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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Poland

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. It states religion is a personal choice, and all churches and religious organizations have equal rights. A concordat with the Holy See defines relations with the Roman Catholic Church. Statutes and agreements determine relations between the government and 15 religious groups. The law prohibits public speech offensive to religious sentiment. The government registered one new religious group and decided 87 religious communal property restitution cases out of 3,240 outstanding cases. After amending the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) law to criminalize ascribing Nazi crimes to the Polish state, the government removed the criminalization provisions, while retaining civil penalties for violators. Governing party parliamentarians, other politicians, and commentators on state television made anti-Semitic statements during the year. The prime minister and the governing Law and Justice Party (PiS) leader denounced anti-Semitism. The president participated in several Holocaust remembrance events. PiS parliamentarians voted down a motion to ask the prime minister to review an appeal to protect Muslims in the country.

The government investigated 328 anti-Muslim and 112 anti-Semitic incidents in 2017, compared with 360 and 160 incidents, respectively, in 2016. Civil society groups said the figures were not comprehensive. Several Jewish groups expressed concern over what they called increasing anti-Semitism and threats and said they felt unsafe in the country. News media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Jewish groups reported an increase in anti-Semitic speech. There were incidents of vandalism at Jewish and Roman Catholic sites.

On January 27, the U.S. Secretary of State delivered remarks and laid a wreath at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Monument to commemorate the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The U.S. Ambassador, embassy staff, and visiting U.S. government delegations raised concerns with government officials about the IPN law and its potential impact on freedom of speech and academic research related to the Holocaust. In February the Ambassador released a video on social media expressing concerns about the amended IPN law. The Ambassador, other embassy staff, and visiting U.S. officials also discussed with government officials and Jewish groups the status of property restitution and anti-Semitism. On September 14, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious

Freedom discussed religious freedom and antidiscrimination issues with government officials and religious leaders. The embassy and Consulate General in Krakow engaged with Jewish and Muslim leaders on countering anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment and sponsored exchanges, roundtables, cultural events, and education grants promoting interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 38.4 million (July 2018 estimate). The Polish government statistical yearbook for 2018, which publishes the membership population for religious groups that voluntarily submit the information for publication, reports 86 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic. The next largest religious groups are the Polish Orthodox Church, with approximately half a million members (although religious groups report that the number of Orthodox worshippers has doubled with an influx of migrant Ukrainian workers), and Jehovah’s Witnesses, with approximately 120,000 members. Other religious groups include Lutherans, Pentecostals, the Old Catholic Mariavite Church, the Polish National Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Church of Christ, Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Buddhists. Some Jewish groups estimate there are 20,000 Jews, while other estimates put the number as high as 40,000. Muslim groups estimate there are 25,000 Muslims. Approximately 10 percent of Muslims are ethnic Tatars, a group present in the country for several hundred years. A Central Statistical Office survey (<http://www.thenews.pl/1/11/Artykul/293281%2cStudy-shows-95-of-Poles-are-religious>) published in December reported 91.9 percent of citizens aged 16 years or older identify as Roman Catholic and 1.7 percent as belonging to other denominations, including Orthodox (0.9 percent), Jehovah’s Witnesses (0.2 percent), or other Protestant groups (0.3 percent). Approximately 3 percent reported no religious identification.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion. It states freedom of religion includes the freedom to profess or to accept a religion by personal choice as well as to manifest that religion, either individually or collectively, publicly or privately, by worshipping, praying, participating in ceremonies, performing rites, or teaching. It states freedom to express religion may be limited only by law when necessary to defend state security, public order, health, morals, or the rights of others. The constitution states “churches and other religious organizations shall have equal rights.” It stipulates the relationship between the state and churches and other religious organizations shall be based on the principle of respect for autonomy and mutual independence. The constitution specifies that relations with the Roman Catholic Church shall be determined by an international concordat concluded with the Holy See and by statute, and relations with other churches and religious organizations by statutes adopted pursuant to agreements between representatives of these groups and the Council of Ministers.

