

BULGARIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and conscience. Religious groups may worship without registering, but registered groups receive 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 April, the Supreme Cassation Court overturned the sentences of 12 Romani Muslims convicted in 2021 of supporting ISIS and spreading Salafi Islam, among other charges, and returned the case to the Pazardjik District Court for retrial. Muslim leaders again said the Sofia Municipality rejected their requests to build a new mosque. Jehovah's Witnesses cited municipalities with ordinances that continued to restrict their activities, and local authorities in Varna continued to obstruct the construction of a Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall despite a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and a letter of support from the national government. In February, the Supreme Cassation Court upheld a restitution claim by the International Missionary Society Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement General Conference on land in Sofia, reversing the lower courts' earlier decisions. The Office of the Grand Mufti reported continuing problems in pursuing restitution claims, and in June expressed concern following a fire in a historic mosque, stating that the government failed to maintain it properly and calling for its restitution. In February, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova again canceled an annual march honoring 1940s pro-Nazi leader Hristo Lukov on procedural grounds after the city was unable to legally ban the event, although event organizers managed to hold a demonstration under different auspices. In November, the government established the permanent position of national coordinator to combat antisemitism and named Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Velislava Petrova as the new national coordinator.

Antisemitic rhetoric continued to appear regularly in online comments and on social networking sites, 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

incidents of antisemitic hate speech online, including numerous antisemitic comments following a September posting alleging Jewish responsibility for a 14th-century historical event. It also reported continued vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. Jehovah's Witnesses reported instances of harassment and threats from the public, which they attributed to resuming their activities in person after a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19 restrictions. In Varna, three individuals physically attacked a member of Jehovah's Witnesses who was trying to defuse an incident of harassment against three members of the group engaged in proselytizing.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly 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 to discuss cases of religious discrimination, harassment of religious minorities, and their efforts to promote interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials regularly met with religious groups and supported civil society efforts to encourage tolerance and stimulate interfaith dialogue. In May, the Ambassador and other embassy representatives joined Shalom and the mayor of Sofia to remove antisemitic graffiti from public facades, and in June, the Ambassador discussed respect for religious pluralism with members of the National Assembly.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.9 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2021 census (the most recent), 69.5 percent of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, primarily affiliated with the BOC. The census reports Muslims, the second largest religious group, are 10.7 percent of the population. Nearly 95 percent of Muslims reported being Sunni; most of the remainder are Shia, and there is a small number of Ahmadis concentrated in Blagoevgrad. Protestants, including the Union of Evangelical Congregational Churches, Union of Evangelical Baptist Churches, Adventists, and Union of Evangelical Pentecostal Churches, are at 1.4 percent, and Catholics at 0.7 percent, 10 percent of whom belong to the Byzantine Rite. 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, 5.1 percent of respondents have no religion, 4.7 percent are atheists, 4.4 percent do not know their religion, and 8 percent did 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 Armenian communities are in Sofia, Plovdiv, and along the Black Sea coast. Protestants live in widely dispersed areas but are more numerous in areas with large Romani 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 levs (\$55 - \$165). If a legal entity commits the infraction, the fine may range from 500 to 5,000 levs (\$280 - \$2,700).

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. There are 212 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 levs (\$5) 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 with regard to such media.

Unregistered religious 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 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. The ordinances in Kyustendil, Maritsa, Pleven, and Shumen prohibit door-to-door proselytizing, and the ones in Kyustendil and Maritsa 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 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 restricts the wearing of face-covering garments in public places, imposing a fine of 200 levs (\$110) for a first offense and 1,500 levs (\$820) for repeat offenses, but officials did 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 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 levs (\$140 - \$1,100). 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 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 levs (\$2,700 - \$5,500), 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 levs (\$2,700). 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 and a fine of 3,000 to 10,000 levs (\$1,600 - \$5,500).

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

In April, the Supreme Cassation Court, the highest court in the country, overturned the Plovdiv Appellate Court's 2021 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 and returned the case to the Pazardjik District Court for retrial. The Supreme Cassation Court criticized the appellate court for declaratively stating that the defendants had preached religious intolerance to those who do not practice Salafi Islam without specifying and analyzing the expressions they had used that had incited religious hatred as well as for “citing and repeating witness testimony” instead of making a conclusion on the factual situation. In May, the Pazardjik District Court terminated the court proceedings and returned the case to the local prosecution service for correction of procedural flaws.

