

# CROATIA

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government demonstrated a trend toward improvement in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government to promote human rights and to support the integration of the country into Euro-Atlantic institutions. U.S. government actions involved regular diplomatic engagement as well as public programs to promote religious tolerance. The U.S. government encouraged the government to adopt non-discriminatory measures to restitute property seized during and after World War II.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

Approximately 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, and 6 percent is Serbian Orthodox Christian (SPC). Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Muslims, Jews, and followers of other religions. Religious affiliation correlates closely with the country's ethnic makeup. SPC followers, predominantly ethnic Serbs, live primarily in cities and areas bordering Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, and Montenegro. Most members of other minority religious groups reside in urban areas. Most immigrants are Roman Catholic ethnic Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

There is no official state religion; however, the Roman Catholic Church receives state financial support and other benefits established in concordats between the government and the Vatican. The government has additional agreements with the following 15 religious communities: the SPC, Islamic Community of Croatia, Evangelical Church, Reformed Christian Church, Pentecostal Church, Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, Christian Adventist Church, Union of Baptist Churches, Church of God, Church of Christ, Seventh-day Adventist Reform

Movement, Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Macedonian Orthodox Church, Croatian Old Catholic Church, and Bet Israel Jewish Community. During the year, the government completed administrative procedures for implementing the agreement it signed in 2010 with the Coordination Committee of Jewish Communities.

The concordats and other government agreements with non-Roman Catholic religious communities allow state financing for some religious officials' salaries and pensions through government-managed pension and health funds. Marriages conducted by the religious communities having agreements with the state are officially recognized, eliminating the need to register the marriages in the civil registry office. The concordats and agreements also regulate public school religious instruction and military chaplains.

The law requires that a group have at least 500 members and be registered as an association for at least five years before being registered as a religious community. Registered communities have legal status and enjoy tax and other benefits. Religious communities existing in the country prior to the law's passage in 2003 do not have to meet these criteria.

The law broadly defines religious communities' legal positions and covers such matters as government funding, tax benefits, and religious education in schools. Matters such as pensions for clergy; religious service in the military, penitentiaries, and police; and recognition of religious marriages are left to each religious community to negotiate separately with the government.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Easter Monday, Corpus Christi Day, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, Christmas, and Saint Stephen's Day (Boxing Day).

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

At the end of the year, there were 44 registered religious communities; two registration requests were pending and a dozen were rejected because the authorities alleged that they did not meet the legal criteria. Three small Christian groups that were registered but unable to sign agreements with the state criticized the criteria for such agreements and claimed that authorities applied them inconsistently. In 2010 the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that Croatia discriminated against the three Christian communities. In May the government paid to the three communities a 9,000 euro (\$12,000) fine in line with the ECHR ruling. The government did not, however, implement legal or

regulatory changes to prevent similar violations in the future, but formed a working group to identify and recommend changes.

Restitution of property nationalized or confiscated during World War II by the Ustashe (the Nazi-controlled regime that ruled Croatia during World War II) and the post-war Yugoslav communist regime remained a problem. The SPC and Jewish religious communities identified property return as their top priority and complained of the lack of progress.

The SPC noted that there has been minimal progress in property restitution over the past decade. While no progress was made in Zagreb, the Orthodox Church in the Dalmatia eparchy reported progress on its main claim, the return of a building adjacent to their seat in Sibenik. A Zagreb Administrative Court decision returned the building in April. The Dalmatia eparchy also sought permission to complete a church in the center of Split begun before World War II. In 2010 Orthodox Church authorities submitted geodetic measurements to the Regional Institute for Protection of Monuments for a permit to continue work on the church but have not received a response. Elsewhere, government-funded reconstruction of a number of Serbian Orthodox churches continued, but progress was slow. SPC officials considered the pace satisfactory given the economic recession in the country. The SPC continued to press for changes to a 1996 law, which they alleged opened the possibility for the government to resell previously nationalized property to new private owners, making restitution more difficult.

Catholic Church officials stated that there was no progress on restitution during the year, but the restitution process overall was satisfactory and proceeding within the government's capabilities.

Several Jewish communal property claims, including the former Chevra Kadisha charity at Amruseva 8 in Zagreb, remained pending; the Jewish community complained that restitution had been at a standstill for years. The Jewish community gained the title to its community summer camp property at Pirovac in September.

Muslim community representatives reported that progress had been made during the year in the allocation of space at city cemeteries in Rijeka and the wider area of Istria for Muslim graves. In the city of Umag, local authorities issued a location permit (a type of building permit) pending since 2005 when the government sold the Muslim community the land to construct a community center. A neighboring private company challenged the permit through a complaint to the Ministry of Environment Protection, Zoning and Construction, claiming that the community center's variances posed a harmful effect.

In issues other than property concerns, SPC officials reported that they had access to hospitals and prisons to provide pastoral care; in an improvement over past practice, they were able to assess the need for religious care in military and police structures.

The Muslim community reported some women continued to face obstacles when attempting to obtain identity cards with photographs in which they were wearing a headscarf. There were four such cases in Primorsko Goranska and Karlovacka County during the year. The law allows local police to determine their own policies on details related to identity card issuance.

The government requires that religious training be provided in public schools, although attendance is optional. The Roman Catholic catechism is the predominant religious teaching offered in public schools. In May the Government Commission for Relations with Religious Communities asked non-Catholic communities to accept an amendment of their agreements that would remove their rights to provide public school religious instruction. The commission backed down when some communities challenged the amendment. As a result, the communities continued to provide public school religious instruction.

SPC officials in Zagreb commended city authorities for a substantial donation that completed their new high school building, finished at the end of July and hosting 87 students, who are mostly from outside of the city and provided with stipends by the SPC. The school is open for students of different ethnicities and religious affiliations and is developing an ecumenical cultural center.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because religion and ethnicity are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. Nongovernmental human rights organizations and most religious leaders noted that, overall, ethnic and religious relations remained stable.

SPC officials from Zagreb reported that the overall trend on societal respect showed some improvement. Nevertheless, they reported that many schoolchildren and their parents, particularly in cities where Serbian Orthodox believers do not live in compact communities, remained reluctant to identify themselves as Serbian Orthodox due to concern for societal discrimination.

There were a number of incidents of vandalism directed against various religious communities. In one example, anti-Semitic graffiti that included Nazi swastikas and “U” signs representing the Ustashe regime appeared on the wall by the entrance to the Jewish community premises in Split between May 29 and 30. The graffiti were marked to suggest that fans of the local soccer club “Torcida” and members of the ultra right-wing Croatian Pure Party of Rights were responsible. Police investigated but found no perpetrators. The Jewish community of Split issued a statement condemning the incident. Both the current and a former president also condemned the graffiti.

SPC officials from the Dalmatian eparchy reported vandalism against church property. SPC officials criticized the police for inefficiency, as their investigations were rarely successful and culprits were seldom brought to justice. For example, “U” signs were sprayed on the wall by the entrance to Saint Ilija church in the coastal city of Zadar on February 18 and again on August 4. In both cases police investigated but did not identify perpetrators. On October 28, unknown persons broke into and damaged an icon at the Holy Mother's Shroud Church in Knin.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and the rule of law. Engagement on religious freedom at all levels of government also supported the goals of advancing the country’s integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and strengthening the stability and prosperity of the region. In 2011 the embassy engaged on issues of religious freedom primarily through dialogue with the government, civil society, religious communities, and the public. The ambassador urged the government to adopt non-discriminatory measures for restitution of property seized during and after World War II. The embassy’s public affairs section organized a number of events focused on freedom of and respect for religion.