



Croatia

International Religious Freedom Report 2003 Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion and free public profession of religious conviction, and the Government generally respects these rights in practice. There is no official state religion; however, the Roman Catholic Church enjoys a historic relationship with the State not shared by other religious groups. The position of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church has improved due to agreements with the State, which grants benefits similar to those enjoyed by the Catholic Church.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and the democratic coalition Government continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Religion and ethnicity are linked closely in society. Since independence in 1991, religious institutions of all faiths have been victimized by the ethnic conflicts that led to the break up of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. Such violent incidents still occur, particularly in the war-affected areas where there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries.

The U.S. Government discusses religious issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. U.S. Embassy officials frequently meet with representatives of religious and ethnic minority communities and with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 21,829 square miles, and its population is approximately 4,437,000. The religious breakdown of the country is approximately: Roman Catholic, 85 percent; Orthodox Christian, 6 percent; Muslim, 1 percent; Jewish, less than 1 percent; other, 4 percent; and atheist, 2 percent. The statistics correlate closely with the country's ethnic makeup. The Orthodox, predominantly ethnic Serbs associated with the Serbian Orthodox Church, primarily live in cities and border areas with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro. Members of other minority religions reside mostly in urban areas. Most immigrants are Roman Catholic ethnic Croats.

Protestants from a number of denominations and foreign clergy actively practice and proselytize, as do representatives of Eastern religions. A variety of missionaries are present in the country, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Catholics, Pentecostals, Hare Krishnas, and a wide range of evangelical Protestant Christians (including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Church of Christ, and various nondenominational organizations such as the Campus Crusades for Christ).

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

In July 2002, the Government passed the Law on Legal Status of Religious Communities, which broadly defines religious communities' legal position, and covers such issues as government funding, tax benefits, and religious education in schools. Other important issues, such as pensions for clergy, religious service in the military, penitentiaries and police, and recognition of religious marriages, were left to each religious community to negotiate separately with the Government. Most religious communities involved in the discussions on the draft considered the law an improvement over the existing state of affairs. However, some religious leaders and political parties expressed concern over instituting Catholic catechism in kindergarten, which was established previously in the Concordat agreements between the Vatican and the Government but never implemented. Restitution of nationalized or confiscated church property is regulated under the Law on Return of Property Expropriated or Nationalized During the Yugoslav Communist Rule, which was amended in July 2002.

In January the Government approved a regulation on the registration of religious communities, known as the "Regulation on Forms and Maintaining Records of Religious Communities in Croatia," which required all religious communities to submit registration applications within 6 months. The process of registration was not completed during the period covered by this report. The new regulation stipulates that to register, religious communities must have at least 500 believers, and must be registered as an association for 5 years. Registered religious communities will be granted the status of a "legal person," and will enjoy tax and other benefits under the Law on Religious Communities. Religious communities that are based abroad will need to submit written permission for registration from their country of origin. No specific licensing is required for foreign missionaries.

Representatives of minority religious communities indicate that the overall climate for religious freedom has improved since the January 2000 election of a democratic coalition government. Agreements between the State and the Islamic and the Serbian Orthodox communities provide a framework for a more balanced treatment of religious communities in comparison with the Catholic Church. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Government was negotiating agreements with nine additional Christian Churches (Evangelical, Reformed Christian, Pentecostal, Christian Adventist, Union of Baptist Churches, Church of God, Church of the Christ, the Reformed Movement of Seventh-day Adventists, and the Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ). While the Government has taken actions to eliminate religious discrimination, its approach is to negotiate with individual religious communities based on a common framework, rather than setting uniform, nondiscriminatory standards and practices. Leaders of minority religions have expressed satisfaction with the communication and cooperation they have received from the Government, most notably with the Government Commission on Relations with Religious Communities, chaired by a Deputy Prime Minister.

An agreement between the Catholic Church and the state-run Croatian State Radio and Television (HRT) provides regular, extensive coverage of Catholic events (as many as 10 hours per month). Other religious communities receive approximately 10 minutes broadcast time per month or less. The Catholic Church operates one of the country's private national radio stations, Catholic Radio, which is financed by private contributions. The Jewish community reports no restrictions on religious broadcasting. Topics of interest to major non-Catholic religious groups are covered regularly on weekly religious programming on HRT. The Muslim community's Bairam ceremony, usually attended by high-level government officials, is telecast live annually from the Zagreb Mosque.

