



2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Macedonia

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Almost all religious groups asserted that the government favored the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA). Some groups stated that the government inconsistently implemented regulations for the registration of religious groups and the ownership and use of property by religious groups, favoring some, including the MOC-OA, over others. The head of the self-declared Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, which has links to the Serbian Orthodox Church and does not recognize the MOC-OA, remains in prison for embezzlement and was convicted on separate charges of money laundering. Restitution of expropriated properties from the Yugoslav era continued to proceed slowly.

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. At times, ethnic tensions negatively affected religious freedom. The Bektashi community reported harassment and occasional threats from individuals with differing interpretations of Islam. The politicization of religious issues appears to be growing and has had a negative effect on religious tolerance.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers met regularly with religious groups and government officials to discuss issues such as property restitution, interfaith tolerance, and the separation of church and state.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2013 estimate). The last national census in 2002 estimated that 65 percent of the population was of the Orthodox Christian faith with large and 33 percent of the Muslim faith. Other religious groups include Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Sufi orders, and Jews. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation; the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian and most Muslims are ethnic Albanian. There are currently 30 registered religious organizations in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. An antidiscrimination law includes discrimination based on religious beliefs.

There is no official state religion, and the law states that all registered religious organizations are separate from the state and equal before the law. Although a constitutional amendment specifically names only five religious communities (the MOC-OA, the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM), the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Evangelical Methodist Church), the same amendment also allows other religious organizations to apply for government recognition. In order to obtain the same legal rights and status as the five groups named in the constitution, the law requires aspirant religious communities to register with the courts.

Religious organizations can apply to register themselves as a "church," a "religious community," or a "religious group." According to judicial authorities, these three categories are treated equally before the law. Skopje Basic Court II accepts registration applications and has 15 business days to determine whether a religious organization's application meets the legal registration criteria. These criteria are: a physical administrative presence within the country, an explanation of the beliefs and practices that distinguish it from other religious organizations, a unique name and official insignia, a breakdown of the organization's financial assets and funding sources, identification of a supervisory body to manage the organization's finances, and minutes from the organization's foundational meeting. The law allows multiple groups of a single religion to register. The courts interpret the law to require that the registered leaders of religious groups be citizens of Macedonia.

The court sends approved applications to the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), which adds the organization to its registry. If the application is denied, the organization can appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the State Appellate Court denies the application, the only recourse for the organization is to file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court on grounds of discrimination of religious rights. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization can appeal the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

All foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites, whether affiliated with a registered religious organization or not, must obtain a work visa before arriving, a process that reportedly takes approximately four months. Foreign religious workers are then required to register with the CRRCG. The visa validity is six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent visa renewals are valid for one year. Although the spouses of foreign religious workers are eligible for a six-month visa, children are not eligible to accompany the religious worker until a one-year visa is issued.

The law does not permit private religious primary schools, but allows private religious schools at the secondary level and above, as well as religious education in religious venues such as churches and mosques.

The Ministry of Education requires fifth-grade students to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content: Introduction to Religions, Ethics in Religion, or Classical Culture in European Civilization.

Government Practices

The government's policies towards minority religious groups and its implementation of the registration process led to complaints of favoritism and politicization of religion. There was no progress on the restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government.

Members of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, which has a following of approximately 100 members but is recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as the sole legitimate autonomous Orthodox Church in Macedonia, stated that the government subjected them to media harassment and undue monitoring due to their refusal to recognize the MOC-OA's complete independence from the Serbian Orthodox Church (autocephaly). In August Skopje Basic Court I found several members of the group, including its leader, Jovan Vraniskovski, guilty of money laundering. While his co-defendants were given two-year suspended sentences, Vraniskovski, a former bishop of the MOC-OA who had been defrocked and previously imprisoned for embezzlement related to the same case, was sentenced to three years in prison. A Supreme Court decision in February upheld Vraniskovski's previous embezzlement charges, and his followers responded by filing an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights on October 31.

Most other religious groups stated that the government favored the MOC-OA by granting it unique tax privileges, public properties free of charge, funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches, and exclusive invitations for its representatives to attend government functions. Moreover, other religious groups said the ruling coalition's dominant ethnic Macedonian and predominantly Orthodox party politicized religion for its own political gain by appealing to the religious beliefs and identity of the country's majority, and by using the MOC-OA as a tool to that end. The MOC-OA denied any affiliation with the government and said that the church does not involve itself in politics. Smaller religious organizations also stated that religious organizations not listed in the constitution are not treated as equal to the five named organizations.

Some within the government and the Muslim community stated that the ICM also benefited from close ties to the government. As an example, they cited the government's grant to the ICM of direct liaison responsibility with Saudi Arabian consular officials for the issuance of visas for the Hajj. These individuals stated further that this right allowed the ICM to charge disproportionate fees of approximately 400 euros (\$551) to validate applications for the otherwise free visas issued by Saudi Arabia for Hajj participation.

Some groups complained of political influence in the religious registration process. Skopje Basic Court II had no applications pending from previous years, and it did not receive any new applications for registration during the year. The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order, continued a long-running property dispute with the ICM in Tetovo. As a consequence of the Bektashi community's inability to register as an official religious organization, the community cannot make independent claims to Islamic religious property. The ICM continued to occupy most of the Harabati Baba *teqe* compound in Tetovo claimed by the Bektashi, limiting the Bektashis' ability to worship there. Judicial officials stated that the court denied the Bektashi Community of Macedonia's registration application because it was "incomplete." However, the Bektashi stated that the court denied their application because of political interference from the ICM and the government.

