



Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	152
Land:	Kroatien
Kilde:	U.S. Department of State
Titel:	"International Religious Freedom Report 2005"
Udgivet:	8. november 2005
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. januar 2006



Croatia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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 close relationship with the State not shared by other religious groups. The legal position of most major religious communities has improved due to agreements with the State, which grant 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 coalition Government that took power in 2003 has 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 were victimized by the ethnic conflicts that led to the breakup of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. There were sporadic reports of intimidation and vandalism, particularly in the war-affected areas, directed against Serbian Orthodox clergy and property, although there was a decrease in severity and frequency of such attacks.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials frequently met with representatives of religious and ethnic minority communities and with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 21,831 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 Asian religions. A variety of missionaries are present, 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 Campus Crusade 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, Islamic community, and other smaller Christian denominations that have signed agreements with the State, receive some state support.

The Law on Legal Status of Religious Communities broadly defines religious communities' legal positions 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 considered the law an improvement over the previous state of affairs. 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 2002.

In 2003, 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 six months. The new regulation stipulates that to register, a religious community must have at least 500 believers and must be registered as an association for five years. All religious communities in the country prior to passage of the law are being registered without conditions; religious communities that are new to the country since passage of the law will need to fulfill the requirements for the minimum number of believers and time registered as an association. By mid 2003, approximately 40 religious communities had been registered. Registered religious communities are granted the status of a "legal person" and enjoy tax and other benefits under the Law on Religious Communities. Religious communities that are based abroad need to submit written permission for registration from their country of origin. The Helsinki Commission reported on conditions to register new religious communities, but prominent human rights organizations including the Croatian Helsinki Committee considered the requirements well within OSCE standards and granting them "privileges that were more than sufficient." No specific licensing is required for foreign missionaries.

In line with the Concordats signed with the Catholic Church and in an effort to define their rights and privileges within a legal framework, agreements have been signed with the following religious communities: the Serbian Orthodox Church and Islamic Community (2002); the Evangelical Church, Reformed Christian Church, Pentecostal Church, Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, Christian Adventist Church, Union of Baptist Churches, Church of God, Church of Christ, and the Reformed Movement of Seventh-Day Adventists (2003); and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Macedonian Orthodox Church, and Croatian Old Catholic Church (2003). In addition, in 2003, the Government adopted unilaterally an agreement with the Jewish Community of Zagreb, which refused to sign the agreement because of lack of sufficient progress on property restitution issues. The Government's general approach is to negotiate agreements with individual religious communities based on a common framework rather than set uniform, nondiscriminatory standards and practices. Leaders of non-Roman Catholic religions have expressed general satisfaction with the communication they have with the Government, most notably with the Government Commission on Relations with Religious Communities, chaired by the Minister of Culture.

An agreement between the Roman Catholic Church and the state-run Croatian State Radio and Television (HRT) provides regular, extensive coverage of Roman Catholic events (as many as 10 hours per month). Other religious communities receive approximately 10 minutes broadcast time per month or less. The Roman Catholic Church operates one of the country's private national radio stations, Catholic Radio, which is financed by private contributions. There are no restrictions on religious broadcasting. Topics of interest to major non-Roman Catholic religious groups are covered regularly on weekly religious programming on HRT. The Roman Catholic Church on several occasions reacted to its treatment in the media. In April 2004, the Zagreb Auxiliary Bishop Vlado Koscic, who presides over the Bishops' Conference's "Justitia et Pax" Commission, wrote to CNN requesting an apology for comments about the beatified Croatian Cardinal Stepinac, made during the funeral of Pope John-Paul II. CNN had reported that many perceived Stepinac as close to the country's WWII Nazi puppet regime. CNN denied the request, claiming that no explicit accusations against Stepinac were made and that they merely reported about his life. In November 2004, Christian youth associations protested against a satirical cartoon series critical of the Roman Catholic Church that is broadcast by Croatian national television. In May 2005, the Catholic Radio Marija Association collected more than 40,000 signatures requesting that the series be removed, and sent an open letter to the OSCE disagreeing with the organization's view that the program was an expression of civic and media freedoms. The Islamic community's Bairam ceremony, usually attended by high-level government officials, is telecast live annually from the Zagreb Mosque. The Islamic community credits the monthly TV broadcast "Ekumena" for contributing significantly to an atmosphere of greater tolerance.

