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Croatia

International Religious Freedom Report
Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion and free public profession of religious conviction, and the Government generally respects these rights in practice.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and the democratic coalition Government continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. There is no official state religion; however, the Roman Catholic Church is one of the most powerful national symbols and enjoys a historic relationship with the State not shared by other denominations, and receives some state support.

Notions of religion and ethnicity are closely intertwined in society. During the past 10 years, religious institutions of all faiths have been targets of violence, reflecting the conflicts underway. Such incidents still occur, particularly in the Danubian region (Eastern Slavonia), where there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries.

The U.S. Government continues to encourage the Government to respect religious freedom in practice. Embassy officials frequently meet with representatives of religious and ethnic minority communities and with government officials to promote respect for religious freedom and protection of human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of 21,829 square miles and its population is approximately 4,677,000. The religious breakdown of the country is approximately: Roman Catholic, 85 percent; Orthodox Christian, 6 percent; Muslim, 1 percent; Jewish, less than 1 percent; other, 4 percent; and atheist, 2 percent. These numbers are approximate because the results of the April 2001 census—the first to be conducted since 1991, before the war and its associated population shifts—are not yet available. These statistics correlate closely with the country's ethnic makeup. The Orthodox can be found in Serb areas, notably cities and the war-affected regions, and members of other minority religions can be found mostly in urban areas. Most immigrants are Roman Catholic ethnic Croats.

Protestants from a number of denominations and foreign clergy actively practice and proselytize, as do representatives of Eastern religions. Missionaries from a number of different groups are present in the country, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Catholics, Pentecostals, Hare Krishnas, and a wide range of evangelical Protestant Christians (including Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Church of Christ, and various nondenominational organizations such as the Campus Crusades for Christ). Contrary to the situation in past years, there were no reports of missionaries experiencing difficulties in obtaining missionary visas during the period covered by this report.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion and free public profession of religious conviction, and the Government generally respects these rights in practice. There is no official state religion; however, the Roman Catholic Church receives some state support.

The Government is drafting a new law on religious communities in consultations with the religious communities; it is expected to be debated by Parliament during autumn 2001. Religious leaders expressed satisfaction with their level of participation in the drafting procedure. Among other issues, the law is expected to regulate religious education in public schools and government funding for religious minorities.

In the past, the dividing line between the Catholic Church and the State often was blurred, as the then-ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party periodically attempted to identify itself more closely with the Catholic Church. However, parliamentary elections in January 2000 brought to power a democratic Government committed to respecting human rights and to improving cooperation with all religious communities.

Representatives of minority religious communities indicate that the overall climate for religious freedom has improved since the January 2000 election of a democratic coalition government. For example, leaders of the Islamic community expressed satisfaction with both the Government's approach and media coverage of religious communities. While the new Government has expressed interest in eliminating religious discrimination, its approach is ad hoc, treating problems as they arise and addressing specific issues (for example, the validity of religious marriage ceremonies) with individual religious communities rather than setting uniform nondiscriminatory standards and practices.

In July 2000, the Catholic Church signed an agreement with the state-run Croatian State Radio and Television (HRT) to provide regular, extensive coverage of Catholic events (as much as 10 hours per month). Other denominations receive about 10 minutes broadcast time per month or less. The Catholic Church operates the country's only private national radio station, Catholic Radio, which is financed by private contributions. The Jewish community reports no restrictions on religious broadcasting. Jewish topics are covered periodically on weekly religious programming of HRT, for example, at times of Jewish holidays. The Muslim community has 4.5 minutes of radio broadcast time per month, as well as 4.5 minutes per month on Radio Zagreb. In addition, the Bairam ceremony from the Zagreb mosque is telecast annually.

Muslims have the right to observe their religious holidays. They are granted a paid holiday for one Bairam and have the right to observe the other as well (although they are not paid for the day).

The Government requires that religious training be provided in schools, although attendance is optional; however, in general, the lack of resources, minority students, and qualified teachers impeded instruction in minority faiths, and the Catholic catechism was the one predominantly offered.

