

BULGARIA 2020 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 benefits. The constitution recognizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's "traditional" religion, and the law exempts the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) from registration. In December, the Plovdiv Appellate Court began hearing an appeal by 14 Romani Muslims convicted in 2019 of spreading Salafi Islam, among other charges. Muslim leaders again said several municipalities denied permission to build new or rehabilitate existing religious facilities. The Evangelical Alliance and some other religious groups stated the government did not apply COVID-19 restrictions on religious groups equally, favoring the BOC. The European Court of Human Rights stopped the deportation of three Uyghur Muslims to China. In February, a Shumen court ruled the municipality's ordinance restricting proselytizing was unconstitutional. A parliamentarian and member of the governing political coalition criticized the ruling, which was being appealed, calling Jehovah's Witnesses a "dangerous sect." In February, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld the Sofia mayor's ban on the annual march honoring Hristo Lukov, leader of a pro-Nazi organization in the 1940s, restricting the event to laying flowers at Lukov's plaque. The academy of sciences published a report, backed by several government ministries, denying the World War II-era government had sent Jews to forced labor camps but instead had tried to save them from the Nazis.

The Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO) Shalom reported death threats, increased incidents of anti-Semitic hate speech in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and Jehovah's Witnesses reported fewer instances of harassment and threats, attributing the change to COVID-19 restrictions. Jehovah's Witnesses said some media continued to misrepresent their activities. Protestants stated media published information about members of their community who tested positive for COVID-19, while not doing so for members of any other religious group. An Alpha research survey issued in January of Orthodox Christians and nonbelievers found rates of mistrust of Muslims was 26 percent, of Jews and Protestants 10 percent, and of Catholics 8 percent.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly discussed cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and initiatives supporting interfaith dialogue with government officials, including representatives of the Directorate for Religious Affairs, Office of the Ombudsman, Commission for Protection against Discrimination, and local governments. The Ambassador and embassy officials also met with minority religious groups and supported civil society efforts to encourage tolerance and stimulate interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.0 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census (the most recent), 76 percent of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, primarily 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. Nearly 95 percent of Muslims reported being Sunni; most of the rest are Shia, and there is a small number of Ahmadis concentrated in Blagoevgrad. Orthodox Christians of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Sri Chinmoy, and other groups together make up 0.2 percent of the population. According to the census, 4.8 percent of respondents have no religion and 7.1 percent did not specify a religion. According to a 2019 report by the think tank Agency for Social Analyses, 74 percent of individuals identify as Orthodox Christians, 10 percent as Muslims, 13 percent as atheists, and 3 percent with other religious traditions.

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 region, 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. 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 four 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 except to the extent 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 prohibits the formation of political parties along religious lines or organizations that incite religious animosity, as well as the use of religious beliefs, institutions, and communities for political ends. 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 seeking legal recognition.

The penal code prescribes up to three years' imprisonment for persons attacking 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, carry out their rituals and services, or compel another to participate in religious rituals and services may receive prison sentences of up to one year. Violating a person's or group's freedom to acquire or practice a religious belief is subject to a fine of between 100 and 300 levs (\$63-\$190). If a legal entity commits the infraction, the fine may range from 500 to 5,000 levs (\$310-\$3,100).

To receive national legal recognition, religious groups other than the BOC must 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 and 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 of the group. The Directorate for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers provides expert opinions on registration matters upon the court's request. Applicants must notify the Directorate for Religious Affairs within seven days of receiving a court decision on their registration. 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, and local authorities enter them in a register. Local branches are not required to obtain registration from the local court. The law prohibits registration of different groups with the same name in the same location. The Directorate for Religious Affairs and any prosecutor may request that a court revoke a religious group's registration on the grounds of systematic violations of the law. There are 203 registered religious groups in addition to the BOC.

Registered religious groups must maintain a registry of their clergy and employees, provide the Directorate for Religious Affairs with access to the registry, and issue a certificate to each clerical member, who must carry it as proof of representing the group. Foreign members of registered religious groups may obtain long-term residency permits, but for the foreign member to be allowed to conduct religious services during his or her stay, the group must send advance notice to the Directorate for Religious Affairs.

