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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Poland

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. It states religion is a personal choice, and all churches and religious organizations have equal rights. A concordat with the Holy See defines relations with the Roman Catholic Church. Statutes and agreements determine relations between the government and 14 other religious groups. The law prohibits public speech offensive to religious sentiment. In July, the government moved to invalidate the registration of the Reformed Catholic Church for recognizing same-sex marriage after registering the group earlier in the year. Municipal authorities in the town of Jaslo proceeded with construction of a road running through what the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries identified as a Jewish cemetery and, after uncovering several graves, exhumed the bodies and reburied them in another cemetery over the opposition of the commission. The government decided 22 religious communal-property restitution cases out of 2,938 outstanding cases, compared with 151 cases decided in 2019. During the national presidential campaign, President Andrzej Duda and governing Law and Justice Party (PiS) Chairman Jaroslaw Kaczynski, as well as opposition politicians, expressed opposition to restitution for Jewish heirless property claims arising from the Holocaust era. Government-controlled media used anti-Semitic rhetoric during the presidential campaign in the spring and summer. Some opposition parliamentarians made anti-Semitic comments during the year. Senior government officials participated in Holocaust remembrance events.

The government investigated 370 religiously motivated incidents in 2019 (the most recent data available), compared with 429 in the previous year. There were 182 anti-Semitic, 112 anti-Muslim, and 76 anti-Catholic incidents. Civil society groups said the figures were not comprehensive. Although statistics for 2020 were unavailable, there were reports of assault against Roman Catholic priests and vandalism against Roman Catholic and Jewish sites during the year. On October 25, abortion rights demonstrators disrupted masses and vandalized Catholic churches throughout the country following a ruling by the Constitutional Court that banned abortions in certain circumstances. Authorities recorded 22 cases of disruption of Mass and 79 of vandalism associated with the ruling. Online anti-Semitic speech continued, particularly during the presidential campaign.

The U.S. Ambassador, other embassy and consulate general staff, and visiting U.S. officials discussed with government officials antidiscrimination, the status of private property restitution, and countering anti-Semitism. In January, the Secretary of the Treasury led a U.S. government delegation to the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the U.S. Secretary of State announced a contribution of \$2 million to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation. In May, October, and December, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met virtually with representatives of the Jewish community, academics, and civil society activists to discuss anti-Semitism, Holocaust remembrance and education, and other issues of importance to the Jewish community. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general staff also met with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders to discuss property restitution, Holocaust remembrance and education, proposed legislation restricting religious slaughter, and the communities' concerns over intolerance, anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim sentiment. The embassy and the consulate general in Krakow engaged with Jewish and Muslim leaders on countering anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment and sponsored exchanges, roundtables, cultural events, and education grants promoting interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 38.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The 2020 Polish government statistical yearbook, which publishes the membership figures for religious groups that voluntarily submit the information for publication, reports almost 85 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic. The next largest religious groups are the Polish Orthodox Church, with approximately half a million members (religious groups report that the number of Orthodox worshippers doubled since 2014 as a result of an influx of migrant Ukrainian workers), and Jehovah's Witnesses, with approximately 116,000 members. Other religious groups include Lutherans, Pentecostals, the Old Catholic Mariavite Church, the Polish National Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Church of Christ, Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Buddhists. Some Jewish groups estimate there are 20,000 Jews, while other estimates, including by Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich, put the number as high as 40,000. Muslim groups estimate there are 25,000 Muslims, mostly Sunni. Approximately 10 percent of Muslims are ethnic Tatars, a group present in the country for several hundred years.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion. It states freedom of religion includes the freedom to profess or to accept a religion by personal choice as well as to manifest that religion, either individually or collectively, publicly or privately, by worshipping, praying, participating in ceremonies, performing rites, or teaching. It states freedom to express religion may be limited only by law when necessary to defend state security, public order, health, morals, or the rights of others. The constitution states, “Churches and other religious organizations shall have equal rights.” It stipulates the relationship between the state and churches and other religious organizations shall be based on the principle of respect for autonomy and mutual independence. The constitution specifies that relations with the Roman Catholic Church shall be determined by an international concordat concluded with the Holy See and by statute, and relations with other churches and religious organizations by statutes adopted pursuant to agreements between representatives of these groups and the Council of Ministers.

According to the constitution, freedom of religion also includes the right to own places of worship and to provide religious services. The constitution stipulates parents have the right to ensure their children receive a moral and religious upbringing and teaching in accordance with their convictions and their own religious and philosophical beliefs. It states religious organizations may teach their faith in schools if doing so does not infringe on the religious freedom of others. The constitution acknowledges the right of national and ethnic minorities to establish institutions designed to protect religious identity. The constitution prohibits parties and other organizations with programs based on Nazism or communism.

