



Universal Periodic Review 50th session – Stakeholders' Report

Bulgaria: Freedom of Religion, Rights of Minorities, Rule of Law, and Political and Public Participation Rights

7 April 2025

Joint Submission by:

Обединени Евангелски Църкви - The United Evangelical Churches (UEC) is an association of 13 registered denominations from the Evangelical-Protestant community and 14 non-governmental organizations as associate members in Bulgaria. On an international level, the UEC is a member of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), while on a national level, it is a member of the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria (NCRCB).

The European Evangelical Alliance (EEA) is an alliance of more than 50 European grassroots national and transnational evangelical movements from all Protestant traditions in 35 European countries. The EEA serves as a platform for common action and a voice for Europe's 20+ million Evangelicals.

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) was founded in 1846 and is a network of churches in over 140 nations that have each formed an evangelical alliance, and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a world-wide identity, voice, and platform to more than 600 million evangelical Christians worldwide.

For additional information, please contact the Geneva Office of the World Evangelical Alliance at geneva@worldea.org, or visit <https://un.worldea.org>; World Evangelical Alliance C/O RES CP 23, 1211 Geneva 8, Switzerland

Introduction

1. This report examines why Bulgaria must strengthen freedom of religion and belief and protect minorities from unfair treatment concerning their fundamental rights.
2. It also explores the political landscape in the country and how it negatively impacts these fundamental rights and freedoms.
3. The present document also includes complaints regarding the abuse of legal powers by the Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria.

Background

4. Article 13 of the Bulgarian Constitution states that "the practicing of any religion shall be unrestricted" and that "religious communities and institutions, as well as religious beliefs, may not be used for political purposes." Furthermore, Bulgaria is a party to multiple international treaties and conventions that it has ratified in its domestic legislation. These treaties and conventions safeguard both religious freedom and the political rights of citizens. Among them are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the United Nations Convention against Corruption. It is also a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

(a) Political Instability in Bulgaria and Violations of Citizens' and Religious Communities' Rights

5. For the relevant facts to be properly understood and objectively analyzed, it is essential to outline the specific socio-political context of the recent period, particularly the ongoing processes within the Prosecutor's Office. These developments are driven by increasing internal and external pressure for reforms, including the introduction of a mechanism for oversight and investigation of the Prosecutor General, in line with the European Court of Human Rights' ruling in *Kolevi v. Bulgaria* (Application No. 1108/02).¹
6. Since the last UPR, political stability in Bulgaria has significantly deteriorated. Over the past three years, the country has undergone seven rounds of parliamentary elections, none of which have led to lasting political stability. Despite the formation of a government following the October 2024 elections, it remains fragile, with numerous reports and evidence of vote-buying and election manipulation. These concerns have even led to cases being brought before the Constitutional Court, which ultimately ruled that the election of certain Members of Parliament was unlawful.²

7. Such a situation creates a conducive environment for the disregard of fundamental civil rights, including the rights of religious groups and minorities.
8. Vote-buying is a widespread practice in Bulgaria, driven by social and economic inequalities. In many regions, particularly in Roma communities, agricultural areas, and small towns and villages, living conditions are extremely poor, creating dependence on political figures. Unfortunately, in these areas, there is a frequent tendency for people to sell their votes in exchange for money or social benefits.
9. Political actors, in turn, have a vested interest in keeping people in poverty, as this enables them to exert control over their votes during elections. The practice of vote-buying seriously undermines the democratic process by violating the right to free and fair elections. Such manipulation not only restricts citizens' freedom but also threatens the fundamental principles of the rule of law and equality before the law.
10. These practices further lead to discrimination and social isolation of the most vulnerable groups in society, hindering their opportunities for economic and social advancement. This is in direct contradiction to international standards for the protection of citizens' rights, which require equal access to the political process, free from manipulation and coercion.

(b) Examples of Abuse of Freedom of Religion, Political Rights and Racism

11. The following three cases are examples of violations of freedom of religion, political rights and racism. All three examples involve Roma Evangelical churches, which have been singled out. Majority Orthodox churches and non-Roma Evangelical churches have not faced "inspections" and their pastors have not faced criminal charges. These cases show that the Bulgarian government has violated the ICCPR articles 2, 17, 18, 25, 26 and 27.

Case 1

12. In 2020, a lockdown was imposed in Bulgaria due to COVID-19, but churches were exempt from the gathering restrictions. Evangelical churches voluntarily suspended in-person services, but a Roma church in Samokov held an outdoor service for a major Christian holiday, splitting it into two gatherings to maintain social distancing. Representatives of the Holy Synod, together with the Prime Minister, held a press conference advising people to avoid indoor gatherings for the holiday whenever possible.³
13. Even though Orthodox churches also held services across the country, the prosecutor's office filed charges only against the pastor of this Evangelical

church, accusing him of committing a crime by “endangering public health.” Church leaders and staff were also questioned. The court acquitted the pastor, ruling that his actions did not constitute a crime.⁴ However, the lengthy legal process and negative publicity led to a significant decline in church attendance. After the lockdown ended, church attendance dropped to just 25% of its previous level.

