

# **CROATIA 2013 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 Protestant religious communities 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.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief or practice, including one of a personal physical attack. A number of incidents involved vandalism of Serbian Orthodox sites. Serbian Orthodox Church representatives in the Dalmatia region expressed concern over an increase in societal intolerance that they attributed to the protests around the placement of dual Latin and Cyrillic script signs in Vukovar. Serbian Orthodox Church representatives, however, voiced their support for the government's protection of minority rights.

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

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.5 million (July 2013 estimate). Approximately 86 percent is Roman Catholic, 4 percent is Serbian Orthodox, and 1.5 percent is Muslim. Other groups in total constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jews, Protestants, and members of other Christian groups. Nearly 4 percent self-identify 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 generally protect religious freedom.

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 288.9 million kuna (HRK) (\$52.9 million) 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 approximately HRK 17 million (\$3.1 million) during the year to these groups in amounts proportional to their size, approximately \$500,000 less than in 2012.

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. 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. Religious communities in the country prior to the law's 2003 passage do not have to meet these criteria. Registered religious communities have legal status and receive tax and other benefits. 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 of a given faith. Students may opt out of religious education, although the Orthodox community reports there is potentially a stigma associated with doing so.

Pensions for clergy, religious services in the military, police force, and penitentiaries, and recognition of religious marriages are left to each religious community to negotiate separately with the government.

The country is an active member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

### **Government Practices**

On July 10, the government offered a new draft agreement covering recognition of religious marriage and provision of religious education in public schools with the previously-registered Church of the Full Gospel, Protestant Reformed Church, and Word of Life Church, following a similar attempt in October 2012. The government's offer was an effort to comply with a 2010 European Court of Human Rights finding of discrimination. The three groups rejected the offer, however, because it did not include funding equivalent to the funding provided to 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 SPC and Jewish communities continued to identify property restitution 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, as well as the Holy Trinity chapel in Osijek, and several forests and agricultural plots near monasteries in the towns of Gomirje, Lepavina, and Pakra.

Police charged a group of seven ethnic-Croat juveniles with a hate crime for allegedly verbally and physically attacking five ethnic-Serb seminarians on March 17, near the Serbian Orthodox monastery Krka. The victims were attacked with baseball bats and iron rods. Prime Minister Milanovic condemned the violence. Local prosecutors in Sibenik charged the suspects as juveniles,

requesting special supervision including remand to a developmental institution for three of the minors. Prosecutors also recommended that juvenile sanctions be issued for the other four perpetrators. Prosecutors requested that all perpetrators be ordered to apologize to all of the victims. The County Court in Sibenik issued a restraining order banning all perpetrators from coming near the Krka monastery.

In Dalj, the Serbian Orthodox Osijek Poljska Eparchy received a decision April 24 from the county branch of the state administration office restituting 400 hectares (1000 acres) of land, 40 percent of its claim. However, the restitution of this property was postponed following an appeal by the Osijek county prosecutor on grounds that one part of the property was registered to a private person and not to the Orthodox Church. SPC officials reported they received no response to letters sent to government officials in 2012, 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. On July 4, however, newly elected Mayor of Split Ivo Baldasar visited the Episcopo of Dalmatia Fotije, which was the first mayoral visit with Serbian Orthodox leaders in Split since Croatia's independence in 1991. Baldasar suggested initial steps to obtain construction permits for repairs of the church and offered additional municipal assistance. 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.

The Croatian Bishops' Conference (HBK) criticized the national public broadcaster, Croatian Radio Television, for failing to abide by an agreement with the Catholic Church and the other religious communities that regulates religious programs. Specifically, the HBK said that religious communities saw their influence decline over the content of religious programming and noted that one daily broadcast was removed from public radio. The HBK also criticized the government for stalling talks and failing to return or provide restitution for property seized during the Yugoslav period.