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.

Muslims have the right to observe their religious holy days. 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. The concordats and the other agreements with non-Catholic religious communities allow state financing for some salaries and pensions for priests and nuns through government-managed pension and health funds.

The concordats also regulate recognition of marriages, public school catechisms, and military chaplains. The Ministry of Defense employs 15 full-time and 4 part-time Catholic priests and chaplains. After the Government signed an agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church, five Orthodox priests began service in prisons and penitentiaries; the Islamic Community has deployed one imam in the same service. In May 2005, the Government signed a protocol with the Islamic community that guarantees that armed forces' members and recruits of the Muslim faith have regular access to chaplains, are provided with halal meals, and are excused from duty during major holidays.

Marriages conducted by the 15 religious communities that have agreements with the State are officially recognized, eliminating the need to register the marriages in the civil registry office.

Facilitating the return of refugees (primarily ethnic Serbs) is a challenge for the Government, which has made progress in a number of areas relating to returns. However, some ethnic Serbs who wish to return to the country, including Serbian Orthodox clergy, continue to encounter difficulties or delays in reconstructing damaged or destroyed houses. Serbian Orthodox officials report that in the aftermath of the 1991-1995 war, the number of clergy had been reduced to 30 out of the approximately 200 clergy who resided in the country prior to the war. An additional 40 clergy have returned, raising the total to approximately 70 Serbian Orthodox clergy by May 2004. More than a dozen new priests, mostly from Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro, came to the country in the past year and the rising number was partly due to the increase in Serb returnees. Orthodox Church sources complain that the new priests must renew their working permits and residency status at relatively short intervals ranging from every three months to one year and that the lack of a more permanent status deprives them and their family members of health care benefits and pensions. The Church plans to officially request a more favorable application of regulations related to residency status for clergy according to models in the European Union. While religion and ethnicity are closely linked in society, the majority of incidents of discrimination are motivated by ethnicity rather than religion or religious doctrine. A pattern of open discrimination continues against ethnic Serbs, and, at times, other minorities in a number of areas, including the administration of justice, employment, and housing.

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 teaching offered in public schools. Schools that meet the necessary quota of seven students of a minority faith per class permitted separate religion classes to be held 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. In 2003, government officials estimated that 4,500 primary and secondary school children in 37 schools attended Serbian Orthodox religion classes, the majority of which are in Eastern Slavonia, Rijeka, and Gorski Kotar. After initial resistance, principals in two schools in Knin in September 2005 permitted Serbian Orthodox religion classes for the approximately 500 primary and secondary school children eligible to attend. Similar resistance by local school boards to establishing Serbian Orthodox religion classes in schools continued in Imotski and Skradin. In the mainly Serb-populated Donji Lapac, the school principal banned the Orthodox clergy from organizing religious classes for some 30 interested children. Serbian Orthodox officials reported that many school children and their parents are reluctant to identify themselves as Serbian Orthodox to avoid being singled out. Similarly, the Orthodox clergy noted that children in the Karlovac area were reluctant to openly attend their religious education, for fear of being ostracized.

There has been almost no textbook or curriculum reform since independence in 1991. Members of the Jewish community have remarked that basic information about Judaism provided to students was inaccurate. In September 2003, the Jewish Community of Zagreb opened the first private Jewish elementary school in the country. In January 2004, the Government recognized Holocaust Remembrance Day with seminars and commemorative events.

