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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Kosovo

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, subject to limitations to ensure public order, health, and safety or to protect the rights of others. The law does not allow religious groups to register as legal entities, creating obstacles for them in conducting their affairs. The government approved and parliament considered but did not vote on a draft law that would allow religious groups to register as legal entities so they would be able to conduct business and legal matters with the state and private entities.

Religious groups said municipal authorities often did not provide them with equal rights and benefits, especially with regard to religious property and burial sites. The Pristina Municipality, citing the lack of a construction permit, halted Serbian Orthodox monks from cleaning and making light repairs at the unfinished St. Saviors Church after vandals set fire to it. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) said Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sport (MCYS) Kujtim Shala did not fulfill a pledge to issue a permit for the reconstruction of a chapel in the Holy Archangels Monastery in Prizren. The government worked with the Kosovo Islamic Community (BIK) to combat violent extremism, and condemned vandalism of religious places.

Protesters threw stones and Molotov cocktails at participants in several events hosting Serbian Orthodox pilgrims. In one incident, ethnic Albanian protestors threw stones and prevented Serbian Orthodox pilgrims from celebrating the Feast of the Assumption in Mushutishte/Musutiste. On several occasions, vandals damaged SOC religious properties, despite government protection. An ethnic Serb damaged a Muslim mosque.

U.S. embassy representatives met frequently with government officials to urge religious tolerance, passage of legislation to allow religious institutions to obtain legal status, and full implementation of the law protecting religious sites and to discuss efforts to resolve religious property disputes. The embassy engaged with religious communities to discuss access to cemetery sites for Protestants and cosponsored a conference on the role of women in interfaith dialogue and countering violent extremism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (July 2016 estimate). Census data from 2011 identifies 95.6 percent of the population as Muslim, 2.2 percent as Roman Catholic, and 1.4 percent as Serbian Orthodox. A boycott of that census by ethnic Serbs resulted in a significant undercounting of SOC members. The SOC estimates there are 120,000 Serbian Orthodox believers in Kosovo, or 6.3 percent. Protestants and those without a religious affiliation said they were incorrectly classified as Muslims by census takers. Per the

census regulation, census takers did not inquire if citizens were Protestant. The Protestant community estimates 20,000 followers throughout the country, or 1.1 percent of the population. Census categories for “other,” “none,” or “no response” each constitute less than 1 percent.

The majority of the Muslim population belongs to the Hanafi Sunni school, although a number follow Sufi and Shia traditions that are part of Bektashi or Tarikat groups. Most SOC members reside in majority ethnic Serb municipalities in the south of the country, or in four northern Serb-majority municipalities. The largest Catholic communities are in Gjakove/Djakovica, Janjeve/Janjevo, Kline/Klina, Pristina, and Prizren. Evangelical Protestant populations are located throughout the country and concentrated in Pristina and Gjakove/Djakovica. There are small numbers of Jews in Prizren and Pristina.

Religion and ethnicity are often linked. The majority of ethnic Albanians are Muslim, while some are Catholic and Protestant; almost all ethnic Serbs belong to the SOC. The majority of ethnic Ashkalis, Bosniaks, Egyptians, Goranis, Roma, and Turks are also Muslim, while most ethnic Montenegrins and some Roma belong to the SOC. Ethnic Croats almost all belong to the Catholic Church.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion for all residents, including the right to change, express, or not express religious belief; to practice or abstain from practicing religion; and to join or refuse to join a religious community. These rights are subject to limitations for reasons of public safety and order or to protect the health or rights of others. The constitution provides for the separation of religious communities from public institutions, including the right of religious groups to independently regulate their own organizations, activities, and ceremonies, and the right to establish religious schools and charity institutions. It guarantees equal rights for all religious communities, stipulates the country is secular and neutral with regard to religion, declares that the state shall ensure the protection and preservation of the country’s religious heritage, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The constitution stipulates the law may limit freedom of expression to prevent provocation of violence and hostility on grounds of race, nationality, ethnicity, or religion. It allows courts to ban organizations or activities that encourage racial, national, ethnic, or religious hatred.

The constitution stipulates communities traditionally present in the country, including religious communities, shall have specific rights, including to maintain, develop, and preserve their religion, use their own language, establish and manage their own private schools with financial assistance from the state, have access to public media, establish and use their own media, maintain unhindered peaceful contacts with persons outside the country with whom they share a religious identity, and have equitable access to public employment. It guarantees 20 of 120 seats in the national assembly to minority communities and stipulates the adoption, amendment, or repeal of any laws pertaining to religious freedom and cultural heritage or to agreements with religious communities requires a majority of the deputies present holding seats guaranteed for minority communities as well as a majority of the all the deputies present.

