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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: North Macedonia

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and religious expression. It provides for equality before the law for all individuals regardless of religious belief. The constitution cites by name five religious groups that automatically receive tax exemptions and other benefits. Other religious groups must register to receive the same benefits. Registration applications by the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO) and the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community remained pending with Skopje Basic Court II, following a European Commission (EC) report calling on the government to comply with previous European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings that the government should reconsider its earlier rejections of these groups' applications. The Bektashi (Tetovo), a Sufi community, again reported harassment of its members by the government and the Islamic Religious Community in North Macedonia (IRC, but also written as ICM). The IRC said the government continued to show favoritism toward the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), and smaller religious groups continued to report unequal government treatment compared with the five constitutionally named groups. In April after Skopje Basic Court II recognized an imam the IRC had dismissed as its head, the IRC accused government officials of a “coup attempt” and appealed the ruling to the Skopje Appellate Court, which remanded the case to the basic court in October. The lower court immediately reversed its earlier decision, leaving in place the existing IRC leadership.

In September unknown persons attempted to assault the founder of the Religious Community of Orthodox Albanians, who blamed an ineffective government investigation of a previous assault. Police said they charged six persons for instances of theft, arson, or vandalism against religious targets, but did not identify the perpetrators of a separate attempted arson of a church in Cheflik belonging to the Evangelical Church. The MOC-OA reported 12 incidents of theft and one of attempted arson of its churches, and the government reported two incidents of vandalism against Orthodox cemeteries; this compares with 26 acts of theft or vandalism of Orthodox sites in 2018. The government also reported one theft at a mosque. The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community continued to dispute the IRC's claims to full ownership of, and plans to renovate, the Harabati Baba Teqe, a complex the Bektashi (Tetovo) used as a headquarters.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from the government to discuss religious freedom issues, including improved interfaith cooperation and governmental respect for and equal treatment of faith groups. The Secretary of State met with MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan and two MOC-OA bishops during a visit to the country in October. Embassy officials met with representatives from a variety of religious minorities, including Bektashis, Jews, and members of smaller Christian denominations, and with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with religious freedom. The embassy supported Holocaust education efforts and sponsored civil society and religious representatives on visits to the United States for programs focused on promoting religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the last national census, in 2002, an estimated 65 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian and 33 percent Muslim. The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni. There are a small number of Sufi (Shia) groups, including several Bektashi orders. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Roman Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Jewish community estimates it has approximately 200 members.

Most Muslims live in the northern and western parts of the country. The majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and southeastern regions. 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 equality of rights for all citizens regardless of religious belief. It provides for freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their faith freely and in public, individually, or with others. It provides for the protection of religious identity of all communities. The constitution states restriction of freedoms and rights may not be applied to personal conviction, conscience, thought, and religious confession. The constitution cites five religious groups – the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community in North Macedonia, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community – and stipulates they, as well as other religious communities and groups, are separate from the state, equal before the law, and free to establish 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, and related persons or property committed because of a real or assumed characteristic, including nationality, ethnic origin, and religion or belief, of the victim. Hate speech and hate crimes are punishable criminal acts by themselves and may result in harsher sentences for other crimes when hate crime elements are involved.

Religious organizations may apply to register as a “church,” a “religious community,” or a “religious group.” These classifications are based on group size, internal organization, and internal hierarchy. The law treats these three categories equally, bestowing the same legal rights, benefits, and obligations on all of them. The government recognizes 37 religious organizations, including the five named in the constitution. The total consists of 17 churches, nine religious communities, and 11 religious groups. Once registered, a church, religious community, or religious group is exempt from taxes and eligible to apply for restitution of properties nationalized during the communist era (provided they existed during that era), government-funded projects, and construction permits for preservation of shrines and cultural sites. It may also establish schools. Unregistered groups may hold religious services or other meetings and proselytize, but they may not engage in certain activities such as establishing schools or receiving donations that are tax deductible for the donor, and they are not tax-exempt.

