

# **SLOVENIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their religious beliefs in public and private. It states all religious communities shall enjoy equal rights and prohibits incitement of religious hatred or intolerance. The World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) and Ministry of Justice continued a joint research project to establish the scope of Jewish heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their collaborators. Mufti Nedžad Grabus of the Islamic Community of Slovenia expressed concern about what he said were rising levels of anti-Islamic sentiment in the country and urged the government to dedicate more attention to combating hate speech. Muslims asked the government to provide pork-free meals in public institutions. Muslim groups reported difficulties in receiving services in hospitals, prisons, and the military.

Muslim groups reported obstacles in accessing halal food and spiritual care, and in circumcising their male children. They also reported anti-Muslim sentiment in news media and online. In March an advisor to former prime minister Bernard Brščič formed a new far-right anti-migrant party, the Homeland League. During a media interview, Brščič said Islam was a totalitarian ideology rather than a religion and that Muslims had the goal of destroying Western civilization. Construction of the country's first mosque continued after delays due to funding shortages. Muslims held services elsewhere in the interim. The Serbian Orthodox community reported the construction of a church in Koper was delayed due to opposition from the local municipality that refused to approve the construction.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet regularly with government officials responsible for upholding religious freedom, including the Ministry of Culture (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 May the embassy cosponsored a roundtable on religious plurality, and an embassy representative delivered remarks on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy sponsored the participation of Secretary-General of the Islamic Community of Slovenia Nevzet Poric in an exchange program in the United States on advancing interfaith relations. In October the Ambassador hosted representatives of the Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox communities to discuss issues such as interfaith dialogue, hate speech, and relations with the government. In February the Charge d'Affaires hosted a lunch for representatives of the Roman Catholic, Muslim, and

Jewish communities to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including circumcision of boys, legal restrictions on the ritual slaughter of animals, and the Islamic Community's project to open the country's first mosque. 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 (midyear 2019 estimate). In 2003 the government ceased asking about religious affiliation in censuses, so accurate statistics about membership in religious groups are difficult to obtain. Estimates of the Catholic community's size range from one million to 1.5 million persons. According to the secretary-general of the Islamic Community, the Muslim population remained at approximately 100,000. Estimates of the Serbian Orthodox Church community's size range from 30,000 to 45,000 persons. The head of the Protestant community estimates its size at 10,000 persons. The Jewish community estimates its size at 300 persons. The Orthodox and Muslim communities include a large number of immigrants from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A number of refugees and immigrants, including foreign workers, are part of the Muslim community. The Buddhist community, made up mostly of ethnic Slovenians, is estimated to number 2,000 persons.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for 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 affords 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

stipulates 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 allows churches and other religious communities to register with the government to obtain status as officially recognized religious entities, but it does not restrict the religious activities of unregistered religious groups. Unregistered religious groups may establish legal associations or entities to purchase property and are required to pay taxes on such property, whereas property owned by registered religious groups used for religious purposes is exempt from taxation. According to the law, the rights of registered and unregistered 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; and freedom to construct buildings for religious purposes. Registered religious groups may provide religious services to military, police, prisons, hospitals, and social care institutions. The government employs Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy in the armed forces and employs two Roman Catholic priests to coordinate spiritual care in prisons. The law states religious groups have a responsibility to respect the constitution and the legal provisions on nondiscrimination.

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 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, 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 (\$25). 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, the largest of which are the Catholic Church, Islamic Community of Slovenia, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Evangelical Church.

The government may refuse the registration of a religious group only 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.

In accordance with the law, citizens may apply for the return of property nationalized between 1945 and 1963. The government may provide monetary compensation to former owners who cannot receive restitution in kind; for example, it may authorize monetary compensation if government institutions are using the property for an official 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 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 human rights ombudsman to investigate and report on alleged human rights violations by the government. The president nominates and the national assembly appoints the human rights 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, but appellants must exhaust all regular and extraordinary legal remedies before turning to the ombudsman. 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 Government Council for Dialogue on Religious Freedom under the auspices of the MOC Office for Religious Communities is responsible for promoting transparency and explaining national and European Union (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, the Advocate of 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 a nonbinding opinion by the human rights ombudsman states 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." Some hospitals do not offer circumcision because of this opinion.

