

CROATIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits incitement of religious hatred. All religious communities have the same religious protections under the law. The government has written agreements with the Roman Catholic Church that provide state financial support and favorable tax and other treatment; 54 other registered religious communities that have agreements with the state receive equivalent treatment that registered religious communities without such agreements and unregistered religious groups do not receive. During the year the state registered a newly established religious community called the Catholic Old Church. Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) representatives said lack of restitution of property seized by the Yugoslavia government remained an outstanding issue. Atheist groups continued to complain that Roman Catholic symbols remained prevalent in government buildings such as courtrooms, prisons, and public hospitals. Representatives of the Jewish and Serbian communities expressed concerns about the rise of neo-Ustasha sentiment and historical revisionism about atrocities committed by the pro-Nazi government during the Second World War (WWII) against those communities. They said the government did not take a strong enough stand against historical revisionism and downplayed the public display of symbols of the Ustasha regime. They also said the current exhibition of the WWII-era Jasenovac concentration camp obscures the cruelty toward victims and fails to explain the affiliation of the victims persecuted by the Ustasha regime. In August the High Misdemeanor Court fined a singer who used the Nazi-era Ustasha salute while performing a popular nationalist song. In an article published in June, media characterized Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Ruza Tomasic as sympathetic to the fascist Ustasha movement through her statements defending elements of the movement and leader Ante Pavelic. Jewish and Serb leaders, the latter largely Orthodox, and representatives of the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Fighters again boycotted the government's annual commemoration at the Jasenovac concentration camp, citing the government's lack of response to Holocaust revisionism and failure to address Holocaust-era property restitution issues.

SOC representatives reported an increased number of incidents targeting individuals of Serbian ethnicity compared with 2018, including physical and verbal attacks. According to SOC representatives, however, it was unclear if these incidents were religiously or ethnically motivated. In a European Commission study published in September, 40 percent of the respondents believed

discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in the country, while 58 percent said it was rare. On January 25, the Holocaust Remembrance Project published a “Holocaust Revisionist Report,” giving the country a “red card for revisionism” (the worst possible rating). The report pointed to the continued use of the wartime fascist Ustasha salute at public events, the relative lack of Holocaust commemoration sites, outstanding restitution issues, and what it said were President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic’s contradictory statements on the Ustasha.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the status and treatment of religious minorities, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust revisionism with the government. U.S. officials encouraged the government to amend existing legislation covering Holocaust-era property restitution to allow for restitution and compensation claims with a revised deadline for new applications. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues, including freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination, with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives from a broad spectrum of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.2 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 86.3 percent of the population is 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 World Jewish Congress, there are approximately 1,700 Jews.

Religious affiliation correlates closely with ethnicity. Ethnic Serbs are predominantly members of the SOC and live primarily in cities and areas bordering Serbia 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, as well as freedom of conscience and religious expression. It prohibits incitement of religious hatred. According to the constitution, religious communities shall be equal under the law and separate from the state; they are free to conduct religious

services publicly as well as open and manage schools and charitable organizations under the protection and with the assistance of the state.

The Roman Catholic Church receives state financial support and other benefits established by four concordats between the government and the Holy See. These agreements provide for state financing for salaries and pensions of some religious officials associated with religious education through government-managed pension and health funds. These agreements also stipulate state funding for religious education in public schools.

The law defines the legal position of religious communities and determines eligibility for government funding and tax benefits. Registered religious communities are exempt from taxes on the purchase of real estate, the profit/capital gains tax, and taxes on donations. According to the law, a religious community previously active as a legal entity before enactment of the current law in 2002 (amended in 2013) need only submit its name, the location of its headquarters, information on the office of the person authorized to represent it, and the seal and stamp it uses to register. To register as a religious community, a religious group without prior legal status must have at least 500 members and have been registered as an association, with at least three members, for at least five years. To register as a religious community, a group submits a list of its members and documentation outlining the group's activities and bylaws and describing its mission to the Ministry of Administration. Nonregistered religious groups may operate freely but do not receive tax benefits. They may conduct financial transactions as legal entities. A contractual agreement with the state, which grants a registered religious community eligibility for further funding and benefits, defines the community's role and activities and provides for collaboration with the government in areas of joint interest, such as education, health, and culture.

There are 55 registered religious communities, including the Roman Catholic Church, SOC, Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Christian Adventist Church, Church of Christ, Church of God, Croatian Old Catholic Church, Catholic Old Church, Evangelical Church, Macedonian Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Church, Reformed Christian Church, Union of Baptist Churches, Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, Coordination Committee of Jewish Communities in Croatia (an umbrella group of nine distinct Jewish communities), Jewish Community of Virovitica, Bet Israel (a Jewish group), and the Islamic Community of Croatia. In addition to the Roman Catholic Church, 19 religious communities have formal agreements with the state that more clearly define activities and cooperation, such

as in the areas of marriage and of religious education in public schools. These groups may access state funds for religious activities.

