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Croatia

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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 historic relationship with the State not shared by other denominations, and receives some state support.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and the democratic coalition Government continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Religion and ethnicity are linked closely in society. During the past 11 years, religious institutions of all faiths were victimized by the ethnic conflicts that led to the break up of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. Such violent incidents still occur, particularly in the Danubian region (Eastern Slavonia), where there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries.

The U.S. Government continues to encourage the Government to respect religious freedom in practice. U.S. Embassy officials frequently meet with representatives of religious and ethnic minority communities and with government officials to promote respect for religious freedom and protection of human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 21,829 square miles, and its population is approximately 4,381,000. 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 generally live in Serb areas, notably cities and the war-affected regions, and 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 Eastern religions. Missionaries from a number of different groups are present in the country, 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 the Campus Crusades 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 receives some state support.

At the end of the period covered by this report, the Government was working on a new law on religious communities, which was expected to be passed in the summer of 2002. While the original drafting was undertaken in consultation with representatives of several denominations, some religious leaders expressed concern about provisions later inserted into the text by the Government. Among other changes, the law is expected to institute Catholic catechism in kindergarten, as previously established in concordats with the Vatican but never implemented, create a definition of a "religious community," and regulate government funding and tax benefit entitlements to registered religious communities. The law is not expected to cover the most critical outstanding concern of most religious communities—the return of nationalized property. There was public concern that the Government's effort to define a "religious community" in the law would result in discrimination, particularly against smaller denominations, and that kindergarten catechism is being instituted in response to requests of the Catholic Church and over the objections of other denominations.

Representatives of minority religious communities indicate that the overall climate for religious freedom has improved moderately since the January 2000 election of a democratic coalition government. For example, leaders of the Islamic community expressed satisfaction with both the Government's approach

and media coverage of religious communities. While the new Government has expressed interest in eliminating religious discrimination, its approach is ad hoc, addressing specific issues (for example, the validity of religious marriage ceremonies) with individual religious communities, rather than setting uniform, nondiscriminatory standards and practices. Orthodox leaders also have expressed satisfaction with the communication and cooperation they have received from government officials, including the Deputy Prime Minister, who chairs the Government Commission for Relations with Religious Communities.

In 2000 the Catholic Church signed an agreement with the state-run Croatian State Radio and Television (HRT) to provide regular, extensive coverage of Catholic events (as many as 10 hours per month). Other denominations receive approximately 10 minutes broadcast time per month or less. The Catholic Church operates the country's only private national radio station, Catholic Radio, which is financed by private contributions. The Jewish community reports no restrictions on religious broadcasting. Jewish topics are covered periodically on weekly religious programming on HRT, for example, at times of Jewish holidays. The Muslim community has 4.5 minutes of radio broadcast time per month, as well as 4.5 minutes per month on Radio Zagreb. In addition, the Bairam ceremony from the Zagreb mosque is telecast annually.

Muslims have the right to observe their religious holidays. 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).

Missionaries do not operate registered schools, but the Mormon community provides free English lessons, which normally are followed by some sort of religious class. The Ministry of Education recognizes the diploma conferred by the Muslim community's secondary school in Zagreb. Enrollment in the school subsequently has increased by 50 percent. An estimated 4,000 primary and secondary school children in 35 schools in the Danubian region (Eastern Slavonia) attend Orthodox religion classes. The classes are led by 20 Orthodox priests and 4 laypersons. Orthodox officials organizing these classes stated that they cooperated well with the Ministry of Education, which organized a series of orientation seminars for the teachers.

The Government requires that religious training be provided in schools, although attendance is optional; however, in general, the lack of resources, minority students, and qualified teachers impeded instruction in minority faiths, and the Catholic catechism was the one predominantly offered.

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. There are no similar concordats established with other denominations. For example, the concordats allow state financing for some salaries and pensions for priests and nuns through the government-managed pension and health funds; Orthodox priests, rabbis, and imams must pay their contributions to the health and pension funds from their own resources in order to be covered by a pension plan. Other agreements with the Vatican regulate Catholic marriages, property restitution, public school catechism, and military chaplains. The Ministry of Defense employs 17 full-time and 6 part-time Catholic priests as chaplains.

Catholic marriages are recognized by the State, eliminating the need to register them in the civil registry office. The Muslim and Jewish communities, seeking similar status, have raised this issue repeatedly with the Government, but they had not received such status by the end of the period covered by this report.

Facilitating the return of refugees is a challenge for the Government, which has made progress in a number of areas relating to returns. However, many ethnic Serbs who wish to return to Croatia, including Serbian Orthodox clergy, continued to encounter difficulties recovering their prewar property and reconstructing damaged or destroyed houses. There were no reports of specific discrimination against Orthodox clergy beyond that faced by other ethnic Serb citizen refugees. Orthodox officials report that approximately 30 percent of prewar Orthodox clergy have returned to the war-affected areas, indicating that the proportion of returning clergy is somewhat greater than that of the general Serb population. Religion and ethnicity are linked closely in society, but the majority of incidents of discrimination are motivated by ethnicity rather than religion or religious doctrine. A pattern of often open and severe discrimination continues against ethnic Serbs, and, at times, other minorities in a wide number of areas, including the administration of justice, employment, housing, and freedom of movement. The previous government, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party, often maintained a double standard of treatment based on ethnicity; effects of this double standard continue.

