

Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Bulgarian Case Study

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First of all, I would like to express my thankfulness to the Conference of European Churches for organizing this event and for inviting me to speak about the proposed legislation for changes in the Religious Law in Bulgaria. It is pity that 70 years after the acceptance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights I have to draw your attention to a case that seems to bring us back to the past that we do not want to remember, but we should not forget.

On 4 May 2018, the three major parties in the Bulgarian Parliament introduced changes to the Law on Religion. Few days later one of the Nationalist parties introduced their own proposal for changes to the Law that were even more extreme. For the first time in the history of this parliament, political parties have agreed on a particular issue. Unfortunately, their agreement was linked to a proposal for drastically limiting the freedom of religion and belief.

The proposed changes include *banning funding and financial support* from abroad to the religious organizations. No foreign money can be used for paying salaries. Money from abroad (only for social projects and for building and repair projects) can be received only after a prior permission by the Religious Department of the Cabinet [paragraph 8]. Any donations from local people or organizations, above a certain amount, are to be reported to the Religious Department. The state will provide *financial support* only to those religious organizations, which have more than 1% of the population according to the last census, i.e. the Orthodox Church and the Muslim denomination [paragraph 6]. It is believed that the way the census is carried out does not give an accurate picture of church membership in Bulgaria, thus putting the minority religious groups at a disadvantage. Only the Orthodox Church and the Muslim denomination will have the right to open theological training schools and Universities [paragraph 12]. No foreigners will be allowed to serve in any capacity in the churches nor could they even take part in any services or rituals without prior permission by the Religious Department and only alongside with representatives of the local church that has invited him/her [paragraph nine].

The more extreme proposed changes include that no *training from abroad* will be acknowledged without a special recognition by the state. Only people with a theological training approved by the state will be allowed to serve in a priestly position.

The *rationale behind the proposals* is to prevent the flow of money from radical Islamic organizations, national security, public order, etc. However, it is clear that this is not going to work. Such a law will not stop any financial support for the radical groups.

According to the Constitution Church and State are separate. With these proposed changes the State will be interfering in the running of the Church – paying directly the salaries of the Orthodox priests and Muslim imams. It will also interfere with the running of the other religious communities, cutting them from their worldwide families.

The Methodist Church will not be the only one affected. All Protestant Churches, The Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Jews will also be hit.

The Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance, of which the Methodist Church is a member, has sent a letter to the Parliament with its objections. In its letter, the Alliance insists that the proposals should not be even considered and if they are to be discussed in the appropriate parliamentary committee that representatives of the churches would be invited to attend the debates.

There have been *several attempts* of similar changes to be accepted but till now they have been proposed by minority groups and never managed to get the necessary support. Now we are really concerned that the three major parties (which constitute about 90% of the MPs) have joined forces and have jointly signed the proposals, which means that there is a high possibility that they may be passed in one way or another.

After the first reading of the proposals during the plenary session of the Parliament, the two drafts were *merged mechanically into one proposed legislation*. It contained a number of disconcerting restrictions, including impeding clergy training; strict filtering of international donations to churches; limitations on sermon content; restraining liturgy to designated buildings; obstructing non-Bulgarians' ministry; membership of 300 for legal registration; allowing special privileges to religious groups over one percent of the population.

The lawmakers' initiative triggered a massive public outcry. Every faith group in Bulgaria issued a statement of objection. The Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance (the Bulgarian member churches of CEC are members of the BEA) and communities like Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventists and other Evangelical denominations mobilized church members for public protests on November 11, 18, 25 and December 2. These peaceful vigils were called "prayer rallies" and were held in a dozen Bulgarian towns. Almost every media in the country so far, covered the third protest, the largest so far. The Evangelical rallies were accompanied by statements of groups of academicians and public figures, as well as by several legal rights associations.

After a Parliamentary workgroup deliberated on Nov.14, some of the initial proposals were withdrawn. Two days later, a *new version* of the amendments was published on the Bulgarian Parliament's website. In the new document, the lawmakers had conceded some initial provisions like restricting worship only to designated buildings, banning or filtering international sponsorship, limiting foreigners' ministry, disallowing religious schools of minority religious communities. However, other problematic provisions remained.

The *November 16 version* of the draft increased tenfold the threshold for registering a religious group: at least 3,000 members! This is an act of discrimination against minority groups. Apparently, the lawmakers' intention is to severely cut the number of legal faith groups in Bulgaria (currently, 183 registered religions in the country). Even though there was an oral commitment that this article would not be used with reverse force, there is another one, according to which a legally recognized religious institutions might lose its registration if it fails to abide by the new requirements. Once again, clergymen and missionaries wishing to be involved in liturgy or worship will have to register with the state or else risk penalty.

Ten days after the first meeting of the workgroup, a second one was held on November 23. Representatives of various religious groups were invited. The lawmakers made more *oral promises* for concessions, including: dropping the requirement for registration to 200 members; rewriting the text so that it would not have a reverse strength; cancelling the prohibition of worship outside designated buildings.

Once again, *no written record* was provided of the group's deliberations. No document was submitted into Parliament documenting these concessions. Instead, it was made clear that every preliminary version of the proposed legislation would enter parliamentary deliberations. This understanding leads us to be seriously concerned

that some of the commitments taken during the working group's discussions may in fact be ignored by MPs during the bill's final voting.

It is also necessary to say something about the *procedure* of how the new legislation was handled by Bulgarian lawmakers. Whereas the normal logic of new legal instalments would mean first a consultation with the religious groups affected, and only then submitting the bill for reading at Parliament, in this case our decision makers adopted a reverse series of steps. First, two new drafts (with different agendas) were pushed in Parliament; then they were mechanically united into one bill with amendments; and only then was a working group of interested parties invited to the table to discuss provisions that were completely unacceptable, before submitting the document for second reading at the Parliament.

I see in all these proposals – initial and consolidated as well - an attempt from the state side to *nationalize religious communities*, which in some respects surpasses the restrictive provisions of the Religious Law during the Communist Regime. I hope that not all proposals are the result of a well-thought-out strategy for restrictions of freedom of religion and belief. There is also a lack of competence in the religious sphere on the part of Bulgarian politicians, for whom religion is often only an element of national identity or a foundation for national ideology.