

CROATIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Three religious groups did not accept the government's offer to conclude agreements supplemental to registration, stating the interim nature and the terms of the agreements were discriminatory. There was no progress on restitution of Jewish and Serbian Orthodox religious properties. The president and prime minister for the first time attended religious services to mark Orthodox Christmas. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. A number incidents involved vandalism of Serbian Orthodox sites.

The U.S. embassy encouraged the government to adopt nondiscriminatory measures to retribute property seized during and after World War II, with a focus on restitution of Jewish properties. The embassy also sponsored and participated in public programs to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is approximately 4.3 million, according to the 2011 census. Approximately 86 percent is Roman Catholic, 4 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 1.5 percent Muslim. Other groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jews, Protestants, and members of other Christian groups. Nearly 4 percent self-identifies as nonreligious or atheist. Religious affiliation correlates closely with ethnicity. Members of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), predominantly ethnic Serbs, live primarily in cities and areas bordering Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. 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.

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There is no official state religion; however, the Catholic Church receives significant state financial support and other benefits established in four concordats between the government and the Vatican. According to the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the concordats grant the Catholic Church more than \$43 million dollars in annual government funding for religious education and other operational costs.

The government also has agreements with Bet Israel (a Jewish group), the SPC, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Christian Adventist Church, the Church of Christ, the Church of God, the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia, the Croatian Old Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church, the Islamic Community of Croatia, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Union of Baptist Churches, the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement, and the Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ. According to the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the government provided 20 million kuna (\$3,440,000) during the year to these groups in amounts proportional to their size. A registered religious community may enter into agreements with the government if it was historically present in Croatia in 1941, or if it has at least 6,000 members.

The concordats and other agreements allow state financing for salaries and pensions of some religious officials through government-managed pension and health funds. Marriages conducted by religious communities having agreements with the state are officially recognized, eliminating the need for civil registration. The concordats and agreements also regulate public school religious instruction and military chaplains. The law requires a religious group to have at least 500 members and be registered as an association for at least five years before being registered as a religious community. Registered religious communities have legal status and receive tax and other benefits. Religious communities in the country prior to the law's 2003 passage do not have to meet these criteria. There are currently 44 registered religious communities.

The law broadly defines the legal position of religious communities and covers such matters as government funding, tax benefits, and religious education in schools. The government requires religious education in public schools, although attendance is optional. The Roman Catholic catechism is the predominant religious text used. The other 16 religious groups having agreements with the state may offer religious education in schools in which there are seven or more students

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of a given faith. Students may opt out of religious education, although some groups reported there was potentially a stigma associated with doing so.

Matters such as pensions for clergy, religious services in the military, police force, or penitentiaries, 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.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government took no action on registration requests from the Church of St. John and Paul in Varazdin and the Church of St. John and Paul in Zlatar Bistrica, which have been pending for several years, as the groups did not meet the minimum number of 500 members to be registered.

In October the government offered to conclude agreements covering recognition of religious marriage and provision of religious education in public schools with the previously-registered Church of Full Gospel, Protestant Reformed Church, and Word of Life Church. The government's offer was an effort to comply with a 2010 European Court for Human Rights finding of discrimination. However, the three groups rejected the offer because it did not include the right to give state-recognized grades to students who attended classes on their religious premises, nor did it include funding equivalent to that provided other groups with such agreements. In addition, the agreements offered would have been valid only until the adoption of a new law on religious communities.

The government took no action on restitution of property nationalized or confiscated by the fascist regime during World War II, and by the post-war Yugoslav communist regime. The SPC and Jewish communities identified property return as their top priority.

The SPC reported no progress in property restitution despite ongoing negotiations with the government over buildings in Zagreb, Vukovar, and Vinkovci, the Holy Trinity chapel in Osijek, several forests and agricultural plots near monasteries in the towns of Gomirje, Lepavina, and Pakra, as well as agricultural land in Dalj.

