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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: North Macedonia

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws prohibit religious discrimination and guarantee freedom of religion and religious expression. They provide for equality before the law for all individuals regardless of religious belief. The constitution cites five religious groups by name; other religious groups may register with the government to receive benefits equivalent to those received by the five named groups. In December hate crimes were added to the criminal code, including crimes based on the religion or belief of the victim. During the year, the court in charge of registering religious entities accepted two applications and did not rule on two others. The Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO) remained unable to register as a religious entity. In April the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rejected the government's appeal of the court's November 2017 ruling that the government had violated the OAO's rights by refusing it registration. Also in April the ECHR reached a unanimous verdict in favor of the Bektashi Community and determined the government had violated the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms by denying the community registration. As of the end of the year, both the OAO and the Bektashi Community registration applications were pending with Skopje Basic Court II. In June the government paid the last tranche of compensation to the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia (Holocaust Fund) based on previous restitution claims. The Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia (ICM) said the government continued to show favoritism toward the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), and smaller religious groups continued to report unequal government treatment compared with the five constitutionally named groups. Some MOC-OA clergy protested the change of the country's name to the Republic of North Macedonia, while ICM religious leaders supported it. In March the country marked the 75th anniversary of the deportation of Jews with a tribute at the Jewish cemetery in Bitola and a March of the Living in Skopje.

Representatives of the Bektashi Community objected to the ICM's claims to full ownership of, and plans to renovate the Harabati Baba Teqe, the complex where the unregistered Sufi Bektashi Community of Macedonia's headquarters are located. Additionally, the representatives reported harassment by ICM-affiliated individuals. There were several incidents of vandalism or theft of Orthodox Church property, one at the Harabati Baba Teqe, one case of fire at the Turkish Islamic cemetery in Bitola, and one incident in which a mosque was burned near Prilep.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with representatives from government and parliament to discuss religious freedom issues, including improved interfaith cooperation, MOC-OA autocephaly, religious freedom, and governmental respect for and equal treatment of faith groups. The Ambassador met with the justice minister to discuss the then draft legislation on hate crimes. The Ambassador also discussed these issues with the heads of the Bektashi Community and MOC-OA. Embassy officials met with representatives from a variety of minority religious groups, including the Bektashi, Jewish, and Christian minority denominations, and with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with religious freedom. The embassy supported Holocaust education efforts and sponsored civil society and government representatives on visits to the United States for programs that focused on promoting religious tolerance. The embassy also continued to fund a television documentary series featuring prominent religious leaders, academics, and citizens promoting tolerance of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the last national census, in 2002, an estimated 65 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian and 33 percent Muslim. The Muslim community includes a small number of Sufi orders. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Roman Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Jewish community estimates it has 200-250 members. According to a 2017 Brima/Gallup poll, less than 1 percent of the population identifies as atheist.

The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, and most live in the northern and western parts of the country. 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 Muslims are ethnic Albanians. Most Roma, and virtually all ethnic Turks and ethnic Bosniaks, are Muslim, and most ethnic Serbs and Vlachs are Orthodox Christian. There is also a correlation between religious and political affiliation, as political parties are largely divided along ethnic lines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018)



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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 protection of religious identity of all communities. Some rights may only be restricted in cases determined by the constitution and in cases of war and emergency on a nondiscriminatory basis, and not at the detriment of freedom of conscience or freedom of religious expression. The constitution specifically cites five religious groups: the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community. The law allows other religious groups to obtain the same legal rights and status as these five groups by applying for government recognition and registration through the courts. The constitution states the five named religious groups “and other religious communities and groups” are separate from the state, equal before the law, and free to establish schools, charities, and other social and charitable institutions. The constitution bars political parties or other associations from inciting religious hatred or intolerance.

In December the criminal code was amended to add hate crimes and defined these as a criminal offense against a person, legal entity, and related persons or property committed because of a real or assumed characteristic including nationality, ethnic origin, and religion or belief of the victim. Hate and hate crime were added as a punishable category to the criminal acts of murder, physical injury, coercion, deprivation of liberty, torture and other cruel inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment, threats to safety, denying right to freedom of public assembly, rape, severe theft, desecration of cemeteries, justification of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Religious organizations may 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, the law treats these three categories equally, bestowing the same legal rights, benefits, and obligations on all of them. The government recognizes 37 religious organizations (consisting of 17 churches, 10 religious communities, and 10 religious groups). Once registered, a church, religious community, or religious group is exempt from taxes and is eligible to apply for property restitution for properties nationalized during the communist era, government-funded projects, and construction permits for preservation of shrines and cultural sites. It may also establish schools. Failure to register does not prevent a religious group from holding meetings or proselytizing, or result in legal punishment or fines, but prevents the group from engaging in certain activities, such as establishing schools or receiving donations that are tax-deductible for the donor.

