

ROMANIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits restrictions on freedom of conscience and belief, as well as forcing an individual to espouse a religious belief contrary to the individual's convictions. It stipulates all religions are independent from the state and have the freedom to organize "in accordance with their own statutes." According to law, the state recognizes the "important role" of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the history of the country. The law specifies a three-tiered classification of religious organizations, although civil associations wishing to perform religious functions may organize under a separate provision of the law. Religious organizations recognized as religious denominations under the law receive state support and permission to minister to persons in the armed forces, hospitals, retirement homes, public schools, mass media, penitentiaries, and orphanages. Religious minorities continued to report registration requirements limited their ability to function and restricted where they could bury their dead. There were continued reports of the slow pace of restitution of confiscated properties, especially to the Greek Catholic Church and the Jewish community. As of December the government rejected 980 restitution claims for confiscated religious properties and approved 26. Minority religious groups continued to state that the national and local governments gave preference to the ROC, to report incidents of discrimination against them, and to object to government implementation of laws regarding religious instruction in schools. The naming of some streets, organizations, schools, and libraries after persons convicted of war crimes or crimes against humanity continued. Holocaust education remained optional in schools. Government leaders continued to speak out against anti-Semitism.

In October self-declared anti-Muslim activists interrupted a performance in the Cluj-Napoca Opera House during the recital of the Islamic call to prayer. Several mainstream media outlets depicted refugees and asylum seekers as Muslim "invaders." Minority religious groups reported continued harassment of their congregations by ROC priests and adherents, including the denial of access to cemeteries. According to a report on hate speech, a considerable number of users and groups on social media advocated for the extermination of Jews or other violent acts. Members of the ROC praised convicted war criminals and Legionnaires. The media and the Jewish community reported several instances of vandalism of Jewish religious properties, including the destruction by unidentified vandals of 10 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Bucharest.

In meetings with the general secretary of the government, U.S. embassy officials raised continued concerns about the slow pace of the restitution process and the low number of properties restored to minority religious groups. Embassy officials facilitated meetings between the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) and government officials to help speed the processes of property restitution and pensions for Holocaust survivors. The embassy supported the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania (Wiesel Institute) and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in their efforts to establish a museum of Jewish history. The Ambassador participated in commemorations of the Holocaust, speaking out against the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the country. Embassy representatives continued to meet with Greek Catholic priests to discuss ROC-Greek Catholic relations and incidents of discrimination. The Ambassador hosted several events for religious leaders to facilitate interreligious dialogue and understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 21.5 million (July 2017 estimate). According to a 2011 government census, ROC adherents constitute 86.5 percent of the population and Roman Catholics almost 5 percent. According to the census, there are approximately 151,000 Greek Catholics; however, Greek Catholics estimate their numbers at 488,000. Other religious groups include Old Rite Russian Christians; Protestants, including Reformed Protestants, Pentecostals, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and other Protestant denominations; Jews; Muslims; Jehovah's Witnesses; Bahais; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); Zen Buddhists; members of the Family (God's Children); the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church); and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. Atheists and nonbelievers represent less than 1 percent of the population.

According to the census, Old Rite Russian Christians are mainly located in Moldavia and Dobrogea. Most Muslims live in the southeast around Constanta. Most Greek Catholics reside in Transylvania. Protestants of various denominations and Roman Catholics reside primarily in Transylvania. Orthodox and Greek Catholic ethnic Ukrainians live mostly in the north. Orthodox ethnic Serbs are primarily in Banat. Members of the Armenian Apostolic Church are concentrated in Moldavia and the south. Virtually all members of the Protestant Reformed and Unitarian Churches of Transylvania are ethnic Hungarians. More than half of the Roman Catholic and evangelical Lutheran churches in

Transylvania are composed of ethnic Hungarians. Approximately 40 percent of the country's Jewish population of 3,400 resides in Bucharest.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits restricting freedom of thought, opinion, conscience or religious beliefs, as well as forcing individuals to espouse a religious belief contrary to their convictions. It stipulates all religions are independent from the state and have the freedom to organize “in accordance with their own statutes” under terms defined by the law. The law specifies the state's recognition of the “important role of the Romanian Orthodox Church” as well as the role of “other churches and denominations as recognized by the national history” of the country.

The constitution also states religious denominations shall be autonomous and enjoy state support, including the facilitation of religious assistance in the army, hospitals, penitentiaries, retirement homes, and orphanages. The law forbids public authorities or private legal entities from asking individuals to specify their religion, with the exception of the census.

