

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Croatia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits incitement of religious hatred. All religious communities have the same religious protections under the law. The government has written agreements with the Roman Catholic Church that provide for state financial support and specific tax and other benefits; 20 other registered religious communities have agreements with the state offering benefits not available to registered religious communities without agreements or to unregistered religious groups.

In April, the parliament adopted legislation that provides for higher fines and possible prison sentences for persons who engage publicly in use of symbols that disturb public order and peace, the legislation often used to prosecute hate speech. Representatives of the Jewish community, Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Catholic Church said the communities were still facing problems regarding the restitution of properties appropriated by the former socialist federal republic of Yugoslavia that remain under government control. In December, the government, the City of Zagreb, and the Zagreb Archdiocese reached an agreement on the construction of a new city soccer stadium, under which the Catholic Church agreed to give up its claim for the restitution of real estate at the location and receive property at 10 other locations in the city in return. The agreement resolved a restitution claim dating back to 1997. In January, the government adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism.

During the year, some Catholic churches in multiple cities were vandalized, and a Catholic priest was assaulted; the state prosecutor was investigating the attacks as hate crimes. The Jewish community in Rijeka reported an antisemitic comment was posted on social media in connection with the installation of “Stumbling Blocks,” a Holocaust remembrance memorial.

Atheist groups objected to the prevalence of Christian symbols, such as crucifixes, in public buildings. In September, the National Museum of Modern Art returned some looted art to a family member whose relatives had been killed at Auschwitz.

Representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church were concerned regarding negative messaging about the church in the media. Two Serbian Orthodox churches reported vandalism, and Serb minority institutions reported posters urging the lynching of Serbs in multiple cities. Threats of hangings and other violence were also reported. Well-known Croatian author Slavica Stojan said Serbs were “bugs” and must be exterminated with “poisons and flamethrowers.” She later clarified and said she was referring to “cultural appropriation by the Serbian political elite...not the whole nation.” Jewish groups continued to report hate speech, especially on the internet. The president of the country’s Jewish community organization said Holocaust denial continued to go unpunished and Jewish graves were being obliterated. The Minister of Culture and Media and members of the Jewish community discussed possible solutions to stop the removal of Jewish graves. The Rijeka Municipal Court imposed a fine and a prison sentence on two persons convicted of displaying a flag from the World War II-era pro-Nazi *Ustasha* regime during a soccer match.

During the year, the U.S. embassy engaged government officials on religious freedom issues and advocated for the restitution of individual, heirless, and communal property. Embassy officials attended major events and commemorations in Pula, Jasenovac, and Ustica that emphasized the importance of Holocaust remembrance and interreligious dialogue. In June, embassy officials hosted a roundtable of youths from different faith groups to discuss religious freedom and societal, diversity, and identity issues. On June 28, the Chargé and representatives of the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) hosted a roundtable with like-minded ambassadors to the country

that reiterated the importance of restitution legislation. On June 29, embassy officials and WJRO representatives met with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior and encouraged the country to follow through on its commitments under the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust-era assets. The delegation met with the Minister of Culture and Media and the head of the ministry's Provenance Working Group, with whom they discussed the ministry's support for provenance research of looted art. In July, embassy officials and a representative from the Office of International Religious Freedom met with the multiple religious groups, an atheist association, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the Ombudsperson's Office to discuss religious minority inclusion, education, movable and immovable property restitution, and Holocaust remembrance. The country assumed the one-year presidency of the IHRA on March 1. In November, the Chargé again met with like-minded ambassadors to the country and WJRO researchers to discuss looted Jewish art restitution. In November, the Chargé met with the Minister of Physical Planning, Construction, and State Assets, who coordinated negotiations on communal property restitution, to advocate for government action to finalize a package with the Jewish Community. The embassy remained engaged with the minister's staff as negotiations continued and reiterated U.S. government support for communal property restitution.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.2 million (midyear 2023). According to Croatian government 2021 census data released on September 22, 79 percent of the population is Catholic, 3.3 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 1.3 percent Muslim. Nearly 5 percent identify as nonreligious or atheist. According to the census, the number of self-identified Catholics declined by 7.3 percentage points from the previous census in 2011, Serbian Orthodox Christians declined by 1.08 percentage points, and Muslims declined by 0.18 percentage point. The number of agnostics and skeptics increased from 0.76 percent to 1.68 percent of the population.

