

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: North Macedonia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and religious expression. It grants equality before the law for all individuals regardless of religious belief and cites five Christian, Muslim, and Jewish religious groups that automatically receive tax exemptions and other benefits.

An interagency working group continued to consider proposed amendments to law that would enable individual churches and mosques to acquire the status of legal entities, a longtime request of the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA) and the Islamic Religious Community in North Macedonia (IRC). The government and the Tetovo Bektashi Community, a Sufi order, continued to differ on that religious group's registration. In October, the Skopje Basic Civil Court postponed a hearing on the issue and no further action was taken during the year. The Tetovo Bektashi Community continued to say its nonregistered status restricted its ability to acquire or use the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, its traditional headquarters, for religious activity. Tetovo Bektashi Community members and members of the government-registered Bektashi Religious Community (BRC), a different religious group, continued to dispute the IRC's claim of full ownership of and plans to renovate the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine. Tetovo Bektashi Community members again reported harassment by the government and BRC members. Christian and Muslim groups said the government's property restitution process continued to be slow and incomplete. The government, the MOC-OA, and the IRC resolved some differences on the regulation and accreditation of religious schools, but the MOC-OA withdrew its support for government recognition and funding of religious high schools, leaving MOC-OA and IRC-run high schools unaccredited, and students from those schools unable to enroll in secular universities. IRC leaders said relations with the government continued to improve but the government showed favoritism toward the MOC-OA. The Jewish Community continued to express regret that the government had not approved its 2017 initiative to amend the criminal code to criminalize antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, or the glorification of Nazi and fascist symbols.

In April, the MOC-OA Archdiocese began to absorb the much smaller Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO). The former OAO bishops were appointed to dioceses June 20, completing the merger of church personnel. The Jewish Community reported no violent acts against its members, but observers reported a significant increase in the number of other antisemitic incidents, including antisemitic speech and online incidents in October following the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's response.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials discussed the importance of tolerance, understanding, and interfaith dialogue among various religious groups with government representatives, including the director of the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), mayors, and other officials. With members of parliament, embassy officials discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, religious property restitution, and amendments to the law on high schools, including the accreditation of religious schools. The Ambassador and embassy officials met with the head of the MOC-OA, Archbishop Stefan of Ohrid and Macedonia, and IRC leader Reis Shaqir Fetahu to discuss religious freedom issues, including interfaith cooperation, the accreditation of religious schools, and perceived government favoritism toward certain religious groups. They also met with representatives of other religious groups to discuss the government's treatment of smaller groups and respect for their religious freedom. Throughout the year, the embassy used social media to disseminate messages on the importance of religious freedom.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (mid-year 2023). According to the country's 2021 national census, the total resident population is 1.8 million; the remainder are non-resident citizens who have been out of the country for a year or more; many of these individuals are working abroad. Of the resident population, 46.1 percent are Orthodox Christian, the overwhelming majority of whom are followers of the MOC-OA; 32.2 percent are Muslim, the vast majority of whom are Sunni and followers of the IRC; 13.2 percent are Christian, without specifying a denomination; and 7.2 percent are unknown. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Catholics from the Eastern and Roman traditions; Sufi groups with several Bektashi orders, including the Tetovo Bektashi Community and the BRC; the OAO, which in June merged into the MOC-OA; Jehovah's Witnesses; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, various Protestant denominations; and Vaishnav Hindus. The Jewish Community estimates it has 200 members, although the 2021 census data showed that only 66 individuals claimed a Jewish ethnic affiliation.

The majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and southeastern regions. Most Muslims live in the northern and western parts of the country. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation: the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian, and most Muslims are ethnic Albanian. Most Roma and virtually all ethnic Turks and ethnic Bosniaks are Muslim, and most ethnic Serbs and Vlachs are Orthodox Christian. There is also a correlation between religious and political affiliation, as political parties are largely divided along ethnic lines.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equal rights for all citizens regardless of religious belief. It grants freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their faith freely and in public, individually, or with others. The constitution also protects the religious identity of all communities. The constitution states restrictions on freedoms and rights may not be applied to personal conviction, conscience, thought, or religious confession. An amendment to the constitution cites five religious groups that automatically receive tax exemptions and other benefits: the MOC-OA, IRC, Catholic Church, Evangelical Methodist Church in Macedonia (EMC), and the Jewish Community. It stipulates these five groups, as well as other registered groups, are separate from the state, equal before the law, and free to establish secondary schools, charities, and other social institutions. The law allows other religious groups to obtain the same legal rights and status as these five groups by applying for government recognition and registration through the courts. The constitution bars political parties or other associations from inciting religious hatred or intolerance.