The provisions of the law devoted to religion stipulate a three-tier system of religious classification with “religious denominations” at the highest level, followed by “religious associations,” and “religious groups” at the most basic level. Organizations in the top two tiers are legal entities, while religious groups are not. Under separate provisions of the law governing associations and foundations, civil associations may also engage in religious activities and have the status of legal entities.

By law, there are 18 religious organizations recognized as “religious denominations,” all of which were in existence at the time the specific law on religion was enacted in 2006. They include the ROC; Orthodox Serb Bishopric of Timisoara; Roman Catholic Church; Greek Catholic Church; Old Rite Russian Christian (Orthodox) Church; Reformed (Protestant) Church; Christian Evangelical Church; Romanian Evangelical Church; Evangelical Augustinian Church; Lutheran Evangelical Church; Unitarian Church; the Baptist Church; Pentecostal Church; Seventh-day Adventist Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Federation of Jewish Communities; Muslim Denomination (Islam); and Jehovah's Witnesses.

For additional organizations to obtain recognition as religious denominations, the law specifies they must demonstrate 12 years of continuous activity since the law's passage, which cannot occur before 2018. After it demonstrates 12 years of continuous activity, a religious association is eligible to apply for the status of religious denomination if it has a membership of 0.1 percent of the population (approximately 21,500 persons) or more.

The law defines a religious association as an organization of at least 300 citizens who share and practice the same faith and that has attained legal status through registration with the Registry of Religious Associations in the office of the clerk of the court where the main branch of the association is located. To register, religious associations must submit to the government their members' personal data (e.g., names, addresses, personal identification numbers, and signatures), which the law says may not be shared with other public institutions or used in any other way. To operate as religious associations, organizations also require approval from the National Secretariat for Religious Denominations, which is subordinated to the Prime Minister's Office. At year's end, 33 entities with diverse religious affiliations were registered as religious associations, up from 27 in 2016.

The law defines a religious group as a group of individuals who share the same beliefs. Religious groups do not have to register to practice their religion and do not need approval from the national secretariat to operate.

Civil associations engaged in religious activities function like secular associations and foundations; however, they do not receive the same benefits as religious denominations or religious associations. Civil associations may not qualify under the numerical/administrative criteria (300 members) for recognition as religious associations or may choose not to apply for such recognition. These associations do not require approval from the National Secretariat for Religious Denominations to operate. Their registration falls under the provisions of law governing the establishment of foundations, associations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which require a minimum membership of three individuals. Such civil associations are not required to submit their members' personal data.

Religious denominations are eligible for state financial and other support. They have the right to teach religion classes in public schools, receive government funds to build places of worship, partially pay clergy salaries with state funds, broadcast religious programming on radio and television, and apply for broadcasting licenses for their own stations. Under the law, the amount of state funding a denomination

receives is determined by the number of adherents reported in the most recent census, as well as by “the religious denomination’s actual needs.”

Religious associations do not receive government funding, but both they and religious denominations receive tax exemptions on income and buildings used for religious, educational, or other social purposes. Religious groups do not receive either government funding or tax exemptions.

Both religious denominations and religious associations may own or rent property, publish or import religious literature, proselytize, establish and operate schools or hospitals, own cemeteries, and receive tax exemptions on income and buildings used for religious, educational, or other social purposes. Religious groups have no legal status to engage in such activities; however, they may practice their religious beliefs, including in public.

Civil associations engaged in religious activities may engage in religious worship. While they do not receive the same tax exemptions or other benefits granted to religious denominations and religious associations, they may receive the tax advantages and other benefits accruing to civil associations and foundations.

Legal provisions allow local authorities to fund places of worship and theological schools belonging to religious denominations, including providing funding for staff salaries and building maintenance, renovation, and conservation or construction of places of worship. No similar provisions exist for religious associations or other associations engaged in religious activities; however, these associations may receive funding through legal provisions for civil associations and foundations.

The law entitles all types of religious organizations to bury their deceased members in cemeteries belonging to other religious organizations – with the exception of Jewish and Muslim cemeteries – in localities where they do not have cemeteries of their own and where there is no public cemetery. Public cemeteries must have separate sections for each religious denomination if requested by the denominations operating in the locality.

The law allows clergy from recognized religious denominations to minister to military personnel. This includes the possibility of clergy functioning within the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Intelligence Service, Foreign Intelligence Service, Protection and Guard Service, Special Telecommunications Service, and General Directorate for Penitentiaries. Under various other arrangements, clergy of recognized religious denominations, and in some cases religious associations,

may enter hospitals, orphanages, and retirement homes to undertake religious activities. Religious denominations and religious associations may undertake activities in penitentiaries, subject to approval by the director of the detention facility.