The constitution provides for the Ombudsperson’s Institution, which is responsible for monitoring religious freedom among other human rights and recommending actions to correct violations. It stipulates the state shall take all necessary measures to protect individuals who may be subject to threats, hostility, discrimination, or violence because of their religious identity.

The law does not provide a legal mechanism or specific guidance for religious groups to obtain legal status through registration or other means. The law does not require groups to register, but without legal status, religious groups may not own property, open bank accounts, employ staff, access the courts, or perform other administrative tasks in their own name.

The law stipulates there is no official religion, but it lists five “traditional” religious communities: the BIK, the SOC, the Catholic Church, the Hebrew (Jewish) community, and the Evangelical (Protestant) Church. The law provides extra protections and benefits to these five groups, such as reduced taxes and relief from water tariffs. According to a law passed in 2015, religious buildings belonging to these five communities, but not their administrative offices, are eligible for waivers of water utility fees. Religious institutions must apply with the public water provider to be granted the waiver.

According to the law, “public education institutions shall refrain from teaching religion or other activities that propagate a specific religion.”

Municipalities hold titles to all public cemeteries, including those for religious communities, and are required by law to maintain them.

The law provides safeguards for religious and cultural Special Protection Zones (SPZs), based on religious and cultural significance, by restricting nearby activities that could damage the surrounding historical, cultural, or natural environment. According to the law, the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC) arbitrates disputes between the government and the SOC concerning SPZs and other matters related to protecting the SOC's religious and cultural heritage. The IMC is a special body that stems from the Comprehensive Plan for Kosovo and the SPZ law. It became operational in 2010. Its mandate includes safeguarding SOC heritage as included in the law on Velika Hoca/Hoce e Madhe village and the law on Prizren's historic center. The IMC includes the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning (as cochair); the MCYS; the SOC; the Special Representative of the European Union (as cochair) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The IMC's charter calls for meetings every two months; however, the group only met once during the year in April.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government took steps to counter radicalization and violent extremism related to religion. According to religious communities, the government continued to respond to societal violence and vandalism against several religious minority communities. Parliament considered, but did not vote on, a government-recommended bill that would allow religious groups to register and acquire legal status so they would be able to conduct business. Religious minorities said municipalities failed to act on requests to build churches and cemeteries, and the government failed to assist them with zoning issues. Several longstanding disputes over ownership of religious property remained unresolved.

On January 30, the Kosovo Police (KP) arrested four ethnic Albanians in front of the Visoki Decani Monastery. According to the KP, the suspects were in possession of an AK-47 rifle and a pistol, and some wore clothing that the authorities stated was typically associated with ISIS militants. On February 1, a local prosecutor told the press two of the arrestees had been involved with the conflict in Syria. According to the KP, those arrested were fined for illegal possession of weapons and the case was closed. Father Sava, the monastery's Abbot, said the KP was uncooperative with the monastery during the investigation and deliberately downplayed the case in public. He said this incident demonstrated the need for Kosovo Force (KFOR) troops to remain at the monastery. Sava also expressed his concern that the suspects were not charged with more serious offenses.

On May 20, the Basic Court of Ferizaj/Uroševac convicted Imam Zekirja Qazimi, formerly from a BIK mosque in Gjiilan/Gnjilane, on charges of recruitment for terrorism and incitement of hatred, and sentenced him to 10 years' imprisonment. On November 25, the Court of Appeals confirmed his sentence.

On July 26, prosecutors charged Iranian cleric Hasan Azari Bejandi with laundering money through a nominally nongovernmental organization (NGO) he operated. Authorities said Bejandi was the head of the Quran Foundation of Kosovo, the reported umbrella group for five Shia organizations he ran in the country with links to Iran. The KP did not arrest Bejandi, who fled the country on July 28. The government subsequently shut down the five organizations.

On September 15, prosecutors charged four ethnic Albanian imams; two of the imams were charged with committing terrorist acts and the other two were charged with "inciting national, racial, religious, or ethnic hatred."

The government worked with the BIK and civil society groups to combat violent extremism. As part of the government's strategy, the BIK held sessions in its madrassahs and Islamic studies facilities that urged students not to fall prey to extremism.