According to the constitution, freedom of religion also includes the right to own places of worship and to provide religious services. The constitution stipulates parents have the right to ensure their children receive a moral and religious upbringing and teaching in accordance with their convictions and their own religious and philosophical beliefs. It states religious organizations may teach their faith in schools if doing so does not infringe on the religious freedom of others. The constitution acknowledges the right of national and ethnic minorities to establish institutions designed to protect religious identity. The constitution prohibits parties and other organizations whose programs are based on Nazism or communism.

The criminal code outlaws public speech that offends religious sentiment. The law prescribes a fine, typically 5,000 zloty (\$1,300), or up to two years in prison for violations.

Specific legislation governs the relationship of 15 religious groups with the state, outlining the structure of that relationship and procedures for communal property restitution. The 15 religious groups are the Roman Catholic Church, Polish Orthodox Church, Evangelical-Augsburg (Lutheran) Church, Evangelical Reformed Church, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Polish National Catholic Church, Pentecostal Church, the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland, Mariavite Church, Old Catholic Mariavite Church, Old Eastern Orthodox Church, Muslim Religious Union, and Karaim Religious Union. Marriages performed by officials from 11 of these groups do not require further registration at a civil registry office; however, the Mariavite Church, Muslim Religious Union, Karaim Religious Union, and Old Eastern Orthodox Church do not have that right. An additional 166 registered religious groups and five aggregate religious organizations (the Polish Ecumenical Council, Polish Buddhist Union, Biblical Society, Evangelical Alliance, and Council of Protestant Churches) do not have a statutorily defined relationship with the state.

The law provides equal protection to all registered religious groups. In accordance with the law, the government and the Roman Catholic Church participate in the Joint Government-Episcopate Committee, cochaired by the minister of interior and administration and a bishop, currently the Archbishop of Gdansk, which meets regularly to discuss Catholic Church-state relations. The government also participates in a joint government-Polish Ecumenical Council committee, cochaired by a Ministry of Interior and Administration (MIA) undersecretary and the head of the Polish Ecumenical Council (an association composed of seven denominations and two religious associations, all of them non-Roman Catholic Christian), which meets to discuss issues related to minority Christian churches operating in the country.

Religious groups not the subject of specific legislation may register with the MIA, but registration is not obligatory. To register, the law requires a group to submit a notarized application with the personal information of at least 100 citizen members; details about the group's activities in the country; background on its doctrine and practices; a charter and physical address; identifying information about its leaders; a description of the role of the clergy, if applicable; and information on funding sources and methods of new member recruitment. If the ministry rejects the registration application, religious groups may appeal to an administrative court. By law, the

permissible grounds for refusal of an application are failure to meet formal requirements or inclusion in the application of provisions that may violate public safety and order, health, public morality, parental authority or freedom, and rights of other persons. Unregistered groups may worship, proselytize, publish or import religious literature freely, and bring in foreign missionaries, but they have no legal recognition and are unable to undertake certain functions such as owning property or holding bank accounts in their name. The 186 registered and statutorily recognized religious groups receive other privileges not available to unregistered groups, such as selective tax benefits – they are exempt from import tariffs, property taxes and income tax on their educational, scientific, cultural, and legal activities, and their official representatives are also exempt from income and property taxes – and the right to acquire property and teach religion in schools.

Four commissions oversee communal religious property restitution claims submitted by their respective statutory filing deadlines, one each for the Jewish community, Lutheran Church, and Orthodox Church, and one for all other denominations. The commissions function in accordance with legislation providing for the restitution to religious communities of property they owned and that was nationalized during or after World War II (WWII). A separate commission overseeing claims by the Roman Catholic Church completed its work in 2011. The MIA and the respective religious community each appoint representatives to the commissions. The law states decisions by the commission ruling on communal property claims may not be appealed, but the Constitutional Tribunal ruled in 2013 that parties could appeal commission decisions in administrative courts. There have been no reports of parties filing such appeals. The law does not address communal properties the government sold or turned over to new private owners after WWII.

There is no comprehensive national law governing private property restitution. Members of religious groups, like other private claimants, may pursue restitution through the courts.

The law authorizes Warsaw city authorities to expeditiously resolve long-standing restitution cases affecting Warsaw properties now being used for public purposes. Warsaw city officials must post a notification of specific public properties for a six-month period during which original owners of the property must submit their claims. At the end of the six-month period, Warsaw city authorities may make a final determination on the disposition of the property, either declaring that the property shall remain public and not be subject to any future claims, or returning the property or monetary compensation to the original owner.

