

# **BULGARIA 2018 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 after protests by all major religious groups, the National Assembly passed amendments to a 2002 religious denomination law, providing for increased government funding for the BOC and the Muslim community. A wide range of religious groups opposed earlier versions that placed restrictions on some smaller religious groups. An appellate court issued guilty verdicts in a retrial of 13 regional Muslim leaders charged with spreading Salafi Islam. Jehovah's Witnesses reported fewer cases of assault and harassment. There were multiple successful court decisions overturning local prohibitions on Jehovah's Witnesses' religious practices. The Muslim community protested a decision in the Stara Zagora Region to change Turkish and Arabic place names to Bulgarian names, citing "racism and intolerance regarding everything Muslim." Jewish organizations denounced attempts by government leaders to distort historical facts at Holocaust-related events, including honoring individuals complicit in deportations of Jews.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses reported physical assaults, harassment, and threats. In February the Bulgarian National Union again staged an annual march honoring Hristo Lukov, leader of a pro-Nazi organization in the 1940s. Jewish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concern about the continued increase of hate speech and other manifestations of anti-Semitism. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, some media outlets continued to misrepresent their activities. Muslims, Jews, and Jehovah's Witnesses reported incidents of vandalism of their properties. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish groups held events to promote religious tolerance. The National Council of Religious Communities, whose members include representatives of Bulgarian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities, continued its efforts to promote religious tolerance.

The ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials regularly discussed cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and legislative initiatives restricting religious activities, including with representatives of the

National Assembly, Directorate for Religious Affairs, Office of the Ombudsman, Commission for Protection against Discrimination, local governments, and law enforcement. The ambassador protested the march to commemorate Lukov and publicly advocated tolerance and cited lessons from the Holocaust. Embassy officials met with minority religious groups, including the Jewish, Muslim, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Catholic, Protestant, Armenian, and Jehovah's Witnesses communities, to discuss their concerns over existing and proposed restrictions on their activities. A Muslim scholar participated in a Department of State-funded exchange on religious pluralism in the United States.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.0 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 76 percent of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, primarily affiliated with the BOC. The census reported 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, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 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 do not specify 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 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, 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 prohibits 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 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 leva (\$59 to \$180). If a legal entity commits the infraction, the fine can range from 500 to 5,000 leva (\$290 to \$2,900).

To receive national legal recognition, the law requires religious 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 of a group. 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 180 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 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 (\$120) for a first offense and 1,500 leva (\$880) for repeat offenders.

The law allows registered groups to publish, import, and distribute religious media; unregistered groups may not do so. The law does not restrict proselytizing by registered or unregistered groups. Some municipal ordinances, however, restrict the activities of unregistered groups to include proselytizing and require local permits for distribution of religious literature in public places.

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 and does not charge for its services; 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 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 (\$2,900-\$5,900), 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 (\$1,800-\$5,900).

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**

On December 21, the National Assembly passed amendments to a 2002 religious denomination law that provide for increased government funding for the two largest religious groups, the BOC and the Muslim community, and require all religious groups to report to the government all places of worship they use. The original version of the amendments, presented in the National Assembly in May and approved at first reading in October, imposed restrictions on foreign funding and foreign clergy activities. They also prohibited preaching in a language other than Bulgarian, required denominations to prove they had at least 300 (subsequently increased to 3,000) members to obtain registration, and limited religious groups' ability to open religious schools and conduct religious education. All major religious groups in the country opposed the proposed amendments, stating they would restrict religious freedom under the guise of protecting national security and combating terrorism. The religious groups also criticized the amendments as discriminatory toward smaller groups, stating they would violate the constitutional separation between religion and state and impose unprecedented government control on religious life. In November and December, following protests by all major religious groups, the political parties in the National Assembly negotiated with their representatives and agreed on a revised version of the amendments, removing the discriminatory provisions by year's end.

