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### **Attempts to halt construction of house of worship exposed as illegal in Bulgaria**

JW Official Website (27.12.2010) / HRWF (28.12.2012) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - For nine years Jehovah's Witnesses in Varna have been struggling to build a house of worship, known as a Kingdom Hall. After the construction project had been stopped by order of the Mayor of Varna, Mr. Kiril Yordanov, for more than three and a half years, the Varna Administrative Court ruled on December 7, 2010, that the refusal by the Mayor to allow Jehovah's Witnesses to continue the construction was illegal as it violated Bulgarian legislation. This favorable decision is a step forward in overcoming the obstacles to the building of a Kingdom Hall for the more than 400 Jehovah's Witnesses and supporters in Varna.

According to local attorney Mr. Atanas Krusteff, this decision by the court in Varna will serve as a deterrent to similar discrimination in the future and will help to promote religious tolerance in Bulgaria. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

Worldwide, there are more than 18 million of Jehovah's Witnesses and associates who meet together for worship. Throughout Europe, some 2 million Jehovah's Witnesses have established the legal right to carry on their religious activities. In Bulgaria, the nearly 4,000 Witnesses and supporters live according to Christian standards and contribute to the well-being of the communities in which they live.

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### **Interference of the state in the internal affairs of the Muslim community**

***Written question by MEPs Metin Kazak, Carl Haglund and Sophie in't Veld***

***Subject: Freedom of religion and freedom from state interference with religious  
autonomy***

Question nr 4794/2010

EP (30.06.2010) - HRWF (22.09.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - A judicial decision handed down by the Supreme Court of Cassation of Bulgaria in May 2010 provoked a wave of protests within Bulgaria's Muslim community; protests took place in other Member States as well. The Court reinstated Nedim Gendzhev as Chief Mufti of Bulgaria, even though he has been repeatedly and widely rejected by the majority of Bulgaria's Muslims. This is not the first time he has taken advantage of the clear inadequacies of the Bulgarian Law on Confessions of Faith. At the beginning of June, more than 1000 imams from all over the country stood up to demonstrate in Sofia, making the following declaration to the Bulgarian authorities and the EU institutions: 'We see this court decision as direct state interference in the affairs of the Muslim religion. It brings us back to the era of

communism, when Nedim Gendzhev was appointed to this post by Todor Jivkov.' The day after the declaration was made, more than 200 people demonstrated in Malmö, Sweden, against state interference with Muslims' autonomy. The declaration also argues for freedom from state interference in the internal organisation of religious groups, referring to Articles 9 and 11 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and Decision No 30985/96 of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Hasan and Chaush v Bulgaria.

The inequality in the state's attitude towards religions is predetermined by the 2002 Law on Confessions of Faith, which recognises only the Orthodox Church as a legal entity, but obliges other religions to acquire the status of a legal entity by means of a court decision, thereby creating objective conditions of discrimination.

1. Does the Commission endorse religious communities' right to self-governance and religious autonomy?
2. Does it consider it acceptable for the state to interfere in the extremely sensitive field of religious autonomy and the right to self-governance?

**Answer given by Mrs Reding on behalf of the Commission**

The Commission is fully attached to the respect for freedom of religion and the prohibition of discrimination based on a person's religion or belief, as provided in Articles 10 and 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

The legal status of religious communities and the appointment of leaders of such communities are issues which fall in the exclusive competence of EU Member States, as clearly stated in Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

In such cases, it is up to the Member States to ensure that fundamental rights are respected and effectively protected, in accordance with their national laws and international obligations.

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