

USDOS – US Department of State

2021 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. In February, the Plovdiv Appellate Court confirmed the sentences of 12 Romani Muslims convicted in 2019 of supporting ISIS and spreading Salafi Islam, among other charges. The 12 individuals appealed the ruling. Muslim leaders again said several municipalities denied permission to build new or rehabilitate existing religious facilities. In May, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled Shumen Municipality's ordinance restricting proselytizing did not violate the constitution. In March, the Sofia Appellate Court rejected a restitution claim by the International Missionary Society Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement General Conference on land in Sofia. In February, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova canceled an annual march (after it had begun) honoring 1940s pro-Nazi leader Hristo Lukov on procedural grounds after the city was unable to legally ban the event. In February, Jewish groups strongly protested remarks by a television quiz show host on Bulgarian National Television denying there were gas chambers in Nazi extermination camps and stating that Jews disliked working, especially in the camps, preferring others "to do all the work so that they can collect the profit." The director general of the station and the show's host apologized for the remarks. According to NGOs, souvenirs exhibiting Nazi insignias and imagery continued to be widely available in tourist areas around the country and few local governments responded to complaints about them.

Antisemitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly in online comments and on social networking sites, for example, calling Jews "lampshades," and in online media articles and in the mainstream press. Antisemitic graffiti, including swastikas and offensive slurs appeared in public places. The Jewish nongovernmental organization (NGO) Shalom reported increased incidents of antisemitic hate speech online in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing election campaigns, and vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and Jehovah's Witnesses reported no instances of harassment or threats from the public, which they attributed to moving most of their activity online due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with relevant government officials, including representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) Directorate for Human Rights, the Council of Ministers' Directorate for Religious Affairs, Office of the Ombudsman, Commission for Protection against Discrimination, and local governments regularly to discuss cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and their efforts to promote interfaith dialogue among the community. The Ambassador and embassy officials also met with the National Council of Religious Communities (NCRC) and discussed how to involve the BOC more in interreligious activities. Embassy officials regularly met with religious groups and supported civil society efforts to encourage tolerance and stimulate interfaith dialogue, although the frequency of such engagements decreased.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.9 million (midyear 2021). 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, including the Union of Evangelical Congregational Churches, Union of Evangelical Baptist Churches, and Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches, 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 (AAOC), Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, 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 and Armenian communities are 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 identify 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 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 (\$58-\$170). If a legal entity commits the infraction, the fine may range from 500 to 5,000 leva (\$290-\$2,900).

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, 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. There are 199 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 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, 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 does not consider unregistered religious groups. These groups may engage in religious practice, since there is no law prohibiting it, but they 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, receive property tax exemptions, and sell religious merchandise. Some local regulations also restrict the groups, in breach of the law. Several municipalities, including Kyustendil and Sliven, prohibit unregistered religious groups from conducting any religious activities.

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 (\$870) for repeat offenses.

The law allows registered groups to publish, import, and distribute religious media; it does not address the rights of unregistered groups with regard to such media. The law does not restrict proselytizing by registered or unregistered groups. Dozens of municipalities, including the regional cities of Kyustendil, Pleven, Shumen, and Sliven, have ordinances prohibiting door-to-door proselytizing 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 religious dress and symbols of unregistered religious groups. Some municipalities prohibit religious activities inside cultural institutes, schools, and establishments for youth and children.

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, children determine their religion by agreement between them and their parents or guardians. If such agreement is not reached, a child 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 post-secondary 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 (\$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 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 (\$2,900-\$5,800), 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 (\$2,900). 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 (\$1,700-\$5,800).

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

On February 19, the Plovdiv Appellate Court confirmed the Pazardjik District Court’s 2019 verdict convicting 12 Romani Muslims on charges of supporting ISIS, assisting foreign fighters, propagating Salafi Islam, characterized by the government as an antidemocratic ideology, and incitement to war.

