perform religious services, own assets such as houses of worship and cemeteries, provide medical, social, and educational activities, and participate in commercial ventures.

The law allows registered groups to publish religious media and distribute religious literature, and it does not restrict proselytizing. Some municipal ordinances,

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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 are allowed, but 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. Any registered religion can be taught in a special course as part of the elective curriculum upon request of a sufficient number of students and availability of books and teachers. Books are approved and provided by the Ministry of Education and Science; denominations are responsible for licensing and providing teachers, which the state pays for only when a school makes the religion course part of the mandatory elective curriculum, meaning that students are required to enroll in a class but can choose which one from a list of alternatives. If the school designates a religion class as a free elective, meaning that students need not enroll in it or any alternative class, the state does not pay for the teachers. These religion classes are the only ones in the free elective curriculum for which the state does not pay for the teachers. The law also allows religious groups to open schools and universities. Education in schools operated by religious groups is required to meet government standards for secular education.

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; and up to three years in prison and a fine of 5,000 leva (\$2,782) for using a religious organization to spread "fascist or another antidemocratic ideology" or to replace public and governmental order by force. It provides for up to four years' imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 to 10,000 leva (\$2,782 to \$5,565) for propagating hatred on religious grounds by means of mass and electronic information systems; up to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 3,000 to 10,000 leva (\$1,669 to \$5,565) for religious desecration, including the destruction or damage of religious buildings, places of prayer, symbols, or gravestones.

An independent ombudsman established by law serves as an advocate for citizens who believe their rights and freedoms, including those pertaining to religion, have been violated by the actions or inaction of public and municipal administrations, as well as by public service providers. The ombudsman can request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals for

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terminating existing practices, refer information to the prosecution service, and request the Constitutional Court to abolish legal provisions as unconstitutional.

Government Practices

An appellate court found one Muslim leader guilty of spreading Salafi Islam and hatred of other religious groups and imposed administrative punishments on 12 other Muslims. The Pazardjik District Court rejected the indictment of 14 Roma Muslims on charges of propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war and aiding foreign fighters, but permitted the prosecution to file new charges, and 12 of the Roma Muslims remained in custody.

Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses reported continued harassment by the security services, and some minority religious groups continued to report local authorities in certain municipalities discriminated against them, despite their national registration status. Schools banned wearing the hijab and crosses, and local governments continued to deny requests to construct new mosques or other religious buildings or repair existing ones. Jewish organizations expressed concern over hate speech and government passivity in addressing it. In November the city of Sofia cosponsored the Festival of Religions to promote religious tolerance.

In July the Plovdiv Appellate Court confirmed a lower court's guilty verdict against Ahmed Mussa, increasing his sentence to two years in prison (Mussa will serve a total of five years when time from a prior sentence is included) and a fine of 5,000 leva (\$2,782) for preaching Salafi Islam, which the court determined was an "antidemocratic ideology" because it opposed the principles of democracy, division of powers, liberalism, statehood, rule of law, basic human rights, and religious freedom. The court acquitted Mussa's 12 codefendants of those charges, but gave them administrative fines of between 4,000 leva (\$2,226) and 5,000 leva (\$2,782) for participating in an organization which spread an "antidemocratic ideology." The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and the Marginalia human rights organization criticized the trial for focusing on theological rather than criminal issues, stating it was insulting to the Muslim community and would increase mistrust between Muslims and the rest of the population. The prosecution said the trial served as an effective deterrent against the spread of radical Islam. The grand mufti's office said the charges on which the trial was based were discriminatory. As of the end of the year, Mussa's defense team was awaiting the transcript of the appellate court's deliberations in order to file an appeal with the Supreme Cassation Court (the highest level appellate court for non-constitutional issues).

