

Jehovah's Witnesses in

Bulgaria

Religious Freedom Concerns

Statement by the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

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Jehovah's Witnesses in Bulgaria enjoy a measure of freedom to worship and generally carry out their religious activities without disturbance. However, the Witnesses suffer numerous incidents of assaults and harassment motivated by religious hatred.

The local authorities provide some assistance but generally fail to prosecute attackers or protect the victims.

Some municipalities attempt to restrict the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses. During June and July 2015, the municipalities of Burgas and Kyustendil issued fines to nine of Jehovah's Witnesses merely for sharing their faith with others in a peaceful manner.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Physical Assaults

- (1) **Sofia.** On 18 March 2015, two of Jehovah's Witnesses were sharing the Bible's message with residents in Sofia. Mr. Mateev became angry and used a large stick to strike one of the Witnesses, Mrs. Georgieva, on the shoulder. He cursed at her and chased her and her companion from the apartment block. Mrs. Georgieva sought medical care for her injury and submitted a complaint to the Prosecutor's Office on 24 March 2015.
- (2) On 4 April 2015, Mr. Georgi Atanasov was peacefully participating in the public ministry when Mr. Nikolai Ilchev Cherkeзов approached him with a television crew and began asking provocative questions about the Witnesses' beliefs. When Mr. Atanasov refused to participate and tried to leave, Mr. Cherkeзов grabbed Mr. Atanasov's arm and squeezed it to prevent him from leaving, thus bruising his arm. He then punched Mr. Atanasov in the left temple area. The police arrived on the scene and made an incident report. On 14 April 2015, a judge of the regional court sent the case back to the Prosecutor's Office for an investigation of a crime motivated by religious hatred.
- (3) **Stara Zagora.** On 6 August 2014, Mr. Stoyanov, a former police officer, attacked Ong-li Becker and Monka Atanasova while they were talking to others about the Bible. Mr. Stoyanov struck Ms. Becker on the back of the neck and hit Ms. Atanasova in the face, bruising her eye and damaging her eyeglasses. The victims filed reports with the police, but the Regional Prosecutor's Office has yet to conclude its investigation.
- (4) **Turgovishte.** On 20 February 2015, two of Jehovah's Witnesses were participating in their Christian ministry in a public area when Mr. Markov approached their literature

table. He turned over the table and kicked one of the Witnesses. The police accepted complaints but have not taken any action against Mr. Markov.

Vandalism and Arson

- (1) **Burgas.** On 8 July 2015, three of Jehovah's Witnesses were preaching in a public area when SKAT TV reporters and a camera crew began harassing them and making slanderous accusations while filming. One of the reporters, Kevork Onnik Daduryan, placed their literature cart in the middle of the street in order to block free movement of pedestrians. Gincho Paskov, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, asked the journalists to leave, but they continued their harassment. Mr. Daduryan slapped Mr. Paskov's hand when he tried to prevent Mr. Daduryan from taking the cart again.

Police officers arrived and issued an administrative violation to Mr. Paskov for allegedly conducting a religious meeting without conforming to regulations. On the same basis, the police officers issued a warning protocol to the other Witnesses but did nothing to help with the reporters who were harassing them. Mr. Paskov has submitted an objection to the citation issued to him and has filed a complaint regarding the police officers' failure to provide protection.

- (2) Since the autumn of 2014, VMRO and NFSB political party members Georgi Kostadinov, Nikolai Cherkezov, and Metodi Biraktarski began a slander campaign and protests in Blagoevgrad against Jehovah's Witnesses. On 25 March 2015, Top Presa news media broadcast slanderous statements made by Georgi Kostadinov and Nikolai Cherkezov about Jehovah's Witnesses. On 8 April 2015, Georgi Kostadinov, Nikolai Cherkezov, and Metodi Biraktarski organized a protest in front of the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. The police arrived and issued warnings to the men not to violate the ordinance for public order. On 3 July 2015, Jehovah's Witnesses submitted a complaint against the three men for slander and displays of religious hatred.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Police Interference With Manifestation of Belief

For the most part, individual police officers deal with Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully when they find them engaged in their lawful religious activity. At times, however, police interfere with the Witnesses' manifestation of belief by citing violations of local ordinances. These ordinances unlawfully restrict religious activity in contradiction of rights guaranteed by Bulgaria's constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

