

# CZECH REPUBLIC

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right of religious freedom. The government continued to provide tax benefits and financial support to registered religious organizations. Members of both registered and nonregistered religious groups were free to worship without government interference. The government took legislative steps to resolve long-standing religious communal property restitution claims.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were reports of occasional acts and expressions of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. Such incidents included vandalism of Jewish monuments and cemeteries, and opposition throughout the country to the construction or opening of new mosques.

During the year, the embassy engaged with the government on issues related to religious freedom. The U.S. government closely followed the efforts of the government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. Embassy officials conducted outreach to religious organizations, including Roman Catholic and Protestant groups, the Jewish and Muslim communities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

## Section I. Religious Demography

The population of 10.6 million is largely homogeneous with a dominant Christian tradition. In a 2011 opinion poll, 32 percent of respondents claimed to believe in God, while 42 percent stated they did not personally believe in God.

According to the 2011 census, there are 2.2 million religious believers in the country. Eleven percent of the population is Roman Catholic; 1.5 percent belongs to Protestant churches; 1.3 percent professes adherence to other religious faiths, including Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism; and 6.7 percent lists no specific religion. Eight percent of the population attends religious services regularly. Leaders of the local Muslim community estimate there are 15,000 Muslims in the country. There

are approximately 3,100 persons officially registered as members of the Jewish community, although the overall Jewish population may be larger.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

Religious affairs are the responsibility of the Department of Churches in the Ministry of Culture. All religious groups registered with the Ministry of Culture are eligible to receive tax benefits and government subsidies, although some decline to receive state financial support as a matter of principle and an expression of independence.

The Law on Religious Freedom and the Position of Churches and Religious Associations created a two-tiered system of registration for religious organizations. To register at the first (lower) tier, a religious group must have at least 300 adult members permanently residing in the country. First-tier registration confers limited tax benefits; in addition, it imposes annual reporting requirements, as well as a 10-year waiting period before an organization may apply for full second-tier registration. To register at the second tier, which entitles an organization to a share of state funding, a religious group must have membership equal to at least 0.1 percent of the country's population, or approximately 10,000 members, and provide that number of signatures as proof.

There are 32 state-recognized religious organizations. Only clergy of registered second-tier organizations may perform officially recognized marriage ceremonies and serve as chaplains in the military and prisons, although prisoners of other religious groups may receive visits from their respective clergy. Religious groups registered prior to 2002, such as the small Jewish community, have been granted a special dispensation and are not required to meet the conditions for second-tier registration, such as minimum membership requirements. Unregistered religious groups may not legally own community property, but they often form civic-interest associations to manage their property until they are able to meet the qualifications for registration. The government does not interfere with or prevent this type of interim solution. Unregistered religious groups otherwise are free to assemble and worship in the manner of their choice.

The penal code contains provisions regarding hate crime. It outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of six months to three years for public denial, questioning, approval of, or attempts to justify the Nazi genocide. The law also outlaws the incitement of hatred based on religion and provides for prison sentences of up to three years. January 27 is designated as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter Monday, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government continued to provide financial support to religious organizations with second-tier registration and to sponsor religiously oriented cultural activities. The government continued efforts to resolve religious communal property restitution problems.

Religious organizations received approximately 1.4 billion Czech crowns (\$70 million) from the government. Funds were divided proportionally among the 17 religious organizations that have second-tier registration and have elected to receive state assistance based on the number of clergy in each. Of this sum, approximately 1.3 billion Czech crowns (\$65 million) went to pay the salaries of clergy. The rest went to church administration and maintenance of church property.

The application for first-tier registration of the Hussite Church, originally filed in July 2010, was rejected in October. The decision was based on the administrative requirement that all applications include signatures from 300 members of the religious organization. After repeated requests, the Hussite Church did not provide this information. A new application filed by the Hussite Church in November was under consideration at year's end. The Ministry of Culture also was considering applications from the Beer Church, Church of Faith, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church.

Missionaries must obtain a long-term residence and work permit if they intend to remain longer than 90 days. There is no special visa category for religious workers; foreign missionaries and clergy are required to meet the conditions for a standard work permit. Missionaries from EU member states are not required to have permits.

Of the 32 registered religious organizations, nine have permission from the Ministry of Culture to teach religion in state schools. According to the ministry, although religious instruction is optional in public schools, school directors must introduce religious education choices if there are at least seven students in one class of the same religious group who request such instruction.

The government continued its effort to resolve religious communal property restitution problems. Jewish claims dated to the period of the Nazi occupation during World War II, while Roman Catholic authorities pressed claims for properties that were seized under the former Communist regime. Although most Roman Catholic churches, parishes, and monasteries were returned in the 1990s, land and forests remained in state possession.