The criminal code outlaws public speech that offends religious sentiment. The law prescribes a fine, typically 5,000 zloty (\$1,300), or up to two years in prison for violations. The same penalties apply for malicious disruption of religious services.

By law, anyone who publicly assigns the “Polish state or nation” responsibility or joint responsibility for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich during World War II (WWII) may be sued by the Institute of National Remembrance and relevant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), fined, and/or forced to retract the offending statement and pay compensation to the state or a charity.

Specific legislation governs the relationship of 15 religious groups with the state, outlining the structure of that relationship and procedures for communal property restitution. The 15 religious groups are the Roman Catholic Church, Polish Orthodox Church, Evangelical-Augsburg (Lutheran) Church, Evangelical Reformed Church, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Polish National Catholic Church, Pentecostal Church, the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland, Mariavite Church, Old Catholic Mariavite Church, Old Eastern Orthodox Church, Muslim Religious Union, and Karaim Religious Union. Marriages performed by officials from 11 of these groups do not require further registration at a civil registry office; however, the Mariavite Church, Muslim Religious Union, Karaim Religious Union, and Old Eastern Orthodox Church do not have that right. An additional 168 registered religious groups and five aggregate religious organizations (the Polish Ecumenical Council, Polish Buddhist Union, Biblical Society, Evangelical Alliance, and Council of Protestant Churches) do not have a statutorily defined relationship with the state.

The law states that relations between the state and all churches and other religious unions are based on respect of freedom of conscience and religion. This includes separation of churches and other religious unions from the state; freedom to perform religious functions; equality of all churches and religious unions, no matter how their legal situation is regulated; and legal protections for churches and other religious groups within the scope defined by the law.

In accordance with the law, the government and the Roman Catholic Church participate in the Joint Government-Episcopate Committee, cochaired by the Minister of Interior and Administration and a bishop, currently the Archbishop of Gdansk, which meets regularly to discuss Catholic Church-state relations. The government also participates in a joint government-Polish Ecumenical Council committee, cochaired by a Ministry of Interior and Administration (MIA) undersecretary and the head of the Polish Ecumenical Council (an association composed of seven denominations and two religious associations, all of them non-Roman Catholic Christian), which meets to discuss issues related to minority Christian churches operating in the country. In addition, there are separate joint committees consisting of government representatives and representatives of the Evangelical Alliance, the Lutheran Church, and the Orthodox Church.

Religious groups not the subject of specific legislation may register with the MIA, but registration is not obligatory. To register, the law requires a group to submit a notarized application with the personal information of at least 100 citizen members; details about the group’s activities in the country; background on the group’s doctrine and practices; a charter and physical address; identifying information about its leaders; a description of the role of the clergy, if applicable; and information on funding sources and methods of new member recruitment. If the ministry rejects the registration application, religious groups may appeal to an administrative court. By law, the permissible grounds for refusal of an application are failure to meet formal requirements or inclusion in the application of provisions that may violate public safety and order, health, public morality, parental authority or freedom, and rights of other persons.

Unregistered groups may worship, proselytize, publish, or import religious literature freely, and bring in foreign missionaries, but they have no legal recognition and are unable to undertake certain functions such as owning property or holding bank accounts in their name. The 188 registered and statutorily recognized religious groups and organizations receive other privileges not available to unregistered groups, such as selective tax benefits – they are exempt from import tariffs, property taxes, and income tax on their educational, scientific, cultural, and legal activities, and their official representatives are also exempt from income and property taxes – and the right to acquire property and teach religion in schools.

Four commissions oversee communal religious-property restitution claims submitted by their respective statutory filing deadlines: one each for the Jewish community, Lutheran Church, and Orthodox Church, and one for all other denominations. The commissions function in accordance with legislation providing for the restitution to religious communities of property they owned that was nationalized during or after WWII. A separate commission overseeing claims by the Roman Catholic Church completed its work in 2011. The MIA and the respective religious community each appoint representatives to the commissions.

The law states decisions by the commission ruling on communal property claims may not be appealed, but the Constitutional Tribunal ruled in 2013 that parties could appeal commission decisions in administrative courts. Religious representatives on the joint commissions stated that (contrary to prior information) parties have appealed final decisions by the commissions. The law does not address communal properties the government sold or turned over to new private owners after WWII.

There is no comprehensive national law governing private property restitution. Members of religious groups, like other private claimants, may pursue restitution through the courts.

The law authorizes Warsaw city authorities to resolve expeditiously longstanding restitution cases affecting properties in Warsaw being used for public purposes. Warsaw city officials must post a notification of specific public properties for a six-month period during which original owners of the property must submit their claims. At the end of the six-month period, Warsaw city authorities may make a final determination on the disposition of the property, either declaring the property shall remain public and not be subject to any future claims, or returning the property or monetary compensation to the original owner. As of October, amendments to the law established new grounds outside claimants’ control on which Warsaw city authorities must refuse the return of properties.