Leaders of the country's BIK, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, SOC, Tarikat (Sufi and Shia orders) and Bektashi (Shia orders) communities continued to criticize the government for its failure to complete a draft law that would provide a legal mechanism through which religious groups could gain legal status so they would be able to conduct business and legal matters with the state and private entities. The Bektashi community also requested that such a law should state it is a community constituting part of the historical heritage and cultural and social life of the country. Although many groups said they had found alternative methods to conduct some of their business affairs, most reported difficulties in registering property and vehicles, opening bank accounts, and paying taxes on employee salaries. Some religious communities opened bank accounts that were not in their communities' names, and the Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church received a tax accounting number from the government in order to pay taxes as if it were a business. Some communities said it was difficult to undertake basic financial tasks, and that they were taxed as for-profit businesses.

Ethnic Albanian protestors threw stones and bottles and prevented Serbian Orthodox pilgrims from celebrating the Feast of the Assumption on August 28 at the ruins of the SOC Holy Trinity Monastery in the village of Mushutishte/Musutiste in the Suhareka/Suva Reka Municipality. The protestors also targeted police, injuring six. The KP evacuated a local priest and his aide from the monastery and turned back approximately 150 pilgrims, accompanied by Deputy Prime Minister Branimir Stojanovic and Communities and Returns Minister Dalibor Jevtic, who observed the holiday in Zociste Monastery (approximately 14 miles away). The KP responded to the violence with tear gas and antiriot measures, and arrested 25 protestors. President Hashim Thaci and Speaker of Parliament Kadri Veseli condemned the violence and called for peace and respect for displaced persons, regardless of their ethnicity. Opposition parties condemned "police violence" against protestors.

Some school officials applied a mandatory administrative instruction previously issued by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology prohibiting primary and secondary students from wearing religious garb on school property; others did not. According to the BIK, public schools did not expel any students for wearing headscarves while attending classes. The Ombudsperson Institution did not receive any reports of a school barring students wearing religious garb, such as headscarves, from attending classes. Some members of the BIK, however, reported girls were forced to remove headscarves in order to study in public schools.

Religious groups said government authorities did not take steps to ensure municipalities treated religious organizations equally on property issues, in particular with regard to churches and cemeteries. Although the law specified that municipalities held title to cemeteries and were responsible for their upkeep, in practice some municipalities allowed religious groups to take de facto possession of public cemeteries. Protestants said most municipalities had not granted land for cemeteries, nor addressed most of their requests to build churches on land the community owned. The Pristina Municipal Assembly approved a Protestant cemetery on December 2; however, at year's end, challenges remained at the central government level. The Glogovac/Glogovac Municipality also granted land to the Protestant community for a cemetery and a church, and the community was working with the municipality to implement the decision. At year's end, none of these municipalities had a Protestant cemetery where Christians could be buried with a cross. Existing Jewish cemeteries were reportedly in disrepair. Members of the Jewish community said they lacked the resources to maintain Jewish cemeteries and local authorities did not maintain these public sites as required by law. The Serbian Orthodox cemetery in Pristina was reportedly also in disrepair and not maintained by municipal authorities. The SOC cited member displacement from the area as a reason for its inability to adequately care for the cemetery. In both cases, the Municipality of Pristina denied these cemeteries were in disrepair.

Protestants continued to lack a designated burial area anywhere in the country. Protestant leaders in Pristina and Gjakove/Djakovica said they faced limitations on holding Protestant funeral services or burying members with crosses at the public cemetery. Protestants said they faced discrimination from municipal or religious leaders who exercised de facto control over some publicly owned burial sites. They said the BIK and the Catholic Church had dedicated spaces, but the Protestant community did not, particularly in Gjakove/Djakovica.

Protestant leaders met with central and local government officials, including Pristina Mayor Shpend Ahmeti, Gjakove/Djakovica Mayor Mimoza Kusari-Lila, Gjilan/Gnjilane Mayor Lutfi Haziri, and former Glogovac/Glogovac Mayor Nexhat Demaku to discuss these issues. The Protestant community engaged in negotiations with Gjakova/Djakovica municipal officials, including Mayor Kusari-Lila, on providing a dedicated space where its parishioners could be buried in a Protestant ceremony and with a Christian cross at the city cemetery. The municipality stated Protestants could be buried with a cross and that the grave was personal property of the owner. The municipality allowed the Protestant community to join the municipal safety council, which acts as a forum for community institutions to discuss local issues of significance. Municipal officials in Ferizaj/Urosevac issued a decision to cover the burial expenses for all citizens, including Protestants. Ferizaj/Urosevac Mayor Muharrem Svarqa also pledged to identify land for a Protestant cemetery, but at year's end the municipality had not done so.

