

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

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MOLDOVA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, a 1992 law on religion that codifies religious freedoms contains restrictions that could--and in some instances did--inhibit the activities of some religious groups. The law provides for freedom of religious practice, including each person's right to profess his religion in any form. It also protects the confidentiality of the confessional, allows denominations to establish associations and foundations, and states that the Government may not interfere in the religious activities of denominations. However, the law prohibits abusive proselytizing and requires that religious groups register with the Government.

The procedures for registering a religious organization are the same for all groups. The Government has recognized 20 religious organizations. Thus far only 2 organizations have been denied recognition. One of these, the Bessarabian Orthodox Church was not registered by the Government but is involved in ongoing litigation over this issue. The other, the Salvation Army, which had been unable to register earlier because it did not meet the requirement of having a citizen as the organization's legal head, was registered in October 1998. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is in the registration process.

The Government denied recognition to the Bessarabian Orthodox Church in October 1992, March 1996, August 1996, and March 1997. The Bessarabian Orthodox Church was formed in 1992 when a number of priests broke away from the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. The Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which sees itself as the legal and canonical successor to the pre-World War II Romanian Orthodox Church in Bessarabia (the part of Moldova between the Nistru and Prut Rivers) subordinated itself to the Bucharest Patriarchate of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The Government consistently has refused to register the Bessarabian Church, citing unresolved property claims as the principal reason. The issue has political overtones as well, since it raises the question whether the Orthodox Church should be united and oriented toward Moscow, or divided with a branch oriented toward Bucharest. (Leaders of the Moldovan Orthodox Church appear more interested in independence than in links to Moscow.) In 1997 the Supreme Court overturned an appeals court decision affirming the right of the Bessarabian Church to be registered. However, the Supreme Court's decision was based on a procedural issue rather than the merits of the case. The Bessarabian Church appealed the case to the European Court in June 1998. There had been no decision by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Moldovan Orthodox Church is the predominant religion and sometimes is favored over other religious groups. The most visible area of favoritism is the restitution of property expropriated during the successive Nazi and Soviet regimes. The Church had little difficulty in recovering its property and, in cases where property was destroyed, the Government offered alternative compensation. High ranking church officials also reportedly have diplomatic passports issued by the Government.

Over 90 percent of the population nominally belong to the Orthodox Church (with the Moldovan Church claiming close to 1,000 parishes and the Bessarabian Church claiming close to 100). Followers of the Old Russian Orthodox Church (Old Believers) make up approximately 3.6 percent of the population. Other registered groups include: Roman Catholics; Baptists; Pentecostals; Seventh-Day Adventists; Jehovah's Witnesses; Bahá'ís; and Hare Krishnas. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has one congregation. The Jewish community has approximately 60,000 members, with about 45,000 living in Chisinau. There are 9 synagogues in Chisinau, Balti, Tiraspol, and Bender, about 5,000 persons celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

The law on religion as amended to legalize proselytizing-- in principle bringing the legislation in line with the European Convention on Human Rights--went into effect in June 1999. However, the law explicitly forbids "abusive proselytizing." Abusive is defined as "an attempt to influence someone's religious faith through violence or abuse of authority." Although some Protestant denominations were concerned that the previous prohibition on proselytizing could inhibit their activities, the law was never enforced. They experience the same difficulties in getting residence permits and customs clearances as other foreign workers.

Foreign missionaries are allowed to enter the country and represent many faiths and denominations. Although the law on religion forbids abusive proselytizing, thus far authorities have not taken legal action against individuals for proselytizing.

The Government formally authorized religious instruction in public schools, but it had not been implemented at the end of the period covered by this report. There are two public schools and a kindergarten open only to Jewish students. These receive the same funding as the state schools, supplemented by financial support from the community. Jewish students are not restricted to these schools. There are no comparable schools for Moldovan Orthodox believers and no reports of such schools for other religious faiths. There is also a private yeshiva licensed by the Ministry of Education. There are a number of theological institutes, seminaries, and other places of religious education throughout the country.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

In January 1998, authorities in Transnistria (a separatist region not under the control of the Government) canceled the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses. Repeated attempts by Jehovah's Witnesses to reregister have been denied or delayed. Transnistrian officials confiscated a truckload of religious tracts in May 1997 and have refused to return them until the group is registered properly. According to local leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses, several members have been questioned by local security officers in Transnistria but always have been released within 1 hour. Baptist leaders have complained that they are not allowed to distribute religious literature or organize public meetings in Transnistria.