The law provides for the restitution of religious properties confiscated between 1940 and 1989, during World War II (WWII) and the ensuing communist regime, as long as the properties are in the possession of the state. These two regimes confiscated the property of both individuals and religious denominations. The Jewish community was forced to “donate” property during WWII and afterward. In accordance with communist-era legislation on the status of religions, if the majority of a “local community of believers” changed their religion, the properties of the church they had left followed them to the new church. The communist regime also outlawed the Greek Catholic Church, forced church members to convert to Orthodoxy, and confiscated all church property. It transferred all places of worship and parish houses to the ROC and most other properties (land and buildings) to the state.

Under the law, if a confiscated property is used “in the public interest,” such as for a school, hospital, or museum, and is returned to its previous owner, the current occupants are allowed to stay in it for 10 years after the restitution decision and pay a capped rent. The law does not address the general return of properties currently used as places of worship. Although the provisions of the law on restitution state a separate law will be adopted to address such cases, to date there is no such law.

A separate statute on the reinstatement of the Greek Catholic Church regulates the restitution of properties to the Greek Catholic Church from the ROC. Restitution decisions are made by a joint commission representing the two churches and based on “the will of the believers from the communities that possess these properties.” The Greek Catholic Church may pursue court action if attempts to obtain restitution of its properties through dialogue are unsuccessful.

The law establishes a points system of compensation in cases where in-kind restitution is not possible. Religious groups may use the points only to bid on other properties in auctions organized by the National Commission for Real Estate Compensation (NCREC). The NCREC also validates compensation decisions of other local or central authorities, including those of the Special Restitution Commission (SRC), which decides on restitution claims filed by religious denominations and national minorities. The law establishes a 240-day deadline by

which claimants must submit additional evidence in their cases at the specific request of the entity in charge of resolving their restitution claim. If a claimant does not meet the deadline, the administrative authority may reject the case. The authority may extend the deadline by an additional 120 days if the claimants prove they made a concerted effort to obtain the evidence, usually in the possession of other state authorities, but were unable to do so.

The law nullifies acts of forced “donations” of Jewish property during WWII and the communist era, and lowers the burden of proof for the previous owners or their heirs to obtain restitution. The law designates the present-day Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania as the legitimate inheritor of forfeited communal Jewish property and accords priority to private claims by Holocaust survivors. The law does not address heirless or unclaimed property left by Holocaust victims.

By law, religious education in schools is optional. Each of the 18 legally recognized religious denominations is entitled to offer religion classes, based on its own religious teachings, in schools. A denomination may offer classes regardless of the number of students adhering to the denomination in a school. The law allows for exceptions where the right of students to attend religion classes cannot be implemented “for objective reasons,” without specifying what these reasons may be.

Under the law, parents of students under 18 years of age are required to request their children’s participation in religion classes, while students 18 and older may themselves ask to attend religion classes. Although a student normally takes a school course based on the religious teachings of the denomination to which the student belongs, it is also possible for a student to take a religion course offered by his or her denomination outside the school system and bring a certificate from the denomination to receive academic credit.

Religion teachers are government employees, but each religious denomination approves the appointment and retention of the teachers of its religion classes.

The law forbids religious proselytizing in schools. If teachers proselytize, the school management decides the punishment based on the conclusions of an internal committee.

The law states the religion of a child who has turned 14 may not be changed without the child’s consent, and from age 16 an individual has the right to choose her/his religion.

The law bans discrimination on religious grounds in all areas of public life. It also bans religious defamation and stirring conflict on religious grounds, as well as public offenses against religious symbols. Penalties may include fines varying from 1,000 to 100,000 lei (\$260 to \$25,800), depending on whether the victim is an individual or a community.

The law prohibits establishment of fascist, Legionnaire, racist, or xenophobic organizations, which it defines in part as groups that promote violence, religiously motivated hatred, or anti-Semitism. Penalties for establishing such organizations range from three to 10 years' imprisonment and the loss of certain rights. Criminal liability is waived if the person involved in establishing such an organization informs authorities before the organization begins its activity; penalties are halved if the individual helps authorities with the criminal investigation. Legislation also makes manufacturing, selling, distributing, owning with intent to distribute, and using Legionnaire symbols illegal. Penalties range from three months' to three years' imprisonment.

