

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and conscience. Religious groups may worship without registering, but registered groups receive financial and other benefits and legal protections. The constitution recognizes Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the country's "traditional" religion, and the law exempts the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) from registration. There are municipalities with ordinances prohibiting various religious activities by unregistered groups.

In January, the Sofia District Court confirmed the acquittal of a Church of God-Bulgaria pastor charged in 2020 with holding an Easter service despite a COVID-19-related ban on public gatherings. In September, the local government in the town of Petrich cancelled an International Society for Krishna Consciousness's (ISKCON) India Festival after a political party threatened to disrupt the event. In February, the Sofia Appellate Court confirmed a lower court's decision denying registration to the Old Calendar Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Jehovah's Witnesses said discriminatory regulations restricting their religious practices remained in place in a few municipalities but were rarely enforced. They reported, however, that the local government in Varna had not responded by year's end to their request to build a place of worship in the city. Courts continued to reject the claims of the Office of the Grand Mufti to properties such as mosques, schools, and land seized by the former communist government, stating that the office was not the clear legal successor to the owners of those properties. In February, the mayor of Sofia banned the "Lukov March" honoring 1940s-era antisemitic leader General Hristo Lukov, following public outcry against the event. In March, police arrested Protestant pastor Petar Blagoev and searched his home and the Evangelical Pentecostal Church in Pernik as part of a pre-election campaign they said was to prevent vote buying. Despite a legal ban on the propagation of fascism or other antidemocratic ideologies, authorities rarely enforced the law, and souvenirs with Nazi insignias were available in tourist areas around the country. Some political parties and leaders continued to use antisemitic language and images.

Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO) Shalom repeatedly expressed concerns regarding escalating public hate speech and antisemitism, including on social networks, and offensive graffiti. Topics included "participation of Bulgarian institutions in the popularization of incorrect theories and distortion of the history of the Jewish population under Bulgarian rule during World War II." The Jewish community protested the participation of publisher Edelweiss, which prints books on Holocaust denial, in open-air book fairs. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that in September, a man yelled at, kicked, and chased after two Jehovah's Witnesses who were proselytizing door-to-door. As of November, the police continued to investigate the 2022 beating of one Jehovah's Witness and the throwing of liquid on the face of another individual in Varna the same year. Throughout the year, the National Council of Religious Communities (NCRC), in partnership with Sofia Municipality, held a series of events to promote religious tolerance.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials held regular discussions with government officials about cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and initiatives to support interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials raised specific examples of harassment of religious communities with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), including a rise in antisemitism. Embassy officials met with representatives of a wide variety of religious groups in the country to discuss religious discrimination through local ordinances and ongoing efforts to restitute religious properties, religious education, and government funding provided to religious groups. On several occasions, embassy officials met with BOC leaders to discuss a range of issues, including hate speech and interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials met with Jehovah's Witnesses in Varna and Sofia to discuss ongoing court cases and instances of discrimination. In several meetings with Shalom,

embassy officials discussed rising antisemitic rhetoric. Subsequently, the embassy denounced religious discrimination, intolerance, and hate speech against the Jewish community through social media posts and events throughout the country. The embassy issued a public statement denouncing the Lukov March in February.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.8 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2021 census, 69.3 percent of the population are Eastern Orthodox Christian, primarily affiliated with the BOC. The census reports Muslims, the second largest religious group, are 10.8 percent of the population, but the Office of the Grand Mufti's parallel count estimates the Muslim population at 20.8 percent. According to the census, Protestants are 1.2 percent of the population, and Catholics 0.7 percent, of whom most are Roman Catholic and 10 percent belong to the Byzantine Rite (Eastern Rite or Greek Catholic). Orthodox Christians of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church (AAOC), Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and other groups together make up 0.4 percent of the population. According to the census, 5.2 percent of respondents report no religion, 4.4 percent do not know their religion, and 8 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, as well as in the northeast part of the country. According to the census, most Catholics live in and around Plovdiv, Sofia, and Pleven. Most of the small Jewish and AAOC communities are in Sofia, Plovdiv, and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants are widely dispersed but are more numerous in areas with large Roma populations, as more than 66 percent of Protestants are Roma. The urban population is mostly Christian, while most Muslims live in rural areas.

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 leva (\$57 to \$171). If a legal entity commits the infraction, the fine may range from 500 to 5,000 leva (\$285 to \$2,850).

