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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Czech Republic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, a supplement to the constitution, provides for freedom of religious conviction and states everyone has the right to change, abstain from, and freely practice religion, subject to potential limitations by law in the event of threats to “public safety and order, health and morals, or the rights and freedoms of others.” The law prohibits speech that incites hatred based on religion.

The case appealing the Ministry of Culture’s (MOC) rejection of the registration application from the Protestant Church of Saint Corona was pending before the Prague Municipal Court at year’s end. Similarly, the Ecclesia Risorum’s (Church of Laughter’s) appeal of the MOC’s multiple denials of its registration applications was pending before the Supreme Administrative Court at year’s end. In April, the Supreme Administrative Court rejected an appeal filed by Path of Guru Jara (PGJ) against the MOC’s registration denial. In January, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) held an International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration dedicated to Jewish musician Alma Rose, who perished at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. In November, the MFA hosted the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) ministerial conference with a focus on freedom of belief under authoritarian regimes. The government continued to compensate religious groups for communal property confiscated by the communist regime and returned art objects seized from a Jewish entrepreneur in 1939 to his U.S.-based descendants. The opposition Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) Party and its leader, Tomio Okamura, continued to publicly criticize Islam and Muslim migrants.

The government reported 25 antisemitic and no anti-Muslim incidents in 2022, compared with 35 and seven incidents, respectively, in 2021. Local nongovernmental organization (NGO) In IUSTITIA reported one threat incident and two violent attacks against Muslims in 2022. The Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC), which monitored the internet for instances of antisemitism, reported 2,277 antisemitic incidents in 2022 – 101 percent more than in 2021 and the previous year and 162 percent higher than in 2020. In addition to online hate speech, the 2022 incidents included two cases of property damage and 10 of harassment. The chairman of the FJC stated, “Despite the dramatic increase in the number of online antisemitic incidents, the cases of antisemitically motivated violence in the Czech Republic remained isolated...” In November, representatives from more than 30 of the country’s universities called on authorities and academic leaders to combat the rise of antisemitism in academia, and in December, the FJC noted a general increase in antisemitic expressions following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel, primarily online.

In November, during a visit to the country to lead the U.S. delegation to the IRFBA ministerial conference, the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights discussed cooperation regarding religious freedom, democracy, and human rights with senior government officials, partners, and youth leaders. U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom issues, including religious tolerance, with MOC officials and the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues at the MFA. Embassy representatives discussed efforts to restore the former Jewish cemetery in Prostejov with local officials. Embassy officials met with Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders to reaffirm U.S. government support for religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy provided a grant to the Jewish Museum for events marking the centennial of the death of Franz Kafka.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.8 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2021 census, of the 70 percent of citizens who responded to the question about their religious beliefs, approximately 48 percent held none, 10 percent were Roman Catholic, 13 percent listed no specific religion, and 9 percent identified with a variety of religious faiths, including the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, other Christian churches, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Academics estimate there are 10,000 Jews, while the FJC estimates there are 15,000 to 20,000. Leaders of the Muslim community estimate there are 10,000 Muslims, most of whom are immigrants. According to a 2018 report by the Pew Research Center based on a 2015 survey of 1,490 adults, 72 percent of persons do not identify with a religious group, 21 percent identify as Catholic, 3 percent as Protestant, 1

percent as Orthodox Christian, and 3 percent as “other” or did not know or refused to answer.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution does not explicitly address religious freedom, but the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, a supplementary constitutional document, provides for freedom of religious conviction and the fundamental rights of all, regardless of faith or religion. It states every individual has the right to change religion or faith; to abstain from religious belief; and to freely practice religion, alone or in community, in private or public, “through worship, teaching, practice, or observance.” The charter defines religious societies, recognizing their freedom to profess their faith publicly or privately and to govern their own affairs, independently of the state. It stipulates conscientious objectors may not be compelled to perform military service and that conditions for religious instruction at state schools shall be set by law. The charter states religious freedom may be limited by law in the event of threats to “public safety and order, health and morals, or the rights and freedoms of others.”

The law states the Department of Churches within the MOC is responsible for religious affairs. Religious groups are not required by law to register with the government and are free to perform religious activities without registering. Unregistered religious groups are also free to assemble and worship but may not legally own property. They may form and register as civic associations to own and manage their property.