In accordance with the law, all public and private schools teach voluntary religion classes. Schools must provide instruction in any of the registered faiths if there are at least seven students requesting it. Each registered religious group determines the content of classes in its faith and provides the teachers, who receive salaries from the state. Students may also request to take an optional ethics class instead of a religion class; the ethics class is optional even if students decline to take a religion class.

Citizens have the right to sue the government for constitutional violations of religious freedom, and the law prohibits discrimination or persecution on the basis of religion or belief.

The constitution recognizes the right to conscientious objection to military service on religious grounds but states such objectors may be required to perform alternative service as specified by law.

The human rights ombudsman is responsible for safeguarding human and civil freedoms and rights, including the freedom of religion and conscience, specified in the constitution and other legal acts. The ombudsman is independent from the government, and appointed by parliament.

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

Government Practices

On July 31, the MIA approved the registration of the Church of the Living God, originally applied for in 2016. According to the MIA, the average length of time to process a registration application is approximately two years.

On February 6, the president signed into law amendments to the IPN law, which stated anyone who publicly assigned the “Polish state or nation” responsibility or joint responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich during WWII could be fined or imprisoned for up to three years. After signing the law, the president referred it to the Constitutional Court over concerns it violated free speech protections. On June 26, following significant international criticism of the law, parliament voted to remove the provisions criminalizing attribution of Nazi crimes to the Polish state or nation, and the president signed the legislation the same day. The civil penalties in the law remained unchanged, as did the provisions criminalizing denial of purported Ukrainian WWII-era collaboration and war crimes. Under the civil provisions, the Institute of National Remembrance and NGOs established to defend the country’s historical record may file suit to defend the country’s reputation and demand a retraction and payment of compensation to the state or a charity.

On February 17, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated in response to a journalist’s question that the IPN law would not affect the ability to say, “...there were Polish perpetrators [during WWII], as there were Jewish perpetrators, as there were Russian perpetrators, as well as Ukrainian perpetrators – not only German perpetrators.”

On June 27, Prime Minister Morawiecki and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed a joint declaration supporting free and open historical expression and research on the Holocaust and condemning all forms of anti-Semitism, and called for a return to civil and respectful public dialogue. On July 5, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Yad Vashem Institute criticized the IPN law and the prime ministers’ joint declaration, stating the penalties remaining in the amended law could harm researchers, impede research, and interfere with the historical memory of the Holocaust.

In July parliamentarians from the PiS Party voted down a motion in the Sejm (parliament) National and Ethnic Minority Committee to request the prime minister to review a June 2017 written appeal by several Muslim organizations to the speaker of the lower house of parliament to protect the Muslim minority in the country. The authors of the appeal stated political debates reinforced anti-Muslim messages in media and could lead to an escalation of xenophobic behavior against Muslims.

According to MIA statistics, the religious community property commissions resolved 87 communal property claims during the year, out of approximately 3,240 pending claims by religious groups. At year's end, the commissions had partially or entirely resolved a total of 2,810 of 5,554 claims by the Jewish community, 989 of 1,200 claims by the Lutheran community, 268 of 472 claims by the Orthodox Church, and 87 of 170 claims by all other denominations.

Critics continued to point out the laws on religious communal property restitution do not address the issue of disputed communal properties now privately owned, and the government left several controversial and complicated cases unresolved. These included a number of cases in which buildings and residences were built on land that included Jewish cemeteries destroyed during or after WWII. The Jewish community continued to report the pace of Jewish communal property restitution was slow, involved considerable legal expense, and often ended without any recovery of property or other compensation for claimants.

Warsaw city authorities continued implementing the 2015 law critics stated might extinguish potential claims by private individuals, including Jews and members of other religious minorities, on public properties seized in WWII or the communist era. On September 17, Warsaw Mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz stated that since the law entered into force in September 2016, the city had discontinued 48 dormant claims filed before 1950 and refused 58 restitution claims against public properties. These included schools, preschools, a park, a police command unit site, a hospital, and city-owned apartment houses. There was no information available as to the identity of those claiming prior ownership or whether any belonged to religious minorities.