During the year, the cabinet approved a bill regarding religious properties still in state hands. Under the agreement, the government is to return lands worth 75 billion Czech crowns (\$4.5 billion) and pay 59 billion Czech crowns (\$3.5 billion) in financial restitution for lands that cannot be returned. The government is to pay out the financial portion of the restitution over 17 years, during which it is to gradually phase out direct state support to religious organizations. The bill must still be approved by parliament and signed by the president.

The government has returned nearly all of the state-owned properties claimed by the Federation of Jewish Communities. Two lawsuits in Brno concerning properties in the possession of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs were pending at year's end. The law of 2000 also enables the government to return artworks to the Jewish community, as well as to individual Jewish claimants.

The Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, which received 300 million Czech crowns (\$15 million) from the state in 2001, continued to assist in the preservation of communal property, educational programs, and community welfare. From these assets, the fund supported numerous social welfare projects. For example, the fund contributed five million Czech crowns (\$250,000) to 17 institutions providing health care for approximately 600 Holocaust survivors.

The Ministry of Interior continued to counter right-wing groups espousing anti-Semitic views by monitoring their activities, increasing cooperation with police from neighboring countries, and shutting down unauthorized rallies. In general, public expressions of anti-Semitism were rare, and authorities vigorously pursued Holocaust-denial investigations and prosecutions.

Throughout the summer and fall, leading government officials, local NGOs, and Jewish groups called for the resignation of Ladislav Batora, head of the Ministry of Education's personnel department. Batora had links to anti-Semitic, anti-Roma, racist, and far-right organizations.

The Ministry of Culture sponsored religiously oriented cultural activities through a grant program. The ministry provided 3.2 million Czech crowns (\$160,000).

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

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice reflecting anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiments. However, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

There was a small, but persistent and fairly well-organized, extreme right movement with anti-Semitic views. Anti-Semitism also persisted among other elements of the population, including neo-Nazi groups and certain Islamic groups. In general, however, public expressions of anti-Semitism were rare.

During the year, there was continued opposition throughout the country to the construction or opening of new mosques or Islamic centers. Opponents organized petitions and launched social media pages and Web sites, which often included xenophobic and racist statements.

In December the chairman of the Young Christian Democrats of Brno filed an appeal with the Ministry of Culture to cancel the registration of the Center of Muslim Communities after the release of a video showing a member of the Muslim community citing the Qur'an and calling for violence against Jews. Police were investigating the incident at year's end.

The Anti-Mesita (Anti-Mosque) group, which was the driving force behind the anti-mosque petitions in Hradec Kralove and Brno, received a grant of 15,000 Czech crowns (\$750) from the Hradec Kralove regional council in July.

In July during a media interview, former prime minister Milos Zeman expressed anti-Muslim views, stating, "a 'moderate Muslim' is a contradiction in terms, much the same as a 'moderate Nazi.'"

There were no reported violent anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim incidents involving individuals; however, the Federation of Jewish Communities reported five anti-Semitic attacks on property and one on a person. The federation's report also listed four cases of "threatening" and seven incidents of harassment. For example, vandals spray-painted an anti-Semitic symbol on a memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. According to ministry of interior figures, there were 18 criminal offenses with an anti-Semitic motive.

The activities of groups such as National Resistance (Narodni odpor) and Autonomous Nationalists (Autonomni nacionaliste) were characterized by racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim attitudes, as well as Holocaust denial and the dissemination of Nazi propaganda.

In May the government approved the 2011 Strategy to Fight Extremism, which stressed the importance of preventive measures, especially education. The police were trained to deal with various forms of extremism. Teachers participated in specialized seminars focused on teaching tolerance and respect for human rights and freedoms to elementary and high school students. The Ministry of Interior and other government agencies actively implemented the strategy during the year.

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

The U.S. government continued to engage the government on religious freedom issues. U.S. government officials also conducted outreach to religious leaders within the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

U.S. government officials continued to encourage the government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. Officials worked to emphasize the importance of restitution (or fair and adequate compensation when return was no longer possible) in pending cases regarding property wrongfully taken from Holocaust victims, the Jewish community, and churches. Embassy representatives participated in meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the Federation of Jewish Communities on restitution matters. Embassy officials responded to individual requests for assistance from Czech-American Holocaust victims seeking compensation.

Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues Douglas Davidson and embassy officials met with officials of the Prague-based European Shoah Legacy Institute and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to monitor progress in fields

specified in the Terezin Declaration, which appealed for governments to address issues relating to the welfare of Holocaust survivors, confiscated real estate, looted art, Judaica, and Holocaust education and remembrance.

The embassy's public affairs section sponsored two interfaith dialogues and provided a small grant to an art exhibition on the Arab Spring, which was aimed at fostering positive images of Islam. The embassy also hosted an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) for Muslims from the local and diplomatic communities, as well as a Passover seder dinner that brought together individuals from across Czech culture.