The law establishes a two-tiered system for religious groups that register with the ministry. To qualify for the first (lower) tier, a religious group must present to the Department of Churches at least 300 signatures of adult members permanently residing in the country, a founding document listing the basic tenets of the faith, and a clearly defined structure of fiduciary responsibilities. First-tier registration confers limited tax benefits, including exemptions from taxes on interest earned on current account deposits, donations, and members’ contributions.

For second (higher) tier registration, a group must have been registered with the Department of Churches as a first-tier group for 10 years, have published annual financial reports for 10 years prior to the second-tier application, and have membership equal to at least 0.1 percent of the population, i.e., approximately 10,700 persons. The group must provide this number of signatures as proof. Second-tier registration entitles religious groups to the tax benefits granted to first-tier groups and the exercise of special rights, including conducting weddings, teaching religion at public schools, and conducting chaplaincy services in the military and

prisons. Prisoners may receive visits from their own clergy, regardless of the clergy's registration status. The government requires second-tier groups to publish an annual report on their exercise of the special rights.

There are 44 state-registered religious groups – 23 first and 21 second tier. Second-tier religious groups registered prior to 2002 are entitled to government subsidies. The law phases out direct state subsidies to second-tier religious groups over a 17-year period ending in 2029.

The MOC reviews applications for first- and second-tier registration with input from other government bodies such as the Office for Protection of Private Data and from outside experts on religious affairs. While the law sets a 30-day deadline for administrative decisions, it allows for extensions that can delay decisions indefinitely. Applicants denied registration may appeal to the Minister of Culture to reconsider its decision and, if denied again, to the courts.

The law permits second-tier religious groups to apply through the MOC to teach religion in state schools if there is a demand for such classes. Eleven of the 21 second-tier groups have permission to teach religion classes. The religious groups provide the teachers, and the school pays their salaries. If a state school does not have enough funds to pay for its religious education teachers, religious groups pay for them. Student attendance at religious classes is optional. According to law, if seven or more students register for a particular religion class at the beginning of the school year, a school must offer that class to those who registered.

The government does not regulate religious instruction in private schools.

The law authorizes the government to return land or other property that was confiscated during the communist era and is still in the government's possession to 17 religious groups (the largest of which are the Roman Catholic Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, and Czechoslovak Hussite Church). The government estimates the total value of property in its possession eligible to be returned at 75 billion Czech crowns (CZK) (\$3.4 billion). The law also sets aside CZK 59 billion (\$2.7 billion) in compensation for property – mostly in possession of private persons or entities or local or regional governments – that cannot be returned, payable over a 30-year period ending in 2042. The law includes an indexation clause that it uses to adjust the annual compensation payments according to inflation. Based on an agreement among the affected religious groups, the law allocates approximately 79 percent of these funds to the Catholic Church and 21 percent to the other 16 groups. The law prescribed a one-year deadline ending in 2013 for religious groups to file restitution claims for confiscated property. The government agency in possession of a property for which a group has filed a restitution claim adjudicates that claim. If the government agency rejects a property claim, the claimant may appeal the decision in court.

The law prohibits speech that incites hatred based on religion, as well as the denial of Nazi- and communist-era genocides and crimes. Violators may be sentenced to up to three years in prison. The law designates January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Religious workers who are not from European Economic Area countries or Switzerland must obtain long-term residence and work permits to remain in the country for more than 90 days. There is no special visa category for religious workers. Foreign missionaries and clergy are required to meet the requirements for a standard work permit.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In April, the District Court in Litomerice convicted Zdenek Masar and Jaromir Bester of Holocaust denial and sentenced them to 10-month and eight-month suspended sentences, respectively. Prosecution of Patrik Tusl, who was also charged with Holocaust denial in this case, was halted as he was prosecuted for other more serious crimes. The three men posted a video filmed at the National Cemetery next to the former Terezín Ghetto, denying the Nazi genocide of Jews.

In August, the Czech Police's National Center against Terrorism, Extremism, and Cybercrime reopened criminal proceedings for Holocaust denial against four individuals and three companies associated with the publishing firm Guidemedia for producing a Czech translation of Germar Rudolf's book, *Dissecting the Holocaust*. The previous criminal proceeding was halted based on the defendants' procedural complaint. The case was pending at year's end. Police continued to investigate Guidemedia for publishing an antisemitic children's book, *Poisonous Mushroom*, first published in Germany in 1938 as part of antisemitic Nazi propaganda. In December, the District Court of Prague Five heard a number of witnesses in the court proceedings regarding the case of Emerich Drtina of the Nase vojsko (Our Army) company. In January 2021, authorities charged Drtina and his company with promoting a movement suppressing human rights and freedoms for publishing a 2021 calendar featuring Nazi figures. The case was pending at year's end.