The secondary school operated by the Islamic Community for religious training is at full capacity (102 students); the community plans to convert the school gradually into a more general secondary school while at the same time developing an institution of higher education specifically for religious training. In October 2005, it plans to open a Faculty of Islamic Studies at the Zagreb mosque, which will educate both clergy and laity and provide training for religious teachers in the schools. An expected 30 students will enroll in the fall 2005. The Minister of Culture in charge of relations with religious communities has expressed support for the project. Authorities representing the Islamic community continued to report good cooperation and dialogue with the Government. The Roman Catholic Church intends to establish a university in Zagreb and the project is in initial planning stages.

Restitution of property nationalized or confiscated by the Yugoslav Communist regime remains a problem. Many religious communities identify property return as their top priority and complain about the lack of progress. A 1998 concordat with the Vatican provided for the return of all Roman 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 2003, the Roman Catholic Church submitted a list of priority properties for restitution 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. Catholic Church officials reported the return of a few properties over the last year. In late 2004, the Church reported the return of a convent building on

the island of Losinj and most of the island of Badija belonging to a Franciscan monastery. The Government signed, at the end of the year, a decision to return to the Catholic Church all forest or agricultural land that is not involved in property disputes. Also, the Government completed an exchange contract for a hospital in Osijek that had belonged to the Church. A suitable property for exchange still needs to be identified. A similar exchange process was begun for a property in Rijeka. While in total an estimated 15 percent of all Church properties have been returned, the Church expressed satisfaction with the Government's work on the issue.

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-Roman Catholic religious groups. The Serbian Orthodox community, the second largest claimant of property in the country, reported that its joint restitution sub-commission with the Government had not convened during the year, despite repeated requests. It reported that restitution in 2004 was minimal and that only 10 percent of the claimed property has been returned to date. The only significant restitution was that of the building in Karlovac in July 2004, which houses county offices. Also in Karlovac eparchy, a small plot of forested land was returned to the Gomirje monastery. Two apartments in the center of Zagreb were returned to the community at the end of the year along with one flat each in Zadar and Sibenik. According to Church sources, reconstruction of 25 churches damaged in the war has been halted for which the previous Government completed project documentation. Reconstruction of two smaller religious buildings in Mali Zdenci and Grubisno Polje were either completed or initiated during the year. The Ministry of Reconstruction set aside funds to tear down and then rebuild the severely damaged Orthodox Church in the center of Karlovac. Overall, sources in the Serbian Orthodox Church consider that the current Government has been slow to follow through on its commitments. During the year the Church took legal action against current owners of 40 previously- church-owned and then nationalized flats in Zagreb, to prevent further sale. Several buildings in downtown Zagreb have not been returned, nor have properties that belonged to monasteries, such as arable land and forests. Serbian Orthodox authorities report that in Pakrac and other war-affected areas of Dalmatia and Eastern Slavonia, there has been almost no property returned; overall they estimate that progress has stalled in the past year.

Several Jewish properties, including some Zagreb buildings, have not been returned. The process of returning nationalized property to the Jewish community in Zagreb is at a near-standstill. There has been no progress on the restitution of the Chevra Kadisha building in Zagreb previously owned by the Jewish community. The Jewish community of Osijek reported some progress on the return of property in Osijek and Vukovar; in 2004, the property on which the former synagogue of Vukovar stood was returned. Other claims remain stalled in court.

The Muslim community has no property claims, but it complained that local authorities in Rijeka have stalled the procedure to approve the detailed environmental plan, the last administrative step before they can build a mosque. 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. Officials within the Islamic community earlier reported a supportive attitude on the part of local authorities. The community is now concerned that local pressure from war veterans associations who have publicly opposed the project will lead to further delays.

Generally, anti-Semitism was not an issue; however in June, a member of the municipal council in Dubrovnik commented on a potential Jewish hotel investor that when "choosing between Serbs and Jews, Jews were still a greater evil." Local authorities and the Government condemned the comments; however, the local branch of the ruling HDZ party took no disciplinary action against the party member. In April 2005, the Jewish community and some international organizations received a threatening, anti-Semitic letter. Police investigated but have identified no suspects.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Religion and ethnicity are closely linked in society, and religion often was used historically to identify non-Croats and single them out for discriminatory practices. This link led to the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s and to the perpetration of violence and intimidation against religious persons, institutions, and symbols of all faiths. Such incidents still occur, primarily directed against Serbian Orthodox clergy and property, although there was a decrease in severity and frequency.

