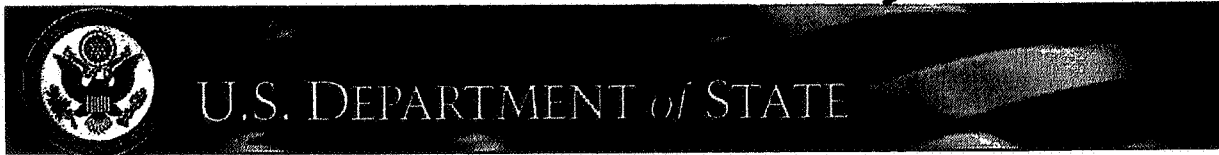


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## Macedonia, Former Yugoslav Republic of

### International Religious Freedom Report 2002

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report; however, the ethnic-Albanian insurgency led by a group of Kosovar and Macedonian ethnic Albanians who call themselves the "National Liberation Army" (NLA), in 2001 has strained religious tolerance. While religion was not a focus of the conflict, both sides occasionally have targeted religious buildings due to the linkage between religion and ethnicity in the country. The August 13 Framework Agreement concluded in 2001 contained broad constitutional and legislative reforms focused on greater minority rights. Throughout the implementation of this agreement and the 2002 election campaign, religious issues increasingly were politicized. The law places some limits on religious practice by restricting the establishment of places of worship and restricting where contributions may be made.

The generally amicable relationship among the various religious communities contributed to religious freedom; however, inter-ethnic conflict and the increased politicization of religion by the Government have strained this relationship.

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

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 9,781 square miles, and its population is approximately 2 million. The country has two major religions: Orthodox and Muslim. Nominally, approximately 66 percent of the population are Macedonian Orthodox, approximately 30 percent are Muslim, approximately 1 percent are Roman Catholic, and approximately 3 percent are of other faiths (largely various Protestant denominations). There is also a small Jewish community in Skopje. Religious participation tends to focus on major holidays or life cycle events.

Numerous foreign missionaries are active and represent a very wide range of faiths. Many of these missionaries enter the country in connection with other work, often charitable or medical. Several Protestant missionary groups and members of Jehovah's Witnesses are active.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, the law places some limits on religious practices, including the establishment of places of worship and the collection of contributions. Prior to January 2002, the Constitution specifically mentioned the Macedonian Orthodox Church, although it did not confer official status. As part of the Framework Agreement, the Constitution was amended to include mention of the Jewish community and the Methodist church. None of these communities has official status or privileges.

The constitutional provision for religious freedom is refined further in the 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups. This law designates the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Methodist Church as religious communities, and all other religions as religious groups. However, there is no legal differentiation between religious communities and groups. In 1999 the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 law, and in practice the remaining provisions of the law are not enforced consistently.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups contained a number of specific requirements for the registration of religious groups that were struck down by the Constitutional Court in 1999. Consequently, there was considerable confusion over which procedures still applied, and several foreign religious bodies experienced delays in their efforts to register. During the period covered by this report, the process remained slow and cumbersome. In practice religious groups need to register to obtain permits to build churches, and to

request visas for foreigners and other permits from the Government. During 2001 several international Protestant churches were granted legal registration, including the Christian Church Bozji Glas; several others were at some stage in the registration process by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also requires that foreigners carrying out religious work and religious rites be registered with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities. The Government does not restrict nor actively monitor new groups or advise the public on them. The Government no longer keeps a count of registered religious groups and communities.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups places some restrictions on the establishment of places of worship. It provides that religious rites and religious activities "shall take place at churches, mosques, and other temples, and in gardens that are parts of those facilities, at cemeteries, and at other facilities of the religious group." Provision is made for holding services in other places, provided that a permit is obtained at least 15 days in advance. No permit or permission is required to perform religious rites in a private home. The law also states that religious activities "shall not violate the public peace and order, and shall not disrespect the religious feelings and other freedoms and rights" of persons who are not members of that particular religion. The Government does not enforce actively most of these provisions of the law but acts upon complaints when they are received. On May 10-14, 2002 in Skopje, a conference was held called "Nurturing a Culture of Dialog," where Muslim leaders complained that crosses were placed on clock towers in villages and that only the Orthodox Church was invited to give prayers at government and sporting events.

Several registered Protestant groups have been unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities due to normal bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction. Churches and mosques often are built without the appropriate building permits. The Government has not taken any actions against religious buildings that lack proper construction permits.

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also places some limitations on the collection of contributions by restricting them only to places where religious rites and activities are conducted.