The law requires the government to provide funding for all registered religious groups based on the number of self-identified followers in the latest census (2011), at a rate of 10 levs (\$6) per capita to groups that comprise more than one percent of the population and varying amounts for the rest.

Registered groups have the right to perform religious services; maintain financial accounts; own property such as houses of worship and cemeteries; provide medical, social, and educational services; receive property tax and other 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 names, operate schools and hospitals, receive property tax exemptions, and sell religious merchandise.

The law restricts the wearing of face-covering garments in public places, imposing a fine of 200 leva (\$130) for a first offense and 1,500 leva (\$940) for repeat offenses.

The law allows registered groups to publish, import, and distribute religious media. The law does not restrict proselytizing by registered or unregistered groups. Dozens of municipalities, including the regional cities of Kyustendil, Shumen, Stara Zagora, and Sliven, have ordinances prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature without a permit. The ordinances in Stara Zagora and Kyustendil remained in effect despite a 2018 Supreme Administrative Court ruling that they were unconstitutional. Several municipalities, including Shumen, Kyustendil, and Sliven, prohibit unregistered religious groups from conducting any religious activities. Some municipalities prohibit religious activities inside cultural institutes, schools, and establishments for youth and children.

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 13 students, subject to the availability of books and teachers. The Ministry of Education and Science approves the content of 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 and does not charge for its services. The commission's decisions may be appealed to administrative courts. Upon accepting a case, the commission assigns it to a panel that then reviews it in open session. If the commission makes a finding of discrimination, it may impose a fine of 250 to 2,000 leva (\$160-\$1,300). 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 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 that the Constitutional Court 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.

The penal code 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 to 10,000 leva (\$3,100-\$6,300), as well as "public censure." The propagation of "fascism or another antidemocratic ideology" is punishable by imprisonment for up to three years or a fine of up to 5,000 leva (\$3,100). Courts have found that Nazism falls within the purview of "antidemocratic ideology." 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 to 10,000 leva (\$1,900-\$6,300).

The law provides for restitution of real estate confiscated during the communist era; courts have also applied the law to Holocaust-related claims.

The law allows religious groups to delay until 2029 paying back outstanding revenue obligations incurred before December 31, 2018.

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

Government Practices

On December 10, the Plovdiv Appellate Court began proceedings involving 14 Romani Muslims, 12 of whom appealed their lower-court convictions on charges of supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, and propagating Salafi Islam, characterized by the government as an antidemocratic ideology, and incitement to war. The prosecution appealed the sentences of 13 defendants to seek more severe

punishments. In 2019, the Pazardjik District Court sentenced the group's leader, Islamic preacher Ahmed Mussa, to 8.5 years in prison, while the rest of the men received prison sentences ranging from 12 to 42 months. The only woman in the group received a two-year suspended sentence.

Some religious groups complained of unequal treatment by the authorities during a COVID-19 state of emergency in effect from March 13 to May 13 when all indoor public gatherings were prohibited. Catholic, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, and most Protestant churches switched to online services, while Muslims and Jews closed mosques and synagogues. BOC churches remained open, without penalty. In October, authorities initiated prosecution against Church of God-Bulgaria pastor Nikolay Vasilev, accusing him of holding an Easter service in Samokov in breach of the ban on public gatherings. According to press reports, more than 100 of the participants at the outdoor event received administrative fines. In a public declaration in April, the Evangelical Alliance stated the authorities' actions against the Samokov church interfered in the internal affairs of a Protestant church in an attempt to disrupt its services and persecute its clerics and worshippers. According to Vasilev as well as videos from the event posted online, the organizers observed all required health measures, including maintaining appropriate physical distance and wearing masks. At year's end, the trial had not been scheduled. The maximum penalty for a conviction is five years' imprisonment and a 15,000-lev (\$9,400) fine.

In February, the European Court of Human Rights ordered interim measures to stop the expulsion of three Uyghur Muslims who had been denied asylum in 2017 and were facing deportation to China. The State Agency for National Security ordered their expulsion in 2018 on national security grounds. NGOs reported the Uyghurs had already fled Bulgaria in 2019 to another European country.

Jehovah's Witnesses said the legal requirement for reporting to the government the names and contact information of all clerics violated the freedom of nondeclaration of religious affiliation guaranteed by the constitution. The Church of Jesus Christ said the legal requirement for providing the government full access to the records of its clerics and personnel was a violation of privacy. The Papal Nuncio also said the requirement imposed a burden on the local Catholic community, which did not have enough staff.