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In December the Pazardjik District Court rejected for a third time the indictment of 14 Roma Muslims, including Ahmed Mussa, who were arrested during a November 2014 police raid on more than 40 homes and a mosque in the Roma neighborhoods in Pazardjik, Plovdiv, and Assenovgrad. The court found the indictment did not specify why eight of the 14 were part of the accused party, which infringed their procedural rights. The prosecution had charged the 14 Muslims with supporting Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), assisting foreign fighters, and propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war. The court did not dismiss the case and allowed the prosecution to file new charges. As of the end of the year, 12 of the Muslims remained in custody.

Some registered minority religious groups, including Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Hare Krishnas, reported the government failed to prosecute cases of assault and harassment against their members. Some of these attacks were carried out by members of nationalist political parties, particularly the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO).

On April 4, an IMRO party member in the company of a television crew from the SKAT TV cable company, which is owned by an NFSB founder and member of parliament, approached and then attacked a Jehovah's Witness who was proselytizing in Blagoevgrad, punching him in the left temple and bruising his arm. Prosecutors initially pursued a hooliganism charge against the attacker, but in April the Blagoevgrad Regional Court returned the case to the prosecution, instructing it to pursue an indictment for religious hatred.

In March the government indicted seven people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, on hooliganism charges for their participation in the 2011 assault on the Sofia mosque organized by the nationalist Ataka Party. At the end of the year, the trial was ongoing at the Sofia Regional Court. In February the European Court of Human Rights ruled the attackers of the mosque had violated the rights of the Muslims attending Friday prayers, and the government had not provided an effective response. It ordered the government to pay the plaintiff 3,000 euros (\$3,264) in compensation. The government approved the payment on July 29. At year's end, the authorities had not identified the perpetrators of the 2011 assault and were still investigating the case.

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As part of an ongoing campaign publicized on SKAT, the NFSB, joined by the IMRO, organized protests against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Karlovo, Blagoevgrad, Petrich, and Gotse Delchev. The protests averaged approximately 50 participants each and were reportedly peaceful, although in one protest in April, one member from each of these parties threw eggs at a Jehovah's Witnesses' prayer house in Blagoevgrad while a meeting was being held there. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, these protests sometimes incited other incidents of vandalism such as broken windows at their properties. There were no reports of arrests at any of these protests.

Minority religious groups continued to report discrimination and prejudice from local authorities in certain municipalities. Some municipalities such as Burgas, Kyustendil, and Karlovo had ordinances prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. Despite letters of protest by the Directorate for Religious Affairs and the ombudsman against the restrictions, the regional governors of Burgas, Kyustendil, and Plovdiv continued to enforce the ordinances. Jehovah's Witnesses received police warnings in Burgas and Kyustendil to stop proselytizing and administrative fines (six fines of 800 levs [\$445] each in Kyustendil and two in Burgas of 50 levs [\$28] each) for violating local regulations. The religious group filed written objections to the police warnings and appealed the fines in court, winning three cases and losing one. Jehovah's Witnesses were reportedly also preparing to challenge the ordinances themselves in court.

The government permitted religious headdresses in official photos for national identity documents as long as both ears and 1 centimeter (2/5 of an inch) of hair were visible. The Commission for Protection from Discrimination and most schools interpreted the law denying privileges based on religious identity to ban the display of all "religious symbols," e.g., hijabs and crosses, in public schools.

In June more than 500 Muslims gathered in front of the historic mosque in Karlovo to protest against municipal plans to turn it into a museum. The mayor of Karlovo had prohibited the demonstration, but the prohibition was overturned by the Administrative Court in Plovdiv. The Sofia City Court had ruled in 2013 that the mosque belonged to the Muslim community, a ruling that the municipality was appealing in the Sofia Appellate Court. At year's end, the Sofia Appellate Court had yet to issue a decision. Protesters stated the municipality had fabricated non-Muslim artifacts to support its case that the mosque belongs to the entire community and should be converted to a museum. Approximately 200 counter-protesters sang the national anthem and booed the demonstrators. The

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mayor stated he would not allow the Muslims to own something that belonged to the people of Karlovo. In a public letter, the mayor wrote that the mosque was not a mosque but a historical building and a monument that had been built as a Muslim house of worship but for a long time had not been used for that purpose.

