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MOLDOVA

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There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

In general there are amicable relations among the various religious communities. The law forbids "abusive proselytizing;" however, the authorities have not taken legal action against individuals for proselytizing.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, a 1992 law on religion that codifies religious freedoms contains restrictions that could--and in some instances did--inhibit the activities of some religious groups. The law provides for freedom of religious practice, including each person's right to profess his religion in any form. It also protects the confidentiality of the confessional, allows denominations to establish associations and foundations, and states that the Government may not interfere in the religious activities of denominations. However, the law prohibits "abusive proselytizing" and requires that religious groups register with the Government.

The procedures for registering a religious organization are the same for all groups. The Government has recognized 19 religious organizations. Three additional religious organizations have pending applications for registration: the General Assembly of the Evangelist Union, the Church of the True Orthodox-Moldova (a branch of the Russian Overseas Orthodox Church), and the Mitropolia Basarabiei. The Bessarabian Orthodox Church was denied registration by the Government and is involved in ongoing litigation over this issue.

The Government denied recognition to the Bessarabian Orthodox Church in October 1992, March 1996, August 1996, and March 1997. The Bessarabian Orthodox Church was formed in 1992 when a number of priests broke away from the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. The Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which sees itself as the legal and canonical successor to the pre-World War II Romanian Orthodox Church in Bessarabia (the part of Moldova between the Nistru and Prut Rivers), subordinated itself to the Bucharest Patriarchate of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The Government consistently has refused to register the Bessarabian Church, citing unresolved property claims and stating that the Bessarabian Church is a "schismatic movement." The issue has political as well as religious overtones, as it raises the question as to whether the Orthodox Church should be united and oriented toward Moscow, or divided with a branch oriented toward Bucharest. (Leaders of the Moldovan Orthodox Church appear more interested in independence than in links to Moscow.) In 1997 the Supreme Court overturned an appellate court decision affirming the right of the Bessarabian Church to register with the Government. However, the Supreme Court's decision was based on a procedural issue rather than on the merits of the case. The Bessarabian Church appealed the case to the European Court of Human Rights in June 1998. The Government submitted its response in February 2000, arguing that registering the Bessarabian Church would interfere with an internal matter of the Moldovan Orthodox Church. There was no decision by mid-2000.

Religious Demography

The Moldovan Orthodox Church is the predominant religion and sometimes is favored over other religious groups. The most visible area of favoritism is the restitution of property expropriated during the successive Nazi and Soviet regimes. The Church had little difficulty in recovering its property and, in cases where property was destroyed, the Government offered alternative compensation. High ranking church officials also reportedly have diplomatic passports issued by the Government.

Over 90 percent of the population nominally belong to the Orthodox Church (with the Moldovan Church claiming over 1,000 parishes and the Bessarabian Church claiming close to 100). Followers of the Old Russian Orthodox Church (Old Believers) make up approximately 3.6 percent of the population. Other registered groups include: Roman Catholics; Baptists; Pentecostals; Seventh-Day Adventists; Jehovah's Witnesses; Bahais; and Hare Krishnas. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has one congregation. The Jewish community has approximately 60,000 members, with about 45,000 living in Chisinau. There are 9 synagogues in Chisinau, Balti, Tiraspol, and Bender; about 5,000 persons celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The law on religion as amended to legalize proselytizing--in principle

bringing the legislation in line with the European Convention on Human Rights--went into effect in June 1999. However, the law explicitly forbids "abusive proselytizing," which is defined as "an attempt to influence someone's religious faith through violence or abuse of authority." Thus far authorities have not taken legal action against individuals for proselytizing.

Foreign missionaries are allowed to enter the country and represent many faiths and denominations. They experience the same difficulties in getting residence permits and customs clearances as other foreign workers.

In the 1999-2000 school year, the history of religion was studied as an optional course. Approximately 1,200 students in two districts enrolled during the school year. During the 2000-2001 school year, in conformity with a February 25, 2000 decree by Parliament, religious instruction will be obligatory for primary-school students and optional for secondary and university students. There are two public schools and a kindergarten open only to Jewish students. These schools receive the same funding as the state schools, and are supplemented by financial support from the community. Jewish students are not restricted to these schools. There are no comparable schools for Moldovan Orthodox believers and no reports of such schools for other religious faiths. Agudath Israel has operated a private boys' yeshiva, licensed by the Ministry of Education, since 1991, and opened a girls' yeshiva in November 1999. There are a number of theological institutes, seminaries, and other places of religious education throughout the country.

The law provides for restitution to politically repressed or exiled persons whose property was confiscated. This regulation has been extended in effect to religious communities. The Moldovan Orthodox Church has received restitution or compensation for nearly all of its prewar property that was expropriated. The Church has recovered churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and administrative properties. Property disputes between the Moldovan and Bessarabian Churches have not been resolved. The Jewish community has had mixed results in recovering its property. The Baptist Church has only one remaining property restitution claim.

In January 1998, authorities in Transnistria (a separatist region not under the control of the Government) canceled the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses. Repeated attempts by Jehovah's Witnesses to reregister have been denied or delayed. Transnistrian officials regularly confiscate religious tracts from Jehovah's witnesses, most recently in January 2000, because the group is not registered properly. According to local leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses, two preachers were arrested and detained for several days in April 1999. The Church of the Living God has been denied registration in five towns in Transnistria. Baptist leaders have complained that they are not allowed to distribute religious literature or organize public meetings in Transnistria. Non-Orthodox groups complain that they generally are not allowed to rent property and often are harassed during religious services.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

In general there are amicable relations between the various religious communities. The dispute between the Moldovan and Bessarabian Orthodox Churches is ongoing, but the members generally worship freely. No significant ecumenical movements or activities were reported.

In May 1999, a group of about 500 Orthodox Christians and between 4 and 6 priests attacked a small group of Baptists in the village of Mingir, injuring 3 and partially destroying a Baptist church that was under construction. The Ministry of Internal Affairs is investigating the case, but no charges had been filed by mid-2000. The village mayor who was implicated in the incident lost his bid for reelection. The Baptist church was allowed to register locally and has continued the construction project.

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Moldova hosted several roundtable discussions on freedom of religion. These discussions followed the Helsinki Committee's publication, in February 1999, of a book, *Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion in the Republic of Moldova*, containing the major international and national declarations, laws, and cases concerning religious freedom.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights. Embassy officers also have met with Baptist leaders and government officials to discuss the restitution of Baptist property in Chisinau.

The U.S. Ambassador met with the leaders of the major religious organizations at various times during the period covered by this report. He and other embassy officers also attended the opening ceremonies for the Agudath Israel girls' yeshiva. Embassy employees met with leaders and members of most of the major religious groups, including the Bessarabian Orthodox Church. Embassy employees maintain official or social contact with most of the resident American missionaries. The Embassy has supported religious (and secular) groups that provide humanitarian assistance to the country.

The Embassy's human rights officer maintains regular contact with religious leaders throughout the country, including in the separatist Transnistria region. In May 2000, the Embassy nominated a group of young parliamentarians--including a counselor for the Bessarabian Orthodox Church and a Baptist minister--to visit the United States as part of the Department of State's international visitor program.

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