As of year’s end, a prosecutor at the Sofia District Court was appealing 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. 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.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses stated that implementation of restrictions on their religious practices by municipalities with discriminatory regulations was uneven. In June, the Pleven Municipality revoked its regulation prohibiting what it referred to as “religious agitation” in public places through the distribution of pamphlets. Jehovah’s Witnesses said a 2021 Supreme Administrative Court decision that a Shumen Municipality ordinance restricting door-to-door proselytizing did not violate the country’s constitution risked subjecting followers to discrimination and aggression. As of year’s end, the group’s November 2021 appeal before the ECHR stating that the ordinance was in direct violation of the European Convention on Human Rights remained undecided.

Following two incident-free years, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported a negative campaign against their members in Varna by the Vazrazhdane political party, described by NGOs as ultranationalist, after they resumed their public proselytizing following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions. On July 28, four Vazrazhdane members, including Varna municipal council member Georgi Georgiev, approached two Jehovah’s Witnesses sharing religious literature and challenged their right to proselytize. They filmed the incident and posted the content online. On the same day, Georgiev addressed a meeting of the municipal

council, expressing doubt about the legality of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the country and called on the local government to revoke their permits for the use of literature carts on the streets. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that subsequently the city denied their request to renew the expired permits.

In its 2022 annual report issued in November, the Jehovah's Witnesses stated 44 municipalities had ordinances restricting religious activities. Other sources stated that this determination was based on information that was four to five years old and since that time some municipalities had dropped these restrictions voluntarily or as the result of court action, while others had adopted restrictions since then. The Jehovah's Witnesses said they were appealing more than 30 citations for violating these municipal ordinances, which were enforced with fines. 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.

In December, the ECHR ruled that the government had violated evangelical Christians' right to religious freedom in 2008 when the Municipality of Burgas issued a circular to school administrators in the city describing evangelical Christians as "dangerous religious cults" that expose their participants to "psychological disorders." The court ordered the government to pay €2,500 (\$2,700) each to the individual plaintiffs and €3,000 (\$3,200) each to the plaintiff associations. The government had not made the payments by year's end.

According to the Office of the Grand Mufti, Sofia Municipality continued to reject, on what the office said were nontransparent grounds, its request to build a new mosque. Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadji said he had raised the issue during the year in several meetings with Sofia Mayor Fandakova, including in March and October, but as of year's end, the mayor's office had not provided any information on the reasons for the city's continued rejection of 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 properties such as mosques, schools, baths, and a cemetery seized by the former communist government. The issue is complicated

by a legal dispute between the Muslim Denomination, led by the Grand Mufti, and the Muslim Sunni Hanafi Denomination regarding the legitimate successor to the organization that had represented Muslims prior to 1949. Pending a decision on the rightful successor to the Muslim religious communities, some courts resumed action on restitution claims by the Office of the Grand Mufti after years of suspension. In August, the Razgrad District Court rejected the Office of the Grand Mufti's restitution claim regarding the central Ibrahim Pasa Mosque in Razgrad, refusing to recognize the office as the proven successor.

In June, the Office of the Grand Mufti voiced a strong concern about a recent fire at the historic Kursun Mosque in Karlovo, which destroyed its wooden front door. In a press release, the office expressed regret that the local government and the Ministry of Culture took what it said was very poor care of the landmark mosque and reiterated its call for the mosque's restitution. On December 20, the Plovdiv Appellate Court ruled against the Office of the Grand Mufti's claim, which had been initiated in 2012 against Karlovo Municipality, regarding ownership of the mosque due to the impossibility of restituting public municipal property. The court, however, recognized that the Muslim group was the rightful successor to the Muslim community that owned the mosque prior to 1944.

In February, the Supreme Cassation Court overturned lower court rulings rejecting a restitution claim by the International Missionary Society Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement regarding a plot of land and part of a house built on it in Sofia. The court, finding that the disputed land had not been properly identified as a unique parcel and that the lower courts had disregarded the group's claim on the house, returned the case to the Sofia City Court for review.

In February, the Ministry of Justice sent a letter to the Varna municipality submitting an action plan to implement a 2020 ECHR decision that the city of Varna's obstruction of the construction of a Kingdom Hall contravened the rules of the European Convention on Human Rights. The ruling reversed the decisions of local courts and the municipality denying Jehovah's Witnesses permission to build a place of worship in Varna. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that as of the end of the year, despite the ministry's instructions, the local government in Varna continued to obstruct the group's attempts to start construction work.