In May the Sofia Appellate Court ruled in favor of former Grand Mufti Nedim Gendjev, appointed to the office by the former Communist government, in his legal challenge against the current grand mufti's office, which Gendhev said was not the rightful successor to the former Muslim religious communities existing from the 1920s to the 1940s. The Sofia court suspended all restitution claims by the grand mufti's office pending resolution of the latter's appeal of the decision to the Supreme Cassation Court. At year's end, the court had yet to rule on the appeal.

The Gotse Delchev prosecutor's office ruled midyear there was insufficient evidence to support that municipality's claim that the local mufti had provided a counterfeit preliminary approval of the Muslim community's application for a permit to construct a mosque. The municipality, however, continued to withhold issuance of a construction permit for the mosque. The Sofia municipal government continued to withhold permission for building a second mosque in Sofia on the grounds that the application for a building permit was not complete. By year's end, the Muslim community had yet to take further action in either case.

The Jehovah's Witnesses stated local authorities refused to issue building permits or deliberately altered zoning regulations to prevent the group from erecting buildings for religious purposes. In February the chief architect of Kyustendil refused to issue a building permit for a prayer house, despite a ruling by the Kyustendil Administrative Court directing the municipality to overcome the obstacles to issuing the permit. In August the mayor of Shumen issued an order designating a property the Jehovah's Witnesses purchased in May for public use and rejecting the Jehovah's Witnesses application to construct a prayer house and fence on the property. The Jehovah's Witnesses appealed to the Shumen Administrative Court, which had not issued a ruling by year's end.

Many Muslim leaders continued to report harassment by the security services and stated that those services had pressured public schools to stop offering courses on Islam. In September the government launched an inspection of the public school and kindergarten in Sofia's Botunets neighborhood, with approximately 90 percent Muslim students, after media reported that the kindergarten director posted on its

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website quotations from the Quran to try to induce more parents to enroll their children in the school. The grand mufti's office reported that, as a result of the probe and pressure by security services, the school removed the course on Islam from its curriculum, and the kindergarten began serving pork with meals three times per week. In April a group of Muslim citizens from the city of Kurdjali filed a complaint with the regional prosecutor of Kurdjali, the Council of Ministers, and parliament that the government forced schools and kindergartens with majority-Muslim student bodies to serve non halal food. The regional prosecutor of Kurdjali and the Council of Ministers responded that there was no legal requirement for food in educational establishments to comply with the religious beliefs of the students or their parents.

The Jewish service organization B'nai B'rith expressed concern over what it stated was government and judicial passivity in addressing hate crimes, particularly the prosecution's tendency to dismiss hate speech complaints on the grounds of freedom of expression.

In January a regional prosecutor in Sofia terminated proceedings against four youths who had urinated on a synagogue wall and spray painted "Death, Jews," arguing that they were answering a call of nature and expressing a personal opinion artistically.

In June President Rosen Plevneliev hosted his second annual iftar, inviting the leaders of the six religious groups comprising the National Council of Religious Denominations (a nongovernmental organization [NGO] that works on projects and issues of common interest and promotes religious tolerance): BOC members, Muslims, evangelicals, Catholics, AAOC members, and Jews. At the iftar, Plevneliev said Bulgarians, regardless of their religion, showed solidarity by extending a hand to those in need. He recalled earlier that month he had presented the Order for Civil Merit to Muslims who had advocated for human rights under Communism, calling their deeds an example of people of different religions uniting and saying "no" to hatred.

In November Sofia municipality, in partnership with the National Council of Religious Denominations, organized the second annual Festival of Religions, a day of music performances, open houses, and sharing of information about each religious group. Titled "Tolerance and Diversity: European Values for a Modern Capital City," the event included written remarks by the Mayor of Sofia, Yordanka Fandakova, who said the presence of different religions in Bulgaria as proof that

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peaceful co-existence was possible, especially in places like Sofia, where representatives of five different denominations prayed within a few blocks of each other.