The law defines hate crimes as criminal offenses against a person, legal entity, or related persons or property, committed because of a real or assumed characteristic of the victim, including nationality, ethnic origin, and religion or belief. Hate speech and hate crimes are criminal acts; perpetrators of other crimes may receive harsher sentences when hate crime elements are involved. Penalties range from one to 10 years in prison and a minimum of 10 years' imprisonment for hate crimes leading to death. The law allows for fines against religious groups promoting gender-based violence and

further stipulates that media and religious communities should promote policies against gender-based violence.

Religious organizations may choose to register as a “church,” a “religious community,” or a “religious group.” The law treats these three categories equally, bestowing the same legal rights, benefits, and obligations on all of them. The government recognizes 43 religious organizations, including the five named in the constitution. The recognized organizations include 20 churches, 10 religious communities (four Christian, four Muslim, one Hindu, and one Jewish), and 13 religious groups (seven Christian and six Muslim). Once registered, a church, religious community, or religious group is exempt from property taxes on the property of the community only; they pay all other taxes, such as value-added tax and personal income tax on the salaries of their leaders. Groups are eligible to apply for restitution of properties nationalized during the Socialist era (provided the group or community existed and owned property during that era), government funding to preserve religious objects or structures designated as cultural heritage, and construction permits for preservation of shrines and cultural sites. Unregistered groups may hold religious services or other meetings and proselytize, but they may not engage in some activities such as establishing schools or receiving donations that are tax-deductible for the donor, and such groups are not tax exempt.

The Skopje Basic Civil Court accepts religious registration applications and has eight business days to determine whether an application meets the legal criteria. The criteria include a physical administrative presence within the country, an explanation of its beliefs and practices that distinguish it from other religious organizations, and a unique name and official insignia. The organization’s application must also identify a supervisory body in charge of managing its finances and submit a breakdown of its financial assets and funding sources, as well as minutes from its founding meeting. The law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. Leaders or legal representatives of registered religious groups must be citizens of the country.

The court forwards approved applications to the CRRCG, the government body responsible for fostering cooperation and communication between the government and registered religious groups, which adds the organization to its registry. The CRRCG has no oversight or ability to influence the registration process. If the court denies the application, the organization may appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the appellate court rules against the appeal, the organization may file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court, which is the highest court in the country having jurisdiction over human rights cases. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization may further appeal the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The law does not permit religious organizations to operate primary schools but allows them to operate schools at the secondary level and above. Religious high schools use their own curricula and need not be certified by the Ministry of Education and Science, although some are certified. Students in religious high schools without certification are not permitted to take the required national matriculation examination (baccalaureate), as their graduation papers are not valid, and therefore they are unable to enroll in secular universities. The ministry’s curriculum requires sixth-grade students to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content – Introduction to Religions or Ethics in Religions. According to the ministry’s description, these courses teach religion in an academic, nondevotional manner. The Ministry of Education and Science often accredits theologians to teach these courses. The ministry mandates that all teachers of these subjects complete training from accredited higher education institutions taught by professors of philosophy or sociology. Parents choose which courses their children take. If students do not wish to take a course on religion, they may opt out and instead take a course on European culture and civilization.

Foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a work visa before arrival, a process that normally takes approximately four months. The CRRCG maintains a register of all foreign religious workers and approves temporary residence permits and work visa applications for missionaries and religious workers on behalf of registered churches, religious communities, and religious groups. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy verifies their compliance with the country’s labor laws and the Ministry of Interior reviews security aspects. Foreign religious workers must be approved by the CRRCG and the two ministries in order

to work in the country. Unregistered groups may apply for work permits and visas for their workers according to the normal procedure. Work visas are valid for six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent renewals are valid for one year. The CRRCG and the two ministries must also approve registration renewal requests. There is no limit to the number of visa renewals for which a religious worker may apply.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

An interagency working group led by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) continued to review draft amendments to the 2007 Law on the Legal Status of a Church, Religious Community, and Religious Groups. The amendments, pending since 2021, would enable larger religious communities' subdivisions, such as individual churches and mosques, to acquire the status of legal entities. This in turn would enable the government to support religious groups' projects when doing so was deemed to be in the public interest, such as assisting with the preservation of culturally or historically significant religious sites, an authority the government lacks. The MOC-OA and the IRC have requested this change since 2020.

