



2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Croatia

Publication date: 15 August 2017

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits incitement of religious hatred. Registered religious groups are equal under the law and free to publicly conduct religious services and open and manage schools and charitable organizations with assistance from the state. The government has four written agreements with the Roman Catholic Church that provide state financial support and other benefits, while the law accords other registered religious groups the same rights and protections. In April, government ministers attended the annual commemoration at the site of the World War II (WWII)-era Jasenovac death camp. Jewish and Serb (largely Orthodox) leaders boycotted the event and held their own commemorations, saying the government had downplayed the abuses of the WWII-era Nazi-aligned Ustasha regime.

A talk show host warned people to stay away from an area in Zagreb where a Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was located, saying “Chetnik vicars” would murder innocent bystanders. Spectators at a soccer match against Israel chanted pro-fascist slogans used under the WWII-era, Nazi-aligned Ustasha regime while the prime minister and Israeli ambassador were in attendance. Director Jakov Sedlar screened the *Jasenovac – The Truth* documentary which questioned the number of killings at the camp, inciting praise and criticism. SOC representatives expressed concern over a perceived increase in societal intolerance. The SOC estimated 20 incidents of vandalism against SOC property.

The U.S. embassy continued to encourage the government to restitute property seized during and after WWII, especially from the Jewish community, and to adopt a claims process for victims. The embassy sponsored a visit by two teachers to the United States for a Holocaust education exchange program.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.5 million (July 2016 estimate). The Bureau of Statistics reports 86.3 percent of residents are Catholic, 4.4 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 1.5 percent Muslim. Nearly four percent self-identify as nonreligious or atheist. Other religious groups include Jews, Protestants, and other Christians. According to the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia, the country’s Jewish community numbers between 2,000 and 2,500.

Religious affiliation correlates closely with ethnicity. Ethnic Serbs are predominantly members of the SOC and live primarily in cities and areas bordering Serbia, Montenegro, 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, freedom of conscience, and religious expression. It prohibits incitement of religious hatred. According to the constitution, religious groups are equal under the law and separate from the state; they are free to publicly conduct religious services and open and manage schools and charitable organizations under the protection and assistance of the state.

The Catholic Church receives state financial support and other benefits established in four concordats between the government and the Holy See. These agreements allow state financing for salaries and pensions of some religious officials associated with religious education through government-managed pension and health funds. These agreements also stipulate state funding for religious education in public schools. The law stipulates the same rights and benefits for other registered religious groups as those specified for the Catholic Church in the concordats, which were signed first.

The law defines the legal position of religious groups and determines eligibility for government funding and tax benefits; recognized religious communities are exempt from real estate taxes, the profit/capital gains tax, and taxes on donations. To obtain legal status as a recognized religious community, a religious group must have at least 500 members and be registered as an organization for at least five years. To register as an organization, groups submit a list of its members and documentation outlining the group's bylaws and describing its mission to the Ministry of Administration. Nonregistered religious groups may operate freely but without tax or other benefits. The state recognizes marriages conducted by recognized religious communities, eliminating the need for civil registration. To be recognized legally, marriages by nonregistered religious groups require civil registration. Nonregistered religious groups cannot conduct religious education in schools or access state funds in support of religious activities, including charitable work, counseling, building costs, and clergy salaries; they may engage in worship, proselytize, own property, import religious literature, and provide spiritual counsel in prisons, hospitals, and the military.

There are 54 recognized religious communities, including the Catholic Church, the SOC, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Christian Adventist Church, the Church of Christ, the Church of God, the Croatian Old Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Union of Baptist Churches, the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia (an umbrella group of nine distinct Jewish communities), the Jewish Community of Virovitica, Bet Israel (a Jewish group), and the Islamic Community of Croatia.

The government requires religious education be offered in public schools, although attendance is optional. The Catholic catechism is the predominant religious text used. Nineteen additional religious communities offer religious education in schools in which there are seven or more students of a given faith. Eligible religious groups provide the instructors and the state pays their salaries. Students may opt out of religious education without providing specific grounds.