In September, the Czech Social Christian Church appealed the MOC's 2022 decision to reject its registration application directly to the Minister of Culture. As of the end of the year, the minister had not rendered a decision. In April, the Supreme Administrative Court rejected the PGJ's 2021 appeal of the Prague Municipal Court decision to uphold the MOC's denial of its registration. In November 2022, the Protestant Church of Saint Corona appealed to the Prague Municipal Court the MOC's 2022 decision to deny its registration. The case remained pending at year's end. In July 2022, the Church of Laughter appealed the Prague Municipal

Court's 2022 decision to uphold the MOC's 2019 and 2020 denials of its registration. The case remained pending at the Supreme Administrative Court at year's end.

In October, the Brno Regional Court released PGJ leader Jaroslav Dobes and member Barbora Plaskova from prison. In 2021, the Olomouc Appellate Court upheld the two men's convictions for the rape of six women who filed criminal complaints against them. At that time, they were in the Philippines where they had been in immigration detention since 2015. In August, Philippines authorities extradited Dobes and Plaskova to the Czech Republic; upon arrival, authorities placed them in prison. Dobes and Plaskova appealed their imprisonment, stating the eight years of detention in what they described as deplorable conditions in the Philippines should satisfy their prison sentences of five and half and five years, respectively. While the Brno Regional Court agreed with their argument, the Regional Public Prosecutor of Brno filed a complaint in October with the High Court of Brno to annul the regional court's decision, stating time spent abroad could not be included as time served because neither was in custody for an act committed in the Czech Republic. The high court had not released a decision as of year's end. In October, authorities released Dobes and Plaskova from prison pending resolution of the appeal.

The government provided second-tier religious groups approximately CZK 3.26 billion (\$150 million). Of this, CZK 866 million (\$39.8 million) comprised government subsidies to 17 religious groups, and a further CZK 2.39 billion (\$109.9 million) was allocated to 16 religious groups as compensation for communal property in private and state hands that would not be returned. Four of the 21 second-tier groups declined the government subsidy and were not eligible for compensation payments for lost property. The Baptist Union accepted the state subsidy, but while eligible to receive it, opted not to accept compensation for unreturned property. In addition, the MOC provided CZK 2.44 million (\$112,000) in grants for religiously oriented cultural activities in response to applications from various religious groups.

The government paid the annual allotment of CZK 20 million (\$920,000) of the total of CZK 100 million (\$4.6 million) earmarked for 2019-2023 as a contribution to the Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims. This contribution was used for projects focused on Holocaust remembrance and education, welfare for Holocaust victims, and care for Jewish monuments. In October, the government earmarked payment of CZK 6.5 million (\$299,000) for 2024, plus annual payments of CZK 33.5 million (\$1.5 million) from 2025 to 2029.

In February, the MOC returned art objects seized from a Jewish entrepreneur in 1939 during the country's occupation by Nazi Germany to his U.S.-based descendants. The Prague National Gallery and the Museum

of Decorative Arts in Prague identified the pieces in their collections in cooperation with the New York State Department of Financial Services' Holocaust Claims Processing Office. Also in February, the Prostějov city council selected an architectural firm to execute a preparatory study for the restoration of the city's former Jewish cemetery that the MOC designated as a cultural monument.

The SPD and its leader and member of the Chamber of Deputies, Tomio Okamura, continued to criticize Islam and Muslim migrants. In October, Okamura wrote in a statement published on his party's Facebook page, "In my opinion, Islam is not consistent with our concept of civic rights because it considers nonbelievers and women as inferior beings." He added, "No to illegal migration. No to Islam in the Czech Republic. No to terrorists."

In June, the government approved the *2022 Report on Extremism and Hate Crime*. Government agencies continued to work in accordance with the *2021-26 Strategy to Combat Extremism and Hate Crime* and the *2023-24 Action Plan to Combat Extremism and Hate Crime*, which defined as one of three strategic goals improving protection and assistance to victims of all hate crimes, including religiously motivated crimes. The action plan outlined specific tasks for various ministries, such as the Ministries of Interior, Justice, Education, Finance, and the MOC, in fighting extremism and hate crimes, including those against religious groups. The document outlined steps including "raising public awareness about extremist activities, initiatives by state regulatory and security bodies to reduce hate speech on the internet, strategic communication to combat xenophobia and racism, education and prevention programs at schools, specialized training for law enforcement, and assistance to victims."

On January 27, the MFA held an International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration dedicated to Austrian Jewish musician Alma Rose, who perished in 1944 at Auschwitz-Birkenau. According to the online music publication *Strad*, Rose was a celebrated violinist who was ordered to form an orchestra and perform music in Auschwitz. Speakers included Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský and the ambassadors of Israel and Austria. In remarks, they each addressed the importance of standing against antisemitism and fighting Holocaust denial and distortion.

On January 27, the Senate, in cooperation with the FJC, again organized a ceremony to honor victims of the Holocaust. President of the Senate Miloš Vystrčil, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Marketa Pekarová Adamová, Holocaust survivor Dita Krausová, and FJC Chairman Petr Papoušek attended. Senate President Vystrčil cautioned, "It is necessary to remind and emphasize that the Holocaust did not come out of nowhere. It was preceded by years of often underestimated propaganda and radicalization of society." Pekarová Adamová, who visited Auschwitz in

Poland in November 2022 to mark the anniversary of the Kristallnacht ("Night of Broken Glass") pogroms in Nazi Germany, spoke about the need to stand up against evil and injustice and to preserve historical memory of the Holocaust for future generations. The event was broadcast live on state-funded television.

On November 28-29, the MFA organized the IRFBA ministerial conference focused on freedom of religion or belief under authoritarian regimes; Minister of Foreign Affairs Lipavsky opened the conference. The conference explored the misuse of religion for political purposes, and how to build resilience and adapt new technologies in the suppression of religious or belief-based minorities. The main panel sessions also analyzed past experiences in Central Europe under communist rule, and considered how that experience might help Central European policymakers and publics understand the means by which repressive regimes currently restrict freedom of religion or belief.

In April, the 18th annual public reading of Holocaust victims' names took place in Prague and 23 other cities throughout the country. Public figures who participated in the reading included Deputy Speaker of the Senate Jiri Drahos, local mayors, and members of the diplomatic community.

In April, Senate President Vystrcil and Prime Minister Petr Fiala sponsored the 20th annual "Culture against Antisemitism" event and march. Senator Drahos, Prague Mayor Bohuslav Svoboda, Holocaust survivor Helga Hoskova-Weissova, and others delivered remarks. Svoboda noted, "It was important not to give up the fight against antisemitism and to continue to defend truth in an active way."

In December, the Government Council for National Minorities adopted a resolution concerning the growth of antisemitism in which it condemned any form of antisemitism, appealed to digital platforms to cooperate with law enforcement institutions regarding online hate crime incidents, and supported security measures adopted by police to protect Jewish centers and synagogues.

During the year, the government provided grants for religiously oriented cultural activities, including the annual "Night of Churches" held in several cities, the "Red Wednesday" project in support of victims of religious persecution, a liturgical festival of St. Cyril and Methodius in Velehrad, an annual concert in memory of Holocaust victims, the Hussite Festival, the Stetl Fest, the annual "Culture against Antisemitism" event and march, and the 8th Litomysl Days of Baroque Religious Tradition.

According to the FJC, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) continued to provide security to the Jewish community and Jewish sites based on a 2016 Memorandum of Cooperation between the FJC and MOI.

The government-funded Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, established by the FJC, contributed CZK 4 million (\$184,000) to 14 institutions providing health and social care to approximately 300 Holocaust survivors in the country.

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

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 28, in Prague's Lesser Town, a historical area and popular tourist destination, employees at a well-known pub refused to serve several tourists from Israel and their Czech guides. Some patrons shouted insults at the tourists and police had to intervene. Although police and the FJC later determined the case was not motivated by antisemitism, it drew elevated attention in the context of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel. At a December meeting of the Czech Government Council for National Minorities, the FJC noted a general increase in antisemitic expressions following the attacks, primarily online.

In November, representatives from more than 30 of the country's universities called on authorities and academic leaders to combat the rise of antisemitism in academia, emphasizing the need for decisive legal measures against any expressions of hatred.