The World Jewish Restitution Organization sent a formal request to the Mayor of Warsaw asking the city to give claimants sufficient time to complete succession proceedings (proving legal inheritance or succession in Polish courts) to avoid the discontinuance of their property claims. The mayor responded the city was obligated to administer the public property restitution law as it was passed by the national parliament and upheld by the Constitutional Court.

A special government commission led by Deputy Justice Minister Patryk Jaki continued to investigate accusations of irregularities in restitution of private property in Warsaw. On June 30, the commission reported it had reviewed 593 prior restitution cases and issued 74 decisions during its first 12 months of operations in 2016-17. The commission chair estimated the commission's actions returned 700 million zloty (\$186.52 million) in property value to the city of Warsaw. Several NGOs and lawyers representing claimants, including lawyers representing Holocaust survivors or their

heirs, stated the commission had had a negative effect on private property restitution cases, as administrative and court decisions had slowed down in response to the commission's decisions.

On February 12, the head of the committee of the Council of Ministers responsible for coordinating legislation announced the justice ministry's October 2017 comprehensive private property restitution draft legislation needed further revisions and analysis, and that there were questions about its potential costs and compliance with national and international law. The proposed law would block any physical return of former properties, whether the properties were currently privately or publicly owned, provide compensation of 20-25 percent of the property's value at the time of taking in cash or government bonds, and set a one-year claims filing period. The draft legislation continued to draw intense media coverage and public scrutiny. NGOs and advocacy groups expressed concern the legislation would exclude foreign potential claimants, many of whom were Holocaust survivors or their heirs. For example, according to media reports in February, the World Jewish Restitution Organization and the World Jewish Congress sent government officials letters criticizing the bill, stating it would end return of properties in kind, provide unjustly low compensations for lost properties, and place unjust restrictions on the persons eligible for compensation. The government had not announced any updates on the status of the draft law by year's end.

On November 11, the government led a march through Warsaw in celebration of 100 years of the country's regained independence. The march occurred together with the annual Independence Day March organized by a coalition of groups, such as National Radical Camp (ONR) and All Polish Youth, widely deemed extremist and nationalist in their ideologies. While there were no reports of anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim posters or chants and no reports of violence, a small number of participants displayed Celtic crosses, a far-right nationalist symbol, and messages such as “Poland, White and Catholic.”

On July 27, the Supreme Administrative Court rejected the final appeal of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, to which the MIA denied registration in 2013.

On January 29, the director of state-run television station TVP-2, Marcin Wolski, stated on air that Nazi concentration camps were “not German or Polish camps, but Jewish camps,” arguing that Jews operated the crematoria at Auschwitz. During the same program, political commentator and author Rafal Ziemkiewicz stated, “Jews were part of their own destruction” during the Holocaust. On February 7, Prosecutor General Zbigniew Ziobro asked the Warsaw prosecutor's office to conduct a preliminary review to determine whether Wolski and Ziemkiewicz's comments violated the law preventing public offense on the grounds of national, ethnic, racial, or religious identity. At year's end, the government had not disclosed any information about the status of the review.

On February 8, PiS Party Parliamentary Caucus Deputy Chair Jacek Zalek said during a televised interview that Germans, not Poles, killed Jews in the 1941 Jedwabne pogrom in which at least 300 Jews perished when a barn in which they were locked was set afire. Historians have found that Jews in Jedwabne were killed by their Polish neighbors while under Nazi occupation.

On February 22, PiS Party Senator Waldemar Bonkowski posted anti-Semitic material on his Facebook page, including a video edited from Nazi propaganda movies. The party suspended Bonkowski's party membership that same day. Bonkowski's membership remained suspended at year's end.

In March opposition parliamentarian Kornel Morawiecki from the Freedom and Solidarity Party said in an interview that Jews moved into WWII-era ghettos voluntarily because “they were told it would be an enclave for them where they would not have to deal with those nasty Poles.”