Publicly denying, contesting, approving, justifying, or minimizing, in an "obvious manner" as determined by a judge, the Holocaust is punishable by six months' to three years' imprisonment or by a fine, depending on circumstances, of up to 200,000 lei (\$51,500). Publicly promoting the cult of persons convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes may incur fines and prison terms ranging from six months to three years and from six months to five years if done online. The same penalties apply to publicly promoting fascist, Legionnaire, racist, or xenophobic ideas, worldviews, or doctrines.

The law allows religious workers from legally recognized religious organizations to enter and remain in the country under an extended-stay visa. Visa applicants must receive approval by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs and submit evidence they represent religious organizations legally established in the country. The secretariat may extend such visas for up to five years.

The country is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). On May 25, the government approved a memorandum to clarify how the government would include the working definition of anti-Semitism into professional training programs and in the civics studies curricula, adopted by consensus at the IHRA Plenary meeting in Bucharest one year earlier.

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

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: The government approved recognition of several religious groups as religious associations but rejected the applications of others. Minority religious groups, in particular, continued to object to the legal classification system for religious organizations. There were continued reports of the slow pace of restitution of confiscated properties, especially reports from the Greek Catholic Church and the Jewish community, and the number of agency and court decisions returning properties remained low. Minority religious groups continued to state that the national and local governments gave preference to the ROC, to report incidents of discrimination against them, and to object to government implementation of laws regarding religious instruction in schools. The naming of some streets, organizations, schools, and libraries after persons convicted of Nazi-era war crimes or crimes against humanity continued. Prosecutions for anti-Semitic speech and Holocaust denial remained rare, while Holocaust education remained optional in schools. Government leaders continued to speak out against anti-Semitism, and the government transferred property to the Wiesel Institute to establish a museum on the history of Romanian Jewry.

As of December, the government approved six applications for religious association status during the year, all of which were Christian associations. In one case, the National Secretariat for Religious Denominations did not issue an advisory opinion because the submitted documentation did not meet the criteria established by law. The establishing act and the statute of the association that did not receive the advisory opinion expressed the will of only seven members and not 300, as required by law, and the official name of the association was not used consistently in all the documents submitted. Groups whose applications were rejected could reapply once they had prepared the necessary documents to complete their applications.

Bahai leaders continued to seek amendment of the law to include provisions for the burial of deceased persons who did not belong to one of the 18 recognized denominations; Bahais were registered as a religious association and not as a denomination.

Religious groups continued to state they viewed the 300-person membership requirement and the need to submit their members' personal data for registration as a religious association as discriminatory because other types of associations only required three members and did not have to submit the personal data of their

members. They also continued to criticize the three-tier classification system for religious organizations.

In May the media reported two persons found dead in their home in Dobresti, a village in Dolj County, were swiftly buried without any religious ceremony following a decision by the mayor. The vice mayor reportedly transported the bodies in plastic bags via bulldozer and dumped them into an unmarked grave on the outskirts of the cemetery. The mayor stated he was concerned about health risks associated with decaying bodies and there was not enough time to call a priest or buy a coffin and a cross.

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that in several areas of the country, some members encountered opposition to their activities and threats from ROC priests, police, and public authorities. In July the mayor of Balilesti village in Arges County and a local ROC priest threatened representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses and forced them out of the village. Following a complaint, police instructed the mayor and the priest to respect the law on religious freedom. In July an ROC priest from the village of Tonea, Calarasi County, accused two members of the Jehovah's Witnesses of distributing religious "propaganda" and threatened to use physical violence against them.

The same month two ROC priests from the village of Radacineni, Valcea County, said to members of the Jehovah's Witnesses the priests would "protect their parish with their own blood" and threatened to use a sword against them if they came again to the village. Following complaints submitted by Jehovah's Witnesses, police fined the priests. The Jehovah's Witnesses also said a local police agent from Margineni, Prahova County, had asked two members of the religious group to identify themselves and said in front of a crowd gathered by an ROC priest the two could be terrorists. After escorting the members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to police headquarters, the Jehovah's Witnesses said a police agent disapproved of their "activity" and took no measures when the ROC priest threatened to force them out of the village with the help of locals. The prosecutor's office attached to the Prahova Tribunal dismissed the criminal complaint submitted by the Jehovah's Witnesses in the case. Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that in the village of Raucesti, Neamt County, agents of the National Police urged two of the religious group's representatives to leave the village and told them they needed a permit from local authorities to carry out religious activities. Jehovah's Witnesses filed a criminal complaint regarding this case. At the end of the year, the case remained pending before the prosecutor's office attached to the Neamt Tribunal.

A Roman Catholic official said the National Audio-Visual Council, a government-appointed entity that monitors broadcast content and issues broadcasting licenses, repeatedly rejected requests for local radio licenses to allow the Catholic “Radio Maria” network to expand the number of stations on which it broadcast.