Other religious groups include Jews, Baha'is, Protestants, and other Christians. According to the World Jewish Congress, there are approximately 1,700 Jews in the country. Members of the Baptist, Catholic, and SOC (Serbian Orthodox Church) Churches reported situations where survey respondents, particularly the elderly, were confused by the wording of the census questions. Church officials specifically said the census included a question in which respondents could identify as Christian as well as a separate question focusing on the denomination to which they belong. All the communities said some respondents answered "yes" only to the first question, potentially skewing the data on specific Christian communities.

Religious affiliation is often related to ethnicity. Ethnic Serbs identify as Orthodox Christians and live primarily in cities and areas bordering Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most members of other minority religious groups reside in urban areas.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for equality of rights regardless of religion as well as for freedom of conscience and religious expression. It prohibits incitement of religious hatred. According to the constitution, religious communities shall be equal under the law and separate from the state; they

are free to conduct religious services publicly as well as open and manage schools and charitable organizations under the protection and with the assistance of the state. The penal code defines a hate crime as a criminal offense committed on the grounds of race, skin color, religion, national or ethnic origin, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The code criminalizes public incitement to violence and hate and provides sanctions for such crimes. Hate crimes are also considered an aggravating circumstance unless a provision of law already provides for more severe sanctions.

Hate speech is also punishable as a misdemeanor under several laws. Use of the Ustasha salute and insignia by themselves are not specifically defined as misdemeanors but could be prosecuted as such under the stricter penal code if combined with acts of violence and incitement to violence. The Misdemeanor Act Against Public Order and Peace includes fines ranging from 700 to 4,000 euros (\$770 to \$4,400) or a prison sentence of up to 30 days for persons who publicly use symbols that disturb public order and peace. The act can be used to sanction offenders who use symbols related to hate speech.

Laws covering electronic media stipulate that in audio or audiovisual media services, it is forbidden to incite, encourage incitement, and spread hatred or discrimination on numerous grounds, including religion and political or other belief as well as antisemitism and xenophobia, fascism, nationalism, communism, and support for other totalitarian regimes. The legislation stipulates that audiovisual and radio programs and contents in electronic publications must publish accurate information and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Catholic Church receives state financial support and other benefits established by four concordats between the government and the Holy See. (Three were adopted at the same time in 1997; the fourth was adopted in 1998.) One of these agreements provides for financial support for some religious officials. Another agreement stipulates funding for religious education in public schools.

The law defines the legal position of religious communities and determines eligibility for government funding and tax benefits. Registered religious communities are exempt from taxes on the purchase of real estate, the profit/capital gains tax, and taxes on donations. According to the law, a religious community previously active as a legal entity before the enactment of the existing law in 2002 (amended in 2013) need only submit its name, the location of its headquarters, information on the office of the person authorized to represent it, and the seal and stamp it uses to register. To register as a religious community, a religious group without prior legal status as a religious community must have at least 500 members and have been registered as an association with at least three members for at least five years. To register as a religious community, a group must also submit a list of its members and documentation outlining the group's activities and bylaws and describing its mission to the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration. Unregistered religious groups may operate freely but do not receive tax benefits. They may conduct financial transactions as legal entities. A contractual agreement with the state, which grants a registered religious community eligibility for further funding and benefits, defines the community's role and activities and provides for collaboration with the government in areas of joint interest, such as education, health, and culture.