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, 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, 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 country's highest court. The law does not require the formal registration of local branches of registered groups with the local court, only that branches notify local authorities and local authorities enter them in a register. 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. As of year's end, there were 228 registered religious groups in addition to the BOC.

Registered religious groups must maintain a registry of all their clergy and employees, provide the Directorate for Religious Affairs with access to the registry, and issue a certificate to each clergy 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 at a rate of 10 leva (\$6) per capita to groups that comprise more than 1 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. The law allows registered groups to publish, import, and distribute religious media; it does not address the rights of unregistered groups regarding such media.

National law does not restrict religious practice by unregistered religious groups, but these groups lack privileges that the law grants 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 and burial grounds, receive property tax exemptions, and sell religious merchandise.

The law does not restrict proselytizing by registered or unregistered groups. Some local ordinances, however, place restrictions on certain activities of religious groups. Some municipalities, including Kyustendil, Maritsa, Pleven, Razgrad, Sliven, and Varna, prohibit unregistered religious groups from conducting any religious activities. Ordinances in Kyustendil, Maritsa, Pleven, and Shumen prohibit door-to-door proselytizing, while in Kyustendil and Maritsa, ordinances restrict religious agitation on the street and the distribution of religious literature without a permit. The ordinance in Kyustendil remains in effect despite a 2018 Supreme Administrative Court ruling that it was unconstitutional. Burgas municipality prohibits the wearing of unregistered religious groups' religious dress and symbols.

Some municipalities prohibit religious activities inside cultural institutes, schools, and establishments for youth and children.

The law restricts the wearing of face-covering garments in public places, imposing a fine of 200 leva (\$114) for a first offense and 1,500 leva (\$855) for repeat offenses, but officials do not enforce this law.

The law states that every child has “the right to protection from involvement” in religious activities and prescribes that parents or guardians shall determine the religious attitudes of children up to 14 years of age. Between the ages of 14 and 18, youths may determine their religious affiliation or lack thereof by agreement between them and their parents or guardians. If such agreement is not reached, a youth may apply to the relevant regional court to resolve the dispute.

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, provided they meet government standards for secular education, and postsecondary educational institutions that meet the requirements for opening secular higher education institutions.

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 (\$142 to \$1,140). The commission may double fines for repeat violations. Regional courts may also try civil cases involving religious discrimination.

The law establishes an independent ombudsperson 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 ombudsperson may request information from authorities, act as an intermediary in resolving disputes, make proposals for terminating existing practices, refer information to the Public Prosecutor’s Office, 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 (\$2,850 to \$5,700), 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 (\$5,700). 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 or probation and a fine of 3,000 to 10,000 leva (\$1,710 to \$5,700) as well as by up to five years or probation and a fine of 5,000 to 10,000 leva (\$2,850 to \$5,700) if it is racially or xenophobically motivated. Religious or faith-based discrimination is subject to a fine between 250 and 2,000 leva (\$142 to \$1,140).

The national coordinator on combating antisemitism, a permanent position assigned to a deputy minister of foreign affairs designated by the minister, is supported by a contact group for combating antisemitism consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Public Prosecutor's Office, Sofia Municipality, State Agency for National Security, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, and the Secretariat of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Affairs.

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 owed to governments, for example, for social insurance payments or garbage collection or other municipal services, incurred before December 31, 2018.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

In March, the Supreme Court confirmed the life prison sentences in absentia for two Hizballah terrorists for an attack on an Israeli tour bus in the seaside resort town of Burgas that killed five Israelis and the bus driver in 2012.

On January 9, the Sofia District Court confirmed the Samokov Regional Court's acquittal of Church of God-Bulgaria pastor Nikolay Vasilev, whom authorities charged in 2020 with holding an Easter service in breach of the COVID-19-related ban on public gatherings. The Samokov Regional Court canceled the fines imposed on other Church of God-Bulgaria officials involved in the same event.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to ISKCON, in August, a Burgas regional prosecutor terminated the preliminary proceedings regarding the 2015 attack in Burgas by four persons on a Hare Krishna parade that injured a participant and damaged property. The prosecutor categorized the incident as a misdemeanor and informed ISKCON it could litigate the case in court.

