

# **SLOVENIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their religious beliefs in public and private. It declares all religious communities shall enjoy equal rights and prohibits incitement of religious hatred or intolerance. Religious groups do not have to register with the government but must register to obtain status as legal entities with tax and other benefits. In September the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) and Ministry of Justice launched a project to establish the scope of Jewish heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their collaborators. Muslims asked the government to expand their access to cemeteries and to provide pork-free meals in public institutions. Muslim and Orthodox groups reported difficulties in providing services in hospitals, prisons, and the military. In April the Constitutional Court upheld a law prohibiting the slaughter of animals without prior stunning.

Muslim groups reported obstacles in accessing halal food, spiritual care, and circumcising their male children. These groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also reported anti-Muslim sentiment at public events, in news media, and online. Vice Chair of the Jewish Community of Slovenia Igor Vojtic expressed concern about what he described as a negative disposition towards Jews, especially among left-leaning citizens. Anti-Muslim hate speech was prevalent, especially online. Construction of the country's first mosque continued after delays due to funding shortages. Muslims held services elsewhere in the interim.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with government officials responsible for upholding religious freedom, including the Ministry of Culture's (MOC) Office for Religious Communities, to discuss issues such as interfaith dialogue, the prohibition of animal slaughter without prior stunning, and the status of circumcision of male children. In April the Ambassador hosted representatives of the Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities to discuss issues such as legal restrictions on the ritual slaughter of animals and circumcision of boys. The embassy amplified its engagement on religious freedom issues through social media.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2002 census (the last one in which the Slovenian government asked about religious affiliation), 57.8 percent of the population is Catholic, 2.4 percent Muslim, 2.3 percent Serbian Orthodox, 0.9 percent “other Christian,” and 10.1 percent atheist. In addition, 23 percent identified as “other” or did not declare a religion, and 3.5 percent declared themselves “unaffiliated.” According to Secretary-General of the Islamic Community of Slovenia Nevzet Poric, the Muslim population numbers approximately 100,000. The head of Slovenia’s Serbian Orthodox Church, Reverend Aleksandar Obradovic, estimates his community at 30,000. The Jewish community estimates its size at 300 persons. The Office for Religious Communities said the Catholic population was steadily declining but did not provide any estimates of its numbers. The Orthodox and Muslim communities include a large number of immigrants from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their beliefs in public and private. It declares all religious communities shall have equal rights and provides for the separation of religion and state. The constitution guarantees equal human rights and fundamental freedoms to all individuals irrespective of their religion; it also prohibits incitement of religious discrimination and inflammation of religious hatred and intolerance. The constitution recognizes the right of conscientious objection to military service for religious reasons.

The law states individuals have the right to freely select a religion; freedom of religious expression (or rejection of expression); to express – alone or in a group, privately or publicly – their religious beliefs freely in “church or other religious communities,” through education, religious ceremonies, or in other ways; and not to be forced to become a member or to remain a member of a religious group, nor to attend (or not attend) worship services or religious ceremonies. The law guarantees the right to refuse to comply with legal duties and requirements that contradict an individual’s religious beliefs, provided such refusals do not limit the rights and freedoms of other persons.

The law requires churches and other religious communities to register with the government to obtain status as legal entities, but it does not restrict the religious

activities of unregistered religious groups. Unregistered religious groups are not permitted by law to purchase property in their name. According to the law, the rights of religious groups include autonomy in selecting their legal form and constituency; freedom to define their internal organization and name and define the competencies of their employees; autonomy in defining the rights and obligations of their members; latitude to participate in interconfessional organizations within the country or abroad; authority to provide religious services to military, police, prisons, hospitals, and social care institutions (the state pays the salaries of chaplains providing services at these institutions); and freedom to construct buildings for religious purposes. The law states religious groups have a responsibility to respect the constitution and the legal provisions on nondiscrimination.

As legal entities, registered religious groups are also eligible for rebates on value-added taxes and government cofinancing of social security contributions for their religious workers.