Missionaries do not operate registered schools, but the Mormon community provides free English lessons, which normally are offered in conjunction with education on the Mormon religion. The Ministry of Education recognizes the diploma conferred by the Muslim community's secondary school in Zagreb. Enrollment in the school subsequently has increased by more than 50 percent and is at full capacity.

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

There is no government-sponsored ecumenical activity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government imposes no formal restrictions on religious groups, and all religious communities are free to conduct public services and to open and run social and charitable institutions.

There is no official state religion; however, the Roman Catholic Church receives some state support and other benefits established in concordats between the Government and the Vatican. In December 2002, similar agreements were signed with the Serbian Orthodox Church and Islamic Community. At the end of the period covered by this report, negotiations were underway with other Christian Churches and the Jewish Community to reach similar agreements. The concordats and the agreements with the Islamic and Orthodox communities allow state financing for some salaries and pensions for priests and nuns through government-managed pension and health funds.

They also regulate recognition of marriages, public school catechisms, and military chaplains. The Ministry of Defense employs 17 full-time and 6 part-time Catholic priests and chaplains. After signing the agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, five Orthodox priests began service in prisons and penitentiaries, and the Islamic Community plans to employ three priests in the same service.

Catholic, Islamic, and Serbian Orthodox marriages are recognized by the State, eliminating the need to register them in the civil registry office.

Facilitating the return of refugees is a challenge for the Government, which has made progress in a number of areas relating to returns. However, many ethnic Serbs who wish to return to Croatia, including Serbian Orthodox clergy, continued to encounter difficulties recovering their prewar property and reconstructing damaged or destroyed houses. There were no reports of specific discrimination against Orthodox clergy beyond that faced by other ethnic Serb citizen refugees. Orthodox officials report that approximately 30 percent of prewar Orthodox clergy have returned to the war-affected areas, indicating that the proportion of returning clergy is somewhat greater than that of the general Serb population. Religion and ethnicity are linked closely in society, but the majority of incidents of discrimination are motivated by ethnicity rather than religion or religious doctrine. A pattern of often open and severe discrimination continues against ethnic Serbs, and, at times, other minorities in a wide number of areas, including the administration of justice, employment, housing, and freedom of movement.

The Government requires that religious training be provided in public schools, although attendance is optional. Given that 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, the Catholic catechism is the predominant one offered in public schools. Schools that meet the necessary quota of seven students of a minority faith per class offered separate religion classes for the students. In cases where there are not sufficient numbers of students of a minority faith to warrant separate classes, students may exercise the option to receive religious instruction through their religious community. An estimated 4,500 primary and secondary school children in 37 schools attend Orthodox religion classes, the majority of which are in Eastern Slavonia, Rijeka, and Gorski Kotar. Orthodox officials report that they have good cooperation with the Ministry of Education, which organizes a series of orientation seminars for the teachers prior to the beginning of the school year. Jewish officials noted in 2003 that basic information about Judaism provided to students was inaccurate. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Islamic Community, which initially opposed the idea of religious training in kindergarten, was negotiating with the Ministry of Education on the curriculum and staff to provide religious education in kindergartens beginning with the Fall 2003 school term.

Restitution of property nationalized or confiscated by the Yugoslav Communist regime remains a problem. Major religious communities, including the Catholic Church, identify property return as their top priority, and complain about the lack of progress. The Government has claimed that while only 20 percent of all restitution cases have been resolved, 35 percent of the total of restitution cases of religious communities have been solved. A 1998 concordat with the Vatican provided for the return of all Catholic Church property confiscated by the Communist regime after 1945. The agreement stipulates that the Government would return seized properties or compensate the Church where return is impossible. Some progress was made with some returnable properties being restituted; however, there has been no compensation to date for non-returnable properties. In April the Catholic Church submitted a list of properties to the Government that included large commercial buildings, recreational property, and several properties already in use by the Church, such as monasteries, dormitories, and residences for children with disabilities. However, at the same time, Catholic Church officials publicly stated

investigated but no arrests have been made in the case.

Relations between the Government and the Jewish Community have steadily improved since the election of the new Government in 2000. In October 2001, President Mesic visited Israel and apologized for the persecution of Jews by the fascist World War II-era Ustasha government. The January 2002 visit of an Israeli Knesset delegation further improved already good bilateral relations. As with other smaller religious communities, the primary issue for the Jewish Community is the return of property either confiscated or nationalized by the Communist regime of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, of which the restitution of even part would significantly affect the community's financial well-being.