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 officials abuse the power of their positions to commit these offenses, they 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.

On hate speech, the law prohibits the incitement to hatred, violence, and intolerance based on nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, skin color, social status, political or other beliefs, sexual orientation, and disability in a way that could threaten or disrupt public order.

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

### **Government Practices**

The Samanadipa Forest Buddhist Hermitage applied to register as an official religious group. At year's end, the registration process remained pending.

The WJRO and Ministry of Justice continued a joint research project to establish the scope of heirless properties in the country seized by the Nazis or their collaborators. The research teams planned to complete their study in 2020. Restitution efforts remained complicated by an earlier law on property nationalization claims, which generally excluded property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945.

According to a Muslim community leader, an earlier request to the government by the Muslim community to reserve special locations in cemeteries for graves for Muslim and allow gravestones to face Mecca had been delegated by the central government to local governments. This leader said he did not see this as a major problem and had not yet addressed it with the relevant local governments. The Muslim community requested the government make pork-free meals readily available in hospitals, schools, prisons, and other 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 fewer 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. The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the country, Reverend Aleksandar Obradovic, attributed the SAF's lack of Orthodox clergy to low numbers of qualified Orthodox priests in the country, rather than to inadequate government support. The Orthodox community said it was preparing two candidates for service as chaplains in the SAF by 2023. Muslim community leaders said the Ministry of Defense had not employed an imam in the SAF, despite their requests to do so. The Jewish community did not have any rabbis in the country; a rabbi in Trieste, Italy, remained responsible for Slovenia and routinely visited the country during the year. Catholic officials said their request for the government to employ an ordained bishop in the SAF to oversee the organization of Catholic chaplains in the military remained pending.

In October the Ljubljana Higher Court ordered the state-operated Farmland and Forest Fund to pay approximately 21 million euros (\$23.6 million) in damages to the Catholic Archdiocese of Ljubljana following protracted negotiations to return land the Yugoslav communist regime confiscated following World War II. The fund paid the full award to the archdiocese before the end of the year.

The Islamic Community of Slovenia continued to provide certificates to companies producing meat from stunned animals, confirming the meat was halal. The Jewish community raised concerns about the law requiring slaughtering with stunning, stating this violated kosher laws, and imported kosher meat from neighboring countries. The government defended the law as necessary to comply with EU regulations to prevent unnecessary suffering to animals.

The Office for Religious Communities and leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities said continuing confusion regarding 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. Muslim and Jewish leaders objected to the human rights ombudsman's opinion that circumcision violated the rights of children, calling it religious discrimination.

In his annual Ramadan remarks in June, Mufti Grabus expressed concern with what he stated were rising levels of Islamophobia in the country. Grabus said that extremist and nationalist platforms in Europe were partly responsible, which was apparent in certain media outlets, on social media, and in some political platforms that often depicted Islam as a violent religion. Grabus also expressed concerns about hate speech targeting Muslims and urged the government to dedicate more attention to combating hate speech.

In a case involving Roma, in August the Supreme Court ruled that incidents involving threats, abusive language, or insult do not necessarily need to jeopardize public order and peace to be treated as crimes. Before this ruling, hate activity typically required violence to occur. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said the ruling set an important precedent for combating incitement to hatred, violence, and intolerance.

According to the Slovenian Press Agency, in April Office for Religious Communities Director Gregor Lesjak said there were practically no legal disputes regarding religious freedom, and that the European Court of Human Rights had never processed a case of violation of religious freedom in the country.

High-level government officials attended observances marking the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Government officials confirmed the country supported IHRA's Working Definition of Antisemitism.

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

Muslim groups said Muslims faced obstacles in obtaining access to halal food and spiritual care, and in circumcising their male children. In contrast to previous years, these groups reported Muslim workers did not have difficulties obtaining time off for Islamic holidays.

