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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Romania

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits restricting freedom of conscience and belief, as well as forcing an individual to espouse a religious belief contrary to the individual’s convictions. It stipulates all religions are independent from the state, and religious groups have the freedom to organize “in accordance with their own statutes.” According to the law on religious freedom and religious denominations, the state recognizes the “important role” of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the history of the country, but it also recognizes the role of “other churches and denominations.” The law specifies a three-tiered classification of religious organizations. In addition, civil associations wishing to perform religious functions may organize under a separate provision of the law. During the year, the government approved four applications for registration of religious associations. Religious groups stated restrictions meant to contain the spread of COVID-19 were unfair because a March ban on travel outside the home contained an exemption for travel to work but not for travel to places of worship. In September, the National Council for Combating Discrimination ruled the lack of an agreement with all recognized religious denominations on Easter observances while COVID-19 restrictions were in force constituted discrimination. The council recommended the Ministry of Interior be impartial towards all religious denominations and establish nondiscriminatory rules for the exercise of freedom of belief. There were continued reports of the slow pace of restitution of confiscated properties, especially to the Greek Catholic Church and the Jewish community. During the year, the government rejected 500 restitution claims for confiscated religious properties and approved 83, compared with 474 claims rejected and 48 approved in 2019; it again approved no claims for the Greek Catholic Church. In February, the standing bureaus of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies appointed Parliamentarian Silviu Vexler to the honorary position of “High Representative of the Parliament for Fighting Antisemitism, Protecting the Memory of Holocaust Victims and Developing Jewish Life.”

Some minority religious groups continued to report at times ROC priests and adherents blocked their access to cemeteries. In June, the Impreuna Agency for Community Development released a survey on the perceptions of Roma and other ethnic and religious minorities in the country, including Jews. According to findings, 44 percent of respondents had little or no trust in Jews and 30 percent would accept Jews as friends or relatives. Some private media outlets depicted religious minority groups as a threat. In October, an article published by the news site *activenews.ro* mentioned the alleged religious affiliation of several government officials, purportedly members of the Baha’i, Unitarian, Reformed, Muslim, or Roman Catholic faiths, and called them “anti-Orthodox Talibans” for imposing COVID-19-related restrictions on religious activities. According to a study released by the Wiesel Institute in May, several articles published online stated Jews or the state of Israel were responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak and were profiting from the health crisis.

Embassy officials continued to advocate with the government for property restitution and religious tolerance. The Ambassador and a senior embassy official participated in several Holocaust commemorations and spoke out against anti-Semitism. Using its Facebook page, the embassy emphasized respect for religious freedom and paid tribute to Holocaust victims. The Ambassador met with leaders of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Muslim community to discuss ways to promote religious freedom and interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 21.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to a 2011 government census, ROC adherents constitute 86.5 percent of the population and Roman Catholics almost 5 percent. According to the census, there are approximately 151,000 Greek Catholics; however, Greek Catholics estimate their numbers at 488,000. According to the Greek Catholic Church, since the time of the census, a significant number of persons whose Greek Catholic families were forced to covert during the Communist regime rediscovered their roots and joined the Greek Catholic Church. Other religious groups include Old Rite Russian Christians; Protestants, including Reformed Protestants, Pentecostals, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Evangelical Lutherans, and Evangelical Augustans; Jews; Muslims; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Baha’is; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Zen Buddhists; the Family (God’s Children); the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church); the Church of Scientology; and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. Atheists and nonbelievers represent less than 1 percent of the population.

According to the 2011 census, Old Rite Russian Christians are mainly located in Moldavia and Dobrogea. Of the 64,337 Muslims accounted for in the 2011 census, 43,279 live in the southeast near Constanta. Most Greek Catholics reside in Transylvania. Protestants of various denominations and Roman Catholics reside primarily in Transylvania. Orthodox and ethnic Ukrainian Greek Catholics live mostly in the north. Orthodox ethnic Serbs are primarily in Banat. Members of the Armenian Apostolic Church are concentrated in Moldavia and the south. Virtually all members of the Protestant Reformed and Unitarian Churches of Transylvania are ethnic Hungarians. More than half of the Roman Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Transylvania are composed of ethnic Hungarians. Approximately 40 percent of the country’s Jewish population of 3,400 resides in Bucharest.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits restricting freedom of thought, opinion, conscience, or religious beliefs, as well as forcing individuals to espouse a religious belief contrary to their convictions. It stipulates all religions are independent from the state and have the freedom to organize “in accordance with their own statutes” under terms defined by the law. The law on religious freedom and religious denominations specifies the state’s recognition of the “important role of the Romanian Orthodox Church” as well as the role of “other churches and denominations as recognized by the national history” of the country.

The constitution states religious denominations shall be autonomous and enjoy state support, including the facilitation of religious assistance in the army, hospitals, penitentiaries, retirement homes, and orphanages. Only clergy members of recognized religious denominations may be hired by the government as military or prison chaplains. Regulations state that clergy members of religious associations may be granted access to prisons on a case-by-case basis in certain conditions. There are no similar regulations for religious groups. The law forbids public authorities or private legal entities from asking individuals to specify their religion, except for the census.