Skopje Basic Court II accepts registration applications and has 15 business days to determine whether a religious organization’s application meets the legal registration criteria. The criteria are: 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. An applicant organization 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 sends approved applications to the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), a government body responsible for fostering cooperation and communication between the government and registered religious groups, which adds the organization to its registry. If the court denies the application, the organization may appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the appellate court denies the application, the organization may file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court, the highest human rights court in the country. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization may appeal the case to the 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 are not subject to the Ministry of Education’s certification. Students in religious high schools are not required nor permitted to take the required national matriculation examination (baccalaureate) and therefore are currently unable to enroll in universities. The ministry requires sixth grade students and above to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content: Introduction to Religions and Ethics in Religion. According to the ministry’s description, these courses teach religion in an academic, nondevotional manner. Orthodox priests or imams, depending on demand from parents and students, usually teach the courses, with ministry consent, and the state pays their salaries. The Ministry of Education states all teachers of these subjects receive training from accredited higher education institutions taught by professors of philosophy or sociology. If students do not wish to take a course on religion, they may take the third option, Classical Culture in European Civilization.

All 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 may approve or deny them the right to conduct religious work within the country. Work visas are valid for six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent visa renewals are valid for one year. There is no limit to the number of visa renewals for which a religious worker may apply. Clergy and religious workers from unregistered groups are eligible for visas.

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

Government Practices

On May 29, the EC released its 2019 report on the country, which called on the government to implement earlier ECHR rulings to respect the rights of the OAO and the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community. In 2017, following appeals by the two groups, the ECHR had ruled the government violated the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (the Convention) by rejecting the OAO’s earlier application for religious

group status. In 2018, the ECHR made a similar ruling regarding the Bektashi (Tetovo). The 2019 EC report welcomed the government’s decision to reopen registration proceedings and ensure redress for both groups, in compliance with the Convention.

In October the government paid the OAO 9,500 euros (\$10,700) in compensation for damages and court fees as required by the 2017 ECHR ruling. OAO authorities stated the government refused to register the group, interfered in the work of the judiciary in cases involving the OAO, and exerted pressure on the OAO to reapply for registration under a new name. The OAO cited a letter from Skopje Basic Court II in February requesting the OAO change its name because the court could not differentiate it from the MOC-OA. At year’s end, the OAO’s 2009 registration application, without a name change, remained pending with Skopje Basic Court II.

In June the government paid the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community 7,000 euros (\$7,900) for damages and court fees as required by the 2018 ECHR ruling, but took no further action. The group’s 2010 registration application remained pending with Skopje Basic Court II at year’s end.

During the year, Skopje Basic Court II received no new registration applications. The court approved in July a 2018 request from the Gospel of Christ Church to change its registration from community to group. The Community of Muslims, which had been rejected for registration in 2016, withdrew its renewed application in April without giving an explanation.

The OAO and the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community said that, as unregistered communities, they continued to face discrimination and intimidation, such as lack of tax-exempt status, the inability to organize their own schools, and disparaging comments about them in the media. The OAO continued to accuse the government of bias against it and of failure to respect domestic and international law. For the eighth year, the Bektashi (Tetovo) reported to police harassment by individuals occupying the Harabati Baba Teqe compound in Tetovo as part of an ongoing property dispute with the IRC. Police were still investigating at year’s end.

In May the Bektashi (Tetovo) condemned the appropriation by the IRC of a parcel of land adjacent to the Harabati Baba Teqe compound. Bektashi (Tetovo) leader Arben Sulejmani stated the government had deprived it of property by not allowing the group to register as a religious entity, despite the favorable 2018 ECHR ruling. The IRC-affiliated Mufti of Tetovo announced in May the construction of two marketplaces on the parcel and stated the government recognized the land as Waqf (Islamic religious property) in 2017 and restituted it in 2018.