The state recognizes marriages conducted by registered religious communities that have concluded agreements with the state, eliminating the need for civil registration. Marriages conducted by registered communities that have not concluded agreements with the state, or by nonregistered religious groups, require civil registration.

Registered religious communities that have not concluded agreements with the state and nonregistered religious groups may not conduct religious education in public schools or access state funds in support of religious activities, including charitable work, counseling, building costs, and clergy salaries; however, they may engage in worship, proselytize, own property, and import religious literature. Only registered religious communities, with or without agreements with the state, may provide spiritual counsel in prisons, hospitals, and the military.

Public schools at both the primary and secondary levels must offer religious education, although students may opt out without providing specific grounds. The Catholic catechism is the predominant religious text used. Other religious communities that have agreements with the state may also offer religious education classes in schools if there are seven or more students of that faith. Eligible religious communities provide the instructors and the state pays their salaries. Private religious schools are eligible for state assistance and follow a national curriculum. Registered religious communities may have their own schools. Unregistered religious groups may not have their own schools.

Education about the Holocaust is mandatory in the seventh and eighth grades of elementary school and during four years of high school.

The law allows foreign citizens whose property was confiscated during and after the Holocaust era to seek compensation or restitution if the applicant's country has a bilateral restitution treaty with the state; however, no such bilateral treaties currently exist. Two court cases have held that such treaties are not required; however, the law has not changed. The law does not allow new property claims, because the deadline expired in 2003.

The ombudsperson is a commissioner appointed by parliament responsible for promoting and protecting human rights and freedoms, including religious freedom. The ombudsperson examines citizens' complaints pertaining to the work of state

bodies; local and regional self-government; and legal persons vested with public authority. The ombudsperson may issue recommendations to government agencies regarding human rights and religious freedom practices but does not have authority to enforce compliance with his or her recommendations.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The Ministry of Administration registered a newly established religious community called the Catholic Old Church, located on the island of Rab.

According to the Office of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the government budgeted 299.5 million kuna (\$46.15 million) during the year for the Roman Catholic Church for salaries, pensions, and other purposes, compared with 288.2 million kuna (\$44.41 million) in 2018. The government provided funding to other religious communities that had concluded agreements with the state, a portion of which was based on their size, in addition to funds provided to support religious education in public schools, and the operation of private religious schools. The government budgeted 22.0 million kuna (\$3.39 million) to these groups, compared to 21.4 million kuna (\$3.3 million) in 2018. Atheist groups criticized the government for allocating more to the Roman Catholic Church than to other groups.

Some minority religious and nonreligious groups, including atheist groups, continued to say the Roman Catholic Church continued to enjoy a special status (and greater financial support) in relation to other religious communities, in part because of its concordats with the government and in part because of its cultural and political influence as the majority religion.

SOC representatives said the community still had outstanding issues with the government regarding repossession of property, residential buildings, and land (including forests) that the government appropriated during the Yugoslav period.

Atheist, Jewish, and Serbian Orthodox organizations continued to report that although the law allows students to opt out of religious education, in practice most public primary schools did not offer any alternatives to Catholic catechism.

Atheist groups continued to complain that Roman Catholic symbols remained prevalent in government buildings such as courtrooms, prisons, and public

hospitals. They said they believed this practice was inconsistent with the constitution, which states religious communities shall be separate from the state.

On August 14, media reported the High Misdemeanor Court fined a singer who used the Ustasha salute “*Za Dom Spremni*” (“For the Homeland – Ready”) while performing a popular nationalist song. The court ruled the “salute conveyed hatred toward people of different races, religions, and ethnicities,” and fined the singer 965 kuna (\$150).

In May MEP Tomasic told the media outlet *Novosti* weekly, “I do not denounce the regular Ustashes who fought for Croatia but did not commit crimes.” Speaking of Ante Pavelic, leader of the pro-Nazi Independent State of Croatia (NDH) that committed genocide against Jews, Serbs, and Roma during WWII, she said, “He did not have to agree to racial laws, but fine. He did not have to have camps, but it must have been war then. He had to live in that time.” On June 5, the Simon Wiesenthal Center condemned Tomasic’s statements. The center’s Director for Eastern European Affairs Dr. Efraim Zuroff called upon political leaders to officially reject Tomasic’s statements, “especially her attempt to whitewash the large-scale atrocities committed by the Ustasha and the NDH.” Members of opposition parties condemned her statements.