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. The criteria are: a physical administrative presence within the country, an explanation of its beliefs and practices that distinguish it from other religious organizations, and a unique name and official insignia. An applicant organization must also identify a supervisory body in charge of managing its finances and submit a breakdown of its financial assets and funding sources as well as minutes from its founding meeting. The law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. Registered leaders or legal representatives of religious groups must be citizens of the country.

The court sends approved applications to the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), a government body responsible for fostering cooperation and communication between the government and religious groups, which adds the organization to its registry. If the court denies the application, the organization may appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the appellate court denies the application, the organization may file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court, the highest human rights court in the country, on grounds of denial of religious rights. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization may appeal the case to the ECHR.

The law does not permit religious organizations to operate primary schools, but allows them to operate schools at the secondary level and above. The Ministry of Education requires sixth grade students and above 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 teach religion in an academic, nondevotional manner. The courses are usually taught by Orthodox priests or imams, whose salaries are paid by the state. The Ministry of Education states all teachers of these subjects receive training from accredited higher education institutions taught by professors of philosophy or sociology. If students do not wish to take a course on religion, they may take the third option, Classical Culture in European Civilization.

All foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a work visa before arrival, a process that normally takes approximately four months. The CRRCG maintains a register of all foreign religious workers and may approve or deny them the right to conduct religious work within the country. 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. There is no limit to the number of visa renewals for which a religious worker may apply. Clergy and religious workers from unregistered groups are eligible for visas.

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

Government Practices

In April the ECHR rejected the government's appeal of its November 2017 ruling that the country had violated the OAO's religious freedom, right of assembly, and freedom of thought and conscience, by refusing to formally register it as a separate religious group. The ECHR also upheld its order to the government to pay the religious group 9,500 euros (\$10,900), which the government had not paid by year's end. The national courts had denied OAO registration on the grounds it could not substantiate the difference between its name and symbols and those of the MOC-OA. In 2017, the ECHR stated

the government had violated the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which includes an obligation to act in a neutral and unbiased manner towards religious groups.

In April the ECHR reached a unanimous verdict in favor of the Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order, which appealed to overturn the 2013 Constitutional Court's denial of its registration. The ECHR determined the government violated the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and obliged the government to compensate the community for nonpecuniary damages and court fees. The ECHR ruling entered into force September 10, and the Bektashi Community reapplied for registration with Basic Court Skopje II on September 25. The government continued to issue visas to foreign members and spiritual leaders of the Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo).

During the year, the Basic Court Skopje II approved the registration of the Christian Community Trinitas and the Bektashi Religious Community seated at Hadder Baba Teqe in Kichevo. Applications from the Bektashi Community (Tetovo) and the Community of Muslims remained pending.

In June the Ministry of Education and Science's State Inspectorate fined the public elementary school in Radovich and its principal for allowing Muslim religious services on school premises during Ramadan.

Smaller religious groups continued to state the government treated them unequally, and the ICM said the government favored the MOC-OA.

MOC-OA clergy participated in political events, and some clergy protested against the change of the country's name. In September the MOC-OA Holy Synod expressed confidence that citizens would exercise their democratic right of choice, freely and democratically, at the September 30 referendum. The MOC-OA's statement underscored citizens' democratic right to vote, free of any pressure, in the referendum, but did not indicate an explicit position (either for or against) on the country's name change. In an earlier statement, MOC-OA Bishop Petar, speaking at a protest February 27, said the United States and NATO were pressuring Macedonia to change its name. In February and March the MOC-OA said it did not want to interfere in politics, and some members of the clergy feared a change of the country's name would also affect the name of the Church. The ICM called on Muslims to turn out massively in support of the country's name change in the September 30 referendum. The ICM said the name change would remove a barrier for the country to join NATO and the EU.

According to various university professors, NGO leaders, and legal and political analysts, religious differences continued to play a role in criminal and civil court cases. The OAO accused the government of bias against it. In July the OAO said police limited OAO Archbishop Jovan Vraniskovski's freedom of movement by seizing his passport without explanation while he tried to cross the border into Greece. The OAO said the action showed religious persecution by the government and "discrimination characteristic of countries lacking rule of law." In August Vraniskovski filed complaints with the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment over the issue, as well as the Council of Europe's Directorate General on Human Rights and Rule of Law. In August he sent an open letter to the interior minister saying he needed to go abroad for medical treatment. The OAO said authorities returned Vraniskovski's passport in September without explanation. Vraniskovski had been convicted in February 2017 for money laundering, which OAO considered to be a result of government bias.