To register legally with the government, a religious group must submit an application to the MOC providing proof it has at least 10 adult members who are citizens or permanent residents; the name of the group in Latin letters, which must be clearly distinguishable from the names of other religious groups; the group's address in the country; and a copy of its official seal to be used in legal transactions. It must pay an administrative tax of 22.60 euros (\$26). The group must also provide the names of the group's representatives in the country, a description of the foundations of the group's religious beliefs, and a copy of its organizational act. If a group wishes to apply for government cosponsorship of social security for clergy members, it must show it has at least 1,000 members for every clergy member.

There are 54 registered religious groups, including the Catholic Church, Evangelical Church, Jewish Community of Slovenia, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Islamic Community of Slovenia.

The government may only refuse the registration of a religious group if the group does not provide the required application materials in full or if the MOC determines the group is a "hate group" – an organization engaging in hate crimes as defined by the penal code.

By law, MOC's Office for Religious Communities monitors and maintains records on registered religious communities and provides legal expertise and assistance to

religious organizations. The MOC establishes and manages the procedures for registration, issues documents related to the legal status of registered communities, distributes funds allocated in the government's budget for religious activities, organizes discussions and gatherings of religious communities to address religious freedom concerns, and provides information to religious groups on the legal provisions and regulations related to their activities.

The government has an agreement with the Holy See covering relations with the Catholic Church. Subsequent to that agreement, the government concluded similar agreements with several other groups. None of the agreements offer rights or privileges beyond those accorded religious groups in the constitution.

In accordance with the law, citizens may apply for the return of property nationalized between 1945 and 1963. The state may provide monetary compensation to former owners who cannot receive restitution in kind; for example, the state may authorize monetary compensation if government institutions are using the property for an official state purpose or public service such as education or healthcare.

According to the constitution, parents have the right to provide their children with a religious upbringing in accordance with the parents' beliefs. The government requires all public schools to include education on world religions in their curricula, with instruction provided by a school's regular teachers. The government allows churches and religious groups to provide religious instruction in their faiths in public schools and preschools on a voluntary basis outside of school hours. The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools as part of the curriculum or during school hours but does not prescribe penalties for violations. Private schools may offer religious classes during or after school hours.

The law mandates Holocaust education in schools. This instruction focuses on the history of the Holocaust inside and outside of the country. Schools use a booklet published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Holocaust education curriculum to create awareness of the history of Jews and anti-Semitism in Europe before World War II and of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. The booklet emphasizes the responsibility of everyone to remember the victims of the Holocaust.

The constitution provides for an independent Office of the Ombudsman for the Protection of Human Rights to investigate and report on alleged human rights violations by the government. The national assembly appoints the ombudsman and

allocates the office's budget, but otherwise the ombudsman operates independently of the government. Individuals have the right to file complaints with the ombudsman to seek administrative relief regarding abuses of religious freedom committed by national or local authorities. The ombudsman's office may forward these complaints to the state prosecutor's office, which may then issue indictments, call for further investigation, or submit the claims directly to a court, whereupon the complaints become formal. The ombudsman also submits an annual human rights report to the national assembly and provides recommendations and expert advice to the government.

The Council of the Government of the Republic for Dialogue on Religious Freedom under the auspices of the MOC's Office for Religious Communities is responsible for promoting transparency and explaining national and EU legislation pertinent to religious groups through workshops and other events, and encouraging dialogue on issues of concern among the country's religious communities. Its members include representatives of the minister of culture, director of the Office for Religious Communities, commissioner for the principle of equality, and representatives of the Catholic Church, Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovenia, Islamic Community of Slovenia, Serbian Orthodox Church, and smaller religious communities.

The law allows for circumcision, but some hospitals believe it is illegal and do not offer the procedure. The Ombudsman for the Protection of Human Rights has issued a nonlegally binding opinion that, based on the constitution and the law, "circumcision for nonmedical reasons is not permissible and constitutes unlawful interference with the child's body, thereby violating his rights."

The law requires that animals be stunned prior to slaughter.