In June the National Radio and Television Broadcasting Council rejected complaints by news portal Okopress and the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland regarding February 24 comments made on state-run television station TVP Info by Roman Catholic priest Henryk Zielinski. Zielinski stated, “For us, the truth means the consistency of what we say with the facts. For the Jew...if [he] is a religious Jew, the truth means what God wants. If he is not religious, the truth is subjective or the truth will be what serves the interests of Israel.” The council said Zielinski's comments could not be considered as offensive or inciting hatred, and that the discussion on the program covered important philosophical and theological topics necessary to facilitating dialogue and agreement on disputed issues.

In July the Ministry of Culture awarded Ryszard Makowski the Gloria Arts Medal for Merit to Culture, one of the country's highest distinctions for artistic contribution to the nation's culture and heritage. In March Makowski, who previously made anti-Semitic jokes on a public television show in 2016, wrote an opinion article in which he criticized the Polish government for inadvertently funding anti-Polish narratives through its support for museums such as the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum, and accused Jews of creating their own anti-Semitism.

Crucifixes continued to be displayed in both the upper and lower houses of parliament, as well as in many other public buildings, including public school classrooms.

There were no publicly available updates on the status of the investigation the government ordered in 2017 about a 1999 video showing naked persons laughing and playing tag in a concentration camp gas chamber at the former Nazi Stutthof concentration camp.

In January Prime Minister Morawiecki and other political and religious leaders joined Holocaust survivors to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day and commemorate the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The prime minister stated that “crushing... force [had] exterminated the Jewish people and a part of the Polish nation,” and that there was no justification for “criminal ideologies,” including anti-Semitism.

On February 10, in comments on the revised IPN law, PiS Party Chairman Jaroslaw Kaczynski condemned anti-Semitism as a “disease of the mind and soul.”

On January 13, MIA Minister Joachim Brudzinski condemned xenophobic and aggressive behavior against people because of their skin color, religion, or beliefs following an incident that day in which two men insulted two Syrian citizens in Wroclaw. Police detained two suspects, who were charged with public insult on the basis of national origin. There was no further information available on the case.

On April 21, law enforcement officials in the town of Dzierzoniow disrupted plans by groups whom media and law enforcement described as neofascists to organize a concert celebrating Adolf Hitler’s birthday. Approximately 300 police officers and Internal Security Agency officers conducted a series of raids in the area, resulting in the questioning of approximately a dozen persons and the detention of the two men suspected of organizing the concert.

On January 15, President Andrzej Duda and his wife hosted an interfaith holiday gathering with representatives of various religious groups and national minorities. The president said, “Many generations of Poles, irrespective of their language and religion, have jointly fought for a free and independent Poland,” and added that the country provided “security, peace, and the possibility for all Poles to live a normal life.”

On February 27, President Duda and his wife visited the Krakow Jewish community preschool and nursery, and met with Krakow Jewish Community Chair Tadeusz Jakubowicz and Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich. During the meeting, the president said Poles and Jews had 1,000 years of shared history and praised the contribution of many Jews to the country’s independence.

On March 6, the lower house of parliament adopted a resolution condemning anti-Semitism to mark the 50th anniversary of the March 1968 purges in which the communist government exiled thousands of Jews from the country. The resolution condemned all manifestations of anti-Semitism and the 1968 communist government.

In March parliament passed, and the president signed, legislation designating March 24 as a national holiday commemorating Poles who saved Jews during WWII.

On April 12, President Duda marched together with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in the International March of the Living, an annual educational program that brought individuals from around the world to Poland to study the history of the Holocaust.

On June 14, Deputy Prime Minister Beata Szydlo attended the 78th anniversary of the first deportation of Poles to Auschwitz at a ceremony at the site of the Nazi death camp.

On October 14, the government organized an official commemoration on the 75th anniversary of the uprising at the Sobibor Nazi extermination camp, with the participation of the Presidential Chancellery (Minister Wojciech Kolarski, who read the letter from the president), Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Glinski, former prisoners, and representatives from the prisoners’ countries of origin, including Russia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, France, Ukraine, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria.

