

Bulgarians rally to pray, protest proposed religious restrictions

November 13, 2018

Bulgarian Baptists joined other Christians in a prayer rally and peaceful protest that drew about 2,000 participants to the nation's capital, united by concern over proposed restrictions on religious freedom.

Baptist World Alliance leaders also appealed to Bulgaria's prime minister after the nation's parliament gave initial approval to a law significantly restricting religious practice, including missionary activity and theological training. The Bulgarian parliament approved the legislation on first reading in early October, setting a Nov. 16 deadline for receiving public comment before a final vote.



Bulgarian Christians gather in Sofia to pray and peacefully protest proposed restrictions on religious freedom. (Photo courtesy of Teodor Oprenov)

While the largest group gathered Nov. 11 outside the Bulgarian Parliament

in Sofia, other Christians assembled around the country to pray and to ask lawmakers to reject amendments to the [Religious Denominations Act](#).

“We have not gathered to overthrow the government, to support any political party or to stand against any religion. We are here to defend the right to free faith expression for everyone,” Teodor Oprenov, pastor of Evangelical Baptist Church in Sofia and leader in the Baptist Union of Bulgaria, told the group that rallied outside the Bulgarian Parliament in Sofia, marched to the National Palace of Culture and then returned to the Tsar Osvoboditel Monument at Parliament Square.

Oprenov emphasized the assembled Christians did not gather to ask lawmakers for a “softer” version of the law.



Christian leaders address a rally at Parliament Square in Sofia, Bulgaria, registering concern about proposed restrictions on religious freedom. Photo courtesy of Teodor Oprenov)

“We want to say ‘no’ to all the changes foreseen in that bill,” he insisted. “There is nothing in favor of freedom of faith in it.”

Oprenov particularly took issue with measures that would restrict donations to churches, noting the Christian faith is built on the “generosity

of God, who gave his Son Jesus.”

“We, as believers, have a duty and a right to support the needy and to uphold the ministries of the church financially,” he said. “The state should encourage people’s gifts to the church and not control them.”

No threat to national security

Several speakers stressed Bulgarian Christians’ love for their country and disputed assertions that members of minority faiths—those not affiliated with the historically dominant Orthodox Church or Islam—threaten national security.



Bulgarian Christians march in downtown Sofia to protest proposed restrictions on religious freedom. (Photo courtesy of Teodor Oprenov)

“No true believers are ever a threat to national security,” said Rumen Bordzhiev, president of the Evangelical Alliance in Bulgaria. “We love Bulgaria and our people. We believe in God, and we will continue with all legitimate means to uphold the right of religion guaranteed by the constitution.”

Anatoli Elenkov, rector of the Evangelical Theological Institute, likewise emphasized the Christians gathered not to advance a political agenda, but to “preserve the freedom to preach God’s word and to be free to share it.”



Christians rally outside the Bulgarian Parliament in Sofia to pray and ask lawmakers to reject proposed restrictions on religious freedom. Photo courtesy of Teodor Oprenov)

“Here we are, Christians of all confessions—Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants. We stand up for the freedom of speech and religion, against all constraints over the faith. ... We say ‘no’ to the interference of the state in the affairs of the church,” he said.

Pastors serving churches that minister to Bulgaria’s Roma people, who represent about 5 percent of the nation’s population, emphasized the proposed law will divide rather than unite.

“The state is trying to integrate the Roma, but the effect is minimal,” said Pastor Lazar Ganchev. “Only the word of God can achieve that, because it builds a value system and a correct way of thinking. The Christ-changed Roma people begin to live according to the Scripture standards. If this

influence is going to be limited, how will the authorities integrate the Roma.”

Appeal to the prime minister

In a Nov. 8 letter to Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, BWA General Secretary Elijah Brown and European Baptist Federation General Secretary Anthony Peck expressed serious concern about amendments to Bulgaria’s law on religious communities, combined into what Bulgarian lawmakers termed the “joint law.” Brown and Peck asked that the law “be withdrawn prior to second reading.”

“We write to express our concern that the implementation of this law could lead to unintended restrictions on religious freedom and the direct persecution of churches and individuals of faith,” the letter stated.



Elijah Brown

The legislation grants Eastern Orthodox and Muslim believers the exclusive right to train clergy and operate religious schools; restricts religious activity only to designated buildings; gives legal religious status only to

groups with more than 300 adherents; places limitations on preaching and teaching; restricts missionary activity; and limits foreign donations to religious groups.

“These efforts to interfere with theological education, restrict missionary and worship activity, and control international donations in fact wrongly extends government power into the internal life of Bulgarian religious communities,” the letter stated.

“No state, we believe, should be in a position to control the training and activities of ecclesiastic ministers, nor should a state favor one faith expression over another. The Bulgarian constitution rightly guarantees freedom of religion; we urge that this principle be adhered to as the right of all the Bulgarian people.”

In a [Facebook post](#), Brown urged Baptists internationally to pray for a reversal and write the Bulgarian embassy in their own countries.

‘Wave of protests’ in Bulgaria

In a Nov. 13 email, Oprenov noted “a wave of protests” across Bulgaria.

“Mass protests are organized in many of the biggest cities against the cost of fuel in the country and for better care for the people who are physically challenged,” he wrote. “Unlike our peaceful prayer protest, these demonstrations are asking for the immediate resignation of the Bulgarian government.

“Thus, there is a lot on the plate of the people in power in Bulgaria right now, and it is possible that the second reading of the religious law propositions for change might actually be postponed for a later date.”

However, if Parliament votes Nov. 16 and approves the law, Christians in

Bulgaria “will be continuing with the protests from the 17th of November onwards,” Oprenov wrote.