On March 30, the Plovdiv Appellate Court sentenced Ahmed Mussa to one year in prison for spreading Salafi Islam, which the prosecution characterized as an antidemocratic ideology, and for membership in an illegal radical organization. The court levied fines on 11 other Muslims ranging between 1,500 and 2,000 leva (\$880-\$1,200). The court found one individual not guilty. In 2016 the Supreme Cassation Court had vacated the guilty verdict against Mussa and rescinded the fines against the 12 other Muslims, ordering the Plovdiv Appellate Court to retry the case. By year's end, Mussa continued to appeal the verdict in the Supreme Cassation Court.

A trial that began in 2016 of 14 Romani Muslims, including Ahmed Mussa, on charges of supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, and propagating antidemocratic ideology and incitement to war continued at year's end in the Pazardjik District Court. Mussa remained free on bail, and the court released the other defendants on their own recognizance.

In April the High Muslim Council (HMC), representing Muslims in the country and led by Grand Mufti Mustafa Alish Hadji, issued a declaration protesting an interview in the online site *Trafficnews*. In the interview, the prosecutor of the two

cases involving Ahmed Mussa and others described Muslims as “an easy to manipulate ... monolithic mass” and a threat to the country’s security. The HMC accused the prosecutor of hate speech and called on authorities to take action against her. The prosecutor said she had not given such an interview. The prosecution service’s inspectorate concluded there had been no misconduct, and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination declined to open a case, citing lack of sufficient evidence.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community remained unregistered despite the June 2017 European Commission on Human Rights ruling that the government had violated the European Convention on Human Rights by denying its registration application. In September the Ahmadis filed a new registration application with the Sofia City Court; the application was pending at year’s end.

In April the Shumen Regional Court issued a four-month suspended sentence and a public censure to brothers Rosen and Atanas Yordanov, also known as Yuzeir and Ali Yuzeirov, for using “OTOMAN” as an acronym for a political party named “Unity for Tolerance, Responsibility, Moral, and Alternative Progress.” The court found that the party’s constituent assembly on the day of Christian observance of Good Friday, its wearing of fez hats, using a crescent on the new party’s flag, and performing a *namaz* prayer during a wreath-laying ceremony at the monument of a Bulgarian war hero who fought in the Balkan War against the Ottomans constituted preaching religious hatred.

On December 21, the Smolyan Regional Court began hearing the case against Efrem Mollov, charged with propagating discrimination and religious hatred in his book, *Is There Future for Great Bulgaria or Why Pomak History Remains Hidden*. According to the indictment, the book distorted history by glorifying Pomaks at the expense of all other Bulgarians. Mollov did not appear in court, but his attorney pled guilty on his behalf and requested a fast-track trial, meaning the court has to sentence him below the minimum penalty (up to four years’ imprisonment or probation and a fine of 5,000-10,000 leva (\$2,900-\$5,900)). The court, however, postponed the case because a fast-track trial requires the defendant’s presence.

Former Grand Mufti Nedim Gendjev continued to challenge the legitimacy of Hadji as grand mufti. At year’s end, an appeal against Hadji’s election at a regular Muslim conference in 2016 remained pending in court.

The national budget allocated a total of five million leva (\$2.93 million) for the construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses, including

3.8 million leva (\$2.23 million) for the BOC; 400,000 leva (\$234,000) for the Muslim community; and 60,000 leva (\$35,100) each for the Catholic Church, AAOC, and the Jewish community. The budget distributed 100,000 leva (\$58,600) among seven 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 300,000 leva (\$176,000) for the maintenance of religious facilities of national importance, 55,000 leva (\$32,200) for the publication of religious books and research, and 15,000 leva (\$8,800) to the National Council of Religious Communities. The budget kept 150,000 leva (\$87,900) in reserve. Throughout the year, as was customary, the government allocated more than two million leva (\$1.17 million) in targeted funding for restoration or construction of BOC facilities.