On September 30, the local government in Petrich canceled ISKCON's religious, cultural, educational, and entertainment event "India Festival" due to reported threats by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization political party that it would disrupt the event. On September 25, the Petrich branch of the party declared on social media that it would organize a parallel procession aiming to oppose and "deal with" a "dangerous" and "highly fanaticized sect" that undermines Christian values. On September 29, the BOC Metropolitan of Nevrokop, Seraphim, publicly accused ISKCON organizers of deliberately misleading official institutions by disguising the festival as a "cultural event" rather than religious proselytizing. The metropolitan said ISKCON was spreading "destructive teaching," which is a "threat to society jeopardizing the social, psychological, and spiritual health of those who take part in it," and called on the local community to avoid the event and on the authorities to disallow it. ISKCON chose not to contest the cancellation of the event. As of year's end, authorities had not responded to ISKCON's report on the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization's threats and the BOC's criticism.

In February, the Sofia Appellate Court confirmed a lower court decision denying registration to the Old Calendar Bulgarian Orthodox Church, stating that unless the Church could provide proof of recognition by the rest of the official Orthodox Christian churches, the BOC would remain the sole

representative of the Orthodox Christian community, in accordance with the principle of “one Orthodox church in one territory.” According to the Directorate for Religious Affairs, despite its lack of registration, the Old Calendar Bulgarian Orthodox Church was able to operate approximately 35 churches in the country without impediment.

Jehovah’s Witnesses stated discriminatory regulations restricting their religious practices remained in place in a few municipalities, which, however, rarely enforced them. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, after meeting with local governments that had illegally disrupted their religious activity in towns such as Sandanski, Aytos, and Nessebar, there were fewer government disruptions of their religious activities. As of year’s end, the group’s 2021 appeal before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) challenging a Shumen Municipality ordinance restricting door-to-door proselytizing and a 2021 Supreme Administrative Court decision ruling that the ordinance did not violate the country’s constitution remained undecided.

Jehovah’s Witnesses stated that the group had no capacity to appeal all municipal ordinances restricting religious activities but took legal action against those which had been enforced against the group. Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to state that the legal requirement for reporting to the government the names and contact information of all of those in a ministerial capacity violated the freedom of nondeclaration of religious affiliation provided by the constitution as well as EU law and the European Convention on Human Rights.

As of October, there were nine court decisions rejecting the claims of the Office of the Grand Mufti to properties such as mosques, schools, and land seized by the former communist government. For example, in June the Kyustendil District Court rejected the Office of the Grand Mufti’s restitution claim regarding the central Fatih Mehmed Sultan Mosque in Kyustendil, refusing to recognize the office as the proven successor of the pre-1949 Muslim religious communities. The issue of recognizing the legitimate successor to all pre-1949 Muslim religious communities, which would determine the outcome of such restitution cases, remained unresolved. The issue was subject to a legal dispute between the Muslim Denomination, led by the Grand Mufti, and the Muslim Sunni Hanafi Denomination. In 2022 the Supreme Cassation Court rejected both their claims as inadmissible. According to the Office of the Grand Mufti, the lack of a decision allowed each court to rule independently regarding the legitimate successor to the organization that had represented Muslims prior to 1949.

In August, the government completed the restoration with EU funds of the historic Kursun Mosque in Karlovo, which is to serve as a museum and tourist attraction. In December 2022, the Plovdiv Appellate Court ruled against the Office of the Grand Mufti’s restitution claim for the mosque, which was in a very poor condition and suffered a fire in June 2022.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that despite a 2020 ECHR ruling and an intervention of the Ministry of Justice in 2022, the local government in Varna had not responded by year’s end to their request for permission to build a place of worship in the city.

The national public school elective curriculum continued to provide for three sets of classes in religious studies at various grade levels: one for Orthodox Christianity, one for Islam, and one for “good morals” (nondenominational) developed by the Protestant NGO Bible League. There were approved official school textbooks for students from first to 12th grade on Orthodox Christianity and Islam and textbooks on nonconfessional religious education from first to sixth grade. In July, the Ministry of Education and Science announced its Expert Council on Religion would resume its work after a three-year break, prioritizing the incorporation of religious moral foundations into the school curriculum.

