

Country Profile

BULGARIA

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in Bulgaria. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 7 million (2018)

Religious affiliation (percent)

Eastern Orthodox Christianity	76.0
Islam	10.0
Protestantism	1.1
Catholicism	0.8
Other	0.2
No denomination	4.7
No self-identification	7.1

Source: National Statistical Institute, National Census Results, 2011 (based on the number of those Bulgarian citizens who chose to respond to the question of denomination – 5 758 301 persons)

Role of religion in state and government

Bulgaria's Constitution proclaims separation between religious institutions and the state (Art. 13, 2) and bans the establishment of political parties on ethnic, racial or religious grounds (Art. 11, 4). The state guarantees that the rights and freedoms of religious community members cannot be restricted by the internal rules and rituals of the respective religious community or institution (Denominations Act, Art. 7, 4).

The relationship between state and religion in Bulgaria is dominated by two-way autonomy with the government exerting moderate control over country's denominations. As per the Constitution, the state is mandated to assist in the maintenance of tolerance and respect among believers of different denominations as well as between believers and nonbelievers (Art. 37, 1).

The state body designated to coordinate the relationship between the executive power and the denominations is the Directorate of Denominations at the Council of Ministers (DDCM) (Denominations Act, Art. 35). DDCM is the administration exerting control over the implementation of the Denominations Act (Art. 35, 1). Its functions include: assisting the implementation of state policy for maintenance of tolerance and respect among the different denominations (art. 35, 2); providing expert positions as foreseen per the Law (Art. 25, 4); and preparing proposals for annual state budget subsidy distributions among the different denominations (Art. 35, 9). In addition, DDCM maintains a public register of all prayer homes, temples and monasteries (Art. 12, 3) based on information provided by each denomination on an annual basis (Art. 12, 2). DDCM is also mandated to issue requests for closure of registered denominations to the Sofia City Court (Art. 20a, 3). It shall be noted that some articles of the present Denominations Act relating to registration (Art. 16), closure (Art. 20a, 3) and subsidy proposals (Art. 35, 9) provide possibility of political interference in denominational matters.

Freedom of religion

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria stipulates that all citizens are equal before the law irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, origin, religion, education, belief, political affiliation, as well as social and economic position (Art. 6, 2). It also proclaims freedom of choice of denomination and of religious or atheist beliefs: “The freedom of conscience, the freedom of thought and the choice of religion and of religious or atheistic views shall be inviolable” (Art. 37, 1). Religious freedom is guaranteed by the Denominations Act which defines the right to religion as the right to choose, change, profess and practice ones religion, individually or collectively, in public or in private through religious service, training or rituals (Art. 2, 2) and prohibits religious discrimination (Art. 4, 4). As per the Constitution religious freedoms are subject to some important constraints: freedom of denominations cannot be used against national security, the public order, health and morals or against the rights and freedoms of other citizens (Art. 37, 2); religious institutions and beliefs can exercise freedom as long as they are not used for political ends (Art. 13, 4); religious or other convictions can be exercised freely as long as they are not used for exemption from obligations established by the constitution or the law (Art. 58, 2). In addition, the Denominations Act guarantees the right of citizens to provide their children with instruction in their religion (Art. 6), and also the right of religious communities to open secondary religious schools (under the supervision of the Ministry of Education) and higher religious schools (with the permission of the National Assembly or the Council of Ministers (Art. 33).

The state guarantees freedom of religion by establishing the conditions for free exercise of the right of denomination and by assisting in maintaining tolerance and respect among believers of different denominations and between believers and nonbelievers (Denominations Act, Art. 4, 3).

Religiously inspired radicalisation

In Bulgaria, radicalisation and violent extremism as potential threats to society have been only recently raised in policy debates. They entered the political agenda mainly in light of global and EU-wide responses to so-called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State (IS) and al'Qa'ida, and the issue of foreign fighters. Religiously inspired radicalisation in the country is discussed only in the context of Islamist radicalisation. Other forms of violent radicalisation such as right-wing extremism and football hooliganism have received considerably less attention.