Minority religious groups reported dozens of municipalities, including the regional cities of Kyustendil, Pleven, Shumen, and Sliven, had ordinances prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing and the distribution of religious literature. Many municipalities, including the regional cities of Razgrad, Varna, and Vratsa, restricted the activities of unregistered religious groups.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported many municipalities continued to have 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 noted many of those municipalities did not enforce these ordinances, especially after the religious group started filing lawsuits. They continued to cite instances in which police or local government officials fined, threatened, warned, or issued citations to individual Jehovah's Witnesses for violating these ordinances. On May 26, a police patrol approached two Jehovah's Witnesses who were proselytizing in a Sofia neighborhood and told them engaging individuals in their homes was illegal, threatening to "take more serious measures" if they continued. Jehovah's Witness representatives stated, however, that such instances had decreased significantly since 2017.

There were continued instances of municipalities imposing fines on individual Jehovah's Witnesses even though the city ordinances did not include restrictions on religious activities. Courts generally annulled these fines when Jehovah's Witnesses appealed them. For example, on January 11, Varna municipal officials issued citations for unauthorized commercial activity to Jehovah's Witnesses

distributing religious literature, but the administrative court in Varna subsequently repealed them.

In February and July, the Supreme Administrative Court confirmed the lower courts' decisions and ruled the Stara Zagora and Kyustendil municipalities' ordinances restricting proselytizing had violated the country's constitution, declaring the ordinances null and void. Shumen Municipality's appeal of a court ruling declaring provisions in its ordinance restricting proselytizing unconstitutional was pending at year's end.

In March, the government secured funding and started a procedure for the restoration of the Makbul Ibrahim Pasa Mosque in Razgrad, a national cultural monument managed by the Ministry of Culture. According to media publications, the government acted because of continued pleas by the regional mufti and requests for reciprocal maintenance of historic religious buildings by Turkey.

In May the Office of the Grand Mufti issued a protest declaration against the decision of the municipal council in Stara Zagora to replace more than 800 place names of Turkish and Arabic origin with Bulgarian names, stating that the "level of racism and intolerance regarding everything Muslim is critical. It is an extremely dangerous process that could provoke a new line of division in society."

Catholic community leaders continued to object to the Sofia municipality's refusal to recognize the religious status of two monasteries there, treating them instead as residential buildings and imposing taxes that otherwise would be waived. At year's end, appeals were pending at the Sofia Administrative Court.

The Office of the Grand Mufti again reported there had been no progress by year's end regarding 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 was the rightful successor to the confiscated properties, the government continued to suspend all restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti.

According to the Catholic Church, authorities had returned approximately 50 percent of the properties for which it was seeking restitution since the restitution law entered into force in 1992; however, the government again did not reconstitute any additional properties during the year.

The United Evangelical Churches (UEC) – a group representing nine individual Protestant churches and three unions of Pentecostal, Baptist, and Congregational Churches – cited cases of small town mayors who pressured the *chitalishta* (local government-supported educational and cultural community centers) to refuse to rent their premises to Protestants for their religious activities because they were “sects.” In April the mayor of the village of Erden told representatives of the Jehovah’s Witnesses that she prohibited them from preaching in the village because it was populated only by Orthodox Christians. She reportedly threatened them with “more serious” measures if they persisted. The UEC, however, reported satisfactory cooperation with local authorities in large cities such as Sofia and Plovdiv.

In April the Stara Zagora Administrative Court ordered the prison administration to pay 1,000 leva (\$590) in damages to a Muslim prisoner in Stara Zagora Prison because of its failure to provide pork-free meals.

The government continued to permit religious headdresses in official photographs for national identity documents as long as both ears and one centimeter (0.4 inches) of hair were visible.

In October Jewish organizations Shalom and B’nai B’rith protested the Ministry of Defense’s initiative to award a medal to Dyanko Markov, a former member of the anti-Semitic organization Union of Bulgarian National Legions that supported the deportation of Jews during World War II. In May Shalom described an exhibition on the role of King Boris III and the government of Bogdan Filov in the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust as a “provocation” and “distortion of history” because it attempted to “prove” the pro-Nazi government rescued the Bulgarian Jews. Speaking to a television reporter at the opening of the exhibition, then Deputy Prime Minister Valeri Simeonov blamed the rescued Jews for subsequently executing their rescuers after becoming part of the communist government. In April Shalom protested a statement by prosecutor Ivan Geshev, who joked during a media briefing that the World Jewish Congress was watching and would step in if prosecutors did not strictly apply the procedures prescribed by law.