The government continued to fund exchanges with national participants and Israeli Jews as part of a long-term cultural exchange agreement with the government of Israel to foster dialogue on restitution, the Holocaust, and interfaith issues.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The national prosecutor’s office reported that during 2017, the most recent period for which data were available, prosecutors investigated 506 religiously motivated incidents, compared with 582 in the previous year. The report cited 328 investigations into anti-Muslim incidents (363 in 2016), and 112 investigations into anti-Semitic incidents (160 in 2016). Prosecutors investigated 66 incidents against Roman Catholics, compared with 59 in 2016. The NGO Never Again Association and religious groups stated government tracking of religiously motivated incidents was not systematic; they said police, prosecutors, and the MIA all kept their own sets of numbers, which did not correspond well with each other.

On February 19, more than 25 Jewish organizations issued a joint statement expressing concern over what they termed a growing wave of intolerance, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism in the country, which they said arose in reaction to criticism of the IPN law. The statement said “It is unacceptable for Poland’s leaders to merely state that anti-Semitism is wrong without recognizing publicly that it is a dangerous, growing problem in our country today.” Signatories stated they saw authorities’ “inaction as tacit consent for hatred directed toward the Jewish community...” They cited an increase in the number of threats and insults directed at Jews and stated they did not feel safe. In April a Holocaust survivor of the Lvov ghetto told participants at a rally in Gdansk of her concern regarding the lack of reaction by the government to increasing anti-Semitism.

On April 14, approximately 100 supporters of ONR marched through Gdansk to mark the 84th anniversary of the group’s founding. During the march, some participants shouted “Death to the enemies of the country” and “One Catholic Poland.” On April 19, Gdansk mayor Pawel Adamowicz announced he had submitted a motion to the prosecutor general and justice minister to revoke ONR’s legal status.

In December the European Union’s Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU-FRA) released its second survey of Jewish experiences and perceptions of anti-Semitism. EU-FRA targeted Jewish populations through community organizations, Jewish media, and social networks; 422 individuals who identified themselves as Jewish citizens of Poland responded to the online survey. Thirty-two percent said they had witnessed other Jews being physically attacked, harassed, or insulted in the previous 12 months, and 32 percent reported being harassed over the same period. Thirty-five percent of respondents felt they had been discriminated against because of their religion or belief; 83 percent thought anti-Semitism had increased over the previous five years.

In February local and international news media, human rights organizations, and Jewish community representatives reported an increase in anti-Semitic speech. Many commentators, including media, NGOs such as the Open Republic Association and Never Again Association, and Jewish groups, linked this reported increase to negative international reactions by the international community to the amendments to the IPN law.

Also in February, well-known author and political commentator Rafal Ziemkiewicz used a historically offensive, Polish-language anti-Semitic epithet on Twitter following negative international reactions to the amended IPN law.

On February 2, the Israeli embassy in Warsaw posted a statement on its website decrying the increase in anti-Semitic comments in public media and on the embassy's social media accounts.

In January private broadcaster TVN aired a report showing what it said was hidden camera footage of neo-Nazis celebrating Adolf Hitler's birthday in Nazi uniforms in the southwestern part of the country. Prime Minister Morawiecki wrote on Twitter that “promoting fascism tramples on the memory of our ancestors.”

On November 11, former Roman Catholic priest Jacek Miedlar – who was barred from public speaking by his former religious order for statements he made about Jews, Muslims, and others and is widely described as an ultranationalist extremist – organized an Independence Day march in Wroclaw with fellow extremist Piotr Rybak. Some of the approximately 9,000 participants in the march reportedly engaged in nationalist chants such as “Poland for Poles, Poles for Poland.” Rybak criticized Wroclaw mayor Rafal Dutkiewicz for trying to ban the march over what the mayor said were public safety concerns. Rybak referred to the mayor, who is not Jewish, as the “outgoing Jew with a yarmulke” and stated, “we will not allow the Hebrew language” to dictate actions in the country, which “must be Catholic and Christian.”

Groups such as National Rebirth of Poland and Blood and Honor continued to espouse anti-Semitic views, but authorities did not link any of them to specific incidents of violence or vandalism. During the year, the Blood and Honor website's RedWatch list described opposition parliamentarian Kamila Gasiuk-Pihowicz as a “Jewish-leftist hyena” who combats racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, and members of the Razem political party as profit-maximizing leftists sponsored by a prominent Jewish financier.