Representatives of the Messiah Evangelical Church in Pristina reported the Municipal Assembly agreed to issue a building permit in November for a house of worship, on land the church purchased. Municipal authorities had previously denied a permit for this church for more than a decade. The Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, however, had not issued a final permit by year's end.

The BIK expressed concern over what it said were false press reports that the Municipality of Mitrovica/Mitrovice North would seize the site of the former Ibar Mosque for use for an international humanitarian project. On September 27, BIK Mufti Naim Ternava visited the site where the mosque had stood before Serb forces destroyed it in 1999 and confirmed the community's intention to rebuild the mosque as soon as the European Union completed revitalization work on the adjacent Austerlitz Bridge. In reference to the mosque reconstruction, Mitrovica/Mitrovice Noeastarth mayor Goran Rakic told the media on July 22 that a yet-to-be-established association of Serb-majority municipalities would decide upon mosque construction in the north of the country.

On May 20, after 16 years of litigation, the Constitutional Court confirmed the Special Chamber of the Supreme Court's (SCSC) 2012 ruling that more than 24 acres of land should be returned to the SOC's Visoki Decani

Monastery. The ruling legally ended the SOC's dispute with a defunct state-owned enterprise from the Yugoslav era and the municipality of Decan/Decani. The Constitutional Court's decision rejected the 2015 finding of the SCSC's Appellate Panel that had sought to return jurisdiction of the case to the Basic Court in Decan/Decani. The Mayor of Decan/Decani, Rasim Selmanaj, called the Constitutional Court's ruling unacceptable and vowed not to implement it, stating he would resign rather than register the SOC as the owner. At year's end, the mayor had not resigned. Municipal employees went on strike for one week in objection to the ruling. On May 25, the Decan/Decani Municipal Assembly adopted a resolution opposing the ruling, calling the monastery's property claims dishonest and unjust. Italian KFOR troops continued to provide fixed security at the monastery. In response to a call for action from Decan/Decani Mayor Selmanaj, several hundred protestors demonstrated in opposition to the ruling on May 26. On June 16, approximately 800 people again protested against the Constitutional Court's decision. The leader of the Vetevendosje party, Visar Ymeri, called the ruling "shameful," stating it "gave legitimacy to the [Slobodan] Milosevic regime's decisions."

The Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) continued to occupy an SOC-owned building and parking lot in Pristina without paying the rent stipulated by a 2011 prime ministerial decision. The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MLSW) vacated a second SOC-owned building adjacent to the agency. The MLSW stopped paying the agreed rent on that building to the SOC in 2014. The MLSW said it recognized that rent was owed to the SOC, and negotiated with the ACA to settle with the church on past and future rent. At year's end, however, no agreement had been reached, and the ACA continued to block a settlement proposed by the MLSW despite multiple years of Auditor General Reports stating it should pay the rent.

On February 17, the SOC received notice that the University of Pristina (UP) had appealed the Pristina Basic Court's 2015 dismissal of the UP's 2012 lawsuit that requested the demolition of the unfinished Christ the Savior Church and the transfer of the land back to the university. A municipal assembly decision had transferred the land from the UP to SOC in the 1990s. On February 24, the SOC responded that the UP's claim should be dismissed as unfounded.

On September 9, unknown persons burned tires inside the SOC St. Saviors Church, which caused large plumes of black smoke to be emitted from the church. The church's gate, interior, and facade were also damaged. The KP attributed the damage to a homeless person. SOC Bishop Teodosije Sibalic condemned the "arson" of the church, and blamed police for failing to protect the area. He also called for the unfinished church's construction to recommence. On September 11, Bishop Teodosije, accompanied by clergy and Deputy Prime Minister Branimir Stojanovic, with a KFOR guard, cleaned and attempted to make light repairs to the gate. According to international experts on site, on September 15, Pristina municipal inspectors entered the church without legal permission and ordered the church to stop cleaning debris and repairing the fire damage, on the grounds that it lacked a construction permit to do so. The SOC called the entry official harassment and discrimination. Inspectors, assisted by police, reportedly confiscated the clergy's IDs and threatened to seal the church with crime scene tape if the clergy failed to report to the municipal inspection department. The SOC presented ownership documents, including those issued by the municipality itself in 2012, and departed the church. The municipal inspectors did not address their complaint in the Serbian language, as required by law. Pristina Mayor Ahmeti stated on social media the municipality had no evidence the SOC owned the property, and Pristina authorities stated the church needed to hold a construction permit to undertake work, including painting over graffiti, inside the church.