In July Social Democratic Union of Macedonia Vice President and Member of Parliament Muhamed Zeqiri submitted a request to the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) to open an inquiry into wiretapped conversations of ICM Head Reis Sulejman Rexhepi that purported to show his abusing his position to charge increased prices for the Hajj and selling visas to Saudi Arabia that were actually free of charge. In response, the ICM called on government officials to refrain from interference in religious communities. The SPO made no public announcements regarding an inquiry into the ICM.

In June the government paid the Holocaust Fund the last installment of 5.6 million euros (\$6.42 million) as part of the 2007 Compensation Agreement for a total of 21.1 million euros (\$24.2 million) in return for seized properties from Jews. In March the Supreme Court ordered the government to pay the ICM 9.35 million denars (\$175,000) for damages to a mosque in Arachinovo, sustained during the 2001 armed conflict, and an additional 9,300 euros (\$10,700) in court costs. The ICM said the government had restored less than 30 percent of property the state previously seized. The ICM said the government was still seeking ownership rights to the Yeni Mosque in Bitola, which the state seized in 1950, declaring it a cultural monument. The Catholic Church regained a property seized by the state before the communist era in the southern village of Paliurci, where it rebuilt a church.

The ICM stated the government continued to prevent construction of a mosque in the ethnically mixed village of Lazhec by denying a construction permit due to pressure from local residents opposed to the mosque since 2002. The ICM also reported the government continued to block reconstruction of the mosque in Prilep, which burned down during armed conflict in 2001, and the Ali Pasha Mosque in Ohrid. According to the ICM, the government denied a permit to rebuild the mosque on the grounds that the Prilep site was a monument of culture under the government's jurisdiction.

The MOC-OA stated the Municipality of Struga had still not issued a decision on the construction of an Orthodox church in the village of Belica and that the Municipality of Tetovo refused to build a road leading to the city chapel. The application for the church has been pending since 2013.

During the year, the ICM continued to state the government favored the MOC-OA by granting it unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge, and funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches

Smaller religious organizations, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Church, Bektashi Community (Tetovo), and OAO, continued to state the government did not treat them as equals of the five religious organizations recognized in the constitution. For example, they stated the government excluded them from official events, such as official holiday celebration events and government building ground-breaking ceremonies, and did not grant them the same level of access to government officials. The OAO and the Bektashi Community said that, as unregistered communities, they often faced discrimination and intimidation. For the seventh year, the Bektashi continued to report to police harassment by what they said were ICM- and government-affiliated occupants of the Harabati Baba Teqe compound in Tetovo

A joint survey by the Institute for Political Research Skopje and Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation, conducted in January with over a thousand respondents, assessed that both the MOC-OA and the ICM had influence over politics. More than 44 percent of the respondents said the two communities built new religious buildings to mark territory and areas of dominance rather than to meet the needs of worshippers.

In March the country marked the 75th anniversary of the deportation of Jews with a tribute at the Jewish cemetery in Bitola and a March of the Living in Skopje. The two-day commemorative events were attended by government leaders and dignitaries from Israel, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the United States. Additionally, parliament adopted a declaration commemorating the country's Jews and acknowledging the country's commitment to protect, never forget, and promote dialogue and understanding.

In March the government adopted the International Remembrance Holocaust Alliance's working definition of anti-Semitism.

On December 1, Minister of Education and Science Arber Ademi and the director of the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center (IHRC) signed a joint declaration pledging continued cooperation in Holocaust education and encouraging effective measures against anti-Semitism and discrimination of any kind. Ademi lauded the material IHRC provided to the Bureau for the Development of Education, and said the ministry would assist in teacher training at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Skopje as well as improve educational resources addressing the Holocaust.

The CRRCG reported it issued letters of consent to all foreign missionaries and clerics who submitted requests for religious work during the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February the Bektashi Community (Tetovo) celebrated the 480th anniversary of the Harabati Baba Teqe. In April the ICM signed in Ankara, Turkey, a new agreement with the Turkish International Cooperation Agency to restore the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, without the consent of the Bektashi Community. The move came after the ICM said in March 2017 it was the sole owner of the compound. Bektashi representatives continued to express concerns that the renovation of the complex would displace them from the compound entirely. In June the ICM Muftiship (regional district) of Tetovo placed a banner with its insignia and title in both Albanian and Arabic at the entrance of the Bektashi shrine. The Bektashi could not assert a claim of ownership to the compound because they remained unregistered.