On January 17, a local court in Oswiecim sentenced two men to 18-months and 14-months imprisonment for insulting a memorial site at the Auschwitz former Nazi concentration camp. The incident took place in March 2017, when 12 persons from Poland, Belarus, and Germany killed a sheep and chained themselves together naked to the main gate of the camp, in what the demonstrators stated was an anti-war protest.

On September 13, the Warsaw local court fined one person 500 zloty (\$130) for disrupting a Catholic Mass during the reading of a letter by the Polish episcopate calling for a total ban on abortion in 2016.

On February 4, unknown persons wrote obscenities on the doors of a Roman Catholic church in the town of Brzeszcze. Police had not identified any suspect by year's end.

On May 14, two men broke into a Roman Catholic church in Nysa and destroyed a wooden religious figure. Police arrested the men. Their case was pending at year's end.

In August unknown persons vandalized more than 30 tombstones at a Jewish cemetery in the town of Myslowice. Police opened an investigation, but there was no further information on the case at year's end.

In July unknown individuals vandalized six tombstones at the Jewish cemetery in the town of Dabrowa Bialostocka. Police had not identified any suspects at year's end.

On November 25, unknown individuals destroyed 22 figures of Catholic saints placed outside the Catholic church in the town of Zarzecze as part of the community's celebration of the country's independence. Interior Minister Joachim Brudzinski wrote on Twitter that the destruction of the figures was not only a blow to the local Catholic community but also to any decent person, and said police would do everything to catch the perpetrators.

On September 19, a man later described by police as mentally ill threw a rock through a synagogue window in Gdansk during Yom Kippur services. Police reported the man had previously been arrested for vandalizing a Roman Catholic church. The mayor of Gdansk and community and religious group leaders attended a ceremony to install a replacement window on the following day.

On July 19, the Bialystok district prosecutor's office discontinued the case involving the alleged desecration of a Jewish cemetery in Siemiatycze during construction work in December 2017, in which workers excavated and removed soil containing human remains from a private commercial lot located within the original boundaries of the cemetery. The prosecutor concluded there was no desecration, as the construction work was legal, the human remains were hard to see, and the construction workers did not intend to desecrate the cemetery.

Authorities did not provide any publicly available updates on the status of an investigation they announced in 2017 into the possible desecration of a Jewish cemetery in the village of Maszewo.

On January 17, the Roman Catholic Church celebrated the 21st annual Day of Judaism, which featured events throughout the country, including meetings, lectures at schools, film screenings, and exhibitions. The principal events took place in Warsaw and included prayers at the graves of the Jewish victims of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, a seminar at the Polin Museum, and a religious service at Warsaw's St. John's Cathedral. Archbishop of Warsaw Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz and Chief Rabbi of Poland Schudrich participated in the events.

On January 26, the Roman Catholic Church celebrated the 18th annual Day of Islam with the stated purpose of promoting peace among religious groups. The Church hosted an event titled “Christians and Muslims – Caring for Our Common Home” in Warsaw, which included discussions, readings from the Bible and the Quran, and prayers. Chair of the Polish Episcopate Committee for Dialogue with Non-Christian Religions Bishop Henryk Ciereszko and President of the Muslim Religious Union Mufti Tomasz Miskiewicz attended the event. The Church also organized a prayer service in Krakow.

The Polish Council of Christians and Jews continued to organize annual conferences and ceremonies, including the Day of Judaism in the Roman Catholic Church on January 17, and “Close Encounters of Christians and Jews” on February 27, to encourage tolerance and understanding.

A Special Committee for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Polish Ecumenical Council met during the year to promote better understanding among different Christian religions. In January the committee helped organized the annual Week of Prayers for Christian Unity.

The Polish Ecumenical Council hosted events facilitating interfaith dialogue. These included a New Year’s holiday reception that brought together representatives of various churches and public figures active in ecumenical movements. On April 20-22, the council’s youth section organized a national congress for Christian leaders, in which youth from the Lutheran, Reformed, Old Catholic Mariavite, and Orthodox Churches learned about different faiths and discussed challenges working with youth in their respective churches.