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 fourth grade.

The Office of the Grand Mufti and the Evangelical Alliance continued to express concerns that they would imminently have to close their religious academies because they lacked the resources to meet the legal requirement for bringing the academies up to university standards, such as full-time faculty for at least 70 percent of the courses, suitable facilities, library, and research facilities.

In August, B’nai B’rith Bulgaria issued a declaration protesting the Sofia Municipality’s tentative decision to erect a monument to former mayor of Sofia Ivan Ivanov, who served in that post from 1934 to 1944, citing his record of supporting Nazi Germany and its ideology.

On February 12, minutes before its scheduled start, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova canceled the so-called Lukov March honoring General Hristo Lukov, the 1940s antisemitic, pro-Nazi Union of Bulgarian National Legions leader. In cancelling the march, she cited the potential risk to public order due to the march’s scheduled overlap with several sports events. In anticipation of such a development, given that the mayor had cancelled the march in 2021 after it had begun, members of the rally organizer, the Bulgarian National Union-Edelweiss, obtained approval from the municipality for protests against soaring prices at three locations in the city, which they used as starting points for three individual processions, ultimately gathering approximately 450 participants from the three locations at Lukov’s house for a commemorative ceremony. In 2021, approximately 50 participants took part in a similar ceremony at Lukov’s house. Visitors that observers described as right-wing extremists from France, Germany, North Macedonia, and Serbia took part, along with local participants. Both ruling and opposition parties, including We Continue the Change, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, Democratic Bulgaria, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, NGOs, international organizations, and diplomatic missions denounced the rally. In April, the Sofia

Appellate Court upheld a lower court decision rejecting the prosecutor's attempt to deregister the rally organizer. The court ruled that the prosecutor failed to provide evidence of incitement of ethnic, racial, and religious hostility or other unconstitutional activity.

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. In September, the NGO Shalom posted information on social media, expressing gratitude to the Education Inspectorate in Sofia for its initiative to clean swastikas and offensive graffiti off facades in the Yavorov neighborhood in close proximity to schools and preschools.

In June, the National Assembly approved compensation to the Muslim community for increased electrical power expenses, awarding five million leva (\$2.7 million) to the BOC and 800,000 leva (\$437,200), but nothing to other registered religious groups.

The national budget allocated 45.64 million leva (\$24.9 million) to registered religious groups for current expenses, such as employee and cleric salaries, educational activities, cemetery maintenance, and capital investments, such as construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses, compared with 42.65 million leva (\$23.3 million) in 2021. Of the 45.64 million, 39.37 million leva (\$21.5 million) went to the BOC; 5.77 million leva (\$3.1 million) to the Muslim community; 200,000 leva (\$109,300) to the Catholic Church; 160,000 leva (\$87,400) to Protestant denominations; and 70,000 leva (\$38,300) 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, according to the Religious Affairs Directorate, because they were not represented by a single organization, even though their numbers exceeded 1 percent of the population. Instead of distributing a lump sum to Protestants, the Religious Affairs Directorate held the subsidy allocated for Protestants and allocated portions of it (typically only for construction and repairs) to whichever denomination sent a request.

In April during Ramadan, President Rumen Radev hosted an iftar for multiple religious groups, including the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Muslim Denomination, the Evangelical Alliance, the Catholic Exarchy, the Central Israelite Religious Council, and the AAOC, which he said was a symbol of “good will, mutual understanding, and cooperation among religious groups” and promoted interfaith and interagency dialogue. In April, the President met with Jewish community leaders, which he said highlighted his “respect for the religious traditions of all citizens,” and extended best wishes for Passover.

In April, Shalom expressed “strong concern about antisemitic and anti-Israeli slogans used at a demonstration organized by Vazrazhdane that compared the Star of David to a swastika.

On November 2, the caretaker government passed a decision establishing the national coordinator on combating antisemitism as a permanent position assigned to a deputy minister of foreign affairs designated by the minister. The decision replaced the previous one from 2017, which appointed the coordinator by name, creating periods of vacancy during interim governments. Later that month, the government named Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Velislava Petrova as the new coordinator.

To mark Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, the Council of Ministers issued a statement praising society, the Orthodox Church, and politicians for preventing the deportation of local Jews to Nazi concentration camps. Speaker of Parliament Nikola Minchev noted the role of 43 members of parliament in protecting the Jewish community during World War II.