There are 55 registered religious communities, including the Catholic Church, SOC, Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Christian Adventist Church, Church of Christ, Church of God, Croatian Old Catholic Church, Catholic Old Church, Evangelical Church, Macedonian Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Church, Reformed Christian Church, Union of Baptist Churches, Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, Coordination Committee of Jewish Communities in Croatia (an umbrella group of nine distinct Jewish communities), Jewish Community of Virovitica, Bet Israel (a Jewish group), and the Islamic Community of Croatia. In addition to the Catholic Church, as of March, 20 of the registered religious communities have formal agreements with the state that more clearly define activities and cooperation, such as in the areas of marriage and religious education in public schools. These groups may access state funds for religious activities. Since March, the government also has an agreement with the Reformed Christian Church of Hungarians in Croatia

on matters of mutual interest and an annex to the agreement with the Reformed Christian Church in Croatia on matters of mutual interest.

According to the law, adherents are entitled to one day of leave from work for religious holidays, and the law does not require proof of affiliation for employees to exercise this right.

The state recognizes marriages conducted by registered religious communities that have concluded agreements with the state, eliminating the need for civil registration. Marriages conducted by registered communities that have not concluded agreements with the state, or by unregistered religious groups, require civil registration.

Registered religious communities that have not concluded agreements with the state and unregistered religious groups may not conduct religious education in public schools. Unregistered religious groups have no access to state funds in support of religious activities, including charitable work, counseling, and building costs. Registered religious communities that have not concluded agreements with the state and unregistered religious groups may engage in worship, proselytize, own property, and import religious literature. Only registered religious communities, with or without agreements with the state, may provide spiritual counsel in prisons, hospitals, and the military.

Public schools at both the primary and secondary levels must offer religious education, although students may opt out without providing specific grounds. The Catholic catechism is the predominant religious text used. Other religious communities that have agreements with the state may also offer religious education classes in schools if there are seven or more students of that faith. Eligible religious communities provide the instructors, and the state pays their salaries. Private religious schools are eligible for state assistance and follow a national curriculum. Registered religious communities may have their own schools. Unregistered religious groups may not have their own schools.

Education regarding the Holocaust is mandatory in the final year of elementary school (eighth grade) and during the final year of high school.

The law allows foreign citizens whose property was confiscated during and after the Holocaust era to seek compensation or restitution if the applicant's country has a bilateral restitution treaty with the state; however, no such bilateral treaties currently exist. While two court cases have held that such treaties are not required, the law has not been changed. The law does not allow new property claims, as the statutory deadline for new claims expired in 2003. The government did not make any efforts to amend the law.

Appointed by parliament, the ombudsperson is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights and freedoms, including religious freedom. The ombudsperson examines citizens' complaints pertaining to the work of state bodies, local and regional self-governments, and legal persons vested with public authority. The ombudsperson may issue recommendations to government agencies regarding human rights and religious freedom practices but does not have authority to enforce compliance with his or her recommendations.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The Ombudsperson's Office opened a case following media announcements regarding a verbal and physical assault on a priest while he was walking along the street. The ombudsperson further requested notification of official Office of the Chief State Prosecutor action in response to the attack following media reports that the state prosecutor was investigating the attack as a potential hate crime. During the year, media outlets reported that some Catholic churches were vandalized in the cities of Zagreb and Sibenik, and the Ombudsperson's Office requested information from the Ministry of Interior on their specific steps taken to respond to those incidents.

Serbian Orthodox Church representatives said their community still had outstanding restitution claims against the government, mainly regarding properties and residential buildings the government appropriated during the socialist Yugoslav period. The government reported that since 1999, the state had resolved property claims related to the Serbian Orthodox Church that included the right to compensation in bonds, an improvement from the previous year. Catholic Church representatives also said there remained a significant number of outstanding claims for Catholic properties appropriated during the Yugoslav period. On December 7, the government, the City of Zagreb, and the Zagreb Archdiocese reached an agreement on the construction of a new city soccer stadium, under which the Catholic Church agreed to give up its claim for the restitution of real estate at the location and receive property at 10 other locations in the city in return. The agreement was to be implemented through two contracts, one between the City of Zagreb and the government and the other between the government and the Zagreb Archdiocese. The agreement resolved a property rights dispute that dated back to 1997.