The Office of the Grand Mufti and the Evangelical Alliance reported they continued to experience difficulties in acquiring necessary resources to meet the legal requirement for raising their religious academies up to university standards, such as providing full-time faculty for at least 70 percent of the courses, suitable facilities, a library, and research facilities. Authorities, however, did not enforce the law requiring those academies to be closed by 2022.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

In February, media outlets reported that Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova banned what organizers called the annual Lukov March honoring General Lukov, the 1940s-era antisemitic, pro-Nazi leader of the Union of Bulgarian National Legions, following public outcry against the event. The MFA, the Public Prosecutor's Office, political parties We Continue the Change, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, Democratic Bulgaria, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, as well as NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions all spoke out against the planned march. Despite the ban, Lukov marches took place on February 13, when approximately 200 participants gathered outside Lukov's house in Sofia to mark the anniversary of his killing, and on February 24, when a few dozen participants marched in downtown Sofia with banners and torches. On February 25, the day of the march, Sofia police prevented participants from gathering or marching. Visitors from the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and Sweden, who traveled to Sofia to participate in the Lukov March, took part in a protest march against the ban, ending in front of the Sofia courthouse.

Media outlets reported that on March 31, police arrested Protestant pastor Petar Blagoev and searched his home and the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, over which he presided, in Pernik as part of an operation they said was to prevent vote buying in parliamentary elections. Police detained the pastor for a few hours; authorities never brought formal charges against him, and they terminated the investigation on October 5. The Evangelical Alliance accused the police of acting without any evidence and of seeking to intimidate Protestant communities in Roma neighborhoods.

Despite the legal ban on the propagation of fascism or other antidemocratic ideologies, authorities rarely enforced the law, and souvenirs with Nazi insignias were available in tourist areas around the country.

The national budget allocated 46.64 million leva (\$2.6 million) to registered religious groups for current expenses such as employee and clerical salaries, educational activities, cemetery maintenance, and capital investments, such as construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses, compared with 45.64 million leva (\$2.5 million) in 2022. Of the total amount for 2023, 38.3 million leva (\$2.1 million) went to the BOC; 7.2 million leva (\$4 million) to the Muslim community; 698,500 leva (\$395,000) to Protestant denominations; 300,000 leva (\$170,000) to the Catholic Church (Roman and Greek Catholic Churches combined); and 70,000 leva (\$40,000) each to the AAOC and the Jewish community. No other registered religious groups received government funding. In December, the government allocated an additional 6.9 million leva (\$3.9 million) for the construction, repair, and upgrade of BOC churches, monasteries, and schools as well as 3.5 million leva (\$1.9 million) for the High Islamic Institute. On December 21, the National Assembly approved a financial compensation provision, effective in 2024, that allows registered religious groups' places of worship to pay for electricity at household consumer rates.

On July 13, Shalom filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's Office over a collage distributed in self-described nationalist political party Vazrazhdane's Telegram channel depicting armed soldiers in Nazi uniforms carrying away a man bearing the face of a former minister of foreign affairs, Solomon Passy, who also is a prominent member of the Jewish community, in a prison uniform with the caption, "If you don't want Russian gas, you can have some of ours." The President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria political party coalition, and many NGOs condemned the publication as an act of antisemitism. Vazrazhdane filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's Office, accusing Shalom president Alexander Oscar of pursuing political goals and engaging in discrimination and anti-Bulgarian actions. In October, Burgas Municipality officials removed from a public facade graffiti depicting a hanged man with the name of Passy next to it after the Alef Jewish Bulgarian Cooperation Center filed a complaint.

In May, Shalom president Alexander Oscar filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's Office over a television interview with Tatyana Doncheva, the leader of Movement 21, which is self-characterized as liberal. In the interview, Doncheva said Jews have "lost their common sense" and become "senile" and ungrateful and that "Jews are at the bottom of all dirty political affairs."

According to press reports, on October 13, Sofia Mayor Fandakova issued an order banning a planned march “in defense of Jerusalem” announced on Facebook by an anti-Israel individual resident in the city, which was announced in the week following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel. A post on Facebook announcing the march contained anti-Israeli content. The same day, the Public Prosecutor’s Office said in a media statement that, regarding hate speech, including calls for radical actions based on religious and ethnic grounds spread on social networks, the office would be “uncompromising” in exercising its powers to guarantee public order and security and to protect what it said were the rights and freedoms of citizens. It said perpetrators of such acts could be held criminally liable under provisions of the criminal code against preaching hatred on a religious basis. Shalom expressed appreciation and gratitude, especially to Fandakova, for holding a clear position regarding attempts at radicalization and to the municipal government of Sofia for banning the march.