The ombudsperson’s 2018 report released in March said most complaints concerned religious discrimination regarding the organization of religious activities in public kindergartens and public primary schools, and complaints about discriminatory content in religious textbooks and Croatian language books for elementary school. Non-Catholic religious groups complained to the ombudsman about Catholic religious activities in schools and kindergartens. The Office of the Ombudsperson for Children said blessing students and common public prayers on the premises of an educational institution were inappropriate outside of catechism, and obliging all the pupils in schools or kindergartens to participate in religious activities could lead to discrimination against children who were nonbelievers or non-Catholics. Responding to complaints from non-Catholic groups about the religious content of Croatian language textbooks, at the end of 2018 parliament adopted amendments to the education legislation stipulating it is the duty of the public school system to be neutral and balanced.

The ombudsperson’s 2018 report stated members of minority religious communities encountered problems exercising their right to take time off for religious holidays and feasts that fell during the work week, and these issues continued during the year.

The ombudsperson's 2018 report stated the office received complaints about displays of religious symbols in public spaces (e.g., a crucifix in the patient's room at a gynecology clinic), where the complainants maintained that this was discrimination against persons who were not Catholic believers or were without religious beliefs. The ombudsperson's office stated displays of religious symbols in public spaces continued to be an issue during the year.

In February parliament rejected a proposal to negotiate modifications to the four concordats between the Holy See and the government. During the year, secularist NGOs held seven rallies calling on the government to give less money to the Roman Catholic Church and terminate agreements with the Vatican guaranteeing the Church an important role in social affairs. Media reported in October the NGO Movement for Secular Croatia and the civil society organizations Protagora, LiberOs, and Atheists and Agnostics of Croatia, and two informal campaign groups, Voice of Reason – Movement for a Secular Croatia and Not a Believer, staged a protest rally in September attended by 500 people. The groups stated the Roman Catholic Church held a privileged position in relation to other religious communities, contrary to the constitution's guarantee that all religious communities were equal before the law and separate from the state. Some protesters carried placards saying, "Constitution before Bible", "Republic Strikes Back" and "Pope Francis: I Want a Poor Church."

Media reported on April 12 that representatives from the Jewish, Serb, and Roma communities, as well as the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Fighters and a delegation from the main opposition Social Democratic Party, held a commemoration ceremony at the Jasenovac Memorial Museum for victims killed by the WWII-era Ustasha regime at the Jasenovac concentration camp. On April 14, the government held its annual commemoration at the camp site. For the fourth year in a row, Jewish community representatives, along with the other groups, boycotted the government event. During the official commemoration Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic called for a united commemoration in 2020 and condemned the Ustasha regime. On April 13, President Grabar-Kitarovic visited the Jasenovac memorial site on a personal visit. Members of Jewish groups, along with the other groups, said the boycott of the government commemoration was necessary to condemn what they said was its lack of response to Holocaust revisionism and failure to address Holocaust-era property restitution issues. Local Jewish community representatives said the government made no significant progress on these issues during the year.

In January the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Director of Eastern European Affairs Zuroff issued a statement calling on authorities to ban a book entitled, "The Jasenovac Lie Revealed," saying the book "denied that mass murders of Serbs, Jews, Roma and Croatian anti-fascists were frequently carried out in the Jasenovac concentration camp." According to media, on January 17, a church in Zagreb hosted an event promoting the book.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) reported in September that IHRA Chair Ambassador Georges Santer called on the government to improve the exhibit at Jasenovac concentration camp to provide historical context so that visitors could understand the situation in the country and Europe during the first half of the 20th century as well as the role of perpetrators who committed the crimes. Santer offered IHRA's expertise and support for the creation of a new exhibit. Minister of Culture Nina Obuljen Korzinek agreed a renewed and extended exhibit should be developed in cooperation with all victim groups and other stakeholders. Minister of Education Blazenka Divjak said the government was willing to increase funding to support at least 100 school visits to the memorial site in 2020.

On April 28, Vukovar Mayor Ivan Penava attended an Orthodox Easter Sunday Mass upon invitation from the local branch of the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS). Penava said he attended the Mass as a show of support to Vukovar's Serbian Orthodox population. Local SDSS leader Srdan Kolar said he appreciated the mayor's participation, adding, "As far as a return gesture is concerned, the moment we receive an invitation to come to events marking Catholic Christmas and Easter, we will be there."

International Orthodox Christian News reported on March 18 that Serbian Orthodox Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana Porfirije met with Prime Minister Plenkovic and expressed his desire to continue dialogue and partnership between the government and religious communities in the country. The metropolitan advocated a joint action program to solve issues important to members of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian national minority. The website of the Orthodox Church published photos of the meeting and said Prime Minister Plenkovic emphasized the government had been working towards strengthening the protection of rights of all national minorities, including through greater financial support for economic development and solving issues that had been postponed for years.

In January Prime Minister Plenkovic attended an Orthodox Christmas reception organized by the Serbian National Council, an association of members of the Serb minority in Croatia, and said, “Christmas is an opportunity to strengthen faith in peace, solidarity, and tolerance, as well as unity in the resolution of issues that are important to all our fellow citizens.”