During the period covered by this report, the Government increasingly politicized religious issues and increased the role of religion in official events. For example, on January 9, 2002, the Minister of Interior organized a ceremony where police special forces were blessed by the Archbishop of Ohrid and each police officer was given a religious plaque. The Government also is financing the placement of a 60-foot-tall Orthodox cross on Mt. Vodno near Skopje. These actions are seen as provocations by the country's ethnic Albanians and have contributed to strained relations between religious groups.

Children below the age of 10 years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or guardians. A new law provides for religious education in the schools on a voluntary basis. The Government is developing the implementation guidelines.

The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups specifically allows for foreign citizens to carry out religious activities, but only at the request of a registered religious body. Because many evangelical Christian missionaries wish to conduct religious activities that are aimed at the creation of new groups of believers, rather than at operating through existing churches, some foreign missionaries have chosen to disregard this portion of the law. This approach has on occasion led to difficulties for those missionaries, as the authorities have questioned their actual reasons for entering the country, usually on tourist visas. The Baptist Church registered in country has refused to sponsor Baptist missionaries from churches based in other countries. During the period covered by this report, several missionaries with improper immigration status were able to obtain religious worker visas. Several applications still were pending in June 2002. In addition, bureaucratic complications between ministries have delayed significantly the issuance of religious worker visas.

The issue of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav Government has not been resolved fully. Many churches and mosques had extensive grounds or other properties that were expropriated by the Communist regime. Virtually all churches and mosques have been returned to the ownership of the appropriate religious community, but that is not the case for many of the other properties. Often restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times or have been developed. In view of the country's very limited financial resources, it is unlikely that religious communities will gain restitution of much of the expropriated properties.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

Forces on both sides of the civil conflict targeted and in some cases destroyed religious buildings. On June 16, 2001, during combat operations, police fired at the mosque at Stracini, although the NLA was not using it as a combat position. In June 2001, during anti-Albanian riots in Bitola, local police reportedly did not take any action to stop rioters from vandalizing a city mosque and its adjacent Muslim cemetery. Some witnesses claimed that a few police officers participated in the riots. On May 21, 2001, in Runica, in the Kumanovo area, government forces burned down the local mosque and a number of other buildings in retaliation for earlier NLA strikes. The NLA used religious sites—both Orthodox and Muslim—as military bases and firing positions, in an attempt to deter security forces from attacking.

During the spring of 2002, NLA fighters used the St. Bogorodica Orthodox Church near Tetovo as a base and caused significant damage to it; the NLA also used the Arabati Baba Teke Dervish monastery near Tetovo as a base. The NLA also attacked Orthodox buildings. On June 3, 2001, NLA combatants attacked and defaced the Orthodox Christian monastery at Matejce, near Kumanovo. On August 21, 2001, the NLA destroyed the church within the Orthodox Christian monastery at Lesok.

On December 8, 2001, arsonists, allegedly former NLA members, destroyed the Sveti Gjorgija (St. George) Church in the village of Golema Recica near Tetovo, the night before St. George's Day. The following night, on December 9, the mosque in Bitola caught fire. Police claimed that the fire was due to faulty electrical wiring; however, most observers believed that the fire was set intentionally in response to the St. George Church fire.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

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

#### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among the various religious communities continued to contribute to religious freedom although it has been tested severely and continues to deteriorate as a result of inter-ethnic tensions.

The religious communities in the country often reflect an ethnic identity. Specifically, most Muslims are ethnic Albanians. However, there are a number of ethnic Macedonians who are Muslim by religion. Ethnic Macedonians contend that they often are associated with the policies of ethnic Albanian Muslims, which they do not support. Societal discrimination is more likely to be based upon ethnic bias than upon religious prejudice.

During the period covered by this report, there was a significant increase in vandalism of religious properties (see Section II). Both mosques and Orthodox churches were targeted, many repeatedly. In June 2001, rioters vandalized the Bitola mosque, breaking windows, setting fire to the mosque interior, and breaking open several graves. Rioters also sprayed swastikas and anti-Albanian graffiti on the mosque. On August 7, in Prilep, a group of ethnic Macedonians burned down the local mosque.

The leaders of the long-established Orthodox, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities have better connections within the Government than do the leaders of new churches, and there were some indications of an effort by the established religions to use that influence to shut out newcomers.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy maintained an extensive dialog with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities, the office charged with the implementation of the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups. The Ambassador met with leaders of the various religious communities, as well as the head of the Commission on Religious Communities and Religious Groups, on several occasions during the period covered by this report.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2002/13948pf.htm)

