

BULGARIA: Christians continue protests

By Ken Camp

Baptist Standard (27.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Q1wtZ0> – For the third consecutive Sunday, Bulgarian Christians gathered in their nation's capital to pray and protest proposed restrictions on religious freedom.

Christians representing varied traditions assembled in Tzar Osvobedital Square in Sofia on Nov. 25 to register concern about potential changes in Bulgaria's Religious Denominations Act that would significantly restrict the rights of minority religions.

"This was a national protest, so people from Sofia, Plovdiv, Pazardjik, Varna, Burgas, Lom and other cities traveled to the capital to raise prayers and voices against the intentions of the Bulgarian politicians," Teodor Oprenov, pastor of Evangelical Baptist Church in Sofia and leader in the Baptist Union of Bulgaria, wrote in a Nov. 25 email.

Carrying signs and Bulgarian flags, the Christians called for members of the Bulgarian Parliament to "abolish" the amendments they had approved on first reading in early October. Oprenov characterized the earlier legislation as a "major drift from the freedom of religion and faith principles in the Constitution of Bulgaria and European laws."

As originally presented, the amendments would grant Eastern Orthodox and Muslim believers the exclusive right to train clergy and operate religious schools; restrict religious activity only to designated buildings; give legal religious status only to groups with more than 300 adherents; place limitations on preaching and teaching; restrict missionary activity; and limit foreign donations to religious groups.

The Nov. 16 deadline for receiving public comment on the amendments passed with the nation's parliament taking no immediate action.

In the days immediately preceding the deadline, a working group of politicians and representatives of major religious bodies met to discuss the legislation, and those meetings reportedly produced "some softening" on certain provisions, Oprenov said.

However, many Christians—particularly those representing groups other than the historically dominant Orthodox Church—remained concerned about the legislation.

Earlier this month, 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Secretary Anthony Peck sent a letter to Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov asking the proposed legislation be withdrawn.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 violate the United Nations Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as similar European Conventions.

Kishan Manocha, senior adviser on freedom of religion or belief at the OSCE, replied in a Nov. 14 email, saying her organization's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights "submitted a letter to the Bulgarian authorities signaling its readiness to prepare a legal opinion on said draft law."

About 2,000 Christians rallied in Sofia outside the Bulgarian Parliament and marched peacefully to the National Palace of Culture on Nov. 11, and smaller groups gathered to pray and protest around the country. In spite of inclement weather, about 1,000 people participated in a second public demonstration Nov. 18, Oprenov reported in a Nov. 20 email.

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