In March, President Rumen Radev hosted an iftar for multiple religious groups, including the BOC, the Muslim Denomination, the Evangelical Alliance, the Greek Catholic Exarchy, the Central Israelite Religious Council, and the AAOC. Radev stated the iftar was “an established symbol of institutional respect for the faith and religious traditions of the Muslim community.” In June, the President, the National Assembly speaker, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs each issued statements congratulating Muslims on Eid al Adha and highlighting interfaith tolerance and mutual respect.

On November 3, the Regional Mufti of Sofia, Beyhan Mehmed, issued a statement expressing gratitude to Sofia Airport management for its assistance in providing a prayer room for the needs of Muslims passing through the airport.

In March, Shalom issued a statement expressing disagreement with the government’s year-long program commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Rescue of Bulgaria’s Jews, which it said contained positions and events that presented the country’s 1940s antisemitic laws and labor camps as “pro forma,” “unreal,” and designed to protect the Jewish population. Shalom also said the program ignored the actions of the government at the time, actions that led in 1943 to the deportation by authorities of 11,343 Jews from territory then administered by the government to Vienna and onward to death camps in Poland.

In an August meeting with National Coordinator on Combatting Antisemitism and Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Irena Dimitrova, the contact group for combating antisemitism confirmed its commitment to provide prompt and coordinated response to antisemitic acts.

On October 18, the government adopted the country’s first five-year national action plan on combating antisemitism, which lists combating antisemitism as a main human rights priority.

To mark Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, the MFA issued a statement commemorating the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The then National Assembly speaker, Vezhdi Rashidov, led the parliament in a minute of silence to honor the memory of the victims.

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

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Antisemitic rhetoric appeared regularly on social networking sites and as comments under online media articles. Shalom repeatedly expressed concerns regarding escalating public hate speech and antisemitism, including on social networks, offensive graffiti, as well as of “participation of Bulgarian institutions in the popularization of incorrect theories and distortion of the history of the Jewish population under Bulgarian rule during World War II.”

In May, representatives of the Jewish community protested the participation of publisher Edelweiss, which prints books on Holocaust denial and promotes antisemitic and racist ideology, in an open-air book fair in Sofia. They called on the Bulgarian Book Association, which organizes the event, to reevaluate the listing of that publisher in the fair. In June, the Bulgarian Book Association informed Shalom that it had referred the case to the Public Prosecutor's Office. In September and December, representatives of the Jewish community protested again over Edelweiss's participation with a similar catalogue in similar book fairs. The prosecutor's office did not respond to the complaints by year's end.

In June, Jewish community organizations from Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, and Serbia signed a joint memorandum, committing to counter Holocaust distortion and revisionism, stand against antisemitism, and preserve Jewish life.

On October 15, Shalom hosted at the Sofia Synagogue a Prayer for Peace event to honor the memory of the victims of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. Government officials, ambassadors, political party leaders, and religious leaders participated in the event. President Radev stated, "In these sad days after the horrific terrorist attack by Hamas against Israel, we pay our deepest respect to the memory of all the innocent victims. I extend my condolences to all Bulgarian Jews, to all the people of the State of Israel and all around the world who have lost loved ones and friends."

During the year, Jehovah's Witnesses reported one case of aggression against their members in Sofia. On September 26, a man yelled at, kicked, and then chased after two Jehovah's Witnesses proselytizing door-to-door. As of the end of the year, there was no response to the complaint they filed with the police after the incident.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses representatives, as of the end of the year, two police inquiries continued in Varna, one of the July 2022 beating of one Jehovah's Witness and the other an assault on an individual that entailed throwing liquid on the victim's face, also in 2022.

On October 19, Bulgarian Orthodox Church Metropolitan of Ruse Naum hosted representatives of the Muslim community, the Catholic and Armenian Churches, the local government, political parties, and civil society, expressing gratitude for their cordial cooperation, support, and respect as part of the local community's efforts for "tolerance and friendship regardless of faith or political views."