During the year, the government made no progress in changing the law to provide for the restitution of private property seized during the Holocaust and post-Holocaust eras to foreign claimants or to reopen the deadline for potential new claims, although officials cited progress in the resolution of some cases that were filed before 2003. In December, the government reported the resolution of 321 claims involving Jewish claimants, mainly from the postwar period, worth a total of 982 million kuna (\$150 million). Of the 101 pending cases the government monitored since 2018, 57 were resolved, some with cash compensation worth \$3.7 million kuna (\$539,000) and others with returned property with an estimated value of 13.1 million euros (\$14.4 million) based on present-day real estate market values. Negotiations continued on restitution of private, communal, and heirless property.

Atheist groups continued to complain that Christian symbols remained prevalent in government buildings such as courtrooms, prisons, and public hospitals. They said they believed this practice was inconsistent with the constitution, which states religious communities are separate from the state.

Some minority religious and secular groups, including atheists, continued to say the Catholic Church enjoyed a special status in relation to other religious communities, in part because of its international concordats with the government, which provide the church with significant financial support, and in part because of its far-reaching cultural, educational, and political influence as the majority religion in the country.

In January, prior to the country's one-year presidency of the IHRA, which began in March, the government adopted the IHRA legally nonbinding working definitions of antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, and anti-Roma racism and discrimination. The Ministry of Science and Education issued a recommendation to country's academic institutions to adopt the IHRA working definitions in accordance with the Stockholm Declaration, which affirms IHRA member countries' commitment to encouraging Holocaust research in all its dimensions and promoting education and training regarding the Holocaust in schools, universities, and communities. On January 26, the senate of the University of Split adopted the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, while on February 21, the senate of the University of Rijeka adopted a conclusion endorsing the working definitions of antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, and antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination. The University of Rijeka and its constituencies published the *IHRA Recommendations for Recognizing and Countering Holocaust Distortion* on their official websites. On March 21, the senate of the University of Zagreb adopted all three working definitions and issued a recommendation to its constituents to adopt and implement the definitions in their work.

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic stated it was the country's duty to fight hate speech, antisemitism, and distortion of truth. In April, parliament adopted amendments to the Misdemeanor Act against Public Order and Peace that increased fines 25-fold for the use of symbols that incite hatred.

On March 25, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior (and the Chair of the National Coordination Body for the Croatian IHRA Presidency) Davor Bozinovic attended the Croatian Football Federation's (HNS) ceremony to mark the acceptance of the IHRA nonbinding working definitions. Bozinovic remarked that he saw the event as an important step forward, acknowledging HNS' important contribution to combating discrimination, racism, and hate speech, particularly as the first soccer federation in the world to demonstrate such high-level support for the IHRA. On November 14, the Croatian Olympic Committee (HOC) formally adopted the definitions at their headquarters in a document that signaled their intention to "fight against attitudes of intolerance, discrimination, and exclusion through sport." Minister of Tourism and Sport Nikolina Brnjac and Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic also signed onto the HOC's adoption declaration.

In March, the Office of the Ombudsperson released its annual report for 2022, which stated that, as in previous years, the office received a small number of complaints related to discrimination on the basis of religion and freedom of religion. The report described reports from the majority Catholic community and from religious minorities related to the lack of tolerance and respect for diversity in public discourse, especially on social networks and in the media. While the Islamic community did not report broader discrimination or violation of religious rights, it noted some instances where high-level government officials used inappropriate and offensive rhetoric when referencing Islamic religious values and symbols. The community also noted that some officials questioned international court verdicts related to acts of genocide committed against the Muslim population. The community believed these incidents could contribute to broader discriminatory behavior as well as damage to relations between the Muslim community and government.