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SPC officials reported they received no response to letters sent to government officials in February and June, following up on a 2010 request for a permit to continue work begun before World War II on a church in the center of Split. Slow progress continued on government-funded reconstruction of a number of Serbian Orthodox churches.

Several Jewish communal property claims, including the former headquarters of the Chevra Kadisha charity in Zagreb and vacation resorts in Crikvenica and in Ravna Gora, remained unresolved. The Jewish community stated that no progress was made on restitution of these properties despite repeated government pledges to return them since 2004.

Muslim community representatives reported that problems with space allocation for Muslim graves at city cemeteries in Rijeka and in the region of Istria were moving toward resolution. In October Umag municipal authorities issued a building permit pending since 2005, when the government sold the Muslim community land for a community center.

In January the president and the prime minister became the first Croatian heads of state and government to attend an Orthodox Christmas mass.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

SPC officials from Zagreb reported persistent discrimination toward members of the Serbian Orthodox communities in Dalmatia and Upper Karlovac. SPC officials in Dalmatia characterized police response to vandalism of churches and religious property as inadequate, noting that perpetrators were rarely apprehended.

On January 6, Orthodox Christmas Eve, unknown persons attempted to set fire to the entrance of the St. Cyril and Methodius Church in Kistanje. Police investigated but identified no culprits. In October vandals overturned tombstones at an Orthodox cemetery in Secerana, but police made no arrests. SPC officials reported a number of church bell robberies in the Karlovac area. Police charged suspects in a November 9 robbery at the St. Nicholas church in Kosinj. Many Serbian

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Orthodox schoolchildren and their parents, particularly in cities where they were a small minority, were reportedly reluctant to identify themselves religiously for fear of discrimination.

In January at the Catholic Cathedral in Dubrovnik, SPC Bishop Grigorije of Zahumlje-Herzegovina offered regrets for the shelling of Dubrovnik by ethnic Serb forces during the wars of the 1990s. In his first visit since independence, SPC Patriarch Irinej Gavrilovic in June officially opened a new SPC high school in Zagreb in a city-donated building. The SPC provided stipends to the school's 86 ethnically and religiously diverse students.

In August the Jasenovac Memorial Museum Council called on the Catholic Church and the government to sanction Catholic priest Stjepan Razum, head of the Archdiocesan Archives, for stating in an August 9 interview that "Jasenovac was not a place of systematic mass executions, but a temporary work camp." Razum called mass executions "a myth which is a result of decades of political propaganda." According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Nazi-allied Ustashe regime murdered up to 99,000 civilians at Jasenovac during World War II. On August 28, President Josipovic condemned Razum's statements and asserted, "Jasenovac is a symbol of evil that no one in the civilized world should ignore or negate." In September the Zagreb Archdiocese spokesperson stated that Razum did not give the interview in his official capacity as head of the Archdiocesan Archives.

In October the University of Zagreb inaugurated a Judaic studies program.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy staff discussed religious freedom with the government, civil society, religious communities, and the public. The embassy and visiting officials from the U.S. Department of State urged the government to adopt nondiscriminatory measures for restitution of property seized during and after World War II, focusing on the restitution of Jewish properties such as cultural centers, synagogues, cemeteries, and private property.

Embassy staff participated in a seminar on Holocaust education in Cakovec where the embassy screened the film "Lea and Darija" to 530 students. The film tells the story of Croatia's "Anne Frank," Lea Deutsch, a young Jewish girl who perished in transit to Auschwitz following deportation by the Ustashe. The embassy

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sponsored discussions of the film and the Holocaust with schoolchildren in five cities. The film was financed in part by an embassy grant.

The embassy provided two fellowships for high school teachers to study the Holocaust through a training program at the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous summer institute for teachers at Columbia University. In January embassy officials attended the opening and several lectures at the Shoah Academy, designed to improve understanding of the Holocaust and promote human rights. In June embassy representatives attended the opening of the Serbian Orthodox high school in Zagreb and discussed religious freedom with Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Irinej and Croatian leaders. In September embassy staff attended the inauguration of the Muslim community's new grand mufti.