The penal code's definition of hate crimes includes publicly provoking religious hatred and diminishing the significance of the Holocaust. Punishment for these offenses is imprisonment of up to two years, or, if the crime involves coercion or endangerment of security – defined as a serious threat to life and limb, desecration, or damage to property – imprisonment for up to five years. If an official abusing the power of his or her position commits these offenses, he or she may be subject to imprisonment of up to five years. Members of groups that engage in these activities in an organized and premeditated fashion – hate groups, according to the law – may also receive a punishment of up to five years in prison.

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

## Government Practices

The government approved the registration of four new religious groups: the Slovene Islamic Community of Grace, Community of Zandernatis, Monastery Awam Gesar, and Slovene Daoists Temple of Highest Harmony. It did not reject any registration applications.

In July the WJRO and Ministry of Justice agreed to launch a joint research project to establish the scope of heirless properties in the country seized by the Nazis or their collaborators. The research teams commenced research in September and planned to complete their study in 2019. Restitution efforts for property seized during the Holocaust were complicated by the period (1945-63) covered by the law on property nationalization claims, which excluded, with some exceptions, property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945.

The Office for Religious Communities reported the Muslim community had requested the government to reserve special locations in cemeteries for Muslim graves and allow gravestones to face Mecca. Only some cemeteries allowed this practice, and some Muslim families buried their dead outside of the country. Muslims may establish their own cemeteries, but there were no reports they had done so. The Muslim community also requested the government make pork-free meals readily available in hospitals, schools, prisons, and other public institutions. The Office of Religious Institutions said it planned to convene a meeting in 2019 of the Council of the Government of the Republic for Dialogue on Religious Freedom to address food service practices in public institutions.

According to the Office for Religious Communities, an inability to provide spiritual care in the military, hospitals, and other public institutions remained a problem for some minority religious communities. While many hospitals had Catholic chapels, members of other faiths had more limited opportunities to attend collective religious services while hospitalized. The armed forces (SAF) employed full-time Catholic and Protestant clergy to provide religious services but no Muslim imams, Orthodox priests, or Jewish rabbis. While Muslims and Orthodox Christians in the SAF had access to their local religious communities while serving domestically, such opportunities were not always available during deployments or training abroad. Head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the country Obradovic attributed the SAF's lack of Orthodox clergy to low numbers of qualified Orthodox priests in the country, rather than inadequate government support. The Orthodox community said it was preparing two candidates for service as chaplains in the

SAF by 2023. The Ministry of Defense said the Muslim community had not made any requests for it to employ imams in the SAF. The Jewish community did not have any rabbis in the country; a rabbi in Trieste in Italy was responsible for Slovenia. Catholic officials said they requested the government employ an ordained bishop as a military ordinary in the SAF and expected this issue to be resolved in a future amendment to the agreement between the government and the Holy See.

According to the Slovenian Press Agency (STA), in April Igor Vojtic, Vice Chair of the Jewish Community of Slovenia, said the community was unable to receive compensation for a synagogue in Murska Sobota the communist government demolished in 1954 or secure a building for a synagogue and cultural center in Ljubljana. Ministry of Justice officials stated it had not received any restitution claims for the Murska Sobota synagogue and the property identified by the Jewish community in Ljubljana was prime real estate with no historic ties to that community.

In April the Constitutional Court upheld the law prohibiting the slaughter of animals without prior stunning. The Slovene Muslim Community, not affiliated with the larger Islamic Community of Slovenia, had filed a case in 2014 alleging this law violated religious freedom. The Islamic Community of Slovenia continued to provide certificates to companies producing meat from stunned animals, confirming the meat was halal. The country permitted imports of halal meat products. The Jewish community also raised concerns over the prohibition and reported it imported kosher meat from neighboring countries. The government defended the law as necessary to comply with EU regulations to prevent unnecessary suffering to animals.

Continuing confusion over the legal status of circumcision resulted in many hospitals not offering the procedure. As a result, some Muslims and Jews continued to have the procedure performed in Austria.

Mufti Nedžad Grabus of the Islamic Community of Slovenia criticized the government's treatment of Muslims in June at the community's prayer for Eid al-Fitr, stating Muslims are "always being pushed towards the margins of this society." Among other issues, Grabus mentioned the restrictions on ritual slaughter of animals and circumcision. He also stated the government prioritized Christian holidays over those of other faiths.

