



Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance

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November 7, 2018
Sofia

Dear Thomas Bucher,

We are writing on the behalf of the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance, member of EEA.

We would like to inform you about a legislative initiative of the Bulgarian Parliament, threatening religious rights and freedom of churches, denominations and religious organizations in our country.

On October 4, 2018, the Parliament of Bulgaria gave a green light at first reading to proposed modifications of the nation's legislature on religions.

Two separate documents were drafted earlier this year in May, and have triggered a hurricane of protests among all religious communities in the country, including the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Muslim religion, all Protestant denominations, the Armenian community, the Jewish community, and the Catholic Church.

Literally no religious community has expressed agreement with the proposed changes. Statements of protest were submitted by a number of Protestant denominations including the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance, by the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria, as well as by civil rights NGOs.

The new legislation insists that Bulgarian citizens should be able to carry out liturgical activity only if they have completed their theological education in Bulgaria or if their foreign diploma is recognized by governmental competent institutions and upon certification by a local denomination that is recognized and registered with the government.

The new legislation requires membership of three hundred people in order for a religious group to obtain the status of judicial entity. It also forbids carrying out religious practices in buildings that are not intended for religious activities.

According one of the draft laws, the right to open religious schools and train denominational ministers would be given only to the Eastern Orthodox and Muslim faiths. All other religious groups, discriminated due to a low number of self-identified followers according to a 2011 national census, will not be allowed to open their own institutions for clergy training. Issuing academic certificates to theology students will be prohibited for all smaller denominations.

Both draft laws install heavy restrictions for foreigners to perform religious duties in the country. The only way a foreigner (a missionary, a preacher, a teacher, an evangelist, etc.) could conduct a worship service or preach a sermon would be if he is doing it jointly with a Bulgarian ordained minister.

The only way donations will be allowed from outside of Bulgaria is if they meet two requirements: the purpose of the funding can only be towards building construction or towards social aid; the donation itself will need a preliminary permission issued by the state Committee of Religious Affairs. In other words, no foreign sponsorship will be allowed for operation of Christian-run medical centers, for educational activity, for publishing literature, for cultural events, for small businesses, for volunteer initiatives, etc. In addition, absolutely no

competencies have been ascribed to the Religious Affairs Committee to decide which donations can be allowed into the country.

By intending to control donations, to interfere with theological education and to install state regulations on issues of clergy responsibilities, the Bulgarian state is wrongly assuming power into the internal life of religious communities. Almost every single article in the newly proposed bills erroneously and unfairly claims political authority over religious life.

After the bill drafts were voted in at first reading in Parliament, there is a period for possible objections and discussions before drafting the final law. It ends on November 16, 2018.

Dissatisfied with these developments, Protestant communities in Bulgaria are now considering various actions. On top of an urgent call to prayer against the new state policy of interference into church affairs, the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance also insisted on being invited into the committee discussing the amended articles on the law. We have also demanded a special meeting with the country's Prime Minister Mr. Boyko Borisov in order to express our explicit refusal to agree with such an intervention of the government into religious affairs. Various NGOs are also considering joining efforts and possibly even taking legal actions, led by the unanimous opinion that the new law is discriminatory, anti-constitutional and unjust.

Dear Thomas Bucher,
Dear respected members of the board of EEA,

We would like to kindly ask you to:

1. Pray for the situation in Bulgaria.
2. Alarm EEA members about the situation in Bulgaria.
3. Contact European institutions, Members of European Parliament, and international human and religious rights organizations, asking them on the behalf of the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance to take legal actions against this restrictive legislation in Bulgaria.
4. Write letters to the Bulgarian government.
5. Thank you very much for your prayers and support!

Sincerely,



Pastor Rumon Bordjiev
President, Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance