



2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Macedonia

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of religion and religious expression. It provides for equality before the law for all individuals regardless of religious belief. Five religious groups are cited by name in the constitution; other religious groups may register with the government to receive benefits equivalent to those of the five named groups. Courts rejected the registration applications of four religious groups. A court overturned the conviction for money laundering of the head of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, which in the past had broken away from the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), and ordered a new trial. The archbishop had been released shortly before this decision after three years in prison on an embezzlement conviction. Some religious groups reported government favoritism towards the MOC-OA and reported discrimination or harassment against smaller religious groups. The leader of the country's largest Muslim group, the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia (ICM), stated the government had illegally wiretapped the group's leaders.

An internal dispute within the ICM led to a 13-day occupation of ICM headquarters by protesters after the group's leadership dismissed its secretary general and the mufti of Skopje. The occupation ended after a court ruled in favor of the ICM leadership. The Bektashi Sufi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) reported harassment by individuals affiliated with the ICM who had different interpretations of Islam. Several individuals reported discrimination or harassment of Muslim men wearing long beards or women wearing hijabs. There were several acts of vandalism at cemeteries and religious sites.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with representatives from government, religious communities, and civil society to discuss religious freedom. The Ambassador discussed interfaith tolerance with senior government officials and at public appearances and discussed property restitution, and combatting violent extremism with the head of the ICM. The embassy funded a visiting speaker who discussed interfaith tolerance and countering violent extremism and supported Holocaust education efforts.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2015 estimate). The last national census in 2002 estimated 65 percent of the population was Orthodox Christian and 33 percent Muslim. Other religious groups, which together constitute less than 2 percent of the population, include Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews.

The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, and most live in the northern and western parts of the country, while the majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and southeastern regions. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation; the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian, and most ethnic Albanians are Muslim. There is also a correlation between religious and political affiliation, since political parties are largely divided along ethnic lines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality of rights for all citizens regardless of religious belief. It guarantees freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their faith freely and in public, individually or with others. It guarantees the religious identity of nationalities and communities in the country. The constitution states “the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Jewish Community and other Religious communities” are separate from the state and equal before the law and free to establish schools, charities, and other social institutions. The constitution bars political parties or other associations from inciting religious hatred.

The state recognizes the five religious groups specifically cited in the constitution. The law allows other religious organizations to obtain the same legal rights and status as these five groups by applying for government recognition and registration through the courts. The government has granted this recognition to 30 religious organizations (consisting of 15 churches, seven religious communities, and eight religious groups). Once registered, a religious church, community, or group is exempted from taxes and is eligible to apply for property restitution, government-funded projects, and construction permits for cultural preservation of shrines and cultural sites. It may also establish schools. Failure to register does not prevent a religious group from practicing, or result in legal punishment or fines, but prevents the group from engaging in certain activities, such as establishing schools and receiving donations, or receiving tax exemptions.

Religious organizations can apply to register as a “church,” a “religious community,” or a “religious group.” These classifications are based on group size, internal organization, and internal hierarchy. According to judicial authorities, these three categories are treated equally before the law and do not bestow different legal rights, benefits, or obligations. 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 distinguishing 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 founding meeting. The law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. The courts require the registered leaders of religious groups to be citizens.

The court sends approved applications to the Committee on Relations between 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 denial of religious rights. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization can appeal the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The law does not permit private religious primary schools, but allows private religious schools at the secondary level and above. The Ministry of Education requires fifth-grade students to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content: Introduction to Religions and Ethics in Religion. According to the ministry's description, these courses cover religion in general. The courses, however, are usually taught by priests or imams. If students do not wish to take a religious course, they may take the third option, Classical Culture in European Civilization, instead.

All foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites 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. Work visas are valid for six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent visa renewals are valid for one year. Clergy and religious workers from unregistered groups can be issued visas.

Government Practices

According to various religious observers, religious differences continued to play a role in criminal and civil court cases. The government continued to deny recognition to minority religious groups and maintained its preferential treatment of the MOC-OA.