In November Janez Jansa, leader of the opposition Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), which won a plurality of votes in June parliamentary elections, said in a speech in Helsinki that Europe faced an external threat from radical Islam. SDS national assembly member Branko Grims said during an election campaign debate in May the EU's future would not be dictated by the budget but rather by "illegal migrations, the process of Europe's radical Islamization, questions of identity, preserving European culture, civilization."

The Office for Religious Communities continued to hold workshops and other events for religious communities to address their questions and foster interfaith cooperation. Events included hosting a state prosecutor to explain technical details of hate speech legislation and a discussion of the UN's Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes.

In July the government approved an agreement between the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Culture Ministry to grant museum representatives access to, and allow the museum to reproduce, material in Slovenia's archives.

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

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

Muslim groups and NGOs said Muslims faced obstacles in obtaining access to halal food, spiritual care, time off for Islamic holidays, and in circumcising their male children.

There were some manifestations of anti-Islamic sentiment through public events and protests and on the internet. In November the widely described as far-right-wing magazine *Demokracija* argued against the government's adoption of the UN Global Compact for Migration, commenting, "The native population tried to preserve their customs and traditions, but the political authorities did not demand of the immigrants to integrate in the western society, but rather let the Muslim immigrants, joined by blacks from Africa, to create their territories (little Eurabias) where they live by their rules...the Marrakesh Declaration will legalize all that."

In April STA reported that Vice Chair of the Jewish Community of Slovenia Vojtic expressed concern about what he described as a negative disposition towards Jews,



especially among left-leaning citizens. The report cited Vojtic as saying, “There is a new anti-Semitism prevailing in Slovenia, one that is in fact covert because of historical experience, so it is manifested through hatred to Israel.” Also in April, online news site Total Slovenia News reported Vojtic expressed concern that immigrants from Syria and Iraq would bring the country “face to face with aggressive Islamic anti-Semitism.”

Hate speech, especially online, was prevalent and often targeted members of the Islamic community through anti-immigrant rhetoric. The group Generation Identity Slovenia was particularly active in posting anti-Islamic comments on social media. The Ministry of Culture reported *Demokracija* to the media inspectorate for its August cover showing a photo of seven black hands groping and touching a white woman with the title, “With Migrants Comes the Culture of Rape.” The inspectorate referred the case to police; an investigation remained pending at year’s end. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

The general state prosecutor did not provide an update on the status of an investigation he announced in 2017 regarding why a local prosecutor had declined to prosecute Bernard Brscic, who had served as an adviser to a former prime minister, on charges of Holocaust denial for statements he made during a television interview earlier that year.

Construction of the country’s first mosque continued in Ljubljana, following delays. According to press reports and the Islamic Community of Slovenia, the delays were due a shortage of funding, three-quarters of which came from the government of Qatar. The Islamic Community of Slovenia said it expected the mosque to open in 2019. In the interim, it said it rented places for worship, including large sports halls for major events.

The Orthodox community’s only church is located in Ljubljana, but Orthodox representatives said they planned to build two churches in Koper and Celje. Catholic churches around the country routinely granted access for local Orthodox communities to host events and religious ceremonies. Representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant communities reported excellent relations among members of different religious groups, including an active dialogue at workshops and conferences. They also reported good relations with the government.

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

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with government officials responsible for upholding the constitutional commitment to religious freedom, including the MOC's Office for Religious Communities, to discuss issues such as interfaith dialogue, the prohibition of animal slaughter without prior stunning, and circumcision of male children.

In March the embassy supported a visit by the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and WJRO representatives to meet with senior government officials and members of the local Jewish community. They discussed the proposed joint study on heirless properties, as well as possible goodwill gestures toward the Jewish community. In April the Ambassador hosted a lunch for representatives of the Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities to discuss issues related to religious freedom, such as circumcision of boys and legal restrictions on the ritual slaughter of animals.

The embassy amplified its engagement through social media posts on the Ambassador's lunch with representatives of the Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities, the release of the 2017 International Religious Freedom Report, and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom's remarks at the International Religious Freedom Ministerial in Washington in July.