As a matter of policy, the government recognized Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Sunni Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism as holding a historic place in the country's culture and expressed a willingness to work more closely with these groups.

The state budget allocated 4.5 million leva (\$2.5 million) for registered religious groups, including 3.26 million leva (\$1.81 million) for the BOC; 360,000 leva (\$200,000) for the Muslim community; 50,000 leva (\$27,800) each for the Roman Catholic Church, AAOC, and the Jewish community; and 80,000 leva (\$44,500) for other registered denominations. Funds were allocated based on the size of the denomination. Religious groups could use this money for maintenance of religious facilities and for research and publication of religious literature. The government allocated 450,000 leva (\$250,000) for maintenance of religious facilities of national importance, 50,000 leva (\$27,800) for publication of religious books and research by the National Council of Religious Communities and by smaller religious groups, while another 150,000 leva (\$83,500) remained in reserve, including 10,000 leva (\$5,565) for updating the register of religious facilities in the country. Other registered denominations had to apply to the Directorate for Religious Affairs for funds, and the directorate stated its goal was to make sure denominations which had not received funding previously received funding if they applied. During the year, all 15 applicants received monetary support, but the amount of funds awarded was small: less than 10,000 leva (\$5,565) each.

The country is an observer at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Mormons reported 14 instances of physical assault and harassment of missionaries in Burgas, Shumen, Pazardjik, Ruse, Veliko Turnovo, and Sofia. They said police did not identify the attackers in any of these incidents and speculated that in some cases the police may have decided the incidents were not worth pursuing.

On October 3, in Pazardjik, a man approached two Mormon missionaries in an apartment building, motioning them into an elevator, where he robbed them of items they were carrying and threatened to stab one of them with a pen. The man

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grabbed the missionaries by the shoulders and yelled obscenities at them, continuing to follow them after they exited the building until the missionaries found refuge in a cafe.

On October 24, three Mormon missionaries in Shumen were yelled at and repeatedly beaten. The police responded and assisted the missionaries to return to the scene of the attack and recover some of their personal items. The Mormons reported the attack was part of an escalating trend that included spray painting of anti-religious statements on their property. They stated they had decided to close their church in Shumen and service the region out of their church in Plovdiv.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported eight cases of physical assault and threats in Balchik, Blagoevgrad, Burgas, Gotse Delchev, Sofia, Stara Zagora, and Targovishte. They stated that, while the police usually noted their complaints, prosecutors later closed the cases due to lack of evidence. On August 6, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, a former police officer attacked two Witnesses in Stara Zagora, striking one in the face and bruising her eye and striking the other in the back of the neck.

Prosecutors closed an investigation of the case in September because of what they said was a lack of other eyewitnesses. In March two Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked by a man in Sofia, who hit one of the Witnesses on the shoulder. The individual filed a complaint with the Sofia prosecutor's office. At year's end, the prosecutor had not yet decided whether to proceed with the case. In February two Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked by a man in Targovishte, who turned over their literature table and kicked one of the Witnesses. The Witnesses filed a complaint with the police, but at year's end the police had yet to take any action against the attacker.

In July four individuals shouting "Sectarians! You must die!" attacked a carriage in a Hare Krishna parade in downtown Burgas, injuring one Hare Krishna participant, destroying some artifacts, and damaging the carriage, causing 700 leva (\$390) worth of damage. The police intervened and arrested one of the four individuals. There was no information on the outcome of the case.

In February the mayors of Karlovo and Kyustendil led protests by local residents and soccer fans in front of the Sofia Appellate Court as it presided over the dispute for succession of the pre-1940s Muslim religious communities. The mayors declared they were showing the court the citizens' opinion about the Muslims' restitution claims.