The Baha'i Community of Croatia said a university denied students who were members of certain religious communities the right to be absent from classes on religious holidays. In 2019, students from certain faith groups (Bahai, Orthodox, Islamic) were formally allowed to miss classes, but were told by administration officials they might suffer consequences. As a result, some chose not to miss classes due to fear of retaliation.

According to the Office of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the government budgeted 47.4 million euros (\$52.3 million) during the year to the Catholic Church for salaries, pensions, and other purposes, compared with 342 million kuna (\$49.7 million) in 2022. The government provided funding to other religious communities that had concluded agreements with the state, a portion of which was based on their size, in addition to funds provided to support religious education in public schools and the operation of private religious schools. The government budgeted 3.5 million euros (\$3.8 million) to these groups, compared with 24.9 million kuna (\$3.6 million) in 2022. Atheist groups again criticized the government for allocating more to the Catholic Church than to other groups. Although the funding was generally proportional to the Catholic share of the population, representatives of atheist groups stated the criticism reflected their general concern regarding what they saw as the outsized role of the Catholic Church in society.

On March 9, the president of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, met with Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic in Split. They discussed topics related to current and future EU policies on religion, including the commitment to promote and protect the fundamental right to freedom of religion, provide support for persecuted Christian communities across the world, and the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

In March, Prime Minister Plenkovic attended the opening of the Anne Frank Park in Pula. In his remarks, he stressed Anne Frank was just one of a million and one-half child victims of the persecution and horrendous genocide committed against Jews during World War II. He also shared the story of the Croatian Jewish child actor Lea Deutsch, adding that "the fates of those two girls should serve as a reminder of duty and commitment to honor and show respect to all innocent Holocaust victims and to preserve the memory of their tragic fates in order to continue building a future of Holocaust remembrance."

Also in March, the Ministry of Science and Education, in cooperation with the Jewish Municipality in Cakovec, financed a study trip for Croatian-language teachers to Auschwitz focused on history

and ethics that culminated in a conference in Cakovec open to the public entitled “Never Forget.” On April 26, in partnership with the House of Europe, the Croatian IHRA committee organized a panel discussion with the Jewish Community of Zagreb, Ombudsperson for Human Rights, and the European Commission’s Coordinator on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Way of Life Katharine von Schnurbein entitled “Antisemitism: Still Relevant Today.”

In April, Prime Minister Plenkovic and President Milanovic, along with ethnic and religious minority groups, commemorated the 78th anniversary of the inmate breakout from Jasenovac concentration camp, which was also the annual commemorative event for victims of the camp. The Prime Minister said the attendance of the entire state leadership and representatives of all ethnic minorities, including Jewish, Roma, Islamic, and Serb minorities, sent an important message. He highlighted the April amendment of the Misdemeanor Law against Public Order and Peace and said the increased penalties for those who use offensive slogans and signs were a step in a positive direction.

Also in April, the Croatian IHRA committee hosted an international teacher training session in Lisbon entitled “The Holocaust as a Starting Point- Sephardic Dialogue,” which included experts and educators from Portugal, Spain, Greece, North Macedonia, and Croatia. The program was organized in partnership with the Memorial de la Shoah and the Education and Teacher Training Agency.

In May, the Ministry of Interior, in cooperation with the Vinkovci City Museum, co-organized a roundtable entitled, “Remembrance of the Holocaust” along with an interactive workshop, “Holocaust and the Prevention of Crimes against Humanity,” and an exhibition entitled “It Did Not Happen Again.” The university and academic community, representatives of relevant state authorities, representatives of local and regional self-government, members of the Jewish Community in Vinkovci, representatives of educational institutions, and local high school students participated in the event.