The law currently does not allow individuals whose property was confiscated during the Holocaust era to seek compensation in court if those individuals subsequently obtained another nationality. This affects Jewish property holders disproportionately.

Government Practices

According to the government Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the Catholic Church received 285.7 million kuna (HRK) (\$40.5 million) in government funding during the year for religious education, salaries, pensions, and other purposes. The government offered funding to other religious institutions, a portion of which was based on their size, in addition to funds provided to support religious education in public schools (all offered on an opt-in basis), as well as the operation of private religious schools. The government provided HRK 20.04 million (\$2.84 million) to these groups.

The government did not resolve any of the outstanding property restitution cases involving the SOC, including claims for land in Osijek County and properties in Vukovar and Vinkovci.

Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the Simon Wiesenthal Center, criticized the January appointment of Zlatko Hasanbegovic as culture minister, saying the historian had praised the WWII-era, Nazi-allied Ustasha movement and downplayed the crimes from that era.

On April 22, government ministers attended the annual official commemoration at the site of the WWII-era Jasenovac death camp. Before the event, Jewish and Serb leaders announced they would not participate. The president of the Coordinating Committee of the Jewish Communities stated his group boycotted the event because the government was downplaying the crimes committed by the Ustasha regime. The Jewish community held a separate commemoration at the site, and representatives of Serbian organizations and the Anti-Fascists' League also held separate commemorations. President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic met with representatives of the Jewish and Serb communities to hear their concerns, and Prime Minister Tihomir Oreskovic issued a statement condemning the Ustasha's crimes.

President Grabar-Kitarovic participated in Poland's commemorations of the 71st anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp, saying "it is necessary to do everything in our power to prevent something like this from ever happening again." Prime Minister Oreskovic and Speaker of Parliament Zeljko Reiner commemorated the day in parliament. Oreskovic said the world must be united against all who "pave the way for new holocausts by denying the Holocaust." Reiner stated "in order to never allow totalitarian or racist ideology to be repeated... we must always keep the horrors of the Holocaust in our memories and honor the memory of all victims of Nazi and Fascist ideology."

During a visit to Israel in May Foreign Minister Miro Kovac told the *Jerusalem Post* he rejected perceptions of anti-Semitism in his country and called it “a role model” with respect to tolerance and protection of minorities.

On July 22, the Zagreb County Court overturned a 1946 sentence against Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb during WWII, for collaboration with the Ustasha regime. Pope John Paul II beatified him in 1998, but many Orthodox Serbs and others stated they viewed him as a collaborator with the Ustasha. Citing the reversal, Efraim Zuroff, head of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, said it was “absolutely shameful and horrible, and it attempts to change history.” The Croatian Democratic Union, a political party, said the reversal “corrected a historical injustice.”

The country is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on ethnic identity. SOC and Jewish representatives expressed concern over a perceived increase in societal intolerance. The office of the ombudsman for human rights reported 117 individuals filed discrimination complaints on the basis of race, ethnicity, or national identity, up from 68 in 2015. The ombudsman’s office did not report how many incidents included a religious motivation, but ethnic Serbs, without citing a specific number, reported increased incidents against them, consisting primarily of property crimes, vandalism, and hate speech. While these incidents were not specifically religiously based, ethnic Serbs constituted the largest religious minority community. On April 19, the ombudsman expressed concern regarding “noticeably harsher rhetoric in the public arena during the election in 2015” and called for “the regular and more consistent use of powers at the disposal of police and judicial staff in the prevention and punishment of hate speech and hate crimes.”

After a visit in April, Nils Muiznieks, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed concern at the reported rise in ethnic intolerance, hate speech, and other forms of hate crime targeting members of national minorities, in particular ethnic Serbs and Jews.