Two other Romani Muslims who were part of the original case did not appeal their convictions or sentences. The appellate court also confirmed the lower court’s sentences: 8.5 years in prison for the group’s leader, Islamic preacher Ahmed Mussa, and incarceration ranging from 12 to 42 months for 10 of the other Romani, all men. The 12th Romani, the only woman in the group, received a two-year suspended sentence. A final appeal of the case to the Supreme Cassation Court by both defendants and prosecutors was pending at year’s end.

In May, the Samokov Regional Court exonerated Church of God-Bulgaria pastor Nikolay Vasilev, who was charged in 2020 with holding an Easter service in Samokov in breach of the COVID-19-related ban on public gatherings. A prosecutor appealed the verdict in the Sofia District Court, where the case was pending at year’s end. Administrative proceedings in the Samokov Regional Court regarding fines imposed on other Church of God-Bulgaria officials relating to the same event were also pending.

In April, Sofia Municipality revoked its ordinance restricting the activity of unregistered religious groups, complying with a 2020 decision of the Sofia Administrative Court. In May, the Supreme Administrative Court reversed a 2020 decision of the Shumen Administrative Court and determined that a Shumen Municipality ordinance restricting door-to-door proselytizing did not violate the country’s constitution and laws, but it stated the provisions prohibiting religious activities by “non-traditional religious groups” (i.e., groups other than the BOC) inside cultural institutes, schools, and establishments for youth and children were illegal, since they discriminated against those religious groups. Jehovah’s Witnesses said the decision limited their right to express their beliefs and put followers at risk of being subjected to discrimination and aggression. On November 2, a five-member panel of the Supreme Administrative Court refused to review an appeal by Jehovah’s Witnesses of the court’s April ruling, stating the group had missed the appeal deadline.

Contrary to years prior to 2020, Jehovah’s Witnesses did not report any incidents against their members by government officials while engaged in proselytizing. They attributed the change to reduced public proselytizing and increased online activity due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In September, a publication in the online human rights platform Marginalia stated the national census had violated children’s rights for the benefit of religious groups by disregarding the legal right of children aged 14-18 to independent religious self-identification. According to the publication, the census instructions allowed adults to increase the number of members of a religious group by including their children, which directly affected the size of the government subsidy for that group until the next census.

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

The Office of the Grand Mufti said it was continuing to search for ways to litigate its recognition as the successor to all 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, some courts continued to suspend action on all restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti. In May, the Targovishte District Court ruled against the Office of the Grand Mufti's claim regarding a former mosque and Muslim school in Popovo, stating the office was not the proven successor. In October, the Varna Appellate Court confirmed the lower court's decision. In October, the Tutrakan Regional Court ruled against the Office of the Grand Mufti's claim to a former Muslim school converted to a secular school during communism, refusing to recognize the office as the proven successor.

In March, the Sofia Appellate Court rejected a restitution claim by the International Missionary Society Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement on a plot of land in Sofia. According to the court, the group had failed to prove that the three persons who bought the lot in 1934 had acted on behalf of the denomination despite the written declarations to that effect by two of those persons in 1949 and 1951. At year's end, an appeal was ongoing at the Supreme Cassation Court, and the next hearing was scheduled for January 2022.

The national public school elective curriculum continued to provide three sets of classes in religious studies at various grade levels: one for Orthodox Christianity, one for Islam, and one for "good morals" (nonconfessional) developed by the Protestant NGO Bible League. In September, the Ministry of Education approved official school textbooks for students from sixth to twelfth grade in the program on Islam, grades one through five having been approved in 2020. Schools began using the full set of books on Orthodox Christianity and Islam from first to twelfth grade in the academic year that began in September. There were approved textbooks on nonconfessional religious education from first to third grade but there were no trained teachers to put them to use. The Evangelical Alliance, a group of 14 Protestant Churches and 16 Protestant NGOs, complained that the Ministry of Education delayed the training of teachers until 2022 and provided funding only for 40 percent of the candidates.

The Office of the Grand Mufti and the Evangelical Alliance expressed concern that they lacked the resources to meet the legal requirement for bringing their religious academies up to university standards by the end of the year and would be forced to close them.