The interagency working group also continued to consider other changes to the 2007 law that would make it more consistent with existing provisions of the criminal code and other laws. These changes would specify that religious groups may not incite intolerance against other religious groups or promote stereotypes of other groups; use/abuse their names, titles, or insignia; act against the legal order, public morality, or health and lives of their own or believers of another religious group; incite religious, ethnic, national or racial hatred; or promote religious radicalism. The working group consulted with religious groups about the draft amendments, but there were no developments by year's end. The MOJ said the amendments would be considered as part of a more comprehensive review of the criminal code in the future.

The Skopje Basic Civil Court reported it reviewed six requests during the year related to registering churches and religious communities or groups. Three of those requests, including two received in 2022 and one in 2023, were from already registered groups seeking to change data, such as the name of a group's leader, legal representative, or headquarters. Two other requests, received in 2023, were applications to register new religious groups – the World Star Church, and the Tetovo Bektashi Headquarters in North Macedonia. The sixth request was a carryover from 2022 to register a new religious community – the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Pehchevo, a small group with approximately one hundred members of primarily Roma ethnic background. The court resolved a request from one of the already registered groups during the year, but no further information was available about the court's ruling or the group involved. The other five requests were pending at year's end.

The government and the Tetovo Bektashi Community continued to differ on that religious group's registration. Although that group submitted the required documents for new registration in September, the Skopje Basic Civil Court postponed a hearing on the issue in October, and no further action was taken during the year. The Community submitted its new request in accordance with a 2020 appellate court ruling and a 2018 ECHR ruling that the group be allowed to register and be recognized as a religious group. The Tetovo Bektashi Community continued to say its nonregistered status restricted its ability to acquire or use property, such as the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, for religious activity.

The IRC said it remained concerned with the functioning of two registered groups it considered "suspicious Muslim organizations" – a Salafi group in Skopje and an Ahli Sunnah Wal Jemaah group in Kumanovo. The IRC asked the government to de-register these two groups and help limit

their ability to spread “radical views” that did not match local traditions. The IRC said they did not object to registration of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Pehchevo because the IRC viewed that group more as a secular organization focused on the humanitarian needs of its members.

Members of the unregistered Tetovo Bektashi Community and members of the government registered BRC continued to dispute the IRC’s claim to full ownership of the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine in Tetovo and the IRC’s plans to renovate it. The shrine is the traditional headquarters of the Tetovo Bektashi Community.

For the 12th year in a row, the Tetovo Bektashi Community reported to police that its members were harassed by individuals affiliated with the IRC who continued to occupy the majority of the Harabati Baba Teqe compound and often prevented Bektashis and other visitors from entering.

On April 6, the Tetovo Bektashi Community reported that an IRC employee guarding part of the Harabati Baba Teqe compound physically threatened and verbally abused the secretary general of the Tetovo Bektashi Community and three visitors (one from France and two from North Macedonia) who were at the compound to attend a meeting. The same individual reportedly made similar threats toward two Bektashi members and the residing dervish (cleric) on June 8. According to the Tetovo Bektashi Community, police took no action in response to the incidents.

On July 17, Bektashi leaders complained to media that the government neglected the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, a cultural monument protected by law, by not maintaining the property. On July 18, the same IRC employee involved in the April 6 incident again verbally threatened the Tetovo Bektashi Community’s secretary-general at the Harabati Baba Teqe compound in the presence of a visiting U.S. official from Washington, D.C., U.S. embassy staff, and local police. Police did not intervene.

In February, the BRC reportedly appealed a Gostivar court decision granting ownership of the Harabati Baba Teqe to a private company; the BRC said the appeal was pending in the Supreme Court at year’s end. Court staff could not confirm this report, however.