In 2016, a former city hall candidate, Catalin Berenghi, filed a court case to annul the 2015 government decision transferring land in Bucharest to the Muslim community in order for it to build a mosque. Beginning in May, an online campaign generated approximately 8,000 motions from individuals desiring to become additional plaintiffs in the court case, thereby delaying the court’s consideration of the original motion. As of December, the case was pending before the Bucharest Court of Appeal.

In May the Roman Catholic Archbishopric of Bucharest criticized the mayor’s office for not enforcing court rulings to demolish a 19-story building constructed within the protected zone around the Roman Catholic Saint Joseph Cathedral, a designated historical monument. According to media reports, Mayor Gabriela Firea stated on a television show she would ask the residents of Bucharest, via an opinion poll, if they agreed to spend millions of euros to demolish the building.

In September the Bucharest City Council allocated one million euros (\$1.2 million) for the continued construction of the Romanian People’s Salvation Cathedral, the patriarchal cathedral of the ROC. The president of Save Romania Union in Bucharest criticized the decision, stating the cathedral did not represent a priority for Bucharest due to more pressing needs, such as addressing the city’s traffic congestion; several journalists agreed with her opinion.

As of December, the National Authority for Property Restitution (NAPR), the government agency responsible for overseeing the restitution process, reported the SRC had approved the restitution of three “immovable properties” (land or buildings) to religious denominations, approved compensation in 26 cases, and rejected 980 other claims during the year. In 231 cases, the filers withdrew, redirected, or attached their claims to other files. According to data provided by NAPR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the number of cases NAPR reviewed decreased 37 percent from 1,955 in 2016 to 1,227.

According to the NAPR, as of December religious groups appealed 85 decisions by the SRC to the courts during the year. The Roman Catholic Church made 31 appeals; the ROC made 16; the Greek Catholics made eight appeals; the Reformed

Church made four appeals; and the Jewish community made 12 appeals. Information concerning court decisions on these cases was unavailable.

The NAPR reviewed 744 claims submitted by the Greek Catholic Church during the year but did not restore any property to the church or grant it compensation in any cases. The NAPR continued to report the reason for the SRC's rejection of some claims for restitution of Greek Catholic properties was that the previous transfer of those properties to the ROC occurred under the communist regime. According to the NAPR, these properties did not belong to the state and therefore the state could not return them.

The Greek Catholic Church reported continued court delays on restitution lawsuits. Two court decisions on Greek Catholic restitution cases were reported during the year. In both cases, the courts rejected restitution claims, but a final decision was pending at year's end.

Restitution of a property in Bixad, previously restored to the Greek Catholic Church by the government and confirmed by earlier court decisions, continued to be delayed while courts considered the case anew, following a 2016 decision by the Alba Tribunal, a county-level court, allowing the Satu Mare County Council to revive its claim for ownership of the property. At year's end, the case was still pending.

Two cases filed in 2016 by the Greek Catholic Church with the European Court of Human Rights for restitution of churches in Bistrita and Breb remained pending. In each case, the Church's complaint concerned court decisions awarding Greek Catholic property to the ROC based on census data showing Greek Catholics as a minority.

Although the government did not issue regulations for implementing new property restitution legislation passed in 2016, which granted priority to cases involving Holocaust survivors, the NAPR approved priority status for the 50 such applications it had received by August. The NAPR awarded compensation to Holocaust survivors in two cases and requested additional documents for the remaining 48 cases.

The Caritatea Foundation, the NGO established by the Federation of Jewish Communities and the WJRO to oversee Jewish communal property claims, reported the SRC had approved nine pending claims as of August – all via compensation – and rejected 107 others. In 62 other cases, claimants withdrew

their requests. No new claims were submitted during the year. The foundation stated the SRC continued to fear assuming responsibility for restitution and preferred to pass decisions on to the courts. The foundation also continued to state the claims procedure was overly bureaucratic and unreasonable, in particular because the SRC often requested the submission of numerous additional documents, giving Jewish claimants little time to meet the 120-day deadline for document submission.

The Caritatea Foundation also said the NCREC continued to invalidate previous positive decisions for compensation by the SRC, citing the case of a Jewish community property in Galati, which remained pending following the NCREC's denial of previously awarded compensation due to a name change of the street where the property had been located.