So far there has been no known involvement of Bulgarian citizens in acts of violent Islamist radicalisation or in Islamist terrorist attacks either at home or internationally. Moreover, Bulgaria is not known to have contributed to the pool of transnational fighters. There are no known cells of radical Islamists in the country. In the context of the EU-wide debate on Islamist radicalisation, some processes relating to religious resurgence and adoption of Salafi interpretations of Islam by segments of some Muslim communities in Bulgaria have played a role in the governance of religious diversity in the country. These processes have also played a role in the way Islam is appropriated for political purposes and in public discussions by certain political actors. In essence, the process of adoption of *Salafi* interpretations of Islam, different from the local Hanafi Sunni traditions, has been associated with religious resurgence, the adoption of more dogmatic Islamic canon and novel religious practice but not radicalisation. It has not led to any (violent) religiously inspired incidents. However, it has been treated as sign of radicalisation by key Bulgarian institutions and addressed from a security perspective. In addition, the manifestations of such processes were exploited by certain right-wing political actors to meet political ends and fuel prejudiced and often non-informed public discussion about the relationship between Islam, Salafi interpretations of Islam and radicalisation.

In light of a terrorist act on Bulgarian territory in July 2012 and the global escalation of Islamist terrorist activity exemplified by IS, Bulgarian law enforcement and intelligence institutions started developing more systematic counter-radicalisation mechanisms. These include relevant amendments in the Criminal Code adopted in June 2015 with provisions on prosecuting acts of terrorism as well as the development of the Strategy for Countering Radicalisation and Terrorism (2015-2020). The approach that is ingrained in the Strategy acknowledges the importance of prevention measures and cooperation among a wide range of state actors and civil society organisations, the private sector and local communities, including religious communities to counter radicalisation. However, the institutional response with regard to countering risks of religious (understood as Islamist) radicalisation has been dominated by law enforcement actors only. The Bulgarian Ministry of Interior, the State Agency for National Security and the Prosecution office have been the only institutions working in the field and enforcing solely security oriented measures with no systematic effort being mounted in the field of prevention.

Religious diversity governance assessment

Bulgaria has been a multi-confessional society since its foundation as a modern national state in 1878. The 2011 census shows that 76% of Bulgarian citizens are Eastern Orthodox, 10% are Muslim, 1.1% are Catholic Christians and 0.8% are Protestant. With respect to the historical context, Orthodox Christianity as the religion of the majority of Bulgaria's population constituted an important aspect of Bulgarian cultural and national identity while the largest minority religion, Islam, has been perceived as the "other" within the construct of the Bulgarian national idea.

With respect to religious diversity the Constitution proclaims the principles of non-discrimination (Art. 6, 2), freedom of choice of denomination and of religious or atheist beliefs (Art. 37, 1). The state is mandated to assist in the maintenance of tolerance and respect among believers of different denominations as well as between believers and nonbelievers (Art. 37, 1). While the Constitution proclaims religious pluralism it also declares Eastern Orthodox Christianity the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria (Art. 13, 3). This is reinforced by the Denominations Act of 2002 which designates Orthodox Christianity as the "traditional denomination" in the Republic of Bulgaria and stipulates that the Orthodox Church is legally established by the Law itself (Art. 10, 2). All other denominations are to be legally established based on registration at the Sofia City Court along the Civil Procedure Code (Article 15, 1). Some of the main denominational rights guaranteed by the law include: foundation of religious communities; establishment of prayer houses, temples and monasteries; performance of religious rights; conduct of religious education in a language of choice; establishment of humanitarian institutions; publishing of religious publications; gathering financial donations from persons and institutions; and the use of languages other than Bulgarian in religious sermons according to the traditions of the respective religious community (Denominations Act, Art. 5 and 6). In addition, all denominations are eligible for state budget subsidies with amounts calculated based on the number of believers as per registration in the national censuses (Denominations Act, Art 28).

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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