The MOC-OA continued to say that the denationalization (restitution) process for property claims remained slow and that more than 90 percent of total positive decisions (those made in favor of returning property) made by the Denationalization Commission, which adjudicated claims, were appealed by the State Attorney’s Office. The MOC-OA continued to state that, from its point of view, the local restitution committees throughout the country were not functional. The MOC-OA said that over the previous three years, the committees decided only one restitution case related to the church’s property and that decision was appealed by the State Attorney’s Office and was under review by a court. MOC-OA said only 65 percent of its property had been returned or compensated for since restitution began in 2000.

According to the IRC, the government continued to restore IRC property that was seized by the state before 1991, but only in areas where Muslims were in the majority. The properties still in dispute included the Husamedin Pasha Mosque in Shtip (nationalized in 1955 and believed by the MOC-OA to have been a church historically), several mosques in Skopje, the Yeni Mosque in Bitola, and the central mosque in Prilep (which remained in ruins). The IRC continued to say that the level of compensation for its claimed property was often below market value. The IRC said that despite improved relations with the government authorities, some Ministry of Finance decisions regarding IRC property were delayed by lack of documentation, current ownership of the property changing hands or the ministry appealing its own decisions with the courts, which the IRC viewed as a tactic to delay or prevent the actual restitution of the properties.

The IRC again stated municipal authorities continued to deny construction permits for a mosque in the ethnically and religiously mixed village of Lazhec due to opposition from its Orthodox residents, as well as for the reconstruction of a mosque in Strumica and the central mosque in Prilep, on the grounds the latter two were cultural monuments under government, not IRC, jurisdiction.

The EMC, part of the United Methodist Church in the United States, continued to say that restitution of church property remained incomplete. The EMC said it could not build a church in Prilep because the municipality had for more than 20 years refused to issue a permit, even though there had previously been a church on the property for more than 100 years and zoning plans provided for the inclusion of a church. The EMC continued to say it faced similar problems in other towns.

The MOC-OA said the municipality of Tetovo's new administration continued to ignore its earlier commitments to collect garbage at the local cemetery's entrance and to permit construction of a church at the cemetery in the neighboring village of Falishe.

In February, religious leaders, political party leaders, university teachers, and religious education experts rejected the government's plans to abolish the Ethics of Religions course in elementary schools after the 2022-23 school year. Religious groups insisted that students be exposed to some religious education and expressed concern that abolishing the courses would mean that the theologians who taught the subject would lose their jobs. After hearing the opposition, the government dropped its plan to abolish the course.

In March, the MOC-OA and the IRC, with support from the CRRCRG, established a Friendship Group of Orthodox priests, IRC imams, and students from Orthodox schools and Islamic madrassahs to discuss how they could more closely cooperate on issues including religious education. Outside the Friendship Group, the government, the MOC-OA, and the IRC resolved some differences regarding curricula with religious content and on the regulation and accreditation of religious schools. In July, however, the MOC-OA withdrew its earlier support, without explanation, for amendments to the Law on High School Education that would give religious high schools government recognition and funding. Although parliament could have proceeded with the amendments without MOC-OA support, for the second year in a row, parliament did not convene the committee session necessary to act on the amendments.

The MOC-OA and the government continued to differ on other education issues. The MOC-OA continued to say it wanted the government to recognize the diplomas of its secondary school theological graduates, but it did not agree with the proposed Ministry of Education plan to reduce the full course of study in MOC-OA secondary schools from five years to four, the standard length of study in secular secondary schools. The MOC-OA continued to say the course duration should remain five years, which the church viewed as the optimal amount of time for high school students to complete the theological courses desired by the MOC-OA and all the secular courses required by the state for a recognized diploma. The issue remained unresolved at the end of the year.

MOC-OA and IRC religious high schools remained unaccredited at year's end, and their graduates could not enroll in secular universities because they were not eligible to take the national final examination that the Law on Higher Education required of all high school students to enroll in those universities. Graduates from MOC-OA and IRC religious high schools, however, could enroll in the Faculty of Orthodoxy or the Faculty of Islamic Science without taking the national examination because those institutions interpreted the examination requirement as only applying to students from accredited high schools. The Ministry of Education allocated approximately 21.6 million denars (\$390,000) to the two faculties for the 2023-24 school year.

