

CROATIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits incitement of religious hatred. Registered religious groups are equal under the law and free to publicly conduct religious services and open and manage schools and charitable organizations with assistance from the state. The government has four written agreements with the Roman Catholic Church that provide state financial support and other benefits, while the law accords other registered religious groups the same rights and protections. Many Jewish community and Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) property claims remained unresolved.

SOC representatives expressed concern over a perceived increase in societal intolerance. Although they did not keep a tally, they estimated there were fewer incidents of vandalism against SOC property than in previous years. Unlike in previous years, the Jewish and Islamic communities did not report incidents of vandalism, although Jewish communities reported social intolerance. Government officials continued to attend commemorations for historical crimes against minority religious groups.

The U.S. embassy continued to encourage the government to restitute property seized during and after World War II, especially from the Jewish community, and to adopt a claims process for victims. The embassy sponsored a visit by four teachers to the United States for a holocaust education exchange program.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.5 million (July 2015 estimate). The Bureau of Statistics reports 86.3 percent of residents are Catholic, 4.4 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 1.5 percent Muslim. Nearly 4 percent self-identify as nonreligious or atheist. Other religious groups include Jews, Protestants, and other Christians. According to the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia, the country's Jewish community numbers between 2,000 and 2,500.

Religious affiliation correlates closely with ethnicity. Members of the SOC, predominantly ethnic Serbs, live primarily in cities and areas bordering Serbia,

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Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most members of other minority religious groups reside in urban areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for equality of rights regardless of religion and freedom of conscience, religion, and religious expression. It prohibits incitement of religious hatred. According to the constitution, religious groups are equal under the law and free to publicly conduct religious services and open and manage schools and charitable organizations under the protection and assistance of the state.

The Catholic Church receives state financial support and other benefits established in four concordats between the government and the Holy See. These agreements allow state financing for salaries and pensions of some religious officials through government-managed pension and health funds. These agreements also stipulate state funding for religious education in public schools. The law stipulates the same rights and benefits for other registered religious groups as those specified for the Catholic Church in the concordats.

The law defines the legal position of religious groups and determines eligibility for government funding and tax benefits. To obtain status as a religious community, a religious group must have at least 500 members and be registered as an organization for at least five years. The state recognizes marriages conducted by registered religious groups, eliminating the need for civil registration. To be recognized legally, marriages by non-registered religious groups require civil registration. Non-registered religious groups also cannot conduct religious education in schools or access state funds in support of religious activities.

There are 54 registered religious groups, including the Catholic Church, the SOC, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Christian Adventist Church, the Church of Christ, the Church of God, the Croatian Old Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Union of Baptist Churches, the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia (an umbrella group of nine distinct Jewish communities), the Jewish

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Community of Virovitica, Bet Israel (a Jewish group), and the Islamic Community of Croatia.

The government requires religious education be offered in public schools, although attendance is optional. Catholic catechism is the predominant religious text used. Nineteen additional religious groups offer religious education in schools in which there are seven or more students of a given faith, including the Church of the Full Gospel, the Word of Life Alliance of Churches, and the Protestant Reformed Christian Church, which were recognized in 2014. Eligible religious groups provide the instructors and the state pays their salaries. Students may opt out of religious education if they wish, without providing specific grounds.

The law currently does not allow individuals whose property was confiscated during the Holocaust era to seek compensation in court if those individuals subsequently obtained another nationality. This affects Jewish property holders disproportionately.

Government Practices

According to the government Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the Catholic Church received 295,330,800 kuna (HRK) (\$43.3 million) in government funding during the year for religious education, salaries, pensions, and other purposes. The government offered funding to other religious institutions to support religious education in public schools (all offered on an opt-in basis), as well as the operation of private religious schools. The government provided approximately HRK 20 million (\$2.9 million) to these groups, with funds allocated to each religious group in proportion to its size.

The government did not resolve any of the outstanding property restitution cases involving the SOC, including claims for land in Osijek County and properties in Vukovar and Vinkovci.

Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic and Parliament Speaker Josip Leko marked Holocaust Remembrance Day in parliament on January 27 alongside representatives of Jewish and Roma associations. President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic visited the Jasenovac Memorial on April 22 to pay her respects to the victims of the World War II-era concentration camp located there. Grabar-Kitarovic condemned the torture and murders at Jasenovac both at the memorial and during a visit to Israel, expressing “deepest remorse” for the crimes of the

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World War II-era Ustasa regime. Prime Minister Milanovic, Parliament Speaker Josip Leko, Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic, and others attended the official ceremony at the Jasenovac memorial on April 26.

The country is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Although they did not maintain a tally, SOC representatives estimated there were approximately 25 incidents of vandalism, fewer, they said, than in previous years, which included spray painting, destruction of Church property, and burglaries. SOC representatives stated they experienced cooperation with relevant elements of the government, including law enforcement.

There were no reported incidents involving property crimes associated with Jewish or Muslim community members or property.

Unknown persons bleached a swastika into the grass on the playing field in advance of a European qualifying match between Croatia and Italy in Split on June 12. On June 18, prosecutors filed misdemeanor charges against the Croatian Football Federation (HNS) and multiple HNS officials. President Grabar-Kitarovic, Prime Minister Milanovic, and Minister of Interior Ranko Ostojic all condemned the incident and called for a swift investigation and punishment for those responsible. The investigation was ongoing at year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff regularly discussed religious freedom issues, including concerns related to the status and treatment of religious minorities, with representatives of the government's Office for Human Rights, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other officials. The embassy and the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues encouraged the government to adopt measures for restitution of religious property seized during and after World War II, including those that would unequivocally allow for foreign claims. Embassy engagement also focused on the restitution of Jewish properties such as cultural centers, synagogues, cemeteries, and private property, as well as creation of a claims process for victims.

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The embassy discussed religious freedom issues, including concerns related to freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination, with civil society organizations and representatives from Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, and other religious groups.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports, the embassy provided funding for four high school teachers to visit the United States to participate in summer teacher training programs to improve Holocaust education. This annual program was jointly organized by the Department of State, the Association of Holocaust Organizations in New York, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.