In September, High Muslim Council chair Vedat Ahmed criticized schools and universities that invited BOC clerics to perform religious rituals, stating that many students were Muslims, and said it would be appropriate either to invite imams as well or refrain from any religious activity.

On February 13, Sofia mayor Fandakova issued an order canceling the Lukov March after it had begun on the grounds that the municipality had not approved the route proposed by the organizers, after the city was unable to legally ban the event in advance. Approximately 50 participants turned out for the annual demonstration to honor General Hristo Lukov, the 1940s antisemitic, pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions leader. Police divided the rally into smaller groups and escorted them to Lukov's house, where the groups held a commemoration ceremony. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the then-ruling GERB Party, the Democratic Bulgaria Alliance, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions denounced the rally. In February, the Sofia City Court rejected a prosecutor's claim for deregistration of the rally organizer, Bulgarian National Union-Edelweiss, stating the claim failed to provide evidence of incitement of ethnic, racial, and religious hostility or other unconstitutional activity by the party. At year's end, an appeal was proceeding in the Sofia Appellate Court.

In February, Blagovest Asenov, the leader of the National Resistance organization, accused on social media Jews and Jewish NGOs of being "anti-Bulgarian," as well as of causing the "refugee crises in Europe" and "forcing the COVID pandemic" on authorities. Police issued Asenov a warning, but a prosecutor dismissed the case, citing lack of evidence of a criminal offense.

Shalom expressed "strong concern" regarding Alternative for Bulgarian Revival Party leader Rumen Petkov's appearance for a TV interview on September 21 while wearing a yellow badge reading "Unvaccinated" on his lapel. Shalom said Petkov's badge was a reference to the yellow stars Jews were forced to wear during World War II and stated he was minimizing the Holocaust. In a subsequent public statement, Petkov denied the accusations of antisemitism and apologized to "everyone who felt offended."

In October, the Office of the Grand Mufti expressed concern that municipal authorities had excavated the area around the historic Kursun Mosque in Karlovo and piled up a large amount of dirt in the yard, calling it a desecration. In a subsequent meeting with Regional Mufti of Plovdiv Taner Veli, Karlovo mayor Emil Kabaivanov explained the piles of dirt were the result of

archaeological excavations dating back three years. At year's end, the Office of the Grand Mufti's litigation (which the office initiated in 2012) against Karlovo Municipality regarding ownership of the mosque was pending in the Sofia Appellate Court.

In February, Jewish organizations protested the "scandalous and slanderous content" of a question posed by Orlin Goranov, host of the game show "Last One Wins," to contestants on Bulgarian National Television. Goranov asked for the name of the chess player who allegedly denied there were gas chambers in Nazi extermination camps and who claimed that Jews disliked working, especially in the camps, preferring others "to do all the work so that they can collect the profit." According to press reports, the host was quoting, without naming him, the late world chess champion Bobby Fischer. The Director General of the station, Emil Koshlukov, apologized on Facebook and fired the scriptwriter for including the question. The show's host also publicly apologized on the air.

According to NGOs, souvenirs exhibiting Nazi insignias and imagery continued to be widely available in tourist areas around the country and few local governments responded to complaints about them. In June and August, Shalom alerted the mayors of Primorsko and Pomorie, respectively, about such souvenirs, calling for their removal from the market. The Primorsko Municipality did not respond, but Pomorie authorities removed the merchandise.

In February, March, April, and November, the government allocated 11.42 million leva (\$6.62 million) to fund repair and maintenance of BOC facilities in Karan Varbovka, Kyustendil, Nevestino, Granitsa, Godech, Pernik, Sugarevo, Zhablyano, Shipka, Veliko Tarnovo, Vidin, Muldava, Sofia, and Rila, as well as 3.34 million leva (\$1.94 million) for repair and maintenance of Islamic facilities and for purchasing a building to house the High Islamic Institute.