In 2022, the most recent year for which its data were available, the MOI reported 25 criminal offenses with antisemitic motives and none with anti-Muslim motives, compared with 37 and seven offenses, respectively, in 2021. The MOI reported only incidents that it investigated. The MOI did not provide any details of the crimes.

The FJC, which monitored the internet for instances of antisemitism, reported 2,277 antisemitic incidents in 2022, an increase of 101 percent over the 1,128 incidents in 2021 and 161 percent over the 874 incidents in 2020. According to the FJC, the largest increase was in antisemitic hate speech on the internet, which accounted for 99.5 percent of the incidents. On June 14, FJC Chairman Papousek stated "Despite the dramatic increase in the number of antisemitic incidents, the cases of antisemitically motivated violence in the Czech Republic remained isolated and the country safe for the Jewish community." According to the FJC, "In addition to the receding coronavirus pandemic, the content and quantity of antisemitic narratives were influenced mainly by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the economic and energy crisis related to it."

In addition to online hate speech, the 2022 incidents included two cases of property damage and 10 of harassment. In one incident in February, an Orthodox Jew in the proximity of the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague became

a target of a verbal assault. A passenger of a passing car shouted aloud “Jude” (Jew in German). In April, a Jewish guest in a restaurant in the district of Kromeriz was threatened with death and called a “dirty Jew” by another guest. In September, an unknown perpetrator poured an unspecified liquid on commemoration “Stones of the Disappeared” laid into the pavement during the “Stetl Fest” Jewish culture festival.

The FJC stated 77.4 percent of the online incidents in 2022 included mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, vulgar, and stereotypical claims and conspiracy theories; 17.7 percent involved “new antisemitism” (a category that includes, according to the FJC, demonization of Israel, double standards, and delegitimization of Israel) and the “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions” movement; 2.9 percent of incidents consisted of threatening, approving, justifying, or calling for physical aggression; and 2 percent involved Holocaust denial. The FJC’s 2022 report, released in May, concluded the country remained safe for the Jewish community.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) cited three cases of antisemitic threats against members of the Jewish community in 2022, one in a letter, and two within personal insults. Two of the cases included death threats. ODIHR sourced reporting of two cases to the FJC and one to the NGO In IUSTITIA.

The ODIHR report, released in December and citing In IUSTITIA, included one threat incident and two violent attacks against Muslims in 2022. A Muslim woman who was a convert to Islam was threatened with death after she wrote about the types of attacks she faced on social media. In one of the reported violent incidents, an Arab man was attacked with a broom and spat at while being subjected to xenophobic and anti-Muslim insults by his roommates in the hostel where he lived. In the other, three persons, including a Roma man and a woman working for an anti-racism and Roma-rights magazine, were physically assaulted by a couple in a bar. The perpetrators also shouted anti-Muslim insults.

On October 16, under the auspices of the Israeli embassy, the NGO Memorial of Silence organized the annual event “Drumming for Bubny,” to commemorate the victims of the first Nazi transport of Jews from Prague on October 16, 1941. According to the organizers, the drumming was meant to break the silence that symbolizes the passive attitude and silence of the majority in situations leading to a tragedy like the Holocaust. The event took place at the Bubny railway station where several speakers called for solidarity with victims of the October 7 terrorist attacks in Israel.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November, the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights led the U.S. delegation to the IRFBA

ministerial conference. She and the Ambassador met with senior government officials, members of parliament, and civil society partners to deepen cooperation regarding religious freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Embassy representatives continued to engage government officials from the MOC on religious issues, including religious tolerance and developments on restoration of the Prostejov Jewish cemetery. In June, an embassy official spoke at a Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Prostejov and expressed support for the restoration of the local Jewish cemetery to Mayor Frantisek Jura.

On October 16, the Ambassador and other embassy officials attended the annual “Drumming for Bubny” event in Prague, which commemorates the first transport of Jews from Nazi-occupied Prague in 1941. As the event occurred a week after the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel, the attendance of the Ambassador and other embassy officials underscored U.S. support for religious tolerance.

Embassy officials continued to meet with representatives and members of the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities to reaffirm the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and diversity, and to hear their views on interfaith relations.

The embassy provided \$12,000 to the Jewish Museum for a series of educational and cultural events marking the centennial of the 1924 death of Franz Kafka, who lived most of his life in Prague.

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