In February, the Shumen Administrative Court determined that the provision in a Shumen municipality ordinance restricting proselytizing violated the country's constitution but stated the provisions prohibiting religious activities inside cultural

institutes, schools, and establishments for youth and children were an “adequate and proportionate measure to protect children.”

Dean Stanchev, Member of Parliament from the United Patriots coalition and part of the governing coalition, posted on social media his “outrage” at the court’s decision, describing Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “dangerous sect” and stating that the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) political party would continue to “fight against its [Jehovah’s Witnesses’] parasitic activities” in order to “clear them from public spaces and people’s homes.” At year’s end, both the municipality and Jehovah’s Witnesses had appealed the decision to the Supreme Administrative Court.

Contrary to previous years, Jehovah’s Witnesses did not report any acts against their members while engaged in proselytizing. They attributed the change to reduced proselytizing due to COVID-19 restrictions. In February, the mayor of Dobrich and the local chief of police met with representatives of Jehovah’s Witnesses to apologize for a December 2019 incident in the city center, when police brought two proselytizing Witnesses to the local precinct and accused them of violating public order. The mayor and the police chief said the officers had acted out of ignorance and inexperience and committed to providing police with the necessary information to avoid further incidents.

In May, June, August, and December, the government allocated 10.2 million leva (\$6.4 million) in funding for repair and maintenance of BOC facilities in Sofia, Varna, Krustova Gora, Rila, Shipka, and Koprivets. In June, the Council of Ministers said it would provide an annual subsidy of one million leva (\$627,000) to the three monasteries under the BOC Patriarch’s jurisdiction.

In July, the Supreme Administrative Court overturned a lower court’s decision and ruled the Catholic Church did not owe property tax from a 2009 claim by Sofia Municipality, which had not recognized the religious status of two Catholic monasteries located in the municipality.

The Office of the Grand Mufti and regional Muslim leaders said several municipalities, including Sofia, Stara Zagora, and Haskovo, continued to reject, on what they said were nontransparent grounds, their requests to build new, or rehabilitate existing, religious facilities. In October, Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadji raised the issue in a meeting with Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova, but by year’s end, the mayor’s office had not provided any information on the city’s continued rejections of the construction applications.

According to Razgrad Mufti Mehmed Alya, local public perception about restoring the landmark Makbul Ibrahim Pasa Mosque in Razgrad, which had been closed for nearly 50 years, to a functioning mosque shifted from negative to positive due to efforts by Regional Governor Gunai Husmen in the previous three years. In October, local authorities used a 2.3-million-lev (\$1.44-million) grant from the national government to start renovating the mosque, which was listed officially as a cultural monument and therefore owned by the national government. New Mayor Dencho Boyadjiev agreed that the mosque could reopen for religious services after restoration, while the Muslim community, in turn, agreed that the mosque would be available for tourist visits when not in religious use.

In July, the National Youth Committee of the VMRO, a member of the governing coalition, called on Sofia Municipality to take steps to convert Banya Basi Mosque in the city center into a museum. The committee said its suggestion was in response to Turkey's decision to reconvert Istanbul's Hagia Sophia into a mosque, stating that "just as in the heart of Istanbul there is no place for a Christian church serving as museum, there is no place in the heart of Sofia for a functioning mosque." The municipality did not respond to the committee's recommendation.

The Office of the Grand Mufti said it was continuing to search for ways to litigate its recognition as the successor to the pre-1949 Muslim religious communities for the purpose of reclaiming approximately 30 properties, including eight mosques, two schools, two baths, and a cemetery seized by the former communist government. Pending a decision on who was the rightful successor to the Muslim religious communities, the courts continued to suspend action on all restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti.

The national public school elective curriculum continued to provide three sets of classes at various grade levels in religious studies: one for Christianity, one for Islam, and one for all religions as ethical systems. In July, the Ministry of Education approved official school textbooks for students from first to fifth grade in the three programs that schools began using in the academic year. The Office of the Grand Mufti stated that some regional education inspectors attempted to persuade principals of schools offering an Islamic studies program to select members of their faculty to be trained as teachers for the program in order to replace teachers who were alumni of the High Islamic Institute. In November, the High Islamic Institute and the Office of the Grand Mufti commenced a project to retrain members of the Muslim community in pedagogical education as teachers of Islam.