The national budget allocated 42.65 million leva (\$24.74 million) to registered religious groups for current expenses, such as employee and cleric salaries, educational activities, and cemetery maintenance, as well as capital investments, such as construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses, compared with 33.34 million leva (\$19.34 million) in 2020. Of the 42.65 million, 35.75 million leva (\$20.74 million) went to the BOC; 6.35 million leva (\$3.68 million) to the Muslim community; 220,000 leva (\$128,000) to the Catholic Church; 176,000 leva (\$102,000) to Protestant denominations; and 77,000 leva (\$45,000) each to the 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 1 percent of the population. The Religious Affairs Directorate held the subsidy allocated for Protestants and said it allocated portions of it (typically only for construction and repairs) to whichever denomination sent a request.

In April, ahead of Ramadan, President Rumen Radev invited Grand Mufti Hadji to meet with him "as a token of respect to the traditions and culture of Bulgarian Muslims." The President subsequently issued an Eid al-Fitr greeting addressed to the country's Muslim population, citing a national culture of tolerance and sharing.

In January, the Armenian Community Association objected in an open letter to the April 4 date the President had set for general elections, which coincided with Armenian Easter, stating it was a "sign of disrespect for Armenian religious customs and culture." Pavel Gudjerov, the mayor of Rakovski, home to the largest Catholic community in the country, also addressed the President, urging him to change the date, but the President did not reverse his decree.

After the government's term expired in May and the new parliament failed to form a government, the two caretaker governments succeeding it did not appoint a new national coordinator on combating antisemitism to replace the outgoing coordinator. In May, a senior official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) said the ministry would fill the coordinator position when parliament formed a regular government. In early November, another MFA official said the previous coordinator could not be replaced because he was appointed to the post by name. The MFA stated in mid-December it was unable to submit the draft decision establishing the position permanently to the Council of Ministers for adoption due to the elections in November and subsequent government formation process, but it expected to have a decree establishing the position permanently at the deputy minister of foreign affairs level in early 2022. At year's end, the government had not filled the coordinator position.

According to press reports, the city of Vidin, with the approval of Shalom, was proceeding with a project using the equivalent of \$6 million in EU funds to restore the crumbling synagogue in the city and convert it into a community and cultural center. The center, according to the plan, would include a permanent exhibition on the history of the Jewish community in Vidin, which once numbered approximately 2,000 members, although only approximately a dozen Jews remained.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Antisemitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly in online comments and on social networking sites, for example, calling Jews “lampshades,” as well as in online media articles and in the mainstream press. Antisemitic graffiti, including swastikas and offensive slurs, appeared regularly in public places.

In June, Shalom reported spotting stickers with Nazi symbols inside public transportation vehicles in Sofia and inside ski lifts in Bansko. Shalom also reported increased incidents of antisemitic hate speech online in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing election campaigns. In October, vice presidential candidate Elena Guncheva of the Vazrazhdane Party referred on social media to local politicians of Jewish and Turkish origin, saying they should consider themselves “guests” in the country. After Shalom complained of “xenophobia and hate speech” to the Central Electoral Commission, which condemned her words but stated it could not interfere in the political campaign, Guncheva addressed Shalom specifically on social media, reiterating that “Bulgaria is the land of Bulgarians.” In November, the Israeli embassy issued a public letter condemning her comments.

Jewish community leaders expressed concern regarding periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments and what they said was an increasing trend of antisemitic and xenophobic propaganda and graffiti. In June, Shalom approached the local government in Provadia after discovering that the old local Jewish cemetery had become an illegal landfill, with bones scattered around the site. Shalom asked the municipality to clean the cemetery and to allow a rabbi to collect the bones. At year’s end, the municipality had not responded to Shalom.

On January 29, unknown persons defaced with a swastika a memorial plaque in Plovdiv for a Jewish man killed in 1943. The Plovdiv municipality cleaned the plaque, but police had not identified the perpetrator by year’s end.

On August 22, vandals drew racist and antisemitic symbols, including a swastika, on the fence of the Sofia Synagogue. Police had not identified any suspects by year’s end.