In January the Bektashi Community of Macedonia submitted an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights to challenge the 2012 Constitutional Court ruling that declared the Bektashi's discrimination-based appeal regarding the denial of their registration "inadmissible for review."

The dominant MOC-OA remained the sole registered Orthodox group due to the requirement that religious groups seeking recognition not have names or symbols similar to those of an already registered group. The self-declared Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid was awaiting a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights regarding its application to register as a recognized religious organization, which courts had denied on the legal grounds that it could not substantiate the difference between its name and symbols and those of the MOC-OA.

In September the Ministry of Interior (MOI) responded to complaints from the ICM that an imam in the village of Dobrosinci of the Vasilevo Municipality had been harassed in July by two local citizens, one a municipal employee, regarding the noise level of his mosque's loudspeakers during call to prayer, and physically attacked by the same men in September. The MOI issued a written warning to one of the men and a verbal warning to the other. The ICM called the MOI's response "too lenient." The CRRCG reported they received over 100 complaints every week regarding noise levels during the call to prayer and indicated that the government was considering more stringent regulation of noise from religious structures such as mosques and churches.

The government had previously restituted all Jewish communal property and almost all churches and many mosques to the appropriate religious groups. Several religious groups, however, have not regained full ownership of other properties expropriated during the communist era. A complicating factor in restitution or compensation claims was that seized properties often changed hands or were developed after expropriation.

The ICM reiterated it was not able to regain the rightful use of several mosques that the government had agreed to return. In addition, the ICM continued to state that in some cases the government blocked the process of restitution by selling or starting new construction on disputed property, or by disputing the historical legal claim of the ICM to religious properties. The government did not reconstitute the site of the Burmali mosque, demolished in the 1920s, to the ICM. The ICM repeated its claim that the government refused to reconstitute this property because the ruling coalition's ethnic Macedonian party and the MOC-OA could not accept the prospect of a new mosque in Skopje's city center. The government, however, argued that the Law on Restitution only applied to properties nationalized after 1945.

Local and national authorities continued to block reconstruction of a mosque in Prilep, destroyed during the 2001 conflict, and construction of a mosque in the village of Lazhec. The ICM said that it continued to meet with government officials to resolve property issues. However, the ICM boycotted a government-sponsored international conference in May on interfaith dialogue due to the bias the ICM perceived the government held against the ICM, its reconstruction projects, and restitution claims.

Several small religious groups complained of bureaucratic obstacles to construction or ownership of houses of worship, which they stated were deliberately designed to make it difficult to construct new religious facilities or to enlarge existing structures. The municipal government continued to block the transfer of ownership of a meeting hall near Kriva Palanka to the Jehovah's Witnesses. In June the Jehovah's Witnesses community filed new lawsuits regarding the transfer, and court decisions were pending at year's end. The community stated its missionaries were subject to occasional harassment by police when distributing religious material.

The trial of six ethnic Albanian Muslims for the April 2012 murder of five ethnic Macedonians of the Orthodox faith near the village of Smiljkovci continued at year's end. The six continued to be portrayed as Islamic terrorists by some media outlets and some government officials.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because religious identity often correlates with ethnic identity, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as motivated by religious intolerance. Isolated acts of vandalism at cemeteries and religious sites continued. The MOC-OA reported 10 robberies of Orthodox churches. In March vandals damaged a memorial in Stip dedicated to the Jews who had been deported to the Treblinka death camp during World War II.

Some smaller religious communities and international observers expressed concern that religious issues were becoming increasingly politicized and that the construction of religious structures was being used to mark ethnic and/or political territory. Protests occasionally resulted from conflicts over construction of religious structures. Shortly after the visit of the prime minister to the village of Oktisi in the Struga Municipality, the MOC-OA began construction of a small church in a predominantly Muslim district. The MOC-OA stated that a church once had existed on the site, while the ICM maintained that a mosque had also once stood there. Following several nonviolent protests against the construction organized by the local Islamic community, a court order, still in effect at the year's end, temporarily suspended construction at the site.

In October the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch described the MOC-OA as a "pseudo-church organization supported by state authorities," angering Orthodox ethnic Macedonians. Officials from the MOC-OA stated that the difficulties facing former bishop Vraniskovski and his followers were strictly legal in nature and not related to religious freedom or the influence of the MOC-OA.

The Bektashi Sufi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) reported that it continued to receive threats from individuals with differing interpretations of Islam who did not recognize it as a bona fide religious entity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador met with government officials and the leaders of religious groups to discuss issues such as property restitution, interfaith tolerance, and national religious policy. He and other embassy officers attended events such as interfaith conferences and an interfaith breakfast hosted by the Bektashi community to foster religious freedom and tolerance.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials hosted several iftars in observance of Ramadan to promote religious and ethnic tolerance. Government officials and members of various religious groups attended. In June the embassy sponsored a speaker to hold a presentation at an embassy-sponsored American cultural and educational center about religious tolerance. The embassy also chose a Macedonian to participate in a 2014 U.S. exchange program about religious tolerance and countering religious extremism. The embassy contributed funds toward a meeting of working-level members of the Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant communities to discuss inter-faith understanding and tolerance.

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