In February, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld Sofia Mayor Fandakova's ban on an annual march of right-wing extremists from across Europe to honor Hristo Lukov, the 1940s leader of the anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions. The mayor's ban cited serious concerns that a torchlight march in downtown Sofia would disrupt public order and restricted the event to laying flowers at Lukov's plaque in front of his house on February 22. In previous years, the Sofia Administrative Court had overturned the mayor's banning of the march. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Democratic Bulgarian alliance, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions had denounced the rally. On February 10, a Sofia prosecutor petitioned the Sofia City Court to deregister the rally organizer, Bulgarian National Union-Edelweiss, stating its activity violated individual rights; incited ethnic, racial, and religious hostility and homophobia; spread anti-Semitic propaganda; and undermined national integrity. At year's end, the case continued in the Sofia City Court.

On January 17, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences organized a roundtable cohosted by the Ministry of Defense to present a report, *Jews' Labor Obligation during World War 2: Rescue Plan or Repressive Measure?*, which denied that authorities forced the male Jewish population into labor camps in the early 1940s and stated that instead the Army Labor Corps drafted Jews as part of a government plan to save them from the Nazis. The Ministries of Education and Culture, VMRO, and several NGOs, such as the Bulgarian-Jewish Research Institute and the Independent Historical Society, supported the roundtable. Shalom criticized the event as "an alarming revisionist attempt to distort the history of the Holocaust" at all institutional levels. In a speech on January 30, Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva stated that sending Jews to labor camps during World War II was part of the "anti-Semitic repressive machine" established with anti-Semitic legislation.

In July, the municipal council in Blagoevgrad, at the request of Sunni Muslim community leaders, rejected a 10,000-euro (\$12,300) donation from the Ahmadi Muslim Community to the city for general emergency relief assistance "in order not to legitimize the organization and its activity in the region."

The national budget allocated 33.34 million leva (\$20.92 million) to registered religious groups for current expenses, such as remuneration for their employees and clerics, education activities, and cemetery maintenance, as well as capital investments, such as construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses, compared with 31.27 million leva (\$19.62 million) in 2019. Of the 33.34 million, 27.2 million leva (\$17.06 million) went to the BOC; 5.77 million

levs (\$3.62 million) to the Muslim community; 160,000 levs (\$100,000) to Protestant denominations; and 70,000 levs (\$43,900) each to the Catholic Church, AAOC, and the Jewish community. No other registered religious groups received government funding. Evangelical Alliance representatives again said Protestants did not receive their fair share of government funding, possibly because they were not represented by a single organization, even though their numbers exceeded one percent of the population.

According to NGOs, souvenirs exhibiting Nazi insignias and imagery continued to be widely available in tourist areas around the country and local governments lacked political will to deal with the problem. The National Coordinator for Combating Anti-Semitism stated that when alerted to them, the national government took steps to close vendors selling Nazi souvenirs.

In May, during Ramadan, President Rumen Radev met with Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadji. Both stated that government and religious institutions must promote solidarity, charity, and mutual assistance among the people.

In August, Shalom expressed concern regarding a statement by Defense Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, who invoked the name of a Jewish-American financier, saying that NGOs linked to him “want to take the power in order to introduce gay marriage.” Shalom stated that, while such statements did not mention the financier’s Jewish heritage, they “have a strong anti-Semitic character and suggest that Jews interfere in the social and economic affairs of countries in the world.”

In March, the Supreme Cassation Court found Boris Yachev, Member of Parliament from the United Patriots coalition, guilty of slander and ordered him to pay 3,000 levs (\$1,900) to Jehovah’s Witnesses for a series of statements about them on his party’s SKAT TV that the court ruled “incite religious hatred and threaten to hinder [the religious group’s] activity.” The court overturned two lower court rulings that had found Jehovah’s Witnesses were not eligible to receive compensation for damages resulting from the statements. In his statements, which he made in 2014, Yachev vowed to use his position in parliament to “restrict the unhindered invasion by [religious] emissaries of Bulgarian cities and villages,” describing Jehovah’s Witnesses as “one of the most dangerous and arrogant sects” that needed to be restricted by legal means.