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO) parties, both members of the United Patriots coalition, did not actively continue their previous campaign against the religious group, which the Witnesses said was likely due to the absence of elections during the year. At year’s end, two members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to appeal the Burgas District Court decisions before the Supreme

Cassation Court, which dismissed their claims against IMRO regional leader Georgi Drakaliev over his alleged instigation and participation in a 2011 attack on the Jehovah's Witnesses kingdom hall in Burgas.

In May President Rumen Radev hosted a traditional presidential iftar attended by religious leaders representing the six religions on the National Council, politicians, academics, diplomats, and refugees. At the iftar, Radev told the participants the event symbolized the “abiding tolerance of the Bulgarian people” and demonstrated the “will of the state to work for greater understanding and mutual respect.” In April Minister of Foreign Affairs Ekaterina Zaharieva hosted a Passover dinner for local and regional members of the Jewish community, religious leaders, and diplomats from member countries of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

On November 29, the country became the 32nd full member of the IHRA. Deputy Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev served as the national coordinator for combating anti-Semitism.

A Holocaust education program continued to train 20-25 history teachers annually, based on a 2016 memorandum between the Ministry of Education and Israel's Yad Vashem. On September 12-14, Shalom hosted a workshop for 50 history teachers from Bulgaria and Macedonia on the Holocaust in the Balkans and the fight against anti-Semitism and hate speech.

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

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported at least 13 instances of physical assault and harassment of missionaries, compared with 22 in 2017. More than half of the incidents occurred in Ruse in the northeastern part of the country. Other incidents took place in Burgas, Plovdiv, and Sofia. Church representatives said police sometimes refused to accept incident reports from victims. On September 19, Church representatives in Ruse reported a group of four young persons threatened two missionaries with a knife and tried to hit them with a motorcycle helmet.

The regional prosecutor's office refused to press charges and terminated its investigation of two teenage girls who in June 2017 attacked Deputy Grand Mufti Biralli Mumun Biralli's wife and two daughters. After the attack, the HMC stated the attack was a consequence of negative anti-Muslim rhetoric by media and politicians, including in the national assembly.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that a man assaulted their members in the street in Nova Zagora on three occasions in June and July. A police officer registered a complaint of the incidents and stated police would "visit the perpetrator."

In May the Shumen District Court confirmed the three-year suspended prison sentence and the 15,129 lev (\$8,900) fine imposed by a lower court on Nikolay N. for a 2016 assault on a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The court did not accept the victim's request that the crime be considered religiously motivated, instead basing its ruling on the prosecution's charges of hooliganism and xenophobia.

In February the Bulgarian National Union held a rally with more than 500 participants in downtown Sofia in honor of Hristo Lukov, leader of anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi organization Union of Bulgarian National Legions in the 1940s. The Sofia municipality, the government, NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions denounced the rally. Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova banned the march on the grounds it would disturb public order, but the Sofia Administrative Court revoked the ban and instructed the mayor to offer alternatives. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the event in declarations issued both before and after the event, calling it a "shameful act" and a "demonstration of xenophobia, discrimination, and hatred." On February 14, the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria party condemned the march before a session of the National Assembly. A few days before the rally, a conference titled "Sofia Says No to Hate Speech and Extremism" gathered government representatives, NGOs, academics, students, and diplomats to discuss what participants said was rising nationalism and increasing intolerance and anti-Semitism, to make a clear statement against extremism, and to explore possible avenues for engaging the public in promoting tolerance.