On October 12, the MCYS's Institute for the Protection of Monuments denied the SOC's request to reconstruct the St. Nicolas Church in the Holy Archangels Monastery in Prizren. The monastery's only church was destroyed in 1999, and the St. Nicholas Church was destroyed at the end of the 16th century. According to some IMC members, MCYS Minister Kujtim Shala's refusal to issue the permit for reconstruction prompted the SOC to stop participating in the IMC. In November the SOC submitted additional information, in support of its application, but by year's end the institute had not issued the permit. Due to the lack of a permit, municipal inspectors ordered the SOC to halt construction on several occasions. The SOC stated the institute's denial of the permit came after a legal deadline, after which the construction should have been allowed to proceed automatically. Notwithstanding the application, the SOC had full discretion to manage its property based on Annex V of the Ahtisaari plan.

The Municipality of Pristina appealed the Basic Court's 2015 ruling that the Catholic Church owned property adjacent to the Mother Teresa Cathedral. An appeal was pending at year's end.

The SOC expressed concern that the MCYS did not consult with it on a draft law on cultural heritage that it said could annul the SOC's legally guaranteed autonomy and preclude it from independently deciding upon the restoration and renovation of its buildings. At year's end, the MCYS had not completed development of the new cultural heritage strategy.

The central government provided some funding to Islamic education in BIK madrassahs in Pristina, Prizren, and Gjiilan/Gnjilane. The government did not provide funding for religious education to any other religious group. Some members of other religious groups and secular representatives voiced concern about the government's funding of religious education in madrassahs over others.

Kosovo Serbs, Kosovo Gorani, Kosovo Croats, and some Kosovo Roma attended Serbian-language public schools that followed a curriculum designed by the Serbian government, based on municipal education laws and in coordination with the education ministry. Restrictions on religious education did not apply to these public schools. Most ethnic Serbs elected to enroll in Serbian Orthodox religious classes instead of civic education. The Serbian government funded the salaries of all teachers in Serbian-language schools, including religious instructors. The Kosovo government supplemented the salaries of some teachers and staff in Serbian-language schools.

On September 23, the Water Regulatory Agency issued an administrative instruction based on the law waiving water utility fees for religious buildings belonging to the five “traditional” religious communities. The instruction directed eligible religious institutions to apply for the waiver with the public water provider. Although the law stipulated the waiver was applicable to all five religious communities, the Protestant community stated it followed the procedure but was not granted a waiver, whereas another religious group had received it.

The police’s unit for specialized protection of cultural and religious heritage sites provided 24-hour security at 24 sites around the country. Despite this protection, theft and vandalism continued at SOC sites, primarily outside of the SPZ where special protection was not provided. For example, individuals set a fire set inside the unfinished Christ the Savior Church in Pristina on September 6. According to SOC Bishop Teodosije, the fire and other acts of desecration were a result of the government’s failure to provide permanent police protection at the church.

On October 3, the SOC said the Pristina Municipality had ignored the vandalism of a chapel at the Serbian Orthodox cemetery in Pristina, stating it had been used as a garbage dump and toilet despite the presence of a guard.

In May the Pristina Municipality approved a request by the Beit Israel NGO to provide assistance in constructing a synagogue. By year’s end, however, the municipality had not provided the assistance, and Beit Israel criticized it for not following through on its approval.

During the year, supporters of Turkish Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen stated authorities, including the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology as well as Kosovo Police, sought to overly regulate their schools and restrict the ability of their affiliated clergy to lead prayers. As a result, Gulenist school representatives said they might be forced to close some of their licensed schools in the country.

As part of its Interfaith Kosovo program, the government undertook several initiatives to promote religious tolerance. The Interfaith Kosovo website provided news about all religious communities in the country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized the fifth International Interfaith Conference on June 1-2, highlighting the role of women in interfaith dialogue and countering violent extremism. On March 19, Interfaith Kosovo organized a workshop in Prizren, focusing on interfaith dialogue and cultural heritage protection to promote reconciliation and combat religious extremism. The workshop gathered 100 participants from around the world.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were instances of religious-based violence, interference with religious pilgrimages, hate speech, and vandalism. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In Gjakove/Djakovica, where a group of 150 Serbian Orthodox pilgrims was visiting a Serbian Orthodox monastery for the Assumption Day Feast, protestors attempted to block the car of a visiting Serbian official and threw stones as he exited the monastery. The pilgrims departed safely to Visoki Decani Monastery.