In accordance with the law, all public and private schools teach voluntary religion classes. Schools at all grade levels must provide instruction in any of the registered faiths if there are at least seven students requesting it. Each registered religious group determines the content of classes on its faith and provides the teachers, who receive salaries from the state. Students may also request to take an optional ethics class instead of a religion class; the ethics class is optional even if students decline to take a religion class.

Citizens have the right to sue the government for constitutional violations of religious freedom, and the law prohibits discrimination or persecution based on religion or belief.

The constitution recognizes the right to conscientious objection to military service on religious grounds but states such objectors may be required to perform alternative service as specified by law.

The human rights ombudsman is responsible for safeguarding human and civil freedoms and rights, including the freedom of religion and conscience, specified in the constitution and other legal acts. The ombudsman is independent from the government and appointed by parliament.

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

Government Practices

In January, the MIA approved the registration of the Christian Church of the Full Gospel – Camp of God and the Reformed Catholic Church in Poland. On July 14, Prosecutor General Zbigniew Ziobro filed a motion with the MIA to invalidate the registration of the Reformed Catholic Church, arguing the Church failed to meet several requirements. On September 15, the MIA ruled the Church’s registration invalid. The MIA said registering the Church, the only registered group that recognizes same-sex marriages, violated the constitution, which defines marriage as “a union of a woman and a man.” The Church and the ombudsman stated the MIA’s decision was inconsistent with the constitutional provision providing for the autonomy and independence of religious organizations in relations with the state. According to the ombudsman, the prosecutor general’s intervention following the registration of a religious group was unprecedented. On October 5, the Reformed Catholic Church filed a motion with the MIA requesting it reverse its September 15 ruling. On December 4, the MIA upheld its previous decision. At year’s end, the Church remained registered and retained options for appeal to an administrative court.

According to MIA statistics, the religious community property commissions resolved 22 communal property claims during the year, out of approximately 2,938 pending claims by religious groups, compared with 151 claims resolved the previous year. At year’s end, the commissions had partially or entirely resolved a total of 2,863 of the 5,504 total claims by the Jewish community deemed valid by the commission (the commission had previously dismissed 40 as invalid), 981 of 1,182 claims by the Lutheran community, 375 of 472 claims by the Orthodox Church, and 90 of 170 claims by all other denominations.

Critics continued to point out the laws on religious communal property restitution do not address the issue of disputed communal properties now privately owned, leaving several controversial and complicated cases unresolved. These included cases in which buildings and residences were built on land that included Jewish cemeteries destroyed during or after WWII. The Jewish community continued to report the pace of Jewish communal property restitution was slow, involved considerable legal expense, and often ended without any recovery of property or other compensation for claimants. For example, a case for restitution of the old Jewish cemetery in the city of Kalisz remained unresolved after 20 years. Religious representatives of other commissions also reported considerable delays in resolving cases, which they attributed to the actions of government officials sitting on the commissions.

During the year, Warsaw city authorities continued implementing a 2015 law with the stated purpose of ending abusive practices in the trading of former property owners' claims. Legal experts expressed concern that the law limited the ability of claimants to reclaim property unjustly taken from their lawful owners during the WWII and communist eras, including from Jews and members of other religious minorities. In November, Warsaw city authorities stated that since the 2015 law entered into force, the city had resolved approximately 352 dormant claims filed before 1950, which included the rejection of 135 restitution claims against public properties. These included schools, preschools, a park, a police command unit site, a hospital, and city-owned apartment houses. There was no information available on the identity of those claiming prior ownership or how many of them belonged to religious minority groups.

A special government commission continued to investigate accusations of irregularities in the restitution of private property in Warsaw. In 2019, the Justice Ministry published a report on the commission's operation between 2017 and 2019. According to the report, the commission overturned restitution decisions for 56 properties and ordered the recovery of improper compensation in the amount of almost 100 million zloty (\$26.93 million). There was no information available on how many of these cases involved claims by members of religious minorities. Several NGOs and lawyers representing claimants, including lawyers representing Holocaust survivors or their heirs, stated the commission had a negative effect on private property restitution cases, as administrative and court decisions had slowed in response to the commission's decisions.

On April 15, during a parliamentary debate on citizen-initiated legislation to protect property from heirless property claims (the “Stop 447” bill), opposition Confederation Member of Parliament (MP) and former presidential candidate Krzysztof Bosak described the bill as “the first step towards the protection of Polish property from unjustified Jewish property claims.” He also criticized the government's response to the U.S. *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act*. PiS opposed the proposed legislation, arguing it was unnecessary because the Ministry of Treasury automatically assumes ownership of heirless property. Parliament sent the draft legislation to committee, where it remained at year's end. PiS MPs said they voted to send the legislation to committee to “respect” the voice of citizens who submitted their signatures for the legislation.