- (1) **Kyustendil.** On 11 April 2015, five of Jehovah's Witnesses were peacefully sharing the Bible's message near the market when police officers charged them with violation of a local ordinance on religious activity. The Witnesses filed written objections to the charges and filed appeals against the fines of 800 lev (409 euros).
- (2) **Burgas.** On 12 April 2015, police officers issued administrative violations to two of Jehovah's Witnesses for participating in their public Christian ministry in a park near the Burgas train station. They filed written objections to the administrative charges, but on 17 April 2015, the Burgas deputy mayor, Krassimir Ivanov Stoichev, imposed fines of 50 lev (25 euros) for their religious activity. The Witnesses appealed the fines, and the Burgas Regional Court dismissed the charges for lack of evidence that an offence had been committed.

Interference With Freedom of Assembly

- (1) **Panagyurishte.** On 19 March 2015, the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Panagyurishte received written notice from Mayor Nikola Belishki that the hall they had previously agreed to rent to the congregation for the Memorial of Christ's death was no longer available. The written notice explained that approval to use the hall had been revoked because citizens in the municipality initiated a petition and the mayor wanted to avoid any potential conflicts. According to media outlets, Orthodox priest Atanas Manolov initiated the petition and collected signatures. The Witnesses secured another facility for the event.

Denial of Zoning Permits

- (1) **Kyustendil.** In 2013, Jehovah's Witnesses purchased a lecture hall in Kyustendil that they renovated to use as a place to hold their religious meetings. Their application to change the use classification from lecture hall to "prayer house" was rejected by the chief architect of the municipality. Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the refusal to the Regional Office for National Construction and Control and then to the Kyustendil Administrative Court. Further appeals have exhausted all domestic remedies. The Witnesses have advised the Minister of Justice regarding the situation.
- (2) Meanwhile, on 12 January 2015, Jehovah's Witnesses learned that the mayor of Kyustendil decided unilaterally to change the registered classification of their place of worship, prohibiting it from being used as either a lecture hall or a prayer house. This decision, if not overturned on appeal, would prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from using the building they had purchased and renovated in 2013 for religious services. Jehovah's Witnesses have filed an appeal of that decision, and the case is now pending in the Kyustendil Administrative Court.

Positive Developments

- (1) Jehovah's Witnesses were pleased to see the response of the Stara Zagora District Prosecutor's Office, which returned the case file of Ms. Atanasova to the Regional Prosecutor's Office for a more thorough investigation.
- (2) The Witnesses are grateful for the ruling of Judge Vladimir Penzov of the Blagoevgrad Regional Court, which recognized the element of religious hatred in the physical assault of Georgi Atanasov and sent the case back for further investigation by the prosecutor.
- (3) Slander in the media has declined this year, though Top Presa News and SKAT TV continue with yellow journalism and negative campaigns attacking the Witnesses.

Meetings With Officials

In February 2015, representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses met with the chief architect of Kyustendil, Ms. Chavdarova, to discuss the judicial decision issued by the Kyustendil Administrative Court directing her to overcome the obstacles to issuing a building permit to Jehovah's Witnesses. Ms. Chavdarova told the representatives that she will not issue a building permit. Jehovah's Witnesses were left with the impression that the Kyustendil Municipality is biased against them and unwilling to cooperate.

In April 2015, three of Jehovah's Witnesses met with Blagoevgrad Municipality legal counsellors regarding the protest permits issued to Nikolai Cherkezev, who organized protests against Jehovah's Witnesses in the city. The Witnesses explained that such permits violate their rights to freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. The legal counsellors responded

positively and assured them that no more protest permits will be issued with the purpose of protesting the meetings of a legally registered religion.

Jehovah's Witnesses respectfully request the government of Bulgaria to:

- (1) Ensure that law enforcement authorities provide appropriate protection against the physical assaults on Jehovah's Witnesses, and acknowledge acts of religious hatred
- (2) Protect the right to manifest one's religious beliefs individually and jointly with others
- (3) Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to build houses of worship without interference or discrimination
- (4) Hold responsible those who slander others in the public media and incite religious hatred

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Bulgaria government.

For more information:

Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at generalcounsel@jw.org.

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