On June 28, an unidentified person threw stones at a van on its way to the Jarinje border crossing, causing slight injuries to two visiting Serbian pilgrims who were celebrating St. Vitus Day. On the same day, the KP reported unidentified individuals threw two Molotov cocktails at an escorted convoy of buses near Mitrovica/Mitrovica South, causing no damage. There were no arrests in either incident.

On January 6, a group of demonstrators gathered in front of an SOC church in Gjakove/Djakovica to protest Orthodox Christmas services. Protestors threw eggs and snowballs at police and towards pilgrims from Serbia who were refugees and previously lived in the city. Protest organizer Mimoza Shala, an activist from the Vetevendosje Party, told the media “war criminals disguised as pilgrims” were unwelcome in Kosovo. The KP removed the protestors without making any arrests. Gjakove/Djakovica Mayor Kusari-Lila called for peaceful protest and respect for religious rites.

The SOC criticized the media for calling its representatives “criminals” and for what it said was contributing to a climate of intolerance. The BIK said the media generally portrayed Muslims in a negative light.

As of September the police had registered 20 incidents of property usurpation, theft, and damage involving SOC facilities, primarily vandalism or theft of metal objects later sold for scrap.

Early in the year, unknown perpetrators urinated in the SOC’s unfinished Christ the Savior Church in Pristina. Deputy Prime Minister Branimir Stojanovic condemned the act.

On August 14, an ethnic Serb from the village of Pasjane in the Partes/Partesh Municipality broke into a nearby mosque in Velekince/Velekinca village and climbed the minaret, partially dismantling and damaging it. Police arrested the perpetrator, while a local imam helped calm several hundred ethnic Albanians who witnessed the vandalism. On August 15, Kosovo-Serb leaders condemned the incident, and SOC Bishop Teodosije addressed a letter to Mufti Naim Ternava, expressing solidarity and stating the perpetrator suffered from drug addiction and mental health problems. On August 16, the Gjilan/Gnjilane Basic Court ordered the perpetrator to one month’s detention.

On October 9, Catholics inaugurated a new church in the village of Llapushnik/Lapusnik in the Glogovac/Glogovac Municipality, following protests in 2015 by Muslim residents who opposed the allocation of land to the church.

Leaders of different religious groups reported generally good relations with one another and participated in numerous interfaith discussions and initiatives. The OSCE continued to coordinate some activities among religious groups, including meetings with municipal mayors, to discuss issues such as access to graveyards and permits to build religious buildings.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met frequently with government officials, including the president, speaker and members of parliament, and prime minister, to urge passage of legislation to allow for the registration of religious institutions and to support full implementation of the law on SPZs. Embassy officials urged increased dialogue between ethnic Albanian members of the government and civil society with SOC members. The embassy urged government officials to resolve the land dispute involving St. Nicolas Chapel in the Holy Archangels Monastery in Prizren and the government’s lack of rent payments owed to the SOC for the ACA’s use of the property in Pristina. The embassy discussed the property issues of other religious groups with government officials on numerous occasions and urged officials to settle the issues based on law.

Embassy officials regularly discussed religious tolerance with leaders of the SOC, as well as with the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Tarikat, Bektashi, and Jewish communities. The U.S. Ambassador hosted a local ecumenical iftar in Gjilan/Gnjilane, during which he discussed the importance of countering violent extremism, SOC property disputes, providing cemetery space for all communities, and the importance of religious freedom in the country, including the draft law on religious freedom. Embassy officials met with BIK imams to discuss efforts to promote tolerance and counter violent extremism and discussed draft laws on religious freedom and cultural heritage with religious leaders. Embassy officials met with the religious leaders on multiple occasions to discuss their human rights and legal concerns.

The embassy cofunded the International Interfaith Conference 2016, held June 1-2 in Pristina, which focused on the role of women in interfaith dialogue and countering violent extremism. Nobel Peace Laureates Shirin Ebadi and Tawakkol Karman participated at the conference, which included 300 participants and religious leaders from 50 countries.