Missionaries do not operate registered schools, but the Mormon community provides free English lessons, which normally are followed by some sort of religious class. In December 2000, the Ministry of Education began recognizing the diploma conferred by the Muslim community's secondary school in Zagreb. Enrollment in this school subsequently increased by 50 percent. An estimated 4,000 primary and secondary school children in 35 schools in the Danubian region (Eastern Slavonia) attend Orthodox religion classes. The classes are led by 20 Orthodox priests and 4 laypersons. Orthodox officials organizing these classes stated that they cooperated well with the Ministry of Education, which organized a series of orientation seminars for the teachers.

There is no government-sponsored ecumenical activity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government imposes no formal restrictions on religious groups, and all religious communities are free to conduct public services and to open and run social and charitable institutions. Contrary to past years, there were no reports of missionaries experiencing difficulties in obtaining missionary visas during the period covered by this report.

While there is no official state religion, the Roman Catholic Church receives direct subsidies, as well as state financing for some salaries and pensions for priests and nuns through the government-managed pension and health funds. Other religious communities still do not have such an agreement with the State, nor is there a law that regulates these issues. (Orthodox priests and imams have been paying their contributions to the health and pension funds from their own resources, in order to be covered by a pension plan.)

Facilitating the return of refugees is a challenge for the new Government, which has made progress in a number of areas relating to returns. However, many ethnic Serbs who wish to return to Croatia, including Serbian Orthodox clergy, continued to encounter difficulties recovering their prewar property and reconstructing damaged or destroyed houses. There were no reports of specific discrimination against Orthodox clergy beyond that faced by other ethnic Serb citizen refugees. Notions of religion and ethnicity are linked closely in society, but the majority of incidents of discrimination are motivated by ethnicity rather than religion or religious doctrine. A pattern of often open and severe discrimination continues against ethnic Serbs, and, at times, other minorities in a wide number of areas, including the administration of justice, employment, housing, and freedom of movement. The then-HDZ party government often maintained a double standard of treatment based on ethnicity; effects of this double standard continue.

The Government requires that religious training be provided in schools, although attendance is optional. Schools filling the necessary quota of seven minority students per class offered separate religion classes for these students. In classes not meeting this quota, minority students could fulfill the religion requirement by bringing a certificate that they had received classes from their religious community. Generally, the lack of resources, minority students, and qualified teachers impeded instruction in minority faiths, and the Catholic catechism was the one predominantly offered. Although religious training is not obligatory, in the past some students reportedly felt pressured to participate. Jewish officials noted that basic information about Judaism provided to students was inaccurate, and their offers to improve the material continued to receive no response.

The Ministry of Defense employs 20 Catholic priests to minister to Catholics in the military. However, neither Orthodox nor Muslim clerics were given this opportunity. A Catholic priest is present and gives a blessing at the oath-giving ceremony upon entering the army, but other clerics have not been invited to participate.

The previous HDZ Government implemented property restitution in a discriminatory manner. In 1998 the Government signed a concordat with the Vatican that provided for the return of all Catholic Church property confiscated by the Communist regime after 1945. This agreement stipulates that the Government would return seized properties or compensate the Church where return is impossible. Some progress has been made with some returnable properties being restituted, but there has been no compensation to date for nonreturnable properties. Three other agreements with the Vatican regulate Catholic marriages, public school catechism, and military chaplains.

There have been no property restitution agreements between the Government and other religious groups. The Orthodox community has filed several requests for the return of seized properties, and some cases have been resolved successfully, particularly cases involving buildings in urban centers. However, several buildings in downtown Zagreb have not been returned, nor have properties that belonged to monasteries, such as arable land and forest. This uneven progress may be the result of a slow judicial system rather than a systematic effort to deny restitution of Orthodox properties. Several Jewish properties, including some Zagreb buildings, have not been returned. No properties have been returned to the Jewish community since March 2000. The Jewish community identifies property return as one of its top priorities. The Government failed to amend discriminatory clauses of the Law on Compensation for Property Taken During Yugoslav Communist Rule that were struck down by the Constitutional Court in 1999. The Government failed to meet a court-mandated March 31, 2001 deadline to enact the amendments, obtaining an extension until July 15, 2001. The new amendments are expected to extend compensation to Jews whose property was confiscated between 1941 and 1945 as well as to foreigners.