Deputy Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev served as the national coordinator for combating anti-Semitism, publicly denouncing hate speech and anti-Semitism. On November 9, Georgiev commemorated the Kristallnacht anniversary, saying he is

proud to be “part of a common cause for ensuring an environment free of any forms of hate speech” by remembering the lessons of history. On December 23, Georgiev denounced the defacement of Plovdiv Synagogue’s front gate with graffiti reading “Israel=Nazis,” calling it a “repulsive,” “undignified,” and “barbarian” act. He stated, “It is essential for every democracy to allow the free expression of political and civilian views, but not by vandalizing, insulting, and violating others' rights.”

The country is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In August, Shalom received a threat via email of a bomb at the synagogue in Plovdiv. In November 2019, Shalom received an emailed death threat from Black Front, an organization Shalom described as white supremacist. Authorities were investigating both threats.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly on social networking sites, in online media articles, and in the mainstream press, and anti-Semitic graffiti, such as swastikas and offensive inscriptions such as “dirty kikes,” appeared regularly in public places. Jewish community leaders also expressed concern regarding what they said was an increasing trend of anti-Semitic and xenophobic propaganda and graffiti.

On December 16, Sofia University fired Mihail Mirchev, a part-time professor, after its ethics commission found his lectures included negative ethnic stereotypes. The firing came after Shalom and other NGOs protested that Mirchev’s lectures featured racist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic content such as, “Is it possible that Bulgaria could turn into a Jewish country if they, being fewer than one percent, own the state, the capital, the media, and the art?” Mirchev said his words had been taken out of context. In November, prior to Mirchev’s dismissal, Shalom’s criticism of him generated numerous anti-Semitic commentaries such as, “Jews can only learn from a heavy hand and a bullet in the back of the head.”

In November, Shalom notified Sofia Municipality about anti-Semitic and racist posters put up all around Sofia by activists of the Nationalist Social Club 131. In June, Shalom stated organizations such as Revived Bulgaria-Bulgarian National Unity and Military Union-Bulgarian National Movement “Shipka” were spreading online propaganda stating Jews were involved with the COVID-19 pandemic in order to provide “a deadly pseudo-antidote” aimed at “mass extermination of

people.” After authorities issued a summons to Revived Bulgaria-Bulgarian National Unity leader Lyudmila Kostadinova informing her that she would be held criminally liable if she continued, the messaging stopped.

According to Jewish community leaders, incidents of vandalism continued, including damaging Jewish graves and painting swastikas and offensive graffiti. For example, in January, vandals broke tombstones and damaged fences in the Jewish cemetery in Shumen. In June, vandals defaced a playground and the facades of adjacent houses in Sofia with 56 swastikas. At year’s end, authorities had not identified any suspects in either incident.

On February 26, Sofia University withdrew honorary degrees it had awarded to Hans Frank, Bernhard Rust, Ewald Robert Valentin von Massow, and Eduard Kohlrausch between 1933 and 1940, complying with a petition from the Bulgarian Association of Holocaust Survivors and Their Children indicating the recipients had been members of the German Nazi Party. According to a university statement, its honorary doctors should not be persons “connected with a hateful ideology or involved in crimes.”

In February, the Pew Research Center published findings on attitudes towards democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society as well as religious freedom, in 34 countries, based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 58 percent of Bulgarian respondents considered religious freedom to be “very important,” ranking it seventh of their priorities for democratic principles of the nine tested.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported negative media characterizations of them again declined but that some local online media outlets, such as *Konkurent*, *Blitz*, and *Utro*, continued to misrepresent the group’s activities and beliefs. On April 21, local Ruse media *Utro* described Jehovah’s Witnesses as “the most dangerous sect in the world” and advised its readers to avoid any contact with the group. Unlike in previous years, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported no cases of hostility or harassment against their members by nongovernment officials, which they attributed to the COVID-19-related restrictions that forced them to switch to online gatherings.