Restitution became a topic of the presidential election campaign. On July 8, President Andrzej Duda stated the government would not pay damages for heirless property and said he would not accept any law that would privilege any ethnic group over others. He continued, “If someone wants compensation, please turn to those who caused World War II.” On July 9, PiS Chairman Kaczynski said opposition Civic Platform presidential candidate Rafal Trzaskowski's comments years earlier that discussion on the issue of compensation for Jewish property was required indicated he did not have a “Polish soul, Polish heart, [or] Polish mind.” Kaczynski stated that PiS and President Duda were a guarantee that the country would not pay such compensation. Trzaskowski said on July 6 he would not sign a bill to provide heirless property restitution.

In June, reports in the government-controlled public media during the presidential campaign drew accusations of anti-Semitism from the domestic and international Jewish community and others. On June 15, state-run television TVP ran a story in which journalists stated the main challenger to the incumbent president would use public funds to “compensate Jews” with respect to private property restitution, should he be elected. The story also said the candidate's approach to restitution “was not based on Poland's interests,” and that it included images of Israel, a well-known American Jewish businessman, the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and money falling out of a bag.

On June 16, American Jewish Committee Central Europe Acting Director Sebastian Rejak sent a letter to the Media Ethics Council, a journalist-led media watchdog, stating that public television coverage could “incite hatred and contempt towards Jews in the world and Polish Jews.” On June 17, the Media Ethics Council responded, echoing Rejak's concerns and identifying other pre-election TVP broadcasts that it found problematic. The organization said the broadcasts were in breach of the Media Ethics Charter and stated, “Inciting anti-Semitism, racism, and hatred towards minorities is not in the interests of the country.”

On June 18, Chief Rabbi Schudrich and the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland released a joint statement that said, “Public media should educate and integrate, not divide,” and, “We must all speak against the use of anti-Semitism or hatred of any other group for political purposes.” On June 29, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe issued a first-round presidential election assessment that said public television had become “a campaign tool for the incumbent,” with reporting that had “clear xenophobic and anti-Semitic undertones.”

On July 31, opposition Confederation Party MP Grzegorz Braun said when commenting on the release of the U.S. JUST Act Report that the U.S. Department of State “serves as a bodyguard to Jewish blackmailers,” and he called the report “an attempt to force the Polish state...to create a precedent for [the benefit] of the Jews.” Braun said it was

time for the lower house of parliament to adopt previously submitted citizen-initiated legislation banning heirless property restitution. Braun stated his country’s government was misinforming the public by downplaying the “serious threat” of such attempts.

On February 19, the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries, led by Chief Rabbi Schudrich, called for the immediate blocking of the construction of a road outside the town of Jaslo, stating the road went through a Jewish cemetery. Local authorities disputed that the area was part of the cemetery, but while preparing the ground for construction, workers had uncovered several graves. Despite the chief rabbi’s request, Jaslo authorities directed the exhumation of the bodies on June 12. On the same day, the chief official of Jaslo County, Adam Pawlus, held a town meeting and informed those present that the exhumations took place over the objections of the commission because, “We act in accordance with Polish law, because we live on Polish soil, and we do not interfere with matters which are dealt with in Israel.” Upon authorization from the chief official of Podkarpackie Province Ewa Leniart, and against the objections of the commission, the remains were reburied on October 27 in a nearby cemetery for WWII victims.

On February 27, opposition Confederation Party MP Janusz Korwin-Mikke said, “As a result of the pogroms [against Jewish people], the strongest and the most gifted [Jews] survived...The Jews are a power because they had pogroms.” He added, “There are even theories that rabbis deliberately provoke pogroms precisely so that Jews survive, and then there is natural selection.”

On January 22, independent Member of the European Parliament Sylwia Spurek shared on social media an image likening the meat industry to the Holocaust. The image contained cows at a slaughterhouse wearing striped uniforms and yellow stars.

On January 28, the Warsaw local prosecutor’s office indicted an artist who in July 2019 initiated an online sale of rainbow-colored pendants of the Virgin Mary in the shape of a vagina. The artist was charged with offending religious sentiment by publicly desecrating an object of religious worship, for which she could face up to two years in prison. At year’s end, a trial had not been scheduled, and the artist was not in detention.

In April, the Walbrzych regional prosecutor’s office filed charges against a man who posted anti-Semitic comments on the internet in 2018. According to the prosecutor’s office, the man incited hatred on national grounds, offended Jewish people, and publicly praised the Holocaust by arguing that the killing of Jews during WWII was a positive development. If convicted, the man faced up to three years in prison. At year’s end, there was no further information on the status of the case.