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In February B'nai B'rith and Shalom – Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria, supported by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms Party and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, again protested and called for a ban of the previously annual march on February 15 honoring Hristo Lukov. Lukov headed the far-right, pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions prior to and during World War II. Sofia municipality officials again withheld permission for the march on grounds it would pose a risk to public order and only allowed supporters to lay flowers at Lukov's memorial plaque. Despite the prohibition, the nationalist Bulgarian National Union organized a march of several hundred people in downtown Sofia under tight security provided by the police. Prior to the march, police detained seven participants for carrying knives, brass knuckles, batons, and pepper spray.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the media continued to misrepresent their activities and beliefs. In particular, the nationalist SKAT TV cable company headquartered in Burgas and, before it ceased publication, the *Top Presa Daily* newspaper, whose reporters, the Jehovah's Witnesses said, harassed them, accused them of criminal acts, and referred to them as "sectarians." The Jehovah's Witnesses reported the Commission for Protection against Discrimination did not allow their attorneys to present evidence during a September hearing on a complaint by the group against SKAT TV.

Jewish community leaders continued to express concern over increasing incidents of anti-Semitism in social media and online forums. They said examples included accusations that Jews hate all other people and are enemies of the state, that the Holocaust was a Jewish form of genocide against humanity, and statements such as "Trained by their Jehovah, whimpering and warring [Jews] have slaughtered, pillaged, and claimed everything." Sometimes the same statements would be posted or reposted on mainstream media websites.

Media and social media users continued to make derogatory references to a prominent U.S. citizen, accusing him of sponsoring antigovernment movements and organizations. They also made frequent references to his Jewish heritage.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and the grand mufti's office continued to report incidents of desecration such as painted swastikas, offensive graffiti, and broken windows. On January 5, Viktor Aleksandrov poured gasoline over the wooden exterior of Cumaya Mosque in Plovdiv and set it on fire. In April Plovdiv Regional Court sentenced Aleksandrov to one year in prison. On July 9, a 14-year-old boy, who later confessed to the police that he had been inspired by the

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internet, spray painted a swastika and “14/88” (a neo-Nazi symbol) on the mosque in Gorna Oryahovitsa. The police referred the perpetrator to the local Commission for Combating the Antisocial Behavior of Minors and Underage Persons. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported vandalism involving the breaking of windows at their prayer houses in Blagoevgrad on August 5 and in Karlovo on May 21.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials regularly communicated with the Directorate for Religious Affairs, the ombudsman’s office, and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, local government administrations, and law enforcement agencies to discuss religious freedom issues such as the Pazardjik trials, discrimination cases, and the denial of permits for construction of new places of worship. The embassy maintained an active dialogue on the state of religious freedom with leaders of the AAOC, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, other Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities, human rights groups, and other activists.

The Ambassador met with the patriarch of the BOC, the grand mufti, and the Central Israelite Spiritual Council to discuss religious freedom issues such as tolerance of different religious communities and the need to counter hate speech. Embassy representatives met frequently with leaders of the Jewish community, the grand mufti’s office, Mormons, evangelicals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses to discuss infringements on freedom of religion and proposed changes in legislation related to religion.

Together with other embassy representatives, the Charge d’Affaires attended the Hanukah Candle Lighting hosted by the Israeli ambassador in December, which was attended by senior government officials, as well as the Festival of Religions in Sofia in November. At both events she met with the former President of the Central Israelite Religious Council, Robert Djerassi, discussed the issues facing the local Jewish community, and expressed her support for events that promote religious tolerance. The Ambassador discussed religious education and tolerance in April with the abbot of the BOC Rila Monastery, the largest in the country. The Ambassador and embassy representatives also expressed support for religious tolerance while attending the commemoration of the 72nd anniversary of the saving of Jews in March, the ceremony marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January, and the opening of the exhibition *The Power of Civil Society: The Fate of the Jews in Bulgaria* in the National Assembly.

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Embassy representatives visited the regional muftis of Haskovo, Pazardjik, and Pleven to learn more about their communities, local religious relations, property disputes, and court trials. In July the Ambassador hosted an iftar at her residence, where she discussed religious freedom and tolerance with the grand mufti, members of the Muslim community, representatives of other religious communities, officials from the presidency and the foreign affairs ministry, a deputy mayor, and a representative of the NGO America for Bulgaria Foundation.