A leader of the SOC in Eastern Slavonia said high-ranking representatives of the Catholic Church met with counterparts from the SOC in January to discuss cooperation and shared concerns such as demographic challenges in the country and outreach to the younger generation.

The Office of the President retained the position of special advisor for Holocaust issues, although the incumbent passed away in November.

The country is a member of the IHRA.

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.

SOC representatives anecdotally reported increased incidents targeting individuals of Serbian ethnicity compared with 2018, including physical and verbal attacks. According to SOC representatives, however, it was unclear to what extent religious motivations played a part.

In May the European Commission (EC) carried out a study in each EU member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 40 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Croatia, while 58 percent said it was rare; 84 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 95 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, 90 percent with an atheist, 86 percent with a Jew, 82 percent with a Buddhist, and 81 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a loving relationship with an individual belonging to various groups, 94 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 82 percent if atheist, 75 percent if Jewish, 68 percent if Buddhist, and 64 percent if Muslim.

In January the EC published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU member state. According to the survey, 28 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was a problem in Croatia, and 54 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 37 percent; on the internet, 34 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 30 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 28 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 30 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 27 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 27 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 30 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 29 percent.

On January 25, the Holocaust Remembrance Project published a “Holocaust Revisionist Report” sponsored by Yale University, Grinnell College, and the European Union of Progressive Judaism. The report gave the country a “red card for revisionism” (the worst possible rating, meaning under the report’s methodology “tough work lies ahead”). The report pointed to the continued use of the wartime fascist Ustasha salute at soccer games, rallies, and protests, the relative lack of Holocaust commemoration sites, outstanding restitution issues, and what it said were President Grabar-Kitarovic’s contradictory statements on the Ustasha. The report said, “Croats continue to have difficulty coming to terms with [the country’s] wartime past under a Nazi collaborationist government. Although new historical research shows that most Croats opposed the fascist puppet regime and many saved Jews, the country’s troubled past, including five decades of post-war communist rule, continues to cast a heavy cloud.”

In May media reported political advertisements for a Serb party were repeatedly marked with symbols of pro-Nazi Ustasha regime and anti-Serb slogans in the run-up to European Union parliamentary elections. In Zagreb, an individual wrote, “Slaughter Serb children, kill the Serb” on an SDSS campaign billboard.

On January 24, the Roman Catholic Church unveiled a large banner on the Zagreb Cathedral to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The World Jewish Congress praised the commemoration, in which Cardinal Josip Bozanic, Archbishop of Zagreb, “declared it unacceptable to permit the re-emergence of anti-Semitism.” Observers from minority religious groups said this was a conspicuous and positive gesture, given complaints by minority groups that the Church has at times minimized its role in Croatia during the Holocaust.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy staff regularly discussed religious freedom issues, including the status and treatment of religious minorities, property restitution, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust revisionism, with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Culture; the ombudsperson; representatives of parliament; youth representing different religious groups, and other officials. The embassy emphasized to Ministry of Interior officials the importance of the government ensuring the religious rights of migrants and asylum seekers were respected.

In April the Ambassador, embassy staff, and the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with the minister of justice, the minister of culture, minister of education and science, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of parliament, the head of the Clinical Hospital, which during WWII saved a number of Jews from persecution, and leaders of Jewish organizations. Similar meetings took place in November. A senior embassy official attended commemorations for victims of the Holocaust, including the April 14 commemoration at Jasenovac, and discussed religious freedom issues with the members of the government and minority groups. U.S. officials continued to encourage the government to adopt amendments to existing legislation to provide for restitution of private and communal or religious property seized during and after WWII, including provisions that would unequivocally allow for foreign claims and that would reopen the deadline for potential new claims. Embassy engagement also focused on the restitution of Jewish communal properties such as cultural centers, synagogues, and cemeteries, as well as private property, and the creation of a claims process for victims.

In October the Ambassador hosted a lunch with youth representatives from different religious communities, including one atheist, to discuss challenges each community faced. He highlighted the importance of interfaith dialogue and promoting religious freedom and tolerance.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues, including freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination, with NGOs such as Human Rights House, Documenta, Protogora, and Zagreb Pride, as well as with representatives from Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Baptist, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious groups. In cooperation with the Ministry of Science and Education, the embassy again funded Holocaust education training in the United States for high school teachers, sending four teachers during the year. These teachers later applied the training in the classroom. The Department of State, Association of

Holocaust Organizations in New York, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum organized the annual program. The program continued to focus on new teaching methods and techniques, facilitated an exchange of ideas and experiences, and provided resources and materials for classroom instruction.

The embassy posted on social media platforms about a range of religious freedom issues, including support for Holocaust commemorations and the younger generation's view of faith and religion in the country.