On July 1, the Plock local prosecutor’s office issued a statement announcing the indictment of three persons for offending religious sentiment in 2019 by creating and posting on various sites in the city of Plock posters of the icon of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa with her halo painted in the colors of the rainbow flag. Some posters were allegedly placed on trash cans and portable toilets. In 2019, police had detained and subsequently released one of the three persons covered by the indictment. If convicted, the accused could face up to two years in prison. Their trial was scheduled for early 2021.

On December 3, the Czestochowa district prosecutor’s office announced it had indicted a man for offending religious sentiment by using an icon of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa with her halo painted in the colors of the rainbow flag during the Equality March in Czestochowa in 2019. Once tried, and if convicted, the accused could face up to two years in prison.

In August, following a two-year investigation that reportedly began after authorities blocked an international concert scheduled to take place on Hitler’s birthday in 2018, prosecutors filed charges of promoting fascism against 13 persons, including two leaders of neo-Nazi group Blood and Honor and a former employee of the Gdansk regional branch of TVP.

On July 30, the Warsaw district prosecutor’s office opened an investigation into the placement of rainbow flags on several Warsaw monuments, including an historic statue of Jesus outside of a church, as a desecration of monuments and offense to religious sentiment. In December, prosecutors discontinued the investigation because they could not identify the perpetrators.

In September, media reported the government awarded a grant to create a “Digital Library of National Thought” – an online collection of books and other works published before WWII by Polish nationalist politicians. Some of the publications, for example a book by Stanislaw Piasecki, editor in chief of a right-wing weekly magazine, contained anti-Semitic content, including some that the library recommended for reading on its social media page.

In September, the lower house of parliament approved legislation endorsed by PiS Chairman Kaczynski that would include a ban on the religious slaughter of animals for export, while continuing to allow it for domestic production of halal and kosher meat. Chief Rabbi Schudrich and Mufti of the Muslim Religious Union Tomasz Miskiewicz met with parliamentary leaders to express concerns about the legislation. The upper house of parliament voted to weaken the ban, and on November 1, Minister of Agriculture Grzegorz Puda announced the legislation would be withdrawn and replaced. Legislators did not introduce new legislation by year’s end.

Crucifixes continued to be displayed in both the upper and lower houses of parliament, as well as in many other public buildings, including public school classrooms.

In January, President Duda and other political and religious leaders joined Holocaust survivors to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day and commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In his remarks, Duda said, “Distorting the history of WWII, denying the crimes of genocide and the Holocaust, as well as an instrumental use of Auschwitz to attain any given goal, is tantamount to desecration of the memory of the victims whose ashes are scattered here. The truth about the Holocaust must not die.” Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki participated in separate commemorations in Berlin, where he also spoke out against Holocaust denial and distortion.

On January 14, President Duda hosted a New Year’s meeting for representatives of various churches, religious unions, and national and ethnic minorities. He stated that all participating communities in the event had their place in the country, and he cited their cooperation and openness to dialogue, “brotherhood,” and a “good coexistence.”

On March 24, the National Day of Poles Rescuing Jews – a national holiday introduced in 2018 to honor Polish citizens who risked their lives to save Jews during the Nazi occupation – President Duda called Poles who saved Jews “heroes of the Republic” and cited their example of “respect and solidarity towards all people and nations co-creating the Republic of Poland.”

On April 19, Prime Minister Morawiecki laid a wreath in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes Monument to commemorate the 77th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

On June 8, Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Glinski and the mayor of Krakow signed a letter of intent to establish a new museum – the Krakow-Plaszow Concentration Camp Memorial Site – to commemorate all victims of the former Nazi concentration camp located in Krakow. The museum was scheduled to open on January 1, 2021. Under the agreement, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and Krakow city authorities each agreed to provide the museum with one million zloty (\$269,000) in subsidies per year, and to spend 25 million zloty (\$6.73 million) each to modernize the commemoration site and purchase equipment for the museum.

On June 15, President Duda commemorated the 80th anniversary of the first transport of Poles to Auschwitz. The President laid flowers at the site where the first trainload of prisoners arrived at the camp. In his address he called for remembrance, stating, “We never forget, lest anything like this ever happen again.”

A musical on divergent Polish-Jewish narratives of the Holocaust titled “Letter from Warsaw” continued its run in Warsaw, with financial support from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The musical tells the story of a family of American Jews that rediscovers its Polish-Jewish roots when informed they are the remaining heirs of unclaimed property in Warsaw.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The national prosecutor’s office reported that during 2019, the most recent period for which data was available, prosecutors investigated 370 religiously motivated incidents, compared with 429 in 2018. The report cited investigations into 182 anti-Semitic, 112 anti-Muslim, and 76 anti-Roman Catholic incidents. Data from 2018 did not break down incidents by religious groups targeted, but in 2017 there were investigations into 112 anti-Semitic, 328 anti-Muslim, and 66 anti-Roman Catholic incidents. The NGO Never Again Association and religious groups stated government tracking of religiously motivated incidents was not comprehensive or systematic.