On February 2, authorities released the head of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, Jovan Vraniskovski, on parole for good behavior after spending three years in prison. He had been convicted of money laundering and, earlier, of embezzlement. The Archbishopric of Ohrid stated it split off from the MOC-OA in 2002 to enter in unity with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church patriarch brokered Vraniskovski's release during a high-level visit in December 2014, according to the MOC-OA and the Russian Orthodox Church. The MOC-OA requested the release as a goodwill gesture to the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches, which opened the door for the MOC-OA to open negotiations with the Serbian Orthodox Church in order to settle the MOC-OA's status within the Orthodox community. Members of Vraniskovski's Church stated he had been convicted for his religious beliefs, and the country's Helsinki Committee for Human Rights called him a political prisoner. The government and the MOC-OA had said the archbishop's troubles were not related to his religion, but after Vraniskovski stated he had been tortured in prison in 2014 because of his religious affiliation, the MOC-OA asked for clemency for him in December of that year. The court released Vraniskovski on parole in February for his embezzlement sentence. On May 7, the Supreme Court published a ruling, based on its February review of Vraniskovski's appeal, reversing his money laundering conviction on grounds of substantive and procedural irregularities and sending the case back for retrial. At year's end, the case was pending retrial before Basic Court Skopje 1.

Basic Court Skopje II received four religious registration applications and denied them on various grounds. In January the court denied the application requesting registration of Christ's Living

Church for failing to list the material basis (funding sources, premises) for the group's operations. The basic court also denied a registration application from the group Trinitas in Macedonia, citing the applicant's failure to secure the Ministry of Justice's written approval to use "Macedonia" in the group's name and to provide proof the applicant, Aleksandar Vuletic, held citizenship. Vuletic did not appeal the ruling. The basic court denied a subsequent application by Vuletic requesting registration of the Christian community Trinitas, under the justification that the applicant submitted the same preaching materials as those of the already registered Christian church Oasis of the Republic of Macedonia. Vuletic appealed this Trinitas decision to the Skopje Appellate Court, which upheld the basic court's ruling rejecting the application. The appellate court upheld another decision by the basic court rejecting the registration of the group Titania.

The Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid was awaiting a ruling from the ECHR 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. The ECHR completed its hearing of the case but had yet to issue a verdict by year's end. According to the MOC-OA, the archbishopric has a following of approximately 100 members. The archbishopric, which the Serbian Orthodox Church recognizes as the sole legitimate autonomous Orthodox Church in the country, stated the government had subjected it to media harassment and undue monitoring due to its refusal to recognize the MOC-OA's complete independence from the Serbian Orthodox Church (autocephaly). According to the archbishopric, its membership numbers are in the thousands.

The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order, continued to await an ECHR ruling on its 2013 appeal asking the ECHR to overturn the Constitutional Court's declaration that the community's suit challenging the denial of its registration was "inadmissible for review," because it contained the name Bektashi, and another group with the same name had previously registered. Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) representatives said the ICM sponsored the other Bektashi group and helped them register to block the registration of the "only legitimate" Bektashi community in the country. Although the group remained unregistered, foreign members of the Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) were able to obtain religious visas.

In November the ombudsman, an official in the Ministry of Justice charged with protecting citizens' rights and combating discrimination, and the country's Helsinki Committee for Human Rights said the involvement of school children in events with a religious connotation served to incite intolerance. At a children's march in Bitola organized by a public school, the children stated they were there to "celebrate good Orthodox holidays only, and not holidays of other religions." The ombudsman said the school children were "mistakenly and unjustifiably being used to promote one religion in Macedonia." The ombudsman urged the Ministry of Education to investigate the children's march. The country's Helsinki Committee for Human Rights also condemned the march, stating the government was exacerbating interreligious relations.

The ombudsman called on all public elementary schools to pay special attention to the education of young people and to promote tolerance and respect, rather than misuse the school subject of Ethics in Religions to preach a specific religion. Mayors, local politicians, and local media reported that many of the religion classes offered in schools focused on the teachings of a single religious group, depending on the religious affiliation of the teacher.

In February the leader of the ICM stated the government had illegally wiretapped Islamic leaders, calling it a “psychopathic act” and publicly demanding the government take official legal responsibility for treating him and his associates “as criminals.” A Ministry of Interior (MOI) spokesperson called the allegations “ridiculous.”

Civil society groups, including Nisma, a think tank composed of several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) stated the government was interfering in religious matters, at the expense of secularity, and politicizing religion. . In December Parliament Speaker Trajko Veljanovski said in a speech that “citizens should return to Orthodox Christian values, under the flag of Christ.”

Smaller religious organizations not listed in the constitution, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Bektashi (Tetovo), and the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, said the government did not treat them as equals with the five religious organizations recognized in the constitution. As examples, they said they were excluded from official events and were not granted the same level of access to government officials. Many religious groups, such as the ICM, the Bektashi (Tetovo), and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, stated the government favored the MOC-OA by granting it unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge, offering funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches, and providing exclusive invitations for its representatives to attend government functions. The MOC-OA denied any affiliation with the government and said the Church did not involve itself in politics.