On September 21-23, the Roman Catholic Church in Gniezno hosted the ecumenical congress “Europe of free people, inspiring power of Christianity,” which brought together representatives of various Christian churches in Europe, to discuss challenges facing modern Europe and the role of Christianity in addressing them.

Human Library projects, funded by European Economic Area grants and coordinated by NGOs Diversja Association and Lambda Warsaw, continued in several cities and towns around the country, including Warsaw, Gdansk, Kudowa-Zdroj, Olesnica, and Wroclaw. The project involved a diverse group of volunteers, including representatives of Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious groups, who told their stories to individuals who could “borrow” them like books. The stated intent of the project was to foster greater tolerance, including religious tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On January 27, the U.S. Secretary of State delivered remarks and laid a wreath at the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Monument to commemorate the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

The U.S. Ambassador, embassy and Krakow Consulate General officers, and visiting U.S. Department of State representatives met with government officials from the interior, foreign affairs, and justice ministries; the presidential chancellery; parliament; and Warsaw and other city offices to discuss religious freedom, anti-Semitism, antidiscrimination, and the state of private and communal property restitution to religious groups and members of religious minorities. The Ambassador, embassy staff, and visiting U.S. government delegations raised concerns with government officials about the IPN law and its potential impact on freedom of speech and academic research related to the Holocaust. They also appealed to the government to extend the provisions of draft private property restitution legislation to cover U.S. citizens and Holocaust survivors and their heirs, who would otherwise be unable to make restitution claims if the legislation were enacted in its unchanged form.

On September 14, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom, anti-Semitism, and antidiscrimination issues. He also participated in a U.S. government delegation to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum where he laid a wreath at the Auschwitz Wall of Death and participated in a candle-lighting ceremony at the International Monument at the conclusion of the tour.

In February and October the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with government officials in Warsaw to discuss Jewish community property and private property restitution issues and social welfare benefits for Holocaust survivors.

On February 15, the Ambassador released a video message on the embassy's social media platforms expressing concerns about the amended IPN law. On February 16, the Ambassador raised these concerns during public remarks at the opening of an international music festival at the POLIN Museum.

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general staff met with members and leaders of the local Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities to discuss issues of concern including private and communal property restitution and the communities' concerns over rising intolerance, anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim sentiment.

On March 8, the Ambassador delivered remarks at the 50th anniversary commemoration of the March 1968 purges in which the communist government expelled thousands of Polish Jews from the country. He described the expulsions as a heart-breaking chapter in the country's history and underlined a collective responsibility to ensure an environment enabling such hideous acts never again be tolerated.

On April 12, embassy and consulate general staff marched in the International March of the Living.

On September 16, a senior embassy representative gave remarks at a luncheon honoring Righteous Among the Nations awardees who saved Jews during the Holocaust and Nazi occupation of the country.

The embassy continued to employ exchange programs, student roundtables, and grants for education and cultural events to promote religious freedom and tolerance. On October 25, the Ambassador delivered opening remarks at an embassy cosponsored Holocaust international education conference hosted at the POLIN Museum that provided training to teachers from the country and abroad on how to teach students about the Holocaust. The conference was part of a cooperative agreement between the embassy and the museum to select and send educators on a Holocaust teacher-training program in the United States. The embassy funded the travel of seven teachers from the country to the United States during the summer for training it organized with the POLIN Museum and sponsored by the Association of Holocaust Organizations.

The embassy sponsored the participation of representatives of media, government, memorial museums, and civil society in exchange programs in the United States focused on religious freedom issues. Twelve participants attended a program about teaching painful chapters of history. Ten memorial museum officials, including representatives from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum and the Treblinka Memorial and Museum, visited counterpart institutions in the United States to learn how U.S. memorial museums engage with audiences on sensitive historical topics while using the latest technologies, methodologies, and user experience models.

The embassy awarded grants to the Warsaw Jewish Motifs Film Festival to fund the participation of four U.S. film directors in the festival and to the annual Isaac Bashevis Singer Festival, an annual international music and culture festival held in the Krakow Jewish quarter in celebration of Jewish-Polish cultural heritage. The Consulate General in Krakow provided financial support to the annual Jewish cultural festival in Krakow, and the Galicja Jewish Museum in Krakow.

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