Muslim community representatives reported that officials in Istria resolved earlier problems with space allocation for Muslim graves at city cemeteries. After several years of delay, in Umag local authorities provided building permits for an Islamic community center, with construction scheduled to start in 2014. The Muslim

community credited cooperation with authorities in Rijeka, where discussions were under way to zone a portion of the city cemetery for Muslim graves.

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

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Religion and ethnicity were often inextricably linked, so it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

On February 2, in Borovo Naselje near Vukovar, where the majority of inhabitants are ethnic Serbs, three ethnic Croat men were alleged to have physically attacked the son of an Orthodox parish priest while he sat in a local cafe. The men were a part of a larger group of protesters against dual Latin and Cyrillic script signs who were passing through the village on buses. The victim sustained injuries on his neck and shoulders and required prolonged psychological treatment. Police who were present during the incident reported the case and on September 30, local prosecutors in Vukovar issued an indictment charging one of the perpetrators with a criminal act “against life and limb.”

SPC officials from Zagreb reported persistent discrimination toward members of the Serbian Orthodox communities in Dalmatia.

Serbian Orthodox Church authorities from the Dalmatia Eparchy said their community was disturbed by a negative trend in the societal atmosphere toward the SPC. They cited protests against dual Latin and Cyrillic script signs installed in September and October on government buildings in Vukovar, as required by the law, but were removed multiple times by protestors in September, October, and November.

On September 3, the Serbian Orthodox church in Dubrovnik was vandalized with graffiti calling Serbs “traitors” and calling on them to leave the country. Dubrovnik Mayor Andro Vlahusic strongly condemned the graffiti and said the city would remain a multicultural and tolerant center. Dubrovnik Catholic Bishop Mate Uznic also wrote to Dubrovnik Orthodox parish priest Vladan Perisic, stating that the graffiti not only vandalized the Orthodox Church, but offended all of the citizens of Dubrovnik. Perisic said he was satisfied with these reactions and described the situation in Dubrovnik as otherwise positive for the church’s adherents. Based on an investigation by the police, a single perpetrator was identified who was alleged to have caused the property damage and spread hate speech. An investigation continued against other possible offenders.

Orthodox Church representatives in Dalmatia also expressed concern over the toppling of a monument in the village of Golubic September 13 dedicated to at least 19 ethnic Serb civilian victims of Operation Storm in August 1995.

As in previous years, there were attempts to break into or loot Serbian Orthodox churches in Dalmatia. On March 7, unknown perpetrators stole copper drainpipes from the newly reconstructed St. Salvation Church in the coastal town of Sibenik. Police investigated but did not find the culprits. On July 18, just days after it was dedicated, a plaque commemorating the estimated 40,000 Jewish and Serbian victims of Ustashi-run death camps was vandalized in Metajna, on the island of Pag. The Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia and the Serb National Council called for the perpetrators to be identified and prosecuted, noting that similar plaques had been removed in 1991 and 2011. The authorities, however, did not identify perpetrators in any of these incidents.

The Islamic Community in Rijeka officially opened a new mosque May 4, holding up to 1,400 worshippers and meant to meet the needs of the Muslim community in the Rijeka metropolitan area. Croatian President Ivo Josipovic attended, as did Qatar's Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs Bin Mubarek Al Kuwari (Qatar was the mosque's primary donor).

#### **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 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, as well as creating a claims process for victims.

As a part of the Zagreb Jewish Film Festival, the embassy sponsored two educational programs for elementary, secondary, and university level students. The May 20 program for secondary school and university students included the screening of "*Sein Kampf*," about the redemption of two neo-Nazi brothers, and a lecture on the symbols of hatred. On May 23, 650 elementary school students attended an embassy co-sponsored discussion during which a Croatian Holocaust survivor and U.S. citizen talked about his experiences in a Nazi concentration

camp. The students also saw the film “*Wunderkinder*,” which tells the story of musically talented children during World War II.

The embassy provided two fellowships for high school teachers to study the Holocaust through an annual training program at the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous summer institute for teachers at Columbia University.