Conservative elements within the Catholic hierarchy have expressed dissatisfaction with government policies, including cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, and have expressed concern for citizens indicted for war crimes.

Since Catholic Archbishop of Zagreb Josip Bozanic took office in 1997 and became head of the HBK, the Catholic Church has sought a more proactive role in advocating reconciliation. In January Bozanic publicly endorsed Croatia's European Union (EU) membership aspirations after meeting with Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission. In a June visit, Pope John Paul II met with members of the Serbian Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic communities and called for ethnic reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Catholic Radio includes a monthly program on ecumenism, inviting speakers from other religious communities. Ecumenical efforts among the religious communities have developed in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. For example, religious leaders meet frequently to discuss issues of mutual interest and to cooperate and coordinate with the Government Commission for Relations with Religious Communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government actively works to encourage the Government to respect religious freedom in practice. U.S. Embassy officials meet frequently at all levels with representatives of religious communities and are engaged in the promotion of human rights, including the religious rights of these groups. The Embassy plays a leading role among diplomatic missions on issues of ethnic and religious reconciliation, and human rights.

Released on December 18, 2003

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24350pf.htm)

that the process of restitution of property had stopped. In June just prior to the visit of the Pope, government officials revealed plans to offer the Catholic Church a 25 percent stake in the country's largest insurance company, Croatia Osiguranje, as compensation for property that is non-returnable. Based on some estimates the Government's offer could be worth approximately \$45 million (50 million euros).

Other than the Law on Return of Property Expropriated or Nationalized During Yugoslav Communist Rule, there are no specific property restitution agreements between the Government and non-Catholic religious groups. The Orthodox community has filed several requests for the return of seized properties, and some cases have been resolved successfully, particularly cases involving buildings in urban centers. However, several buildings in downtown Zagreb have not been returned, nor have properties that belonged to monasteries, such as arable land and forest. Such uneven progress may be the result of a slow judicial system rather than a systematic effort to deny restitution of Orthodox properties.

Several Jewish properties, including some Zagreb buildings, have not been returned. The process of returning nationalized property to the Jewish community is at a near-standstill. There has been no progress on the restitution of the Haver Kadosh Building in Zagreb previously owned by a Jewish organization. The World War II Jasenovac concentration camp, site of a memorial and museum, was damaged severely during the 1991-95 conflict and renovation remained ongoing. In May President Mesic gave the keynote address at a commemoration ceremony at the camp that also was attended by government officials and leaders of ethnic and religious minority communities.

In May local authorities in Rijeka approved the design for a mosque that the Muslim Community has been trying to build since 1982. A location permit was first issued in 1991, but local opposition to the mosque and bureaucratic and financial obstacles combined over the years to delay the project. Although the location must again be approved and construction permits issued, officials within the Muslim community expect construction to begin in early 2004.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

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

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Religion and ethnicity are closely linked in society, and religion often was used to identify non-Croats and single them out for discriminatory practices. Such attitudes led to religious institutions being the target of violence. During the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, religious institutions of all faiths were targets of violence. Such incidents still occur, particularly in the war-affected areas, in which there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries.

Both international observers and religious leaders note that overall ethnic and religious relations are improving slowly. Incidents typically include destruction and vandalism of church property and harassment of clergy. In September 2002, arsonists set fire to a building and destroyed icons belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Osijek; in a separate incident in Osijek, the Catholic Church of St. Mary was vandalized. Also in September 2002 and again in April, tombstones were damaged at an ethnic Serb military cemetery in Vukovar. In August 2002, police failed to act in Sibenik when cars were used to block the entrance to Serbian Orthodox Church offices and prevent the local bishop from exiting the building. Also in Sibenik in August 2002, no charges were brought against a person who was detained for repeatedly throwing garbage and verbally abusing a Serbian Orthodox priest. Serbian Orthodox leaders report that in Knin the Church of St. Pokrov is frequently desecrated with fascist Ustasha symbols.

The Muslim and Jewish Communities have reported no major incidents of violence or harassment toward religious persons or sites during the period covered by this report. However, in June insulting graffiti appeared on the walls and minaret of the Zagreb mosque. Police

