

## Hungary's "discriminatory" new religion law criticised by Euro body

Country/Region: Hungary, Europe

Legislative reforms in Hungary that restrict religious freedom have been deemed "excessive" and "discriminatory" by the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional affairs.

Following widespread opposition to the country's new constitution and associated laws, the Venice Commission was asked to examine the code, which came into effect on 1 January, to assess whether it complied with Hungary's obligations under international human rights law.



The Palace of Europe in Strasbourg is the seat of the Council of Europe  
[CC BY 3.0 / Council of Europe](#)

Barnabas Fund was among those to raise concerns about restrictions to certain rights and freedoms, particularly for religious groups. A new law on religion granted state recognition to 14 religious groups and decertified the rest, meaning that over 300, including a number of major Protestant denominations and many small Catholic orders, lost their official status.

In its assessment published on 19 March, the Venice Commission confirmed our fears, identifying a number of sections of the act that fail to comply with internationally-recognised minimum standards, including aspects of religious freedom, freedom of association, access to effective remedies, and non-discrimination amongst religious beliefs and denominations.

It said that while the act as a whole constitutes a liberal and generous framework for the freedom of religion, some important issues "remain problematic and fall short of international standards":

*The Act sets a range of requirements that are excessive and based on arbitrary criteria with regard to the recognition of a church.*

*The Act has led to a deregistration process of hundreds of previously lawfully recognised churches that can hardly be considered in line with international standards ... The act induces, to some extent, an unequal and even discriminatory treatment of religious beliefs and communities, depending on whether they are recognised or not.*

The Hungarian government has argued that one of the main justifications for the law is to prevent certain organisations that are masquerading as bone fide religious groups, while operating for illicit and harmful purposes or personal gain, from receiving public funding. The Venice Commission accepted that this was a "legitimate concern".

In response to the Commission's report, the Hungarian government has said that it intends to introduce amendments, but the details of these have not yet been made public.

Other concerns about the constitution, chiefly restrictions on media freedom and the independence of the judiciary and central bank, have also been criticised by the EU and Council of Europe. The European Commission started legal action, known as "infringement proceedings", against Hungary on 17 January. It is now considering the country's response.