The law provides for restitution to politically repressed or exiled persons whose property was confiscated. This regulation has been extended in effect to religious communities. The Moldovan Orthodox Church has received restitution or compensation for nearly all of its prewar property that was expropriated. The Church has recovered churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and administrative properties. Property disputes between the Moldovan and Bessarabian Churches have not been resolved. The Jewish community has had mixed results in recovering its property, although there are nine synagogues throughout the country.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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

## **Section II. Societal Attitudes**

In general there are amicable relations between the various religious communities. The dispute between the Moldovan and Bessarabian Orthodox Churches is ongoing, but the members generally worship freely. No significant ecumenical movements or activities were reported.

In May 1999, a group of about 500 Orthodox Christians and from 4 to 6 priests attacked a small group of Baptists in the village of Mingir, injuring 3 and partially destroying a Baptist church that was under construction. The Baptists claimed that the village mayor was the leader of the group and was involved personally in the injuries and destruction, a charge the mayor denied. Someone in the crowd threw stones and hit a Baptist member who tried to photograph the incident. The Ministry of Internal Affairs is investigating the case. A spokesman for the Orthodox Church reportedly expressed regret for the act of violence but blamed it on "abusive proselytizing by the Baptist Church."

Tension between Eastern Orthodox supporters and Protestant groups spread to the 1998 parliamentary election campaign. During the parliamentary campaign, a number of newspaper articles attacked one party for including a Baptist minister on its list of candidates. These and other articles strongly criticized Protestantism and favored Orthodoxy. A senior member of the Orthodox hierarchy allegedly warned a party leader that the Church would destroy the party's election campaign if it did not remove the Baptist candidate. However, the minister gained a seat in Parliament.

In Chisinau in May 1998, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Moldova hosted a 2-day international seminar entitled "The Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in the Republic of Moldova." The Helsinki Committee also published a book in February 1999, reprinting the major international and national declarations, laws, and cases concerning religious freedom.

## **Section III. U.S. Government Policy**

The Department of State's Senior Advisor for Property Restitution visited in November 1998. He discussed this issue with a deputy prime minister, parliamentarians, other government officials, the Metropolitan of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, the Chief Rabbi of Moldova, and rabbis at the Yeshiva Agudath Israel. The Senior Advisor, Ambassador, and embassy officers have assisted Agudath

Israel in its negotiations with the Government to have the property where the yeshiva is operating fully restored to the Jewish community. Although previously threatened with eviction, the yeshiva was continuing operations at the end of the period covered by this report.

The Ambassador has met with the Metropolitan of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, the Chief Rabbi of Moldova, the head of the Moldovan Roman Catholic Church, and the head of the Salvation Army at various times during the period covered by this report. Embassy employees have met with leaders and members of most of the major religious groups, including the Bessarabian Orthodox Church. Embassy employees maintain official or social contact with most of the resident American missionaries. The Embassy has supported religious (and secular) groups that provide humanitarian assistance to the country.

In April 1999, the chief of the U.S. Military Liaison Team and two chaplains from the North Carolina Army National Guard met with a deputy minister of justice, an Orthodox priest, and two Baptist ministers to discuss a prison ministry program. The meeting was significant in that it showed the Government's respect for freedom of religion within the prison system and for interfaith dialog.

After the reported attack on a Baptist church construction site in Mingir (see Section II), a U.S. Embassy officer met with the head of the Union of Baptist Churches in Moldova. He then visited Mingir and met with the mayor and Baptist church members there. The officer also discussed the case with the chief of international relations at the Ministry of Interior, the director of the State Service for Religious Problems, and a member of the parliamentary human rights committee. In these meetings he expressed concern that this incident apparently violated international religious freedom, and he requested a full investigation, which was underway at the end of the period covered by this report.

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