The Government requires that religious training be provided in schools, although attendance is optional. Schools filling the necessary quota of seven minority students per class offered separate religion classes for the students. In classes not meeting the quota, minority students could fulfill the religion requirement by presenting a certificate that they had received classes from their religious community. Generally, the lack of resources, minority students, and qualified teachers impeded instruction in minority faiths, and the Catholic catechism is predominantly offered. Although religious training is not obligatory, in the past, some students reportedly felt pressured to participate. Jewish officials noted in 2001 that basic

information about Judaism provided to students was inaccurate. Since then several textbooks have been revised; however, Jewish leaders have not yet had an opportunity to review the new material.

Restitution of nationalized property remains a problem. Major religious communities identify property return as their top priority. The previous Government implemented property restitution in a discriminatory manner. A 1998 concordat with the Vatican provided for the return of all 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. There are no property restitution agreements between the Government and other religious groups. The Orthodox community has filed several requests for the return of seized properties, and some cases have been resolved successfully, particularly cases involving buildings in urban centers. However, several buildings in downtown Zagreb have not been returned, nor have properties that belonged to monasteries, such as arable land and forest. Such uneven progress may be the result of a slow judicial system rather than a systematic effort to deny restitution of Orthodox properties. Several Jewish properties, including some Zagreb buildings, have not been returned. The process of returning nationalized property to the Jewish community is at a near-standstill. There has been no progress on the restitution of the Haver Kadosh Building in Zagreb previously owned by a Jewish organization. In 2001 the Government failed to meet two court-mandated deadlines to enact amendments to the "Law on Compensation for Property Taken During Yugoslav Communist Rule" that were struck down by the Constitutional Court in 1999.

The World War II Jasenovac concentration camp, site of a memorial and museum, was damaged severely during the 1991-95 conflict, and renovation is ongoing. In April 2002, a government delegation, led by the Prime Minister, attended a commemoration ceremony at the camp that also was attended by several leaders of ethnic and religious minority communities.

In October 2001, President Stjepan Mesic visited Israel and apologized for persecution of Jews by the country's World War II fascist government. In January 2002, a Knesset Delegation visited the country, signaling improved ties between the two States.

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Religion and ethnicity are closely linked in society, and religion often was used to identify non-Croats and single them out for discriminatory practices. Such attitudes led to religious institutions being the target of violence. During the ethnic conflict of the past 11 years, religious institutions of all faiths have been targets of violence. Such incidents still occur, particularly in the tense Danubian region (Eastern Slavonia), in which there were persistent reports of vandalism directed against Serb Orthodox buildings and cemeteries. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) recorded 49 incidents of harassment or violence toward religious persons or sites during the period covered by this report, compared with 23 such incidents in the period covered by the previous report. Observers note that the majority of incidents go unreported, and that the apparent increase may be due to greater reporting rather than an increase in incidents. Both OSCE observers and religious leaders note that overall ethnic and religious relations are improving slowly. While there was no specific breakdown of these incidents by denomination, monitors reported that the majority were directed against the Serb Orthodox community, and that 26 were in the Danubian region (Eastern Slavonia). Incidents typically include disruption of religious services, harassment of clergy, and vandalism of cemeteries. In June 2002, 13 tombstones were damaged at an ethnic Serb military cemetery in Vukovar; in September 2002, tombstones at the same cemetery were damaged—marking the seventh such incident at the cemetery. In August 2002, fascist Ustasha symbols were painted on the Serb Orthodox church in the Dalmatian city of Split. Local observers believed the incident was related to the reopening of a nearby Orthodox chapel, which was reconstructed after 65 years. There were no arrests made in connection with any of these incidents. In September 2001 six Muslim tombstones in the old cemetery of Osijek were damaged. Two juveniles were arrested.

Conservative elements within the Catholic hierarchy have expressed dissatisfaction with government policies, including cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, and have expressed concern for citizens indicted for war crimes. In November 2001, the Catholic Bishops' Conference (HBK) issued a statement on the country's economic situation that was sharply critical of the Government. The statement, part of a longer-running dispute between the HBK and the coalition government, sparked great media controversy.

Since Catholic Archbishop of Zagreb Josip Bozanic took office in 1997 and became head of the HBK, the Catholic Church has sought a more proactive role in advocating reconciliation. Catholic Radio includes a monthly program on ecumenism, inviting speakers from other religious communities. Ecumenical efforts among the religious communities have developed in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. For example, religious leaders met frequently during the period covered by this report, both formally and informally, to develop suggestions for the government office drafting the religious

legislation and to discuss other issues of mutual interest.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government actively works to encourage the Government to respect religious freedom in practice. U.S. Embassy officials meet frequently at all levels with representatives of religious communities and are engaged in the promotion of human rights, including the religious rights of these groups. The Embassy is a leader of the "Article 11 Commission," a group of 24 international missions in the country that directly addresses issues of ethnic and religious reconciliation, and human rights.

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