Although 2020 statistics were not available, there were several physical attacks against Roman Catholic priests and incidents involving the disruption of religious services in Roman Catholic churches around the country. There were also cases of desecration of Roman Catholic, Jewish, and other religious sites, such as churches, temples, and cemeteries.

On October 30, a man who participated in an abortion rights demonstration physically and verbally attacked a man at a gasoline station in the town of Mysliborz. The attacker hit the victim in the face and abdomen. Reportedly, when the attacker found out the victim was a priest, he pursued him and hit him again in the face and head. Prosecutors charged him with insult, physical assault, and engaging in violence on the grounds of religious affiliation. At year’s end, the man was not in detention, and his trial had not been scheduled.

On January 8, the Wroclaw District Court began the trial of a man who stabbed a priest in front of a church in Wroclaw in 2019. Authorities held the man in detention at least until December. The case was pending before the court at year’s end.

On July 31, the Warsaw prosecutor’s office indicted a man on charges of public incitement to murder a priest, hatred on the grounds of religious differences, and insulting followers of the Catholic Church. While participating in a Mr. Gay Poland event in Poznan in 2019, the man had simulated cutting the throat of an effigy of Krakow Archbishop Marek Jedraszewski, who had previously criticized “LGBT ideology.” At year’s end, the man’s trial had not been scheduled.

On July 17, prosecutors indicted a man, who stated he was a bishop representing the United Ecumenical Catholic Church, on charges of offending religious sentiment. If convicted, he could face up to two years in prison. The man dressed as a priest and held what many observers described as a mock Roman Catholic Mass during Warsaw’s Equality Parade in 2019. At year’s end, his trial had not been scheduled.

On October 25, participants of abortion rights demonstrations disrupted Sunday services around the country and painted graffiti on church exteriors, following an October 22 ruling by the Constitutional Court that banned abortions for abnormalities of the embryo or fetus. The MIA said police recorded 22 cases of disrupting masses and 79 cases of exterior vandalism of Catholic churches related to the court ruling. Police detained 76 persons in relation to the incidents. Additional cases of vandalism against Catholic churches around the country took place in late October and early November.

On November 27, the Krakow Regional Court initiated a criminal trial against an IKEA human resources manager for dismissing one of the company’s employees in 2019 after the employee posted quotes from the Bible on the company’s intranet website stating that homosexuality was scandalous and an abomination and gay men would be punished with death. Prosecutors said the manager violated the provision in the criminal code that penalizes anyone who restricts others from exercising their rights because of their religious affiliation. Several dozen NGOs protested the prosecution, stating the human resources manager had acted against workplace discrimination. On November 10, a labor branch of the Krakow Regional Court began trying a labor dispute case brought against IKEA by the dismissed employee.

In February, the Pew Research Center published findings on attitudes towards democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society, as well as religious freedom, in 34 countries, based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 76 percent of Polish respondents considered religious freedom to be “very important,” but ranked it eighth in priority out of nine democratic principles tested.

According to a poll of public opinions on the Roman Catholic Church conducted by the Warsaw-based Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) in December, 41 percent of residents had a favorable opinion of the Church, a drop of eight percentage points since September, while 47 percent had a negative view, an increase of six points from three months earlier. The result was the first time since 1993 that negative views of the Church exceeded positive views in a CBOS poll. Experts on the Catholic Church and the media provided two reasons for the decline in support: the October 22 ruling on abortion (which some attributed to the Church’s influence over the governing party) and perceptions the Church had insufficiently responded to a series of recent sex abuse scandals. The poll found a strong correlation with views of the Church and political affiliation; 82 percent of PiS supporters viewed the Church favorably, while only 13 percent of supporters of the opposition Civic Coalition did so. In another poll of views on the Catholic Church carried out by the pollster IBRiS in November for the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, 35 percent of respondents expressed a positive view of the Church. Among those aged 18-29, nine percent viewed the Church positively, 47 percent viewed it negatively, and 44 percent had neutral views.

The Institute for Catholic Church Statistics reported that in 2019, the most recent year for which data was available, 37 percent of residents attended Sunday Mass regularly, compared to a post-communist high of 50 percent in 1990.

In February, the Wroclaw prosecutor’s office sent three indictments to the Wroclaw District Court against former Roman Catholic priest Jacek Miedlar, charging him with incitement to hatred and Holocaust denial for statements he made in 2017 and 2018 and for publicly offending in 2018 the late Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first noncommunist prime minister of the country since 1946. At year’s end, Miedlar’s trial had not been scheduled. Authorities arrested Miedlar in December 2019 and charged him with incitement of hatred against Jews before releasing him the same day.