IRC representatives said that despite promises to amend the education law, the government delayed the certification of IRC-run madrassahs that wished to receive accreditation. The IRC said this was another reason, in addition to the national examination requirement, that students from those schools could not enroll in secular universities.

Some religious groups and parents continued to say that priests and imams hired to teach the required nondenominational introductory courses on religion and ethics often emphasized the practice of their own religions instead of presenting a neutral overview of different faiths. School children from secular and nonpracticing families were often bullied by peers for "lack of religious education."

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

Smaller Protestant churches continued to say the government extended more privileges to the MOC-OA and the IRC and these two larger groups had more rights than other religious groups. For example, the smaller churches said they continued to have more difficulty building churches because local authorities were more accommodating to the MOC-OA on zoning and construction issues. They also said government officials met often with only the five constitutionally recognized groups and did not always include the smaller groups in public events. MOC-OA and IRC leaders said complaints of government favoritism were a misperception due to their communities' larger size and broader presence in the country.

IRC leaders said they cultivated good relations with the government for a third year in a row, but some ministries and the judiciary continued to treat the IRC unfavorably. As an example, the IRC said that during the year, the MOI and the Skopje Criminal Court did not complete their investigations of earlier incidents affecting the Islamic community and its leadership, such as the 2015 "coup attempt" within the IRC and the 2019 attempt to violently take over the IRC headquarters.

In September, the IRC said the government continued to grant the MOC-OA unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge, as well as delaying decisions affecting other religious groups when the MOC-OA did not agree. Both the MOC-OA and the IRC also said that despite religious workers' key role in ministering to those in prison or hospitals, the Ministries of Health, Justice, and Defense did not always allow priests and army chaplains access to prisoners and patients. The MOC-OA and IRC said the government often justified these actions by citing the separation of state and religion.

The Jewish Community continued to express regret that the government had yet to approve its 2017 initiative for an amendment to the criminal code that would criminalize antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, and the glorification of Nazi and fascist symbols, despite repeated requests by the Community and the Holocaust Fund of Jews from North Macedonia (Holocaust Fund) during the year for the government to do so. The amendments remained pending at year's end, with consideration ostensibly postponed to give parliament time to pass more comprehensive changes to the criminal code.

In October, the State University's Cyril and Methodius' Law School introduced a six module Holocaust education course, titled "Why Teach about the Holocaust in the 21st Century?" The course was designed to raise awareness and understanding about the legal aspects of the Holocaust and its horrific outcomes, highlight the importance of critical thinking about the Holocaust, and provide some tools to prevent and combat antisemitism and Holocaust denial and distortion. The launch of this course was the first of its kind in the country at the university level; the Holocaust is only briefly mentioned in history and civic education textbooks in the country's elementary and high schools.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

As chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the country hosted the Conference on Addressing Antisemitism in the OSCE Region in Skopje on February 6-7. The OSCE said the conference focused on recognizing, recording, and prosecuting antisemitic hate crimes; addressing the security needs of Jewish communities; addressing antisemitism in and through education; countering Holocaust denial; encouraging Holocaust remembrance; and identifying current challenges and best practices to confront antisemitism, in particular using a regional and youth focus. During the conference, Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani said "hatred and intolerance cannot be fought with more hatred or intolerance, but only through active promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination."

On November 6, National Coordinator for Combatting Antisemitism Gabriel Atanasov and 32 officials from other countries, including the United States, issued a statement that the countries

would “do everything in (their) power to see that hatred against Jews is rebuked and that Jewish life flourishes in peace. Antisemitism and all forms of hate are incredibly harmful and unacceptable.”

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On April 25, the Holy Synod of the MOC-OA unanimously decided to begin absorbing the OAO into the MOC-OA by allocating dioceses to former OAO bishops. The former OAO bishops had to be canonically dismissed from the Serbian Orthodox Church before they could join the MOC-OA. On June 20, the MOC-OA formally appointed the former OAO bishops as heads of four dioceses, completing the merger of church personnel.

Although Eastern Orthodox Church Patriarch Bartholomew’s 2022 decision brought the MOC-OA into communion with the Eastern Orthodox church, as of year’s end, the Patriarch had not issued the *tomos* (decree) which would grant autocephaly for the MOC-OA.