In June, the Evangelical Alliance protested to health authorities that a number of media publications released personal information, such as names and addresses, about members of the Protestant community, including pastors, who tested positive for COVID-19. The alliance stated, “Such information has never been released regarding persons of the Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic, Judaic, Armenian, or any

other faith,” and asked health authorities to check whether they had disclosed the information to media. Information as to who released the information was unavailable at year’s end.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ reported three instances of harassment of missionaries in Varna and Sofia in the first 11 months of the year, a number comparable to the previous year. In 2018, there were 13 instances involving physical assault and harassment against members of the Church.

In June, BOC Metropolitan Ioanikiy called for the removal of a plaque from Sozopol’s main street commemorating the Sri Chinmoy Oneness-Home Peace Run. In a letter to the local government, the Metropolitan stated that many countries considered the Sri Chinmoy Center a “totalitarian religious community” that “degrades the family institution, attacks Christians, and undermines the prestige of the Holy Orthodox Church.” Municipal councilors from the ruling GERB political party in Sozopol expressed support for the Metropolitan’s call to remove the plaque. At year’s end, the plaque, inaugurated by the mayor and the chair of the municipal council, remained in place.

In May, the Supreme Cassation Court refused to review the appeal of the Sri Chinmoy Center against the lower-instance Sofia City Court’s decision dismissing the organization’s claim 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. Panayotova described in a 2008 media article the Sri Chinmoy Center as a “dangerous sect” that operates illegally and spreads “unhealthy religious teachings.”

In January, Alpha Research published a survey of Orthodox Christians and nonbelievers/atheists on their attitudes toward religious minority groups which found 3.4 percent of respondents hated, and 5.6 percent feared, Muslims; two percent hated, and 0.4 percent feared, Jews; 1.5 percent hated, and 2.6 percent feared, Protestants; and 0.5 percent hated, and 0.6 percent feared, Catholics. The rates of mistrust of various groups – which the survey’s authors interpreted as reluctance to openly disclose hatred – were: of Muslims, 25.8 percent; Jews, 10.4 percent; Protestants, 10 percent; and Catholics, 7.6 percent. While the average rate of acceptance of a person of a different religion in one’s neighborhood or working environment was approximately 50 percent, only 3.2 percent of respondents would consider marrying a Muslim, 6.3 percent a Jew, 8 percent a Protestant, and 11.7 percent a Catholic.

On February 14, Regional Mufti of Plovdiv Taner Veli hosted the annual Tolerance Coffee, gathering representatives of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities, local government officials, foreign diplomats, and representatives of civil society. According to the press release from the Mufti's office, the event commemorated a 2014 attack on the local Cumaya Mosque and was intended to improve relations among religious groups and to prevent the future occurrence of such attacks.

The National Council of Religious Communities, whose members include representatives of Bulgarian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities, continued to serve as a platform for the largest religious groups to organize joint events and defend a common position on religious issues, such as legislative proposals, political statements, and actions by others, and religiously motivated vandalism. In February, members of the council participated in working meetings of the Muslim Denomination and the Central Israelite Religious Council, in which the host groups presented their faiths and ongoing projects. On February 10, the council conducted an interfaith discussion in Sofia on each of its member group's views on divine revelation. The council substantially curtailed activity soon thereafter due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued discussions with representatives of the Directorate for Religious Affairs, Office of the Ombudsman, Commission for Protection against Discrimination, and local government administrations about cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and initiatives to support interfaith dialogue. In February, the Ambassador discussed religious tolerance during a visit to Vidin with Mayor Tsvetan Tsenkov.

Embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the BOC, National Council of Religious Communities, Office of the Grand Mufti, Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Catholic, Protestant, Armenian Apostolic Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish communities to discuss religious discrimination, restitution of religious properties, and legislative proposals restricting foreign funding. Embassy officials also met with human rights groups, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Inforoma Center, to discuss these issues.

The Ambassador discussed religious tolerance, support for interfaith dialogue, and opposition to persecution with the Grand Mufti in January. In February, the Ambassador visited the mosque in Vidin, which was under renovation with U.S. funding, where she discussed interfaith dialogue and mutual support with Regional Mufti Necati Ali and Orthodox Metropolitan Daniil. In March, the Ambassador discussed with the Papal Nuncio the Catholic community's concerns regarding the funding of religious groups and new administrative requirements under the law, such as providing the government with contact information on clerics and other staff.