Speaking at a “European Islamophobia Summit” in Sarajevo in June, Dino Mujadzovic, an academic from the University of Zagreb, stated anti-Muslim sentiment was growing in the country following the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers in 2015. According to Mujadzovic, “right-wing parties were exploiting the idea of a Muslim threat... and media were reporting on crimes committed by Muslims or asylum seekers in other countries.”

In January, 5,000 people marched outside of the Electronic Media Council, a government-chartered independent media regulator, to protest the three-day suspension of local private television station Z1 after a talk show host urged viewers to stay away from an area in Zagreb where a SOC church was located, saying “Chetnik [a Serbian guerrilla force in WWII] vicars” could emerge and “slaughter” innocent bystanders.

In March, spectators gave the Ustasha salute and chanted slogans associated with the Ustasha regime, such as “Za Dom Spremni” (“For the homeland, ready”) during a soccer match against Israel attended by Prime Minister Oreskovic and the Israeli ambassador. Prior to the match, President Grabar-Kitarovic had called on Facebook for spectators to “show that we are fans who love our team but respect others, and say no to racism.” After the match, the government issued a statement condemning “all forms of expression which promote or incite hate speech or intolerance.” The statement did not specifically cite the pro-fascist slogans at the match.

Director Jakov Sedlar screened his *Jasenovac – The Truth* documentary in Zagreb, which questioned the number of killings at the WWII-era death camp. The director said the number of victims killed at the camp was exaggerated and “between 20,000 and 40,000 would be somewhat realistic.” The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimated 77,000-99,000 people were killed at Jasenovac, including 45,000-52,000 Orthodox Serbs and 12,000-20,000 Jews. Representatives of the Jewish community condemned the documentary, stating it attempted to revise history, but the documentary was praised by Culture Minister Hasanbegovic, who said the documentary was a great way to “shed light on a number of controversial places in Croatian history.”

During a nationally televised, live broadcast of a Sunday morning Mass at a Catholic church in Split in May, Dominican Friar Luka Prcela criticized President Grabar-Kitarovic’s comments the WWII-era, pro-Nazi government represented a criminal regime. The Dominican Order said Prcela’s sermon represented his personal views and did not reflect the views of the order.

SOC representatives expressed concern about societal intolerance and estimated there were approximately 20 incidents of vandalism during the year, five fewer than the previous year, which included spray painting, destruction of church property, and burglaries. SOC representatives stated they cooperated with relevant elements of the government, including law enforcement, to respond to the vandalism, although only two perpetrators were identified, whose trials were pending. SOC representatives said these incidents occurred in larger cities, including Zagreb, Sibenik, Bjelovar, and Sisak, while in previous years vandalism was largely concentrated in rural areas.

On September 9-10, Bartholomew I of Constantinople, the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, visited the country on the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the Jasenovac death camp. The patriarch met with the president and prime minister and reportedly discussed tolerance, respect, and the importance of dialogue as a means of solving problems. He officiated at services and hosted an academic roundtable on WWII-related atrocities.

On April 27, the Islamic community celebrated the 100th anniversary of the legal recognition of Islam with numerous events attended by senior government and visiting foreign officials. Prime Minister Oreskovic stated the integration of the Muslim community served as a model for other European Union states.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff regularly discussed religious freedom issues, including concerns related to the status and treatment of religious minorities, with representatives of the government’s Office for Human Rights, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of the Chief State

Prosecutor, and other officials. The Ambassador, embassy staff, and the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues engaged with and encouraged the government to adopt measures for restitution of religious property seized during and after WWII, including those that would unequivocally allow for foreign claims. Embassy engagement focused on the restitution of Jewish properties such as cultural centers, synagogues, cemeteries, and private property, as well as creation of a claims process for victims.

The embassy discussed religious freedom issues, including concerns related to freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination, with the NGO Society for Promotion of Religious Freedom and other civil society organizations, and representatives from Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious groups.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports, the embassy funded Holocaust education training in the United States for two high school teachers. The annual program was organized by the Department of State, the Association of Holocaust Organizations in New York, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.