On May 22, the Ministry of Interior organized a workshop on antisemitism and other forms of hatred in cooperation with local Zagreb high schools and libraries. The workshop addressed antisemitism from a sociological and ethical perspective, with an emphasis on human rights. On May 31, the Ministry of Interior and Shoah Academy co-organized a Holocaust educational event for police officers, particularly ones engaged in crime prevention. Members of the Zagreb Jewish Community and representatives of the Jewish national minority in Zagreb attended the event. On September 11-12, the Croatian IHRA committee hosted the “Second International Conference on the Genocide of the Roma: Countering Holocaust Distortion and Anti-Roma Discrimination through Research and Education,” which brought together experts from across the EU both virtually and in person.

On September 18, Minister of Culture and Media and President of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities Nina Obuljen Korzinek met with the Minister of the Islamic Affairs of the State of Qatar Ghanem bin Shaheen bin Ghanem Al Ghanem. The Mufti of the Islamic Community in Croatia Aziz Hasanovic had invited the Qatari minister and his delegation.

On September 18, the National Museum of Modern Art returned two pieces of looted art to a family member of a Jewish couple who perished in Auschwitz concentration camp. The museum acted in compliance with a Zagreb Civil Court legal finding that the paintings were unjustly confiscated from the Reichsmann family more than 70 years ago. Minister of Culture and Media Nina Obuljen Korzinek highlighted the Provenance Working Group’s efforts during restitution discussions with the WJRO on June 29.

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Speaker of Parliament Gordan Jandrokovic, accompanied by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Gordan Grlic-Radman, Minister for Culture and Media Nina Obuljen Korzinek, and Special Envoy of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Anja Simpraga, laid wreaths for the victims of the Holocaust at Zagreb’s Mirogoj cemetery.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, Serbian Orthodox Church representatives reported incidents of church vandalism in Bjelovar and Petrinja. Serb minority institutions reported anonymously hung posters that called for the lynching of Serbs in Vinkovci, Split, and Zagreb. Serb minority institutions and Croatian Serb individuals also reported threats of hanging and other forms of violence; however, officials investigating the incidents were unable to determine whether those incidents occurred due to ethnic or religious discrimination.

Serbian Orthodox Church representatives also expressed continuing concern regarding negative sentiment and messaging towards the Orthodox Church by media sources, including on television, as well in private comments on social media platforms. In a public interview related to alleged Serbian attempts to classify Croatian literature as Serbian, well known literary historian and Croatian author Slavica Stojan compared Serbs to bugs and called for their extermination. She called the members of the Serbian nation “predators who lurk from the border and who should be removed by squashing, poisons, and flamethrowers.” Serbian Orthodox Church representatives said that, although the author of the article did not mention the Orthodox Church specifically, they considered this a form of hate speech and a public call for lynching. The author subsequently stated the bug infestation metaphor referred to “the constant and persistent appropriation of the Croatian cultural space by the Serbian political elite, and not to the people, especially not to the whole nation.”

In October 2022, the Jewish Community of Rijeka reported an unnamed person posted an inappropriate comment directed at Jews on the organization’s official Facebook page announcing the installation of three stolpersteine or “stumbling blocks,” which are concrete blocks inscribed with the name and life dates of victims of the Holocaust. The community reported the incident to police as a potential criminal act.

Members of Jewish groups reported incidents of hate speech, especially on the internet. On Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, the president of the Coordination Committee of the Jewish Communities in Croatia, Ognjen Kraus, said Holocaust denial continued to go unpunished and Jewish graves were being obliterated. He added that more than 3,500 Jewish remains were exhumed in the past from heirless plots in Zagreb’s Mirogoj Cemetery in compliance with regulations that allow the exhumation of remains from burial plots with annual fees left unpaid for 10 years or more. The Minister of Culture and Media and members of the Jewish Community said they were discussing possible solutions to preserve heirless plots in the cemetery. Separately, Kraus welcomed the amendments to the Misdemeanor Law against Public Order and Peace but called for a specific sanction for Holocaust denial.