On February 11, Regional Mufti of Plovdiv Taner Veli again hosted an annual "tolerance coffee" commemorating a 2014 incident when soccer hooligans vandalized the Cumaya Mosque. Representatives of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities, local government officials, foreign diplomats, and representatives of civil society participated in the event. Addressing the participants, Deputy Mayor Plamen Panov highlighted the coffee as a symbol of the ethnic and religious diversity, peaceful coexistence, respect, and tolerance in Plovdiv.

The NCRC, whose members include representatives of the BOC, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Catholic, AAC, and Jewish communities, continued to serve as a platform for the largest religious groups to organize joint events to develop and defend a common position on religious issues, such as legislative proposals, political statements and actions by others, and religiously motivated vandalism. The BOC occasionally participated in the council's activities, according to reports from members of the council and public reports of council activities. In partnership with Sofia Municipality, the council held a series of events throughout the year, including "Days of Tolerance in Sofia" in September, which featured a student essay and a multimedia and photo competition, along with a culinary event in October that offered traditional food from each community represented on the council.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials held regular discussions with representatives of the MFA, the Council of Ministers' Directorate for Religious Affairs, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, the judiciary, and local government administrations about cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and initiatives to support interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials raised specific examples of harassment of religious communities with the MFA, including a rise in antisemitism cases.

Embassy officials met with representatives of the NCRC, BOC, Office of the Grand Mufti, Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Evangelical Alliance, and the Catholic, AAOC, Muslim, and Jewish communities throughout the country to discuss religious discrimination through local ordinances and ongoing efforts to restitute religious properties, religious education, and government funding provided to religious groups. Embassy officials also met with civil society and human rights groups, such as the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, to discuss these issues and cases of harassment of religious groups.

On several occasions, the Ambassador and embassy officials met with BOC leaders to discuss a range of issues, such as combating hate speech, promoting religious tolerance, and fostering more interfaith dialogue.

In several meetings with Shalom, the Ambassador and embassy officials discussed rising antisemitic rhetoric. Subsequently, the embassy expressed solidarity with the Jewish community against religious discrimination and denounced hate speech and intolerance through social media posts and events throughout the country. In February, the embassy issued a public statement denouncing the Lukov March, in close coordination with the MFA, likeminded diplomatic missions, and the Sofia Municipality.

On April 4, the Chargé hosted an iftar for members of the interfaith community, as well as civil society and government representatives, to highlight freedom of faith and expression as well as respect for cultural and other societal diversity.

In May, an embassy official met with Jehovah's Witnesses representatives in Varna to discuss ongoing court cases in the city. In October, embassy officials met with representatives in Sofia to discuss cases of discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses in Sofia and in other locations.

In May, a senior embassy official met with Mufti Selahaddin Ahmed Muharrem in Aytos to discuss the growing demand for Islamic religious education in the region.

In May, the embassy invited a historian through the Department of State to present lectures on the danger of disinformation, including distortion of the Holocaust as a form of antisemitism. The speaker met with Jewish leaders and students in Sofia and Varna to discuss strategies to counter such false narratives.

In June, the Chargé attended the signing in Sofia of the joint memorandum against antisemitism and Holocaust revisionism, which was signed by the Jewish communities of the Republic of North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia. The U.S. Special Envoy on Holocaust Issues wrote a letter supporting it.

In June, a senior embassy official wrote a letter that was read at the International Literary Student Competition, which was organized by the Alef Jewish-Bulgarian Cooperation Center in Burgas. The letter highlighted the importance of youth engagement on issues such as preventing antisemitism and promoting diversity and tolerance. The contest featured 170 young authors from nine countries and focused on how youth can create and share powerful stories to counter disinformation and antisemitism.

In July, a senior embassy official spoke to and engaged with teachers as part of a training workshop to prevent discrimination and antisemitism that was organized by the Olga Lengyel Institute for

Holocaust Studies and Human Rights. The workshop included lessons on Jewish history.

In July, the Ambassador met with the Grand Mufti to discuss issues related to building a second mosque in Sofia and government funding of religious organizations in the country.

In October, the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with Jewish leaders, Deputy Foreign Minister and National Coordinator on Combating Antisemitism Dimitrova, and BOC representatives to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews and to discuss the importance of preventing Holocaust distortion as a form of antisemitism.

In October, embassy officials met with representatives of the Evangelical Alliance to discuss police harassment of pastors in Roma neighborhoods and reports of biased media coverage that followed, as well as the alliance's interfaith initiatives within the National Council of Religious Communities.