On April 17, Skopje Basic Court II approved the request of Skender Buzaku to make him the official leader of the IRC. The IRC dismissed Buzaku as leader in 2015. In his request, Buzaku said an extraordinary session of the IRC Assembly in March elected him following the “irrevocable resignation” of Reis Sulejman Rexhepi as IRC leader. According to the IRC, no such extraordinary session took place. The IRC leadership challenged the court decision at the Skopje Appellate Court, stating the Basic Court’s ruling was based on forged documents using IRC seals stolen in 2015. On October 3, the Skopje Appellate Court voided the ruling of Skopje Basic Court II and remanded the case to that court. On October 4, Skopje Basic Court II reversed its previous ruling, stating Buzaku did not meet the minimum age requirement to become leader of the IRC and confirming Rexhepi as leader. In April the IRC filed a criminal complaint against Buzaku, stating Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski supported him. Both officials and CRRCG Director Darijan Sotirovski denied government involvement. During a press conference in October, Buzaku accused Rexhepi of embezzlement and money laundering. The IRC filed slander charges against Buzaku the next day.

The IRC again stated the government had restored less than 30 percent of property the state seized before gaining independence in 1991. The Husamedin Pasha Mosque in Shtip, nationalized in 1955, remained in dispute. According to IRC leaders, police blocked the mosque entrance and harassed janitorial staff, preventing the facility’s upkeep and the IRC from hosting events and blocking it from regaining rightful ownership of the mosque complex.

The IRC stated the government continued to deny a construction permit for a mosque in the ethnically mixed village of Lazhec due to pressure from residents. The IRC also said the government continued to deny a permit for reconstruction of the mosque in Prilep, considering it a cultural monument under government, not IRC jurisdiction. In April, with financial support from the Turkish government, the IRC commenced reconstruction of the Ali Pasha Mosque in Ohrid. The municipality issued the permit after a yearlong delay, reportedly due in part to public opposition to the height of the minaret, and the mosque was reopened in November.

In March IRC head Rexhepi said the government favored the MOC-OA by granting it unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge, and funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches.

In September an organization of Vlachs in Bitola said the government transferred ownership of the historic Vlach-built Saint Konstantin and Elena Church in 2016 to the MOC-OA without the community’s consent, depriving the organization of its rightful ownership of the church.

The MOC-OA stated the Municipality of Struga had still not ruled on an application, pending since 2013, for construction of an Orthodox church in the village of Oktisi.

Smaller religious groups continued to state the government treated them unequally, and favored the religious groups listed in the constitution over others. They said Prime Minister Zaev, President Stevo Pendarovski, and other government officials often met only with the five constitutionally recognized groups.

Some religious groups, parents, and Ministry of Education officials stated the Orthodox priests and imams hired to teach the required nondenominational introduction courses on religion and ethics often emphasize the practice of their religions instead of presenting a neutral overview of different faiths.

At the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Plenary Session in Luxembourg on December 5, the IHRA accepted North Macedonia’s request to elevate its status from observer to liaison, the first step to becoming a full member.

In March the Ministry of Education and the Institute for the Cultural and Spiritual Heritage of the Albanians opened a Holocaust Education and Research Department. The department’s stated goals are to defend religious freedom, promote respect for religious diversity, and encourage interfaith cooperation as a means of combating anti-Semitism.

The CRRCG reported it issued letters of consent and visas to all foreign missionaries and clerics who submitted requests for religious work during the year.

The government did not fund travel of registered religious groups for religious reasons but facilitated some travel procedures through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This included obtaining Saudi visas free of charge for the Hajj and working directly with the Saudi government, since there is no Saudi embassy in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In September, according to Professor Branko Sinadinovski, founder of the Religious Community of Orthodox Albanians, unknown individuals attempted to assault him in front of his home in Skopje. Police intervened to stop the attack. Sinadinovski said he had been targeted several times before (he was assaulted in 2018), and his life was under threat because he had publicly declared himself an Orthodox Albanian. Sinadinovski said he attributed the September incident to lack of effective action by the Ministry of Interior following the previous attack against him.

The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community continued to dispute the IRC’s claims to full ownership of, and plans to renovate with Turkish assistance, the Harabati Baba Teqe complex that the Bektashi (Tetovo) used as a headquarters. Bektashi representatives continued to express concerns that the renovation of the complex would displace them from the compound entirely. The Bektashi could not assert a claim of ownership to the compound because they remained unregistered. At year’s end, the renovation project remained pending until completion of feasibility studies.

