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2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Croatia

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and makes incitement of religious hatred illegal. The government signed an agreement recognizing three Protestant churches, allowing them to operate schools and charitable organizations, and to receive funding from the government. The government announced plans to provide compensation for the nationalization of the Chevra Kadisha property, which had been seized from the Jewish community during World War II.

Serbian Orthodox Church representatives expressed concern over a perceived increase in societal intolerance, but reported fewer incidents of vandalism than in previous years. The Jewish and Islamic communities also reported incidents of vandalism. There were public protests in Zagreb and Osijek to demand the government cancel agreements with the Holy See, which the protesters said undermined Croatia's secular identity.

The U.S. embassy continued to encourage the government to restitute property seized during and after World War II, especially from the Jewish community, and to adopt a claims process for victims. The embassy also sponsored programs to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.5 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, approximately 86.3 percent of residents are Roman Catholic, 4.4 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 1.5 percent Muslim. Nearly 4 percent self-identify as nonreligious or atheist. Other religious groups include Jews, Protestants, and other Christians. According to the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia, the country's Jewish community numbers between 2,000 and 2,500. Religious affiliation correlates closely with ethnicity. Members of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), predominantly ethnic Serbs, live primarily in cities and areas bordering Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most members of other minority religious groups reside in urban areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and states that all religious communities are equal under the law. The constitution makes incitement of religious hatred illegal. Religious communities are free to publicly conduct religious services, operate schools, and operate charitable organizations.

There is no official state religion. The Catholic Church receives state financial support and other benefits established in four concordats between the government and the Holy See. These agreements allow state financing for salaries and pensions of some religious officials through government-managed pension and health funds. These agreements also stipulate state funding for religious education in public schools.

The law defines the legal position of religious communities and covers such matters as government funding and tax benefits. To obtain status as a religious community a religious group must have at least 500 members and be registered as an organization for at least five years. The state recognizes marriages conducted by registered religious communities, eliminating the need for civil registration. To be recognized legally, marriages by non-registered religious communities require civil registration. Non-registered religious communities also cannot conduct religious education in schools or access state funds in support of religious activities.

There are currently 44 registered religious communities, including Bet Israel (a Jewish group), the SOC, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Christian Adventist Church, the Church of Christ, the Church of God, the Coordination of Jewish Communities in Croatia, the Croatian Old Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church, the Islamic Community of Croatia, the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Reformed Christian Church, the Union of Baptist Churches, the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ.

On September 12, the government signed an agreement recognizing three Protestant churches: the Church of the Full Gospel; the Word of Life Alliance of Churches, and the Protestant Reformed Christian Church.

The government requires religious education be offered in public schools, although attendance is optional. The Roman Catholic catechism is the predominant religious text used. Sixteen additional religious groups may offer religious education in schools in which there are seven or more students of a given faith. Students may opt out of religious education if they wish without providing specific grounds.

Government Practices

According to the Government Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the Catholic Church received 292.2 million kuna (HRK) (\$47.5 million) in government funding during the year. Other religious institutions were offered government funding to support religious education in public schools (all offered on an opt-in basis), as well as the operation of private religious schools. The government provided approximately HRK 17 million (\$2.8 million) to these groups, with funds allocated to each religious group in proportion to its size.

On September 16, President Ivo Josipovic met with Metropolitan Porfirije Peric, the head of the SOC in Croatia following several incidents of vandalism. Josipovic stated his firm commitment to ensuring the SOC and its members enjoyed all rights and protections under Croatian law.

On December 3, the justice minister signed a contract finalizing the transfer of a former government building in central Zagreb to the Jewish Community of Zagreb (ZOZ). This transfer was made as compensation for the former headquarters of the ZOZ's Chevra Kadisha charity, which was initially seized by the Nazi-era Ustasha regime and subsequently nationalized by Yugoslav authorities. Other Jewish communal property claims, including properties which have been developed as vacation resorts in Crikvenica and in Ravna Gora, remained unresolved.

A number of property restitution cases involving the SOC remained unresolved. The restitution of 400 hectares (1000 acres) of land in Osijek County, roughly 40 percent of the SOC's claim, was postponed following an appeal by the Osijek municipal prosecutor on grounds that one part of the property was registered to a private individual and not to the SOC. Negotiations continued on former SOC properties in Vukovar and Vinkovci.

President Josipovic, Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic, and Parliament Speaker Josip Leko laid flowers in Zagreb's Victims of Fascism Square on January 27 to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day.

In May a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official publicly expressed concern over previous threats against employees of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum, which preserves the history of the World War II era Jasenovac concentration camp, where more than 83,000 Jews, Serbs, Roma, and Croatian opponents of the fascist regime were killed.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. SOC representatives in the Dalmatia region continued to express concern about a perceived increase in societal intolerance, attributed in part to protests around the placement of Cyrillic script signs in Vukovar.

Roughly 500 protesters rallied in Zagreb and Osijek in September, demanding the government cancel agreements with the Holy See, which protesters contended undermined the country's secular identity and the equality of all citizens, regardless of faith.

SOC members reported fewer cases of vandalism in comparison to previous years, but did not provide specifics. In January vandals damaged the Church of St. George in Knin for the seventh time. The Temple of St. Ilija in Devrska experienced a break-in in March. Vandals painted a swastika on the facade of an SOC temple in Vocin and spray-painted "CEDO" (a derogatory name for Serbs) on the facade of an SOC office in Pakrac. Two individuals faced charges for the theft of church bells in May from the Orthodox temples in Kosinj and Krs (Perusic).

The Jewish community in Split reported several graves in a Jewish cemetery were vandalized in April; the damage did not include anti-Semitic signs and the incident was classified as simple vandalism. The Jewish community in Zagreb received a number of threatening messages during the conflict in Gaza. In August the Jewish community's headquarters in Zagreb received an envelope containing rat poison and a message reading "for Jews and rats."

In September the Islamic community center in Dubrovnik was spray-painted with the Arabic letter "nun," replicating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's marking of Christian homes in Mosul, Iraq. In an open letter to Dubrovnik's Imam Heric, Bishop of Dubrovnik Mate Uzinic strongly condemned this act, expressed his solidarity with all Muslims in Dubrovnik, and called on police to find those culpable as soon as possible. A police investigation remained ongoing at year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff regularly discussed religious freedom issues with the representatives of the Government Office for Human Rights, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other officials, including concerns related to the status and treatment of religious minorities. The embassy and visiting officials from the Department of State encouraged the government to adopt measures for restitution of religious property seized during and after World War II that would unequivocally allow for foreign claims. Embassy engagement also focused on the restitution of Jewish properties such as cultural centers, synagogues, cemeteries, and private property, as well as creating a claims process for victims.

The embassy also discussed religious freedom issues with civil society organizations and representatives from the Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, and other religious communities, including concerns related to freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sport, the embassy provided funding for two high school teachers to visit the United States to participate in summer teacher training programs to improve Holocaust education. This annual program was jointly organized by the Department of State, the Association of Holocaust Organizations in New York, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.