During the period covered by this report, both international observers and religious leaders noted that overall ethnic and religious relations improved. However, incidents involving harassment of clergy and desecration and vandalism of Serbian Orthodox Church property continued to occur sporadically. In Dalmatia, Serbian Orthodox officials reported numerous incidents of verbal threats and isolated physical attacks against clergy and property. Serbian Orthodox officials complain that local police seldom take action against alleged perpetrators.

In Slavonia, verbal abuse continued against the Orthodox religion and priests in the Daruvar area, but they were not reported to the police. In May 2005, unknown perpetrators stole cash from an Orthodox church in Daruvar and toppled the stone cross that leaned against the church wall.

An Orthodox chapel was set alight at the cemetery in Osijek in April 2005; police investigated but there were no reports about its findings by the end of the period covered in this report.

Dalmatian hinterlands remained the area with the greatest frequency of reported incidents against both Orthodox Church property and clergy. The St. Pokrov church in Knin was broken into on two occasions, most recently July 2004 and offensive graffiti appeared on its walls. Church sources claimed that the perpetrators are known but that no legal action was taken against them. Windows in the church building in Vrljka were smashed upon the arrival of the new priest in August; the municipality covered the costs of their repair. The church in the village of Dicmo was broken into in June and in October 2004, and an old tree by its front door was cut down. Burglary attempts occurred in October at the church in Ubli and at the parish priest's home in Imotski. The police regularly investigated but never identified the perpetrators.

In July 2004, Orthodox parish priests in Sibenik and Zadar were harassed in the city streets and complained of insufficient police response. In August 2005, unidentified perpetrators overturned five tombstones at an Orthodox cemetery in Podum. In September 2005, a fascist Ustasha symbol was sprayed on the new door to the church in Kistanje. Police identified no suspects. In Knin, individuals on several occasions, including in September 2004, shouted phrases such as "Kill the Serb" at the Orthodox clergy outside the church of St. Pokrov, but police reportedly declined to take action.

In December 2004, a group of football fans entered the Orthodox bishop's courtyard in Sibenik shouting abuse. The police questioned the bishop but there was no action against the individuals.

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 2004, a Muslim flag was burned at the entrance to the Muslim cemetery in Osijek. In July 2004, unknown perpetrators desecrated 24 tombs at the same cemetery, setting fire to wreaths on the grave of the recently deceased wife of the local imam, and spraying swastikas and fascist messages on 24 graves. Police investigated; preliminary indications were that a group of local youths was behind the incident.

Relations between the Government and the Jewish community have steadily improved over the past several years. In 2003, Israeli President Moshe Katsav visited the country for 3 days on an official visit. In January 2005, President Stjepan Mesic visited Israel. In March 2005, the President visited Yad Vashem memorial. In April 2005, several high-level officials, including Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, attended a commemoration ceremony at the Jasenovac concentration camp. The event was also attended by leaders of ethnic and religious minority communities. Preparations were under way to open an educational center by the end of the year at the Jasenovac Memorial Area for which the Government approved funding in May. The Memorial Center in March hosted a group of 60 Croatian history students, as part of their preparation for future teaching jobs. 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 a part would significantly affect the community's financial well-being.

While the Roman Catholic Church officially seeks no role in political life, conservative elements within the Catholic hierarchy have expressed dissatisfaction with government policies on war legacy issues, including cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY), and concern for citizens indicted for war crimes. Popular priest Zlatko Sudac attracted attention in March when he publicly invited Croatian general Ante Gotovina--indicted for war crimes by the ICTY--not to surrender to the Tribunal. The Croatian Bishop's Conference promptly responded that his statement was not an official position of the Church.

