

BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE *Your network to the world!*[®]

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November 8, 2018

The Honorable Boyko Borissov
Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria
1, Dondukov Blvd.
1594 Sofia
Bulgaria

Dear Prime Minister Borissov,

The Baptist World Alliance is a network of 239 member bodies in 125 countries and territories representing 165,000 churches and 47 million individuals. The European Baptist Federation is part of the Baptist World Alliance and brings together 61 member bodies throughout Europe and the Middle East. We are both grateful for an ongoing partnership with the Baptist Union of Bulgaria.

We have heard from key Bulgarian leaders across your country as well as in Europe regarding their concern related to the intended amendments of the Law on Religious Communities. 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. Our concern is not only for Baptist Christians alone but for all other religious groups and faith channels affected by these actions by the government.

As representatives of these Baptist church groups around the world, We write to urge repeal of the “joint law” policies implementing restriction of the right to **open spiritual schools** and **train denominational ministers**.

We believe the result of this joint law is that a number of religious communities would be **discriminated against due to a low number of self-identified followers** counted in the 2011 national Bulgarian census. We also believe that this joint law runs counter to a growing body of evidence demonstrating that full religious freedom correlates to strengthened democracies, greater peace and a more robust economy as is also clear from the most recent history of Bulgaria.

Some of the joint law amendments introduce **prohibition of preaching or distributing ideas** that might cause Bulgarians to oppose one another. While we do agree with the necessity to install certain limitations on one’s religious speech in reference the “offense principle”, we hold that the freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are basic human rights.

The proposed legislation includes restrictions over **missionary and spiritual activity of foreign citizens** unless accompanied by Bulgarian clergy and approved by the Directorate of Religious Denominations. The changes

require **membership of at least 300 believers** in order for a religious group to be recognized judicially; and forbids **carrying out worship services outside of designated premises**.

In today's globalized context of free movement of goods, service, people and capital, it is surprising to hear of intended state restraints over **international donations for religious purposes** requiring preliminary approval by the Directorate of Religious Denominations. No forms of benefaction, alms, sponsorship and donation should be a matter of governmental control. Even more, financial support should even be granted the right of anonymity.

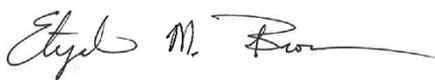
These efforts to interfere with theological education, restrict missionary and worship activity, and control international donations in fact wrongly extends government power into the internal life of Bulgarian religious communities.

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. I ask that this "joint law" be withdrawn prior to the second reading.

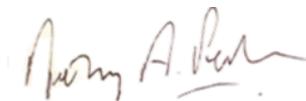
On behalf of Baptists from 125 countries and territories, and in direct partnership with our Baptist brothers and sisters in Bulgaria, please know of our sincerest prayers for you and your country. We pray your deliberations will lead to justice and fairness for all religions. We pray that the guarantee of religious freedom in your constitution will be strengthened because of your actions. We pray for the ongoing well-being of your country.

If the Baptist World Alliance and the European Baptist Federation can be of assistance or engage in further dialogue with you, we stand ready and available.

Sincerely,



Rev. Elijah M. Brown, PhD
General Secretary
Baptist World Alliance



Rev. Anthony Peck
General Secretary
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