The Jewish Community reported no violent acts against its members, but observers reported a significant increase in the number of other antisemitic incidents, such as the drawing of swastikas on the wall of the community’s headquarters in Skopje and Kochani. Jewish Community leaders said these events were not “very serious” and “not necessarily directed at the Jews,” however, and asked that police not incarcerate the youths responsible. Instead, Jewish leaders asked that the mayors and schools address the issue and better educate students on religious tolerance.

The Jewish Community and independent observers reported a significant increase in antisemitic speech and online incidents in October compared to previous years. They attributed the increase to the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and Israel’s response. The Holocaust Fund and the Jewish Community complained the government offered them no feedback about the status of investigations into hate speech and antisemitic incidents in previous years.

In March, retired university professor Doreana Hristova wrote an antisemitic post on social media blaming Jews and the State of Israel for conspiring against North Macedonia’s integration into the EU. The prosecutor handling the case assessed there was no evidence of hate speech or antisemitism in Hristova’s post, but the Holocaust Fund said it would seek other ways to address the issue, including suing North Macedonia in the ECHR for not taking action against Hristova. In a post on the *Motika* social media portal on October 16, a reader said a video showing meat on a grill depicted “baked Jews,” that “the Jews should be sent to Auschwitz,” and that there should be “a Fourth Reich.”

There were instances of antisemitic graffiti in several towns across the country, such as swastikas sprayed in Skopje, Tetovo, and Vevchani. The Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund issued a joint press release in March condemning the Nazi flag displayed and Hitler mask worn by a participant at a carnival in Strumica, which was organized under the auspices of the local government. They stated that it was “unacceptable under the guise of humor and satire to ridicule the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust,” including 7,144 from North Macedonia. The Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund said graffiti with the Nazi swastika that appeared on the fence of the Jewish Community building a few days later was possibly because of the carnival incident. There were no reports that the government took action in response to the incident or the press release.

The Holocaust Fund reported seven antisemitic incidents to the Helsinki Committee, a non-governmental organization based in the country that tracks citizens’ reports of hate speech. In addition to the swastika incidents in Skopje, Tetovo, and Vevchani, and the carnival incident in Strumica, the Holocaust Fund reported a street and a museum named after Nazi collaborators, antisemitic content in the *Levica* (The Left) party’s political platform, and antisemitic conspiracy theories on social media.

The Holocaust Fund continued to work with the Ministry of Education and Science on a project to train educators about the Holocaust and Jewish history. From February 28 to March 2, the Holocaust Fund and partner organizations – Memorial de la SHOAH, the Bulgarian Association of History Teachers, the Jewish Community in Bulgaria – Shalom, and the Ministries of Education of North Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria – organized a trilateral seminar in Sofia, Bulgaria, for elementary and high school teachers from those three countries to gain new knowledge, tools, and practices for the implementation of Holocaust education in schools and to network and exchange experiences and develop projects on Holocaust education and research. Twelve teachers from North Macedonia attended the training, and two of them presented lectures.

In March, the Holocaust Fund completed the eighth seminar from the “EduCon” project, supported by the Headley Trust from the United Kingdom and the Holocaust Fund, entitled “Museum Tailored to the Audience,” and designed for museum and documentation center employees to exchange experiences and increase the number of visits to Holocaust museums.

In August, the Holocaust Fund concluded its two-year project on nonviolent communication approaches to adult education in historical museums and memorial centers. The goals of the project, implemented as part of the EU-funded Erasmus+ exchange program, were to introduce such methods into the daily work of teams in museums and memorial centers, support dialogue between people, and build societies based on empathy and mutual understanding.

The Tetovo Bektashi Community continued to dispute the IRC’s 2017 claim to full ownership of the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, which the Tetovo Bektashi use as their headquarters. The Tetovo Bektashi Community continued to oppose the IRC’s plans to renovate the complex (with Turkish government assistance), which prevented renovation from starting. Tetovo Bektashi representatives said renovating the complex without their consent would displace them from it entirely, in addition to destroying valuable heritage. They remained unable to assert a legal claim of ownership to the compound because the group remained unregistered.

