

# Bulgarian Parliament drops most restrictions in religion law

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Baptists and other adherents of minority religions in Bulgaria received a Christmas blessing a few days early when the nation's Parliament removed the most prohibitive provisions of its Religious Denominations Act before a final vote Dec. 21.

"We are relieved to state that the most discriminatory and limiting clauses which affected us have been successfully removed or changed appropriately," Teodor Oprenov, pastor of Evangelical Baptist Church in Sofia and leader in the Baptist Union of Bulgaria, wrote in an email immediately after the vote.



Bulgarian Christians gathered in their nation's capital to pray and protest proposed restrictions on religious freedom. (Photo courtesy of Teodor Oprenov)

The changes by Bulgarian lawmakers occurred after Christians from varied traditions held multiple public prayer meetings and [protests](#) in Sofia for seven weeks to register concern about amendments to their nation's

[Religious Denominations Act](#) that would have significantly restricted the rights of minority religions.

The amendments, approved by Parliament on first reading in early October, would have granted Eastern Orthodox and Muslim believers the exclusive right to train clergy and operate religious schools; restricted religious activity only to designated buildings; given legal religious status only to groups with more than 300 adherents; placed limitations on preaching and teaching; restricted missionary activity; and limited foreign donations to religious groups.

[Evangelical Focus reported](#) the Bulgarian Parliament's Committee for Religion and Human Rights met at length on Dec. 19 with representatives of varied faith groups in the country, including members of the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance.

"We are fully aware that this would not have happened without the strong international support and prayers that questioned the intentions of our lawmakers and the strong and consistent protesting and lobbying within the country," Oprenov wrote.



Christians rally at Parliament Square in Sofia, Bulgaria, to pray and protest proposed restrictions on religious liberty. (Photo courtesy of Teodor Oprenov)

Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Elijah Brown and European Baptist Federation General Secretary Anthony Peck sent a letter to Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov asking the proposed amendments restricting religious freedom be withdrawn. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom subsequently expressed its concerns about the proposed law in a [tweet](#) that included a [link](#) to the BWA letter.

Christer Daelander, religious freedom representative of the European Baptist Federation and member of the BWA Religious Liberty Commission, also wrote to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, saying the proposed changes in Bulgarian law would have violated the United Nations Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as similar European Conventions.

Soon after the final vote by Parliament, Brown issued a statement saying the BWA joined in celebrating the decision “to allow hundreds of churches, including 130 Baptist churches, to remain open so that people of faith may continue to worship in the free convictions of their conscience.”

“The willingness of the government to listen to the concerns and perspective of citizens with a minority faith is commendable,” Brown said. “The work of many Baptist leaders and other people of goodwill who led rallies for seven weeks inside Bulgaria and faithfully pressed for full religious freedom, as well as the support of many who prayed and engaged across the world, is a powerful example. The actions of today are a true Christmas blessing.”