In March local government officials attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the erection of a 39-foot Orthodox cross in the Skopje municipality of Gjorche Petrov, and in October government representatives attended the groundbreaking of an MOC-OA church in Prilep. Local media reported the government had helped fund the construction of the cross and church and had also unfairly facilitated the permit process. In February the central government and the City of Skopje provided 87 million MKD (\$1.5 million) to upgrade the 217-foot-tall Millennium Cross, which belonged to a nondenominational Christian group on Mount Vodno, overlooking Skopje.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In May the ICM dismissed its secretary general and the mufti of Skopje. One day later, an armed group of the dismissed leaders’ followers forcibly entered the premises of the ICM headquarters in Skopje. Security footage from the incident showed dozens of men jumping over the fence, breaking down a glass door, and pushing men aside as they rushed inside the building. According to media and civil society groups, the attack was an attempt to wrest control of the leadership of the group; the ICM stated the government encouraged the attackers in order to destabilize the ICM. The Ministry of Interior deployed police to separate the two sides but did not evict the intruders. A 13-day occupation of the ICM headquarters ended only after a court decision recognizing the ICM leadership as the only legitimate representatives of the organization.

The Bektashi reported incidents of harassment by ICM-affiliated occupants of the Harabati Baba *teqe* (shrine) compound in Tetovo. Bektashi representatives reported they were verbally harassed regularly, stating that men told them to leave the compound.

Several individuals reported societal prejudice against Muslim men wearing long beards and women wearing hijabs. In one case, a Muslim doctor from Gostivar stated he was subjected to border police harassment and undue scrutiny, which delayed his border crossings whenever he entered and exited the country.

Progovernment media, such as the *Vecer* newspaper and the Sitel television station, negatively portrayed the leader of the Christ's Living Church as an "exorcist" and a "sectarian" after his group's application for registration was denied.

On November 6, following an anti-Islam protest in Kriva Palanka, assailants vandalized a makeshift mosque used primarily by ethnic Roma worshippers. Local media reported that as many as 1,200 citizens attended the protest, where they expressed outrage over the announcement that a mosque would be constructed in the town. The protest was loosely organized under the motto "No Islamization of Kriva Palanka" and was reportedly supported by the mayor of Kriva Palanka. The country's Helsinki Committee called the protest an "act of hate speech and religious intolerance," and Valentina Bozhinovska, President of the CRRCG, a government body that oversees dialogue between religious groups, said the incident was "unacceptable." Several political parties released statements calling for peace and tolerance. Police were investigating the vandalism and by year's end had questioned approximately 40 individuals but had not made any arrests. The government did not prosecute anyone for hate speech as a result of the protest despite appeals from civil society groups that it do so.

Acts of vandalism at cemeteries and religious sites continued. In September unknown vandals desecrated the Muslim cemetery in Ohrid. In March unknown perpetrators spray painted the walls of an Orthodox church in Tetovo and mosque in Bitola with obscene graffiti.

The MOC-OA reported 25 robberies in Orthodox churches and monasteries throughout the country. These robberies were primarily of money collected from donations and a small number of cultural heritage items such as icons.

The Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia, an NGO, continued to work with the Ministry of Education to implement Holocaust and Jewish history programs and to promote interfaith cooperation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador met with the head of the ICM to discuss religious freedom issues, property restitution, and combatting violent extremism. In addition, an embassy official met with representatives from smaller religious communities, government, and civil society to discuss religious freedom.

The Ambassador hosted an iftar for government officials, representatives of civil society, and representatives of various religious groups, at which he spoke about the importance of religious tolerance and encouraged the attendees to advocate tolerance in their own communities. In addition, embassy officials discussed the importance of interfaith tolerance while attending various iftars in the community. The Ambassador spoke about religious freedom and tolerance at a Holocaust memorial event in October.

In March the embassy funded the visit of a Muslim chaplain from a Jesuit university in the United States, who spoke in several cities about the importance of interfaith tolerance, and other religious freedom topics to university, youth, and religious groups.

The embassy supported the Holocaust Fund of the Jews of Macedonia with two small grants, one to cover the costs for teachers from outside of the capital to attend a Holocaust education seminar in Skopje, and another to fund the travel of a participant to a Holocaust summer academy in Poland.