The Reformed, Roman Catholic, Unitarian, and Evangelical Lutheran churches said the government continued to reject their restitution claims on the grounds the entities registered as the former property owners were not the contemporary churches. Church leaders said the communist regime had dismantled the former church entities while confiscating their property, meaning the former property owners no longer existed as such but the contemporary churches, as the successors to the dismantled churches, were in effect the same entities whose property had been seized. Fifty claims submitted by the Roman Catholic Church were resolved as of year's end. The government decided to grant compensation in three cases, 38 claims were denied, and in nine cases the claimants renounced, redirected their claims, or annexed them to other files. Twenty-five claims submitted by the Reformed Church were reviewed and 17 were denied; in seven cases, the plaintiffs either renounced, redirected their claims, or annexed them to other files; in one case, the government granted compensation. During the year, the government reviewed and denied the four pending claims of the Unitarian Church. One claim for restitution filed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church was resolved as of December, and the government granted compensation.

The Roman Catholic Church's appeal of the SRC's 2015 rejection of its claim for restitution of the Batthyaneum Library and an astronomical institute in Alba Iulia remained pending with the court. Greek Catholic priests continued to state that local authorities did not grant construction permits for places of worship, even though there were no apparent legal grounds for denying them. Greek Catholics attributed the delayed issuance of permits to pressure from the ROC.

The percentage of schoolchildren opting to take religion classes remained at almost 90 percent and, according to the media, NGOs, and parents' associations, continued to be the result of manipulation and pressure by the ROC as well as the failure of school directors to offer parents alternatives to the religion classes. Observers reported school inspectorates did not enforce a ministerial order mandating annual submission of requests to take religion classes and instead considered children's initial requests to be valid for an entire four-year study cycle.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church reported schools continued to schedule exams on Saturdays without providing the option for Seventh-day Adventist students, for whom Saturday is the Sabbath, to take the exams on another day.

In September, 20 NGOs sent a public letter to the Ministry of Education requesting a ban on religious services during the opening of the school year. The NGO letter stated children were "forced" to take part in religious services organized in schools, which represented a "serious violation of religious freedom."

Minority religious groups, including the Christian Evangelical Church, reported authorities continued to allow only the ROC to play an active role in the annual opening ceremonies at schools and other community events and usually did not invite other religious groups to attend such ceremonies.

In public speeches, some politicians and the media continued to equate Romanian Orthodoxy with national identity. A National Liberal Party deputy, Daniel Gheorghe, said in October that the Orthodox Church was the "spinal column of the Romanian nation."

Religious groups reported military chaplains continued to be ROC priests with the exception of one Roman Catholic priest and one pastor from the Evangelical Alliance.

The government-established Elie Wiesel Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania reported prosecution of anti-Semitic speech and Holocaust denial remained a rare occurrence. According to statistics released by the government, during the year, the national-level Prosecutor General's Office compiled a list of 42 cases to be resolved. Of those cases, the office reportedly resolved one case through a waiver of criminal prosecution (defined as there being no public interest in prosecution) and dropped 12 other cases.

According to the Wiesel Institute, the delay in the prosecution of cases continued due to lengthy investigations. As of October, Gorj police, under the supervision of the Targu Jiu prosecutor's office, continued to investigate a case from 2014 based on a complaint from the Center for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism (MCA), an independent NGO, concerning a lampshade posted for sale online and advertised as being made of "Jewish skin."

The Wiesel Institute reported local authorities continued to name some streets, organizations, schools, and libraries after persons convicted of Nazi-era war crimes or crimes against humanity and to allow the erection of statues and busts depicting persons convicted of war crimes. The Wiesel Institute asked city authorities in Cluj-Napoca to rename a street named after Radu Gyr, a commander of the Legionnaire movement and apologist for anti-Semitism who was convicted of war crimes. As of December the local government had not changed the name of the street.

According to the Wiesel Institute, the committee for renaming streets within the Bucharest prefect's office recommended against the renaming of a street honoring Mircea Vulcanescu, a cabinet member in the government of WWII leader Ion Antonescu who supported anti-Semitic policies and was convicted as a war criminal. In May the Bucharest Tribunal ruled Vulcanescu's conviction for war crimes in 1948 was politically motivated because he had opposed the communist regime. Several academics criticized the tribunal's decision, stating Vulcanescu's original conviction was based on his activity as a member of the Antonescu cabinet and not on his opposition to the communist regime. In October the Ministry of Finance appealed the decision; the case remained pending in the Court of Appeal at the end of the year.

The government continued to implement the recommendations of the 2004 International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (Wiesel Commission) Report and to cooperate with the USHMM in promoting Holocaust education. The Wiesel Institute continued to organize training sessions for history teachers, carry out educational activities for students, and inform the public about the Holocaust.

