

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Macedonia

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MACEDONIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Despite the specific mention of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in the Constitution, that Church does not have official status.

The constitutional provision for religious freedom is refined further in the 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Groups. This law designates the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic community, and the Roman Catholic Church as "religious communities," and all other religions as "religious groups." However, there is no legal differentiation between religious communities and groups. The law also places some limitations on religious practices, for example, by banning the collection of contributions except at the places where religious rites and activities are conducted. In early 1999, the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Groups, and in practice the remaining provisions of the law are not enforced consistently.

The Government requires that religious groups be registered. The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups contained a number of specific requirements for the registration of religious groups that were struck down by the Constitutional Court in early 1999. Consequently, there was considerable confusion over which procedures still applied, and several foreign religious bodies experienced delays in their efforts to register. During the period covered by this report, the Government acted to make the remaining requirements more transparent, but the process remained slow and cumbersome. During 1999 at least one international Protestant church was granted legal registration, and several others are at some stage of the process. One Islamic group withdrew its 1998 application for registration but continues to operate openly without taking further steps toward legal registration. The Government has not taken any enforcement actions against the group. In 1998 the Government rejected the application for registration of another Islamic group headquartered in a third country. The group lodged a judicial appeal that is now under review in the court system. An Islamic Roma group applied for registration in 1998, and the Government rejected its application on technical grounds. The group resubmitted its application, and the Government granted the group legal registration. The total number of registered religious groups and communities is 19. The law also requires that anyone carrying out religious work and religious rites be registered with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities.

The country has three major religions. Nominally, about 66 percent of the population of 2 million are Macedonian Orthodox, about 30 percent are Muslim, about 1 percent are Roman Catholic, and about 3 percent are of other faiths. The other faiths are largely various Protestant denominations. No reliable estimate is available for the number of atheists. The Islamic faith is prevalent among ethnic Albanians, who primarily live in the western part of the country and in the capital, Skopje. The Roman Catholic community is concentrated in Skopje.

The leaders of the long-established Orthodox, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities have better connections within the Government than do the leaders of new churches, but there is little evidence of any effort by the established religions to use that influence to shut out newcomers. The Government does not actively monitor new groups or advise the public on them.

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups places some restrictions on the establishment of places of worship. It provides that religious rites and religious activities "shall take place at churches, mosques, and other temples, and in gardens that are parts of those facilities, at cemeteries, and at other facilities of the religious group." Provision is made for holding services in other places, provided a permit is obtained at least 15 days in advance. No permit or permission is required to perform religious rites in one's home. The law also states that religious activities "shall not violate the public peace and order, and shall not disrespect the religious feelings and other freedoms and rights" of persons who are not members of that particular religion. The Government does not actively enforce most of these provisions of the law but acts upon complaints when they are received.

Several registered Protestant groups were unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities during 1998 due to normal bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction. Several churches and mosques are currently under construction despite the lack of appropriate building permits.

Children below the age of 10 may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or guardians.

Numerous foreign missionaries are active and represent a very wide range of faiths, mostly Protestant. Many of these missionaries enter the country in connection with other work, often charitable or medical. The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups specifically allows for foreign citizens to carry out religious activities, but only at the request of a registered religious body. Because many evangelical Christian missionaries wish to conduct religious activities that are aimed at the creation of new groups of believers, rather than at operating through existing churches, some foreign missionaries have chosen to disregard this portion of the law. This approach has on occasion led to difficulties for those missionaries, as the authorities have questioned their actual reasons for entering the country, usually on tourist visas. On one occasion in 1998, the immigration officers successfully pressed for the voluntary departure of a group of American missionaries who had intended to live in the country and conduct religious activities while holding only tourist visas.

On a number of occasions the Government refused Serbian Orthodox priests permission to enter the country and apparently plans to continue to do so until the Serbian Orthodox Church recognizes the Macedonian Orthodox Church. However, there were no reports of Serbian Orthodox priests attempting to enter the country for religious purposes since these incidents took place (see Section II).

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

During the period covered by this report there was a gradual improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom. Specifically, the Government showed improved understanding of and cooperation with foreign missionary personnel and took steps to legalize foreign missionary operations that previously had been tolerated but not officially authorized.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

There are generally amicable relations between the various religious communities. However, the religious communities often reflect an ethnic identity as well, and societal tensions along those ethnic lines exist. Specifically, most Muslims are ethnic Albanians, while virtually all Macedonian Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonians. Societal discrimination is more likely to be based upon ethnic bias than upon religious prejudice. The refusal of the Serbian Orthodox Church to recognize the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church has led to difficulties for ethnic Serbs who wish to worship in their own church.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy initiated an extensive dialog with the Government's Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities, the office charged with the implementation of the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups. This contact was sought after several American missionaries advised the Embassy that they were having difficulties in their efforts to register their organizations or workers. In a series of almost a dozen meetings with appropriate officials between December 1998 and April 1999, the Embassy's political officer and consul discussed with government officials the concerns of the American missionary community, as well as the issues that the Government deemed important. These constructive discussions led directly to the legal registration of an international Christian church and the acceleration of the registration process.

The Embassy also intervened successfully in 1999 on behalf of two American students who wished to renew their residence permits. They were having difficulties that they believed were due to unconfirmed government suspicions that they were conducting unregistered religious activities.

The leaders of the various religious communities in the country, as well as the head of the Commission on Religious Communities and Religious Groups, met with the Ambassador on several occasions during the period covered by this report. In addition to including these leaders in invitations to general embassy functions, the Ambassador hosted them at a small private dinner in June 1999. The focus of that working dinner was the advancement of an ecumenical process in the country. During the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe implementation review meeting in Warsaw in November 1998, the U.S. delegation raised its concerns in public interventions and private meetings about the Government's registration requirements for religious organizations.

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