Anti-Semitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly on social networking sites and as comments in online media articles. Anti-Semitic graffiti such as swastikas and offensive inscriptions appeared regularly in public places. Shalom indicated that during the year, there were no violent acts of anti-Semitism but stated anti-Semitic attitudes increased, in part due to the presence of "far-right and ultranationalist" political parties in the government. Souvenirs with Nazi insignias continued to be widely available in tourist areas around the country. In May local authorities in Sliven removed a book on Hitler from a national festival of children's books following a protest from the local Shalom branch. Booksellers promoted the book, entitled *The Man behind the Monster*, during the festival.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported negative characterizations in media continued to decline, but some local online media outlets continued to misrepresent regularly their activities and beliefs. On May 18, online media site *Struma* described the Jehovah's Witnesses as "a very dangerous sect...ensnaring people in order to make them commit suicide as a sacrifice to God." On April 2, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld the 2016 decision of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination that levied a 2,000 lev (\$1,200) fine on SKAT TV and a 1,200 lev (\$700) fine on two of its journalists for spreading false information and making comments that it ruled constituted discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, Jewish community leaders, and the Office of the Grand Mufti, incidents of vandalism continued, such as painted swastikas, graffiti, and broken windows, in their respective places of worship. For example, in July local individuals, subsequently arrested by police, desecrated 55 Muslim and 14 Christian graves in the village of Gradnitsa. In May following the article in the *Struma* site, vandals broke the windows of the Jehovah's Witnesses' rented place of worship in Petrich, and the property owner subsequently decided to discontinue the rental lease agreement. In January unidentified individuals wrote "Enemies of King Boris III" on a monument to the Jews who perished in July 1944 when the labor camp in which they had been held was set on fire.

In February Taner Veli, the regional Mufti of Plovdiv, hosted the fourth 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 representatives of civil society attended the event.

The National Council of Religious Communities, whose members include representatives of Bulgarian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities, continued its efforts to promote religious tolerance. It served as a platform for the largest denominations to organize joint events and defend a common position on religious issues such as certain legislative proposals, anti-Semitic actions, and other acts of defacement.

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

The U.S. ambassador and other embassy officials continued discussions with representatives of the national assembly, Directorate for Religious Affairs, Office

of the Ombudsman, Commission for Protection against Discrimination, local government administrations, and law enforcement agencies about cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and legislative initiatives restricting religious freedom. The ambassador discussed religious tolerance during the iftar hosted by President Radev in May and the Passover dinner hosted by Foreign Minister Zaharieva in April.

In February the ambassador took a clear position against hatred and intolerance at a conference entitled “Sofia Says No to Hate Speech and Extremism,” highlighting the importance of teaching youth history without glorifying its dark chapters. Shalom and NGO Marginalia organized the conference, in partnership with the Sofia municipality, in anticipation of the march commemorating Hristo Lukov. Subsequently, the embassy released a statement in response to the march, expressing concern at the glorification of an individual who promoted hate and injustice, condemning intolerance, and amplifying the message on social media.

Embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, National Council of Religious Communities, Office of the Grand Mufti, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Catholic, Protestant, Armenian Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish communities to discuss problems faced by religious groups, including proposed legislative changes potentially restricting the freedom to practice their respective religions. Embassy officials also met with human rights groups, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Marginalia, Inforoma Center, the Sofia Security Forum, and academics to discuss these issues.

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 75th anniversary of the saving of the country’s Jewish population and at a Shabbat dinner in March, the ambassador spoke about the lessons of the Holocaust and the need for tolerance of different religious communities. The embassy used social media to disseminate the ambassador’s remarks.

The ambassador discussed religious tolerance during an Eid-al-Fitr reception hosted by Grand Mufti Hadji in June. In October the ambassador met separately with Apostolic Nuncio Anselmo Pecorari, Grand Mufti Hadji, and representatives of Protestant churches and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to discuss tolerance and the proposed legislative restrictions on religious groups.

From June 2 to July 14, a Muslim scholar from the High Islamic Institute participated in a Department of State-funded exchange program on religious pluralism in Philadelphia that explored the relationship between religion and state in the United States from both historic and contemporary perspectives.