In January, a man placed wooden crosses on tombstones and hung clothes on graves in the Jewish cemetery in Sopot. The town’s mayor, Jacek Karnowski, visited the cemetery and criticized the vandalism.

In mid-March, unknown perpetrators painted a swastika and a neo-Nazi symbol on a plaque commemorating the local Jewish community and Jewish residents of Szczecin who were killed during WWII in the Belzec extermination camp. Police said they declined to open an investigation because the symbols were cleaned from the plaque before their arrival.

On April 14, a man threw stones at and broke the windows of a synagogue in Wroclaw. The man also shouted neo-Nazi slogans and made neo-fascist gestures. Police detained a suspect on April 17 and charged him with promoting a totalitarian regime and public insult on national, religious, and racial grounds. There was no further information on the case at year’s end.

On June 10, unknown perpetrators defaced a recently renovated wall around the Jewish cemetery in the city of Tarnow with an anti-Semitic inscription. Police were still investigating at year’s end.

On November 11, a coalition of groups, including the National Radical Camp and All-Polish Youth, both of which human rights groups have described as extremist and nationalist, again led an annual Independence Day march. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of the use of anti-Semitic or white supremacist slogans during the event.

On June 23, Independence Units, a group widely described as far-right, organized a demonstration in front of the presidential palace in advance of President Duda’s June 24 meeting with President Trump in Washington. Participants in the event urged President Duda to protest the U.S. JUST Act and any restitution claims from Jewish organizations during his meeting with President Trump. Approximately 30 people demonstrated under the slogan, “Mr. President – we will not pay! Pass it on to President Trump!” Other banners included messages such as, “No to claims!” and “We won’t be robbed of \$300 billion.” Two Confederation Party MPs participated – Grzegorz Braun and Dobromir Sosnierz.

On December 17, the Szczecin branch of the national prosecutor’s office indicted two men on charges of planning a terrorist attack against Muslims and an Islamic religious site. A third man was indicted for illegal possession of explosives. The indictments followed a November 2019 Internal Security Agency operation that uncovered materials for the production of explosives, weapons, and ammunition in an apartment in Warsaw. According to the spokesperson for the Special Services Coordinator, the men were planning an attack against an unspecified Islamic religious site in the country and to use poisonous substances in an attack against specific individuals. According to the spokesperson, the indicted men expressed extreme right-wing views, and their motive was to stop “Islamization” of the country. At year’s end, the trial had not been scheduled.

In a January interview with the German daily *Die Welt*, Chief Rabbi Schudrich stated Poland was a safer place for Jews to live in than some other European countries. Schudrich said anti-Semitism existed in the country, but that it was not expressed in physical attacks (against individuals).

On January 26, the Catholic Church celebrated the 20th Annual Day of Islam with the stated purpose of promoting peace among religious groups. The Church hosted an event titled “Christians and Muslims in the Service of Universal Brotherhood” in Warsaw, which included discussions, readings from the Bible and Quran, and prayers.

On October 13, as part of the 6th Congress of Christian Culture, the Lublin Roman Catholic diocese, in cooperation with local authorities and the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, organized a debate on “Jewish and Christian inspirations for dialogue.” The event took place in a Catholic church in Lublin, with the participation of then-Director of the Jewish Historical Institute Pawel Spiewak and Archbishop of Lodz Grzegorz Rys.

The Polish Council of Christians and Jews organized a joint online Catholic and Jewish prayer meeting to encourage tolerance and understanding on the October 18 Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah.

Human Library projects, funded by European Economic Area grants and coordinated by NGOs Diversja Association and Lambda Warsaw, continued in several cities and towns around the country, including Cieszyn, Katowice, Lodz, Warsaw, Zamosc, and Zory. The projects involved a diverse group of volunteers, including representatives of Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious groups, who told their stories to individuals who could “borrow” them like books. The stated intent of the project was to foster greater tolerance in general, including religious tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, officers from the embassy and consulate general in Krakow, and visiting U.S. Department of State representatives met with government officials from the foreign affairs and justice ministries and parliament to discuss private property restitution, anti-Semitism, and antidiscrimination.

On January 27, the U.S. Secretary of State announced a contribution of \$2 million to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation. The foundation received the contribution on October 1 and will use it to preserve former concentration camps in the Auschwitz-Birkenau area.

Also on January 27, the Secretary of the Treasury led the U.S. government delegation to the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Ambassador, the Deputy Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, and the Deputy Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism were part of the delegation. The Treasury Secretary said in his remarks, “The United States and all other countries must work together to fight for all religious freedoms, justice for the Jewish people, and combating anti-Semitism wherever it appears. We must be committed to honoring the history of the Holocaust so these atrocities never occur ever again to any people anywhere in the world.”