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 on social networking sites and as comments under online media articles. The NGO Shalom and other Jewish community leaders reported a trend of increasing online antisemitic speech and conspiracy theories, as well as antisemitic and xenophobic political statements, graffiti, and vandalism of Jewish community property.

In September, Shalom alerted the prosecutor general to a Facebook publication alleging that a Jew betrayed the country's medieval capital Tarnovo by opening the city gates and allowing the city to fall to the Ottomans in the 14th century. Readers shared the publication thousands of times, adding hundreds of antisemitic comments. Police summoned the author and gave him a notice to refrain from such publications, after which the Facebook profile disappeared and there were no further publications.

Jewish community leaders again expressed concern regarding periodic vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and monuments. In March, members of Shalom discovered vandalized gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in Sofia. The Sofia Municipality and the graveyard administration repaired and restored the damaged graves, charging the expenses to the security company responsible for the site. As of the end of the year, police had not identified the perpetrator.

In January, the news site *Pik.bg* issued an apology to Dr. Alexander Oscar, an ophthalmologist and the president of Shalom, after falsely accusing him of embezzling money from the national health insurance fund. The accusations were accompanied by increased antisemitism on social media, directed both at Dr. Oscar and the Jewish community.

In March a young boy stood in front of a security camera at Sofia Synagogue, giving a Nazi salute and shouting, "Long live Hitler! Death to Jews!" After police identified the boy, his mother explained that one of his friends had persuaded him to do it for five levs (\$3).

After two incident-free years during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jehovah's Witnesses reported cases of aggression and harassment against their members in Varna. On July 6, a man reportedly harassed three Jehovah's Witnesses women proselytizing on the street. Another Jehovah's Witness, Andrei Lezin, arrived at the scene and attempted to defuse the situation, but two men joined the first, attacked and punched Lezin in the face, and tried to assault one of the women, throwing liquid on her face and trying to strike her before she managed to escape. As of the end of the year, Varna police had made no arrests regarding the complaint the Jehovah's Witnesses filed after the incident.

The Office of the Grand Mufti reported offensive graffiti sprayed on the mosque in Kazanlak in April.

On February 11, Regional Mufti of Plovdiv Taner 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 people of different religious beliefs and a message of “hope that we will share together the good times and support each other in bad times.”

In January, the Dr. Bratan Shukerov Hospital in Smolyan inaugurated a prayer room for Muslims created with hospital funds and donations. Smolyan Regional Mufti Nedjmi Dabov expressed gratitude to the hospital leadership for the initiative, underscoring that a prayer room for Christians is also available there.

The National Council of Religious Communities (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 only occasionally participated in the council’s activities, according to reports from members of the council and public reports of council activities. On May 15, in partnership with Sofia Municipality, the council held its fifth annual Festival of Religions, organizing a concert by performers from different religious communities, exhibitions, and a tour of different places of worship in Sofia.

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, the Office of the Ombudsman, the 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 officials raised

specific examples of harassment against religious communities with the MFA, including the growing number of incidents against Jehovah's Witnesses. The MFA promised to follow up on these 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 with regard to 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 against religious groups.

On April 11, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for an 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. The Ambassador also attended the iftar hosted by President Radev.

In May, the Ambassador and embassy representatives joined the NGO Shalom, Sofia Mayor Fandakova, diplomats, and other volunteers in removing hateful graffiti, such as swastikas, from public facades in downtown Sofia, sending a message of tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

At a meeting at the National Assembly in June, the Ambassador discussed respect for religious pluralism and the importance of advancing religious freedom worldwide with a visiting delegation of the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle and representatives of the National Assembly's USA Parliamentarian Friendship group.

In July, a senior embassy officer met with the Jewish organization Alef to discuss ways the embassy could support youth activities to combat antisemitism and hate speech. The senior officer also engaged teachers as part of a training workshop to promote antihate education that was organized by the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights.

In July and October, embassy officials met with representatives of the Grand Mufti's office to discuss issues related to building a second mosque in Sofia and government funding of religious organizations in the country.

In October, embassy officials met with representatives of the Evangelical Alliance to discuss the impact of rising energy prices and the lack of financial support from the National Assembly for minority religious groups.

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. The embassy issued a public statement denouncing the Lukov March in February, in close coordination with the MFA and likeminded diplomatic missions. In August, the Ambassador gave a speech at an event on Jewish heritage at the Sofia Synagogue which touched on combating antisemitism.