Despite the government's commitment to cooperate with the USHMM to promote Holocaust education, observers reported the general history curricula continued not to provide a mandatory class on the country's Holocaust history. The high school course "History of the Jews – The Holocaust" remained optional. During the 2016-17 school year, 2,894 students in 75 schools enrolled in this course, a number

that observers considered extremely low when compared with the total student population.

In May the Wiesel Institute took possession of a building in central Bucharest transferred to it by the Bucharest General Council for establishment of a new museum on the history of the country's Jewish community. The Ministry of Defense promised to facilitate the transfer of historical artifacts to the Wiesel Institute for use in the museum.

Pursuant to its pledge to implement the recommendations of the 2004 International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (Wiesel Commission) Report, the government again commemorated the annual National Holocaust Remembrance Day in October, marking the day when the Romanian authorities began deporting the country's Jews to Transnistria, with a wreath-laying ceremony at the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest. The president and other government officials made public statements against anti-Semitism during the year.

Following vandalism at a Jewish cemetery in Bucharest in April, then-Prime Minister Grindeanu said, "I firmly condemn the serious act of vandalism that occurred at the beginning of this week in the greatest Jewish cemetery in Bucharest. Anti-Semitic acts and vandalism are unacceptable." In June President Iohannis participated in an awards ceremony in the United States hosted by the Global Forum of the American Jewish Committee. After receiving the "Light Unto the Nations" distinction, he said, "We cannot allow Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism to affect the health of democracies."

The Wiesel Institute continued to organize training courses on the history of the Holocaust for teachers, police officers, and other professionals. In April the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a conference on the recently adopted working definition of anti-Semitism by the IHRA. During the conference, NGO representatives, leaders of the Jewish community, and academics discussed the implications of the working definition and the way law enforcement, academics, and educators can use it. On May 25, the government approved a memorandum stipulating measures to be taken by the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, law enforcement authorities, and Ministry of Education to include the working definition in their professional training programs and in the civics studies curricula.

In an article published by the privately owned *Adevarul* newspaper, Radu Preda, who is the executive president of the government-sponsored Institute for Investigating Communist Crimes, which studies the former communist regime,

said the dismantling of the Greek Catholic Church by Stalin was “God’s pedagogy.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In October anti-Muslim activist Calin Marincus and several members of the New Right Party interrupted an artistic performance of a mass in the Cluj-Napoca Opera House, which also included the recital of the Islamic call to prayer. The media reported the activists started singing the Romanian national anthem and Marincus made statements opposing the construction of any “mega-mosque” on Romanian soil. Police removed the protesters from the building and fined them.

Greek Catholic priests said ROC priests continued to harass and intimidate Greek Catholics, especially in rural areas, and to encourage ROC members to try to prevent individuals from joining the Greek Catholic Church.

According to non-Orthodox religious groups, ROC priests continued not to allow them to bury their dead in ROC or public cemeteries or otherwise continued to restrict such burials by requiring the burials take place in isolated sections of a cemetery or follow Orthodox rituals during the funeral services. According to the Greek Catholic Church, in the village of Tiur, the ROC representatives who managed the local cemetery did not allow a Greek Catholic priest to bury a deceased person. The Christian Evangelical Church (CEC) reported that in the village of Sarulesti Gara, the ROC priest refused the burial of persons belonging to other religious denominations in the local cemetery. According to the CEC, there were two cases when the same priest forcefully entered the house of the deceased persons and buried them according to the Orthodox ritual, contrary to the families’ request for burial next to CEC members. The CEC also said ROC priests forced former Orthodox believers who converted to the evangelical Christian faith to give up their graves leased from the local cemetery managed by the ROC. Non-Orthodox religious groups continued to report difficulties in obtaining land to establish cemeteries. The CEC reported that in the village of Cosesti, the mayor’s office rejected the request for land to establish a cemetery and did not approve the establishment of a cemetery next to the local church, citing the local ROC priest’s opposition.

According to Greek Catholic leaders, the ROC, in conjunction with local authorities, continued to deny the Greek Catholic Church and its followers access to the ROC cemetery in Sapanta, which had previously belonged to the Greek Catholic Church.

Bahais reported an ROC priest in one neighborhood in Bucharest repeatedly told parents and residents the purpose of an after-school program owned by a member of the Bahai community was “dangerous” for their children and was to “manipulate and twist their children’s minds.”