There were manifestations of anti-Islamic sentiment in the conventional media and on social media platforms. In March adviser to former prime minister Bernard Brscic formed a new far-right antimigrant party, the Homeland League. During an interview in May, Brscic said Islam was a totalitarian ideology rather than a religion, and Muslims had the goal of destroying Western civilization. The general state prosecutor was conducting an internal investigation to ascertain why a local prosecutor declined to prosecute Brscic for alleged Holocaust denial in 2017. This investigation was pending at year's end. Muslim community leaders, government representatives, and NGO groups stated that anti-Islamic sentiment had declined from 2018 levels and that it seemed to be aimed more at migrants than Muslims as a whole.



Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU-member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 33 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Slovenia, while 62 percent said it was rare; 81 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, 93 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 88 percent said they would be with an atheist, 84 percent with a Jew, 82 percent with a Buddhist, and 82 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a “love relationship” with an individual belonging to various groups, 91 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 81 percent if atheist, 72 percent if Jewish, 73 percent if Buddhist, and 68 percent if Muslim.

In January the Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in each EU-member state. According to the survey, 16 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism to be a problem in Slovenia, and 12 percent believed it had increased over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 19 percent; on the internet, 19 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 17 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 15 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 14 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 14 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 15 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 15 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 16 percent.

Trieste-based Rabbi Ariel Haddad characterized Slovenia as a safe place for Jews and said Jewish-related events in the country attracted high-level attendance, a view not shared by other leaders, such as Vice Chair of the Jewish Community of Slovenia Igor Vojtic.

Construction of the country’s first mosque continued in Ljubljana. The Islamic community expected the mosque to open in 2020. In the interim, it rented places for worship, including large sports halls for major events.

The Orthodox community’s only church was also located in Ljubljana, and Orthodox representatives continued efforts to build churches in Koper and Celje.

The Orthodox community reported the construction of the church in Koper was delayed due to opposition from the mayor, who had not put the issue to the city council for a vote since it was first raised in 2018. Representatives of the Orthodox community purchased land in the center of Koper in 2018 for the church but reported the mayor offered land outside of town instead. The Orthodox community rejected the proposal, because the offered location was too far from the city center. In the interim, they were holding services at a local Catholic church. 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 continued to report productive relations among members of different religious groups, including an active interfaith dialogue at workshops and conferences. They also reported good relations with the government in general but expressed a need for more dialogue with the government on issues related to religious freedom.

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

Embassy officials continued to meet regularly with government officials responsible for religious freedom, including the MOC's Office for Religious Communities. Issues discussed included the prohibition of animal slaughter without prior stunning, circumcision of male children, and interfaith dialogue.

In April the U.S. special envoy for Holocaust issues, along with representatives from the WJRO, met with senior government officials and members of the local Jewish community to discuss the joint study on heirless properties. They also discussed possible government gestures toward the Jewish community, such as offering the community a government property that could serve as its headquarters and a venue for gatherings and ceremonies, as well as a provision of funds to support Holocaust survivors. In November the embassy supported another visit of WJRO representatives to meet with senior government officials to continue the dialogue on Holocaust restitution issues and the course of action to be taken following completion of the joint study.

In October the Ambassador hosted an event for representatives of the Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox communities to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including interfaith dialogue, hate speech, and relations with the government. In February the Charge d' Affaires hosted an event for representatives of the Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities to discuss issues related to religious freedom,

such as circumcision of boys, legal restrictions on the ritual slaughter of animals, and the Islamic Community's project to open the country's first mosque.

The embassy amplified its engagement through social media posts about the embassy's meetings with representatives of religious communities and the Secretary of State's remarks at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington in July.

In May the embassy cosponsored a roundtable on religious plurality in Murska Sobota in the northeastern part of the country at which an embassy representative delivered remarks on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy sponsored the visit of Secretary-General of the Islamic Community of Slovenia Nevzet Poric to participate in an exchange program in the United States on advancing interfaith relations. On his return, Poric reported that the program would help his work to foster better relations among religious groups in the country.