The CRRCG reported that some residents living in close proximity to mosques continued to complain to municipal authorities and police about the loud volume of calls to prayer from the mosques. The CRRCG passed those complaints to police or to municipal inspectors, and also spoke with representatives of the IRC, who the CRRCG said were sympathetic to the complaints. Only a few mosques lowered the volume of their calls to prayer, however.

The Helsinki Committee received 12 reports of religiously based online hate speech during the year, compared to two cases in 2022 and 30 in 2021. In one incident on April 4, a Facebook page dubbed “boulevard stories” and other social media sites posted anti-Muslim hate speech and slurs to criticize the deputy minister of education for organizing a multifaith Iftar at a student dorm in Pelagonija. The critics said the attendees “should be fed poison and die” and alleged that Albanian Muslims were “terrorists.” In another incident on April 5, a tweet called for the murder of gays and Jews. The committee registered 241 additional instances of ethnicity-based hate speech online during the year, compared to 51 in the previous year, noting that this was becoming more prevalent than religiously based hate speech.

Media outlets reported nine incidents of theft from churches, Orthodox monasteries, and mosques during the year, compared to 13 in 2022. Neither the MOC-OA nor the IRC attributed the thefts and vandalism to religious motives.

On May 1, MOC-OA Bishop Petar Karevski launched the “Vistel” television station, the first religious television broadcaster of its kind in the country. Karevski said the station would transmit religious programs in the Skopje region and address the “spiritual crisis” in the country and migration issues. In February, the government’s Audio-Visual Media Agency granted Karevski’s broadcasting company *Preobrazba* a permit to operate for nine years.

On May 23, IRC leader Fetahu dismissed five members of the IRC Assembly for attempts to remove him; his closest associates said IRC rules prohibited such attempts to oust the IRC leader. On November 8, the IRC Presidency also dismissed the Mufti of Tetovo, Qani Nesimi, and the

Mufti of Struga, Salim Sulejmani, in connection with the same incident, but Nesimi refused to step down.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed the importance of interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and understanding among the various religious groups with government representatives, including the director of the CRRCG, mayors, and other officials. They also discussed with members of parliament the status of religious freedom in the country, religious property restitution, and amendments to the law on high schools, including the accreditation of religious schools.

In January, the Ambassador met with Archbishop Stefan of the MOC-OA to discuss religious freedom and relations with the government and other religious groups. The Ambassador and embassy officials met with IRC leader Fetahu in February and June, respectively, to discuss religious freedom issues, interfaith cooperation, combating religious extremist narratives, accreditation of religious schools, and perceived government favoritism toward certain religious groups.

Embassy officials also met with representatives of other religious groups during the year, including the Catholic Church, the Jewish Community, the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Bektashi, and Protestant churches to discuss religious freedom issues, including the government's treatment of smaller groups and respect for their religious freedom.

The Ambassador spoke at the International Holocaust Remembrance Day event organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 27, and on March 12, joined President Pendarovski, government ministers, representatives of the State of Israel and the World Jewish Congress in the "March of the Living," organized by the Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the deportation of 7,144 Jews from North Macedonia to the Treblinka death camp.

In October, at the launch of Holocaust education classes for university students in Skopje, the Ambassador conversed with law professors, students, and representatives of the Holocaust Fund and the German embassy about growing antisemitism globally, and the need to acknowledge the Holocaust and to commit to speaking up and stopping hate-based atrocities and genocide anywhere in the world. She said that the university curricula would provide essential tools for stemming the destructive potential of ethnic scapegoating and nationalist propaganda.

In October, a senior embassy official addressed a group of young religious leaders and scholars at the launch of the "For Dialogue, against Extremism" workshop on interfaith dialogue, sponsored by the U.S. State Department, and implemented by an exchange program alumnus.

The embassy funded the Holocaust Fund's "Teacher Training Seminar: "Art during the Holocaust" project. The embassy also supported a training seminar in November for primary and secondary school teachers to learn new methods of teaching about Jewish history, the Holocaust, and about art and music created in Jewish ghettos and camps.

During the year, the embassy's messages on social media regarding religious freedom reached more than 55,500 followers and generated over 4,800 engagements. Topics included International Religious Freedom Day as well as meetings of the Ambassador and other embassy officials with the country's religious leaders.