Case 2

14. On the eve of the 2023 parliamentary elections, an anonymous complaint accused a Pentecostal evangelical pastor in Pernik—whose congregation is predominantly Roma—of vote-buying. Despite the absence of evidence, police raided his home and church, finding nothing. However, major media outlets were present at the scene, and images of the pastor in handcuffs quickly spread, falsely suggesting his involvement in electoral fraud. He was detained 24 hours without charges, and the court later ruled the arrest unlawful. Nevertheless, the damage had already been done — rumors weakened the trust of his congregation and sent a clear message to Roma churches, which traditionally hold significant influence within their communities.⁵

Case 3

15. Shortly before the parliamentary elections in October 2024, the police received a report alleging that the pastor of the Roma Evangelical Church in Pazardzhik, who also serves as a municipal councilor, was involved in vote-buying. Around midnight, police officers stationed themselves in front of the church and remained there until morning. When the pastor arrived for morning prayer, they entered the church under the pretext of conducting a “routine check” and asked him to unlock the building. They inspected the prayer house, and after finding nothing suspicious, they proceeded to a specific bush in the yard, where they discovered a backpack. They instructed the pastor to open it, causing him to leave fingerprints on it. Inside, they found narcotic substances and a list of names and monetary amounts. The pastor was immediately arrested.
16. Later, security camera footage revealed that the backpack had been planted by a passing car the previous night. The pastor informed his lawyer that he had previously been pressured by a political leader to participate in a vote-buying scheme, and after refusing, the so-called “inspection” followed. Despite the available evidence, the Prosecution office refused to investigate the authenticity of the list. This time, the church community responded quickly and publicized the case, but the pastor remained accused, and the trial continued. At present, the prosecution remains inactive and has taken no investigative steps, despite the

defense's requests. In the week following the parliamentary elections, the pastor's detention was changed to a "monetary bail."

17. Court rulings regarding these measures have not been published yet, and therefore, no official source can be attached to this report at the time of its creation, as the case is still ongoing.
18. These cases demonstrate systematic attempts to restrict the freedom of religious communities in Bulgaria and undermine their trust and influence in society. Political actors cross the line of permissible electoral manipulation by using religious leaders from marginalized and impoverished communities to send messages—both to these communities and to society at large—on how to vote or abstain from voting.
19. Seemingly legitimate accusations against religious leaders are, in practice, being used for purposes that are impermissible under the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. From this perspective, the complaint under Article 18 of the ECHR bears contextual similarities to cases no. 33188/20, *Stoimenova v. Bulgaria*; no. 39127/19, *Yoncheva v. Bulgaria*; no. 53050/21, *Zlatanov v. Bulgaria*; no. 23152/22, *Denkov and Bakalova v. Bulgaria*; and no. 50519/21, *Kalinova v. Bulgaria*, all of which highlight the same structural deficiencies in the functioning of the Prosecutor's Office within the specific socio-political context of Bulgaria.

(c) Recommendations

20. We call on the Republic of Bulgaria to strictly adhere to its international obligations under the treaties and conventions it has ratified and to ensure their effective implementation through specific legislative and practical measures. In particular, we urge Bulgaria to:
 - 1) **Comply with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** – Guarantee freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right of individuals to freely practice their religion without interference from state authorities or political actors.
 - 2) **Comply with Articles 2(1) and 27 of the ICCPR** – Practice non-discrimination in the application of the law such that Roma people are not discriminated against in the application of criminal law.
 - 3) **Comply with Article 17 of the ICCPR** – Respect the privacy of pastors and churches of Roma people and do not subject them to searches.
 - 4) **Uphold Articles 25 and 26 of the ICCPR** – Guarantee equal access to political and public life for all citizens, including the right to free and fair

elections without external pressure, manipulation, or restrictions on the voting rights of vulnerable groups.

- 5) Implement the UN Convention against Corruption** – Strengthen measures against political corruption, particularly in the electoral process, and ensure effective investigation and sanctioning of abuses of power that restrict citizens' democratic rights.
- 6) Ensure adherence to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** – Provide protection against unlawful restrictions on religious freedom and ensure that all religious communities can practice their faith without discrimination.
- 7) Respect Article 14 of the ECHR and Article 2 of the ICCPR** – Ensure that no one is subjected to discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, or social status, particularly in the context of elections and the exercise of fundamental rights.
- 8) Adhere to Article 3 of Protocol No. 1 to the ECHR** – Ensure the fair conduct of elections by providing a genuine opportunity for voters to express their will freely, without vote-buying or pressure on religious communities.

21. We urge the Republic of Bulgaria to take concrete steps to strictly uphold these international commitments, including through independent investigations into reported violations, legislative reforms to prevent corruption and electoral manipulation, and effective mechanisms to protect religious communities from political pressure and discrimination.

¹ *Kolevi v. Bulgaria* (Application No. 1108/02), ECtHR, 28 April 2005. Available online: <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-68928>.

² Solution #1, Constitutional cases No. 33/2024, No. 34/2024, No. 35/2024, No. 36/2024 and No. 37/2024, 13 March 2025. Available online: <https://www.constcourt.bg/bg/act-10083>.

³ BNT News, Църквите няма да раздават върба на Цветница, службите на Великден ще се провеждат навън [Churches will not distribute willow on Palm Sunday, Easter services will be held outside], 9 April 2020. Available online: <https://bntnews.bg/news/carkvite-nyama-da-razdavats-varba-na-cvetnica-sluzhbite-na-velikden-shte-se-provezhdats-navan-1048239news.html>.

⁴ DECISION No. 1; Sofia, 4 January 2023; SOFIA DISTRICT COURT, III SECOND-INSTANCE CRIMINAL PANEL.

⁵ DECISION No. 361; Pernik, 5 October 2023; PERNIK DISTRICT COURT, V CRIMINAL PANEL.