A survey by Kantar TNS, commissioned by the Wiesel Institute and released in October, found that while 68 percent of the 1,014 adults 18 years and older surveyed had heard of the Holocaust, only 41 percent believed the Holocaust had occurred in the country. Approximately 55 percent of the respondents blamed the Holocaust on Nazi Germany, while 22 percent considered the wartime government of general Ion Antonescu responsible. Of the respondents, 44 percent considered Antonescu a hero; 46 percent of those interviewed agreed with the statement “it would be better for Jews to go live in their country.”

Material promoting anti-Semitic views and glorifying Legionnaires appeared in both print and social media. According to a report released in April on hate speech on social media during 2016 by the Wiesel Institute, 59 percent of the recorded hate speech incidents targeted Jews. The report stated 2 percent of recorded hate speech repeated longstanding accusations against Jews, such as declaring the Talmud a “satanic Bible” or characterizing Jews as being part of a plot to bring the anti-Christ to earth. The report found 22 percent of the recorded hate speech posted by users and groups on social media advocated the extermination of Jews or other violent acts.

According to the MCA, in May the Ion I. Bratianu Cultural Foundation, a Bucharest-based NGO that organizes cultural and scientific events, hosted the launch of an anti-Semitic book, *The Nazi Zionism*, by retired general Radu Theodoru. The MCA stated it had informed the prosecutor’s and mayor’s offices about the book launch before it took place, but the authorities did not intervene.

Observers reported members of the ROC continued to make public statements praising convicted war criminals and members of the Legionnaire Movement. In the context of the ROC’s Commemorative Year Dedicated to the Defenders of Orthodoxy During Communism, ROC Spokesperson Vasile Banescu stated Mircea Vulcanescu was among those who should be honored because they “sacrificed themselves for the defense of national and Christian values.”

In September the media reported hundreds of individuals participated in a march recreating Elie Wiesel’s deportation journey as a protest against anti-Semitism.

Several mainstream media outlets depicted refugees and asylum seekers as Muslim “invaders,” while conspiracy theories and antagonistic speech against Muslims appeared frequently on social networks. In August during a World Cup qualification match against Armenia, observers reported Romanian supporters displayed a banner reading “No to Islamization.” An article published by the Evenimentul Zilei news site in August regarding the recent flow of migrants was titled, “The Migrant Invasion: Muslims Storm Romania’s Borders.”

In April vandals destroyed 10 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Bucharest, according to the MCA. Police identified three underage individuals who allegedly were responsible for the crime. Although the vandalism took place on Holocaust Remembrance Day, observers reported the police investigation found the perpetrators had acted without a specific reason. At year’s end, the case remained pending before a Bucharest district court.

In June the Jewish community in Cluj-Napoca notified police about anti-Semitic and Holocaust denial messages painted on the exterior wall of the Memorial Temple of Deported Jews synagogue in Cluj-Napoca. A police investigation remained pending at the end of the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy raised its continued concerns about the slow pace of religious property restitution with the general secretary of the government. The embassy also continued to facilitate meetings between the WJRO and the government to help speed the processes of property restitution and pensions for Holocaust survivors.

Embassy officials and representatives of the USHMM continued discussions with government ministers, officials in the education ministry, and heads of the major political parties. They stressed the importance of full official recognition of the Holocaust in the country, the necessity of expanding Holocaust education for both students and civil servants, and the need for complete implementation of the recommendations of the Wiesel Commission.

The embassy continued to assist the USHMM’s effort to access the country’s national archives by engaging with various ministries and agencies. Embassy officials also continued to support the Wiesel Institute in establishing a museum on the history of Romanian Jews by raising the project in meetings with key

ministries, engaging the Ministry of Defense on the transfer of historical artifacts to the Wiesel Institute for use by the museum, and by the Ambassador's participation on the museum's consultative committee.

Embassy officials met with a regional leader of the Greek Catholic Church in Bucharest to discuss its relations with the ROC, incidents of discrimination by local authorities, and its relationship with the national government. The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to hold meetings with Muslim and Jewish community leaders to discuss ways of promoting religious diversity and curbing religious discrimination. The Ambassador and embassy officers also continued to meet with the Romanian Orthodox Patriarch to discuss their shared interest in maintaining regional stability, encouraging progress on rule of law reform efforts, and combatting trafficking in persons.

In late June the Ambassador traveled to Iasi to participate in the 76th anniversary commemoration of the Jewish pogrom there. The Ambassador recited a poem by a Jewish writer before laying a wreath at the Jewish cemetery. In October at a ceremony for National Holocaust Commemoration Day, the Ambassador spoke about the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the country and laid a wreath.

During the year, the Ambassador hosted an iftar and other events that gathered religious leaders of various faiths to facilitate interreligious dialogue and understanding.