In March two unknown individuals assaulted the founder of the Religious Community of Orthodox Albanians, Professor Branko Sinadinovski, in front of his home in Skopje. He said he had been targeted several times before and his life threatened for publicly declaring himself an Orthodox Albanian. Sinadinovski said the MOI did not conduct a thorough investigation of the case.

In March police filed charges against an individual, identified as K.D., for painting a swastika on the memorial museum of the uprising against fascism and other buildings in Prilep, under the section of the criminal code for "damage or destruction of protected objects, cultural heritage or natural rarities".

Again this year, the Holocaust Fund, an NGO, continued to work with the Ministry of Education to implement Holocaust education and Jewish history programs and promote interfaith cooperation. The project provided teachers with tools to teach secondary school students about the Holocaust and Jewish history. The Holocaust Memorial Center, a museum overseen by members of the Jewish community and the government that commemorates the 7,200 Jews sent to the Treblinka death camp, also conducted Holocaust education programs in partnership with the Ministry of Education and organized a number of regional seminars on Jewish culture, tolerance, and respect for diversity with Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Greece.

According to religious communities, there were fewer reported acts of vandalism at religious sites than during 2017. MOC-OA reported 12 acts of vandalism of Orthodox churches, including in July, when unknown individuals broke the window of the Orthodox church in Radiocve, near Tetovo, and stole donation money.

In October unknown individuals set on fire a 350-year-old mosque in the village of Erekovci, near Prilep. The ICM condemned the action as "racist." Police were investigating the case as arson. In October there was a fire at the Turkish Islamic cemetery in Bitola; there were no reports of a police investigation to determine the actual cause of fire.

On May 29, unidentified individuals vandalized the Harabati Baba Teqe, causing material damage and stealing documents. Representatives of the Bektashi Community notified the police and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Field Office in Tetovo.

The MOC-OA reported 14 robberies of Orthodox churches in various towns during the year, most often involving money from church collections.

In May the MOC-OA celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the establishment of the Ohrid Archbishopric with multiple activities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials engaged with government and parliamentary representatives, including the speaker, to discuss issues of religious freedom and tolerance, including improved interfaith cooperation, MOC-OA autocephaly, religious freedom, and governmental respect for and equal treatment of faith groups. The Ambassador also discussed interfaith tolerance, the importance of open dialogue, and countering religiously based violent extremism with senior government officials, including Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski, and new National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism Borce Petrevski. The Ambassador, other embassy personnel, and the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues (SEHI) participated in official events commemorating the 75th anniversary of the deportation of Jews from Macedonia. The SEHI met with the head of the Jewish Community to discuss the government's involvement with the community's activities, the status of property restitution, and the Holocaust Memorial Center.

In May the Ambassador took part in an event hosted by the World Leader of the Bektashi Community on religious tolerance following the ECHR decisions on unregistered religious groups in the country.

Embassy officials met with the heads of the ICM and MOC-OA to discuss religious freedom issues, including charges of political interference and favoritism toward certain religious groups and efforts to combat violent extremism related to religion.

The embassy continued to support the Holocaust Fund with a grant to fund a seminar for teachers on Sephardic Jewish history and the Holocaust. Forty-five primary and secondary school teachers of different ethnicities from all over the country and the region learned how to teach their students about Jewish life before the war and the Holocaust, using digital technology and social media. The seminar also provided an opportunity to share best practices for presenting Holocaust education in schools.

The embassy covered the cost of three participants to attend an international summer academy focused on Holocaust education, 20th century Jewish history, and civil society in Budapest and Belgrade.

The embassy sponsored the participation of a Holocaust Fund staffer working on multicultural education and religious dialogue in a program to discuss interfaith dialogue and religious freedom with leaders on these issues in the United States.

The embassy again partnered with a team of journalists and film professionals to produce and broadcast a documentary series that presented a tolerant and multicultural account of the country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. The show, *On the Same Side*, comprised 30-minute episodes containing Macedonian and Albanian dual-language content. It featured prominent members of the religious community, academics, and citizens from locations throughout the country. The series, now in its third season, aired on Sitel, the largest privately owned television station in the country.

The embassy posted 10 different messages on social media regarding religious freedom reaching over 200,000 followers.

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