Catholic marriages are recognized by the State, eliminating the need to register them in the civil registry office. The Muslim and Jewish communities, seeking similar status, have raised this issue repeatedly with the Government, but there had been no resolution by the end of the period covered by this report.

The World War II Jasenovac concentration camp, site of a memorial and museum, was damaged severely during the recent conflict and renovation is ongoing. In April 2001, a government delegation, led by the Minister of Culture, attended a commemoration ceremony there that also was attended by several leaders of ethnic and religious minority communities.

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 Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Notions of religion and ethnicity are intertwined closely in society, and religion often was used to identify non-Croats and to single them out for discriminatory practices. This caused religious institutions to be targets of violence. In the past 10 years, religious institutions of all faiths have been targets of violence. Such incidents still occur, particularly in the tense Danubian region (Eastern Slavonia), where there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) recorded 23 incidents of harassment or violence towards religious persons or sites during the period covered by this report; 18 of these were directed against the Serb Orthodox community, including several incidents of disruption of religious services, harassment of Orthodox clergy, and damage to cemeteries. In February 2001, the Orthodox church in Darda, in the tense Eastern Slavonian region, was vandalized for the fifth time in 18 months when windows and a door were damaged. In addition, the Orthodox church reports that the bishop of Sibenik is unable to appear in public in his clerical garments due to constant harassment. In August 2000, unidentified vandals broke into the Orthodox church in the Danubian town of Branjina and wrote anti-Serb messages on the walls; no arrests were made. In July 2000, an Orthodox priest in Ilok, Eastern Slavonia, was crossing the street in his clerical robes when a car swerved to hit him. He was uninjured and the driver was given a warning by police.

In contrast to the previous reporting period, Jewish leaders reported no serious discriminatory incidents during the period covered by this report. Anti-Semitic letters were mailed to the Jewish Center in Zagreb in April and May 2001 and were turned over to the police; no arrests were made. A series of harsh anonymous telephone calls to the Center ceased after police began investigating.

The Catholic Church at times was openly critical of the previous government. However, conservative elements within the Catholic hierarchy in the country have shown increasing dissatisfaction with the policies of the new coalition Government. In January 2001, conservative Dalmatian bishops boycotted President Stjepan Mesic's annual reception for religious communities, apparently to register their dissatisfaction with both the Government and Catholic Archbishop Josip Bozanic's progressive stances. In February 2001, several of the Dalmatian clergy publicly supported right-wing demonstrations in support of General Mirko Norac, who is indicted for war crimes. In March 2001, a conservative editorial in the church's weekly publication, Glas Koncila, sharply criticized government policies and highlighted this policy rift within the hierarchy.

Since Catholic Archbishop Bozanic took office in 1997, the Catholic Church has sought a more proactive role in advocating reconciliation. Catholic Radio includes a monthly program on ecumenism, inviting speakers

from other religious communities. Ecumenical efforts among the religious communities have developed in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. For example, religious leaders met frequently during the reporting period, both formally and informally, to provide input to the government office drafting the religious legislation and to discuss other issues of mutual interest. Participants describe these sessions as "friendly and healthy."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government actively works to encourage the Government to respect religious freedom in practice and to support the efforts of the Catholic Church to foster a constructive environment in post-conflict society. Embassy officials have frequent meetings at all levels with representatives of the ethnic Serb (Orthodox) community as well as the Jewish and Muslim communities and are engaged in the promotion of human rights, including the religious rights, of these groups. Embassy officials meet and hold frequent discussions at all levels with government officials about respect for religious freedom and problems of discrimination against religious communities. The Embassy is a leader of the "Article 11 Commission," a group of 24 international missions in the country that deals directly with issues of ethnic and religious reconciliation and human rights.

[End]

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