On September 15, the Rijeka Municipal Court rendered a verdict against two Croatians for displaying the flag of the WWII Nazi puppet Ustasha regime (1941-45) during a soccer match between Croatia and Latvia. The court fined the first defendant 1,300 euros (\$1,400) and imposed a 20-day sentence on the second. In addition, both defendants were prohibited from attending all future sporting events involving the Croatian national football team within the country and overseas. Minister of Interior Davor Bozinovic confirmed to the media that proceedings against a third individual involved in the incident continued, along with a criminal investigation. Prime Minister Plenkovic condemned the incident, and the Croatian Football Federation expressed its gratitude to authorities for their prompt action and welcomed the penalties.

The Croatian Conference of Catholic Bishops reported continuing instances of offensive and unacceptable language in media reporting on religion.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy remained engaged with host government officials regarding religious freedom and specifically advocated for the restitution of individual, heirless, and communal property to include looted art, noted support for provenance research, and highlighted the importance of addressing the concerns of religious minority groups.

Throughout the year, the Chargé and other U.S. officials continued to encourage the government to provide for the restitution of private, heirless, and communal property, including provisions that would unequivocally allow for foreign claimants as well as reopen the window for new claims. During the year, embassy officials attended major events and commemorations in Jasenovac and Ustica that emphasized the importance of Holocaust remembrance and interreligious dialogue.

In March, a senior embassy official attended the opening of Anne Frank Park in Pula and discussed religious freedom and the country's preparation for the IHRA presidency with the government officials.

In June, embassy officials hosted a roundtable that gathered youth from different faith groups, including Baptist, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, and Atheist. They discussed religious freedom, societal, diversity, and identity issues.

On June 28, the Chargé and representatives of the WJRO hosted a roundtable with like-minded ambassadors to Croatia to reiterate U.S. government and WJRO messaging on restitution in their meetings, including at the highest-level, with the country's officials.

On June 29, embassy officials and WJRO representatives met with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Davor Bozinovic and encouraged the country to follow through on its commitments under the 2009 Terezin Declaration on Holocaust-era Assets. They discussed restitution of private and communal property as well as the potential establishment of a foundation to continue domestic restitution projects and efforts to combat Holocaust distortion after the country's IHRA presidency ends in 2024. The delegation met separately with Minister of Culture and Media Nina Obuljen Korzinek along with the head of the ministry's Provenance Working Group and discussed the ministry's support for provenance research of looted art in Croatian museums. The delegation encouraged the minister to expand official records of Jewish cemeteries in partnership with researchers.

In July, embassy officials and a representative from the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom met with multiple religious groups, an atheist association, nongovernmental organizations, and the Office of the Ombudsperson to discuss religious minority inclusion, education, movable and immovable property restitution, and Holocaust remembrance.

In November, embassy officials and a delegation of WJRO researchers met again with Minister Obuljen Korzinek and further discussed options for restitution of looted cultural heritage items. In November, the Chargé met with the Minister of Physical Planning, Construction, and State Assets, who coordinated negotiations on communal property restitution, to advocate for government action to finalize a package with the Jewish Community. Embassy officials remained engaged with the minister's staff as negotiations continued and reiterated U.S. government support for communal property restitution.

In meetings throughout the year, embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues, including freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination, with NGOs such as Human Rights House and Protogora, academics, the Office of the Ombudsperson, historians, and representatives from Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Baptist, Jewish, Islamic, and other religious groups. The embassy continued to provide grants to local NGOs and cultural institutions for the advancement of education on Holocaust issues, with the goal of creating a regional network of teachers to address the topic through conferences, commemorations, and cultural events.

The embassy used social media to highlight a range of religious freedom issues, including support for Holocaust commemorations and a pluralistic view of faith and religion, particularly among youth in the country. The embassy also provided funding for the Croatian Education and Development Network for the Evolution of Communication that created a training seminar for teachers; recorded two new contemporary witness testimonies to be added to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum oral history archive; and produced a graphic novel about Lea Deutsch, a Croatian Jewish child actress murdered in the Holocaust.