In March police filed charges against an individual, identified as K.D., for painting a swastika on the former Bulgarian police station, now a memorial museum of the uprising against fascism, and other buildings in Prilep, under the section of the criminal code for “damage or destruction of protected objects, cultural heritage or natural rarities.” Because the perpetrator was a minor, he was released with a warning.

Police identified and charged six persons with acts of theft, arson, or vandalism against religious targets during the year, compared to one in 2018. The six were in the court process at the end of the year. MOC-OA reported 13 acts of theft of icons, altar decorations, or money in Orthodox churches, and the government reported two incidents of vandalism against Orthodox cemeteries, compared with 26 acts of theft or vandalism of Orthodox sites the previous year. The government also reported one theft in a mosque.

In January unknown persons attempted to set fire to the Evangelical church in the village of Cheflik, in Cheshinovo-Obleshevo Municipality. At year’s end, police had not charged any suspects.

In March a tomb in the yard of an Orthodox church was vandalized in the village of Vapila, Ohrid Municipality. In April unknown persons vandalized the Orthodox cemetery in the village of Brnjarci, Gazi Baba Municipality. By year’s end, police did not identify suspects in either incident.

In December the Helsinki Committee in the country registered eight incidents of hate speech with a religious component during the year. In one case in November, an individual posted threats against members of the OAO on the “Free Orthodoxy” website, calling for their “collective and brutal extermination.”

The Holocaust Fund, an NGO, continued to work with the Ministry of Education on a project to train teachers to teach secondary school students about the Holocaust and Jewish history.

In March the Holocaust Memorial Center officially opened its multimillion dollar permanent exhibition, commemorating North Macedonia’s Jewish population and the 7,148 Jews sent to the Treblinka death camp during World War II. As in previous years, the Center conducted Holocaust education programs in partnership with the Ministry of Education.

In May Pope Francis visited Skopje and met with then-president Gjorge Ivanov and other political leaders, civil society, religious leaders, and youth. He visited the Mother Theresa Memorial and celebrated a Mass for approximately 15,000 persons. Pope Francis praised the harmony between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the country and the welcome it had extended to refugees from the Middle East. He said the country’s example showed peaceful coexistence was possible amid rich diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy and U.S. government officials engaged with government representatives, including Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski, Minister of Justice Renata Deskoska, and Deputy Prime Minister for European Union Affairs Bujar Osmani to discuss issues of religious freedom and tolerance, including improved interfaith cooperation and governmental respect for and equal treatment of faith groups. The Ambassador also discussed with religious leaders interfaith tolerance and the importance of open dialogue with faith groups.

The Secretary of State met with MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan and two bishops from the MOC-OA during an October visit to the country.

Embassy officials met with IRC leader Rexhepi and Archbishop Stefan to discuss religious freedom issues, including charges of religious groups’ interference in judicial cases (such as on the IRC leadership) and in elections, and government favoritism toward certain religious groups.

Embassy officials also met with representatives from a variety of minority religious groups, including the Bektashi, Jews, and Christian minority denominations, and with NGOs concerned with religious freedom.

The embassy funded the participation of three teachers in an international summer academy in Berlin which focused on Holocaust education and 20th century Jewish history, among other topics.

Partnering with the Holocaust Fund, the embassy also provided the expenses for 40 teachers from the Western Balkans (30 from North Macedonia and 10 from Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) to attend a seminar in Skopje on interfaith relations in October. The seminar included history lectures, workshops on creating curricula and cross-cultural projects and visits to the oldest synagogue outside of Israel at the archeological site of Stobi, and to the permanent exhibition of the Holocaust Memorial Center.

In October the embassy sponsored the visit by eight religious and civil society leaders to the United States to participate in a program where they met with thought leaders to discuss religious freedom, religious diversity, the protection of cultural heritage, and the role of religious narratives. The group included representatives of the MOC-OA and IRC, the Jewish and Bektashi communities, the Evangelical Methodists and civil society.

The embassy posted 14 messages on social media regarding religious freedom reaching more than 70,000 followers. Topics included the Secretary of State’s messages on the importance of protecting religious freedom and marking the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

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