Shalom condemned remarks by Miroslav Ivanov, a candidate for parliament from the Bulgarian National Union-New Democracy Party during a television interview in July. The party has no representation in parliament. According to press reports, among other comments, Ivanov said that Jews were happy under Hitler because they could work freely, Nazi gas chambers were used for deworming, and that a Nazi salute he was shown to be doing in a picture was actually a “Roman salute.” Shalom called for Ivanov to be prosecuted for Holocaust denial and spreading antisemitic propaganda.

For the second consecutive year, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported no cases of hostility or harassment against their members by nongovernment officials, which they attributed to COVID-19-related restrictions that forced them to switch to online gatherings.

The Church of Jesus Christ reported no instances of harassment of missionaries, compared with three such incidents in 2020. The Church attributed the change to having moved most of its activity online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Office of the Grand Mufti said Muslims were targets of periodic hate speech, such as at a protest in November in front of the Embassy of Turkey in Sofia against alleged interference of Turkey in the general elections, where participants chanted “death to Turks.” According to the office, since most of the Muslim population in the country is ethnic Turkish, Bulgarian society frequently conflates “Muslim” and “Turk.” The office also cited several instances of offensive graffiti on Muslim properties, such as a swastika on a mosque in Plovdiv in January and obscenities spray-painted on a mosque in Kazanlak.

On February 14, Regional Mufti of Plovdiv Veli again 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 the 2014 attack on the local Cumaya Mosque and was intended as a sign of respect and tolerance among all people, regardless of their ethnic background or religious beliefs.

The National Council of Religious Communities, 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 and defend a common position on religious issues, such as legislative proposals, political statements, and actions by others, and religiously motivated vandalism. The BOC only occasionally participated in the council’s activities,

according to reports from members of the council and public reports of council activities. The council again substantially curtailed activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including by canceling the annual Festival of Religions in Sofia for the second year in a row.

In July, Bridges – Eastern European Forum for Dialogue, an NGO, organized its fifth youth camp, gathering 15 youths from different regions in the country and from different faiths in Plovdiv for discussions on history, traditions, tolerance, and dialogue with BOC, Catholic, Muslim, AAOC, and Jewish leaders.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials held regular discussions with representatives of the MFA's Directorate for Human Rights, the Council of Ministers' 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. Embassy representatives also discussed with the MFA the need to fill the position of national coordinator on combating antisemitism, vacant since May.

Embassy officials continued to meet 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 with regard to ongoing efforts to restitute religious properties, religious education, and government funding provided to the 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 against religious groups.

In February, the Ambassador visited the new mosque in Kardjali and discussed interfaith dialogue and mutual support with Regional Mufti Beyhan Mehmedov. In February, the Ambassador discussed with the NCRC joint initiatives to promote interfaith dialogue, such as a proposal to hold an interfaith roundtable, possibly in 2022, when it could potentially be held in person. The Ambassador also discussed with the council the lack of BOC participation in most council meetings and events, and possible ways to bring in the BOC. The Ambassador discussed religious tolerance, support for interfaith dialogue, and initiatives with Grand Mufti Hadji in June. They conferred about joint public events between the embassy and the Office of the Grand Mufti. In July, the Grand Mufti and the Ambassador jointly commemorated Eid al-Adha by delivering a donation of food and toys to a Center for Children with Disabilities in Sofia

In November, the Ambassador and embassy officials discussed rising antisemitic rhetoric with Shalom, both in the country and beyond. Subsequently, the embassy posted a message about the meeting on social media that expressed solidarity with the Jewish community in the face of discrimination and denounced hate speech and intolerance.

In December, the Ambassador met separately with BOC Patriarch Neofit and Grand Mufti Hadji. The Ambassador sought their support in interfaith efforts to promote tolerance.

On December 10, to recognize International Human Rights Day, the Ambassador joined religious groups, the NCRC, like-minded diplomatic missions, and local human rights NGOs within Sofia's "Triangle of Tolerance" – an area downtown demarcated by the Sveta Petka Orthodox Church, the Banya Bashi Mosque, and the Sofia Synagogue – to record a video message against religious intolerance and hate speech and unveil a banner reading in Bulgarian and English, "United for Human Rights – United Against Hate." Participants signed the banner, to be displayed on a rotating basis at their respective organizations.

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