On Easter, Cardinal Josip Bozanic delivered a notable sermon discussing the country's integration into the European Union and cooperation with ICTY, calling on Croatians to examine themselves rather than blame international institutions for their problems. He also called on citizens to respect and utilize international institutions and the legal system to further the country's cause, rather than denigrate them. In May, the Bishops' Conference invited PM Sanader to speak to the group about EU integration and the role of the Church.

According to the results of a survey published in May by the international research agency GFK Marketing Research Center, citizens place the most trust in the Catholic Church, the Croatian President, and persons close to them, as opposed to the government, judiciary and political parties, which occupy the opposite end of the scale. According to the same survey, the high level of trust has remained unchanged for over the past five years.

The Catholic Church exercised considerable influence over the Government's social policies. For example, in January 2005 and in spring 2004 the church publicly criticized the international Global Fund's MEMOIDS educational program, designed to raise AIDS awareness in secondary schools. The three-year program was approved by the Ministry of Health in 2003 and supported by the Education Ministry. The Church objected to the mention of the use of condoms in the program, stating that it encouraged promiscuity. After the criticism, which coincided with the change in government, the relevant ministries failed to make timely statements in support of the program, which seriously decreased the interest of schools in its application. In late 2003 Caritas, the largest Catholic Church charity in the country, campaigned for legislation based on the church/state concordats that would ban most retail stores from opening on Sundays. A law restricting business activities on Sundays was enacted in January 2004; however, the Constitutional Court overturned the law in April 2004 after major retailers appealed the law citing financial losses.

Since Cardinal Bozanic took office as Archbishop of Zagreb in 1997 and became head of the Bishop's Conference, the Catholic Church leadership has sought a more proactive role in advocating reconciliation. 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. In late 2004, the three largest religions jointly declared their opposition to legalized abortion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom and actively works to encourage the Government to respect religious freedom in practice. U.S. Embassy officials met frequently at all levels with representatives of religious communities and minority groups and engaged in the promotion of human rights, including the religious rights of these groups.

The Embassy played a leading role among diplomatic missions on issues of ethnic and religious reconciliation, and human rights. For example, on several occasions the Embassy advocated formally and informally for the granting of citizenship to ethnic Bosniaks--largely members of the Muslim faith--who were denied citizenship for more than a decade. This advocacy took place over several years and consisted of formal meetings with Ministry of Interior and local authorities, frequent visits to the community, as well as direct financial support through the Embassy to the Muslim community for organizing their legal effort. In May 2005, the Croatian Government granted citizenship to members of the community.

The U.S. Government has supported several programs to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In 2004, the Embassy supported the construction of an inter-ethnic, inter-religious seniors' home in an ethnically-mixed community near the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Embassy organized the visit of a U.S. university lecturer to speak about contemporary trends in Islamic understanding, Islamic thought, and Muslims in the U.S., and to encourage interfaith tolerance. The Embassy also was involved in the selection and support of two high school history teachers to participate in a seminar on Holocaust teacher training hosted by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and other museums and study centers.

During the period covered by this report, Phase II of the International Partnership among Museums (IPAM) was implemented between USHMM and the Jasenovac Memorial Area. (IPAM is a State Department-administered international museum exchange program in collaboration with the American Association of Museums). The partnership's previous work in Phase I concentrated on technical expertise exchange, such as preserving and managing collections, developing a joint web site, and conducting research. Phase II concentrated on efforts to educate the Croatian public about the Holocaust and the history of the Jasenovac concentration camp. Activities consisted primarily of personnel and expertise exchanges, both in person and electronically. The U.S. is supporting the development of a Holocaust Education Center at Jasenovac Memorial, through the expertise of the USHMM. The education center will provide workshops for student tour groups.

In January 2005, the USHMM participated in a Ministry of Education seminar for history teachers on learning and teaching the Holocaust. In addition, the Embassy is funding the translation and printing of a USHMM handbook on teaching about the Holocaust. The project commenced in 2004 and will be completed in 2005, when the handbooks will be distributed in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and with the Jasenovac memorial area.

Released on November 8, 2005

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