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general staff met with members and leaders of the local Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities to discuss issues of concern, including private and communal property restitution, proposed legislation restricting religious slaughter, and the communities’ concerns regarding intolerance, anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim sentiment.

In January, the USAID Deputy Administrator attended a roundtable on protecting religious and ethnic minorities hosted by the American Jewish Committee.

In January, the USAID Deputy Administrator, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, and the Deputy Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met in Krakow with Chief Rabbi Schudrich and representatives of the local Jewish community to discuss anti-Semitism, relations between Jews and non-Jews in the country, and other issues of importance to the Jewish community.

On October 22, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and embassy officials participated virtually in the annual meeting of the International Committee of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation. The Special Envoy commended the foundation’s renewed efforts to preserve the former concentration camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau and to expand virtual education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May, October, and December, the Special Envoy held virtual meetings with representatives of the Jewish community, academics, civil society activists, and others to discuss the level of anti-Semitism in the country, Holocaust remembrance and education, and the general condition of the Jewish community in the country.

On November 16 and 17, the U.S. Department of State and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs partnered to host from Warsaw a virtual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. The Secretary of State and Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau provided opening remarks for the event, which included a dialogue between representatives of civil society and religious groups.

In April, the Ambassador participated in the March of the Living Virtual Plaque Project, which substituted for the annual in-person commemorative walk between the former concentration camp sites around Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Ambassador’s online message honored Holocaust victims.

To commemorate the 77th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that began on April 19, 1943, the Ambassador used the embassy’s social media accounts to express solidarity with the annual “Daffodils” social and educational program conducted online by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The program aims to educate the public about the uprising by handing out thousands of paper daffodils on Warsaw streets in remembrance of the Jews who fought and died in the uprising.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador and embassy used social media to call for respect and tolerance for all religions, underscore religious freedom as a fundamental pillar and value of a strong democracy, condemn violence based on religious beliefs, and highlight U.S. government support for combating anti-Semitism and protecting places related to the Holocaust.

In June and July, staff from the consulate general in Krakow participated in the Krakow Jewish Community Center’s Virtual Ride for the Living by pledging to bike, run, or walk 60 miles (the distance between the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Krakow), in tribute to Holocaust memory and to celebrate the rebirth of Jewish life in Krakow.

The embassy continued to sponsor exchange programs, award grants, participate in conferences, and financially support educational and cultural events to promote religious freedom and tolerance. Highlights included continued embassy support for the “Letter from Warsaw” musical on divergent Polish-Jewish narratives of the Holocaust, Krakow’s Jewish Culture Festival, and support for a new music program promoting Poland’s Jewish heritage. The embassy highlighted its support of these initiatives on social media.

On September 7, an embassy officer addressed 40 Polish educators competitively selected to attend the eight-week online course, “Teaching about the Holocaust and Human Rights through Art,” organized by the New York-based Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights, in collaboration with the POLIN Museum in Warsaw and the Yad Vashem Institute in Israel. In his remarks, the embassy officer highlighted the importance of education in combating racism and discrimination based on faith or ethnicity.

The embassy once again cosponsored the annual educational conference for Polish teachers organized by the POLIN Museum, which took place online in November. The embassy financially supported the participation of two U.S. speakers at the conference on “Emotions and History: How to Talk about Difficult Topics at School,” with a focus on methods of teaching the history of WWII and the Holocaust. In virtual remarks, the Ambassador commended the teachers for their dedication and said, “Education is the foundation of understanding and acceptance – and it is the best antidote against stereotypes, racism, and bigotry against Jews and all minorities around the world.”

The embassy also provided support to individuals and organizations that sought to deepen public understanding of the country’s Jewish heritage, including financial support of a documentary project chronicling non-Jewish rescuers of Jewish memory in the country and financial support for a virtual reality-delivered cultural program to promote the 100th anniversary of the Dybbuk, a Yiddish-language play which touches on the role, culture, and history of Jews in the country.

The consulate general in Krakow provided grant funding for educational and cultural projects connected to the promotion of religious freedom or combating anti-Semitism. In June and July, the consulate supported the 30th iteration of Krakow’s Jewish Culture Festival, which comprised over 60 online events, presenting contemporary Jewish culture.

In August, the consulate general in Krakow funded an intensive one-week online course led by the Auschwitz Jewish Center. The course targeted a select group of high school teachers and NGO activists and focused on teaching about anti-Semitism and implementing antidiscrimination training in the classroom.

In January, the consulate general in Krakow partnered with a U.S. artist to support “Cities of Peace Auschwitz,” a peacebuilding initiative involving local artists and scholars in the creation of a collaborative mural to honor the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Consul General delivered opening remarks at the mural’s unveiling on January 28.

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