The provisions of the law devoted to religion stipulate a three-tier system of religious classification, with “religious denominations” at the highest level, followed by “religious associations,” and “religious groups” at the most basic level. Organizations in the top two tiers are legal entities, while religious groups are not. Civil associations established under separate provisions of the law governing associations and foundations may also engage in religious activities and have the status of legal entities.

By law, there are 18 religious organizations recognized as “religious denominations,” all of which were in existence at the time the law on religion was enacted in 2006: the ROC, Orthodox Serb Bishopric of Timisoara, Roman Catholic Church, Greek Catholic Church, Old Rite Russian Christian (Orthodox) Church, Reformed (Protestant) Church, Christian Evangelical Church, Romanian Evangelical Church, Evangelical Augustan Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Unitarian Church, Baptist Church, Pentecostal Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Federation of Jewish Communities, Muslim Denomination (Islam), and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

For additional organizations to obtain recognition as religious denominations, the law specifies they must demonstrate 12 years of continuous activity beginning in 2006. A religious association is then eligible to apply for the status of religious denomination if it has a membership of at least 0.1 percent of the population as counted at the most recent census (approximately 20,120 persons).

The law defines a religious association as an organization of at least 300 citizens who share and practice the same faith and has attained legal status through registration with the Registry of Religious Associations in the office of the clerk of the court where the main branch of the association is located. To register, religious associations must submit to the government their members’ personal data (e.g., names, addresses, personal identification numbers, and signatures), which the law says the government may not share with other public institutions or use in any other way. To operate as religious associations, organizations also require approval from the National Secretariat for Religious Denominations, which is under the authority of the Office of the Prime Minister.

The law defines a religious group as a group of individuals sharing the same beliefs. Religious groups do not have to register to practice their religion and do not need approval from the national secretariat to operate.

Civil associations engaged in religious activities function like secular associations and foundations; however, they do not receive the same benefits as religious denominations or religious associations. These associations do not require approval from the National Secretariat for Religious Denominations to operate. Their registration falls under the provisions of law governing the establishment of foundations, associations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which require a minimum membership of three individuals. Such civil associations are not required to submit their members’ personal data.

Under the constitution, each of the 18 recognized minorities, including Jews, is entitled to a representative in the Chamber of Deputies. An organization is required, however, to receive votes equal to 5 percent of the national average number of votes cast by district for a deputy to be elected, and any citizen, regardless of religious affiliation, may vote for them. The list of organizations that benefit from these provisions is limited to those belonging to the National Council of Minorities, which consists of organizations already in Parliament.

Religious denominations are eligible for state financial and other support. They have the right to teach religion classes in public schools, receive government funds to build places of worship, partially pay clergy salaries with state funds, broadcast religious programming on radio and television, and apply for broadcasting licenses for their own stations. Under the law, the amount of state funding a denomination receives is determined by the number of adherents reported in the most recent census, as well as by “the religious denomination’s actual needs,” which the law does not define.

Religious associations do not receive government funding and do not have the right to teach religion in public schools, but both they and religious denominations receive tax exemptions on income and buildings used for religious, educational, or other social purposes. Religious groups do not receive either government funding or tax exemptions.

Both religious denominations and religious associations may own or rent property, publish or import religious literature, proselytize, establish and operate schools or hospitals, own cemeteries, and receive tax exemptions on income and buildings used for religious, educational, or other social purposes. Religious groups have no legal status to engage in such activities; however, they may practice their religious beliefs, including in public.

Civil associations engaged in religious activities may engage in religious worship and own cemeteries. While they do not receive the same tax exemptions or other benefits granted to religious denominations and religious associations, they may receive the tax advantages and other benefits accruing to civil associations and foundations.

Legal provisions allow local authorities to fund places of worship and theological schools belonging to religious denominations, including providing funding for staff salaries and building maintenance, renovation, and conservation or construction of places of worship. No similar provisions exist for religious associations or other associations engaged in religious activities; however, these associations may receive funding through legal provisions for civil associations and foundations.

The law allows all types of religious organizations to bury their dead in cemeteries belonging to other religious organizations, except for cemeteries belonging to local Jewish and Muslim communities. By law, non-Muslims and non-Jews are not entitled to be buried in Jewish or Islamic cemeteries. Public cemeteries must have separate sections for each religious denomination if requested by the denominations operating in the locality.

The law allows clergy from recognized religious denominations to minister to military personnel. This includes the possibility of clergy to function within the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Intelligence Service, Foreign Intelligence Service, Protection and Guard Service, Special Telecommunications Service, and General Directorate for Penitentiaries. Under various other arrangements, clergy of recognized religious denominations, and in some cases religious associations, may enter hospitals, orphanages, and retirement homes to undertake religious activities. Religious denominations and religious associations may undertake activities in penitentiaries, subject to approval by the director of the detention facility.

The law provides for the restitution of religious properties confiscated between 1940 and 1989, during World War II, and during the ensuing Communist regime, if the properties are in the possession of the state.

Under the law, if a confiscated property is used “in the public interest,” such as for a school, hospital, or museum, and is returned to its previous owner, the current occupants are allowed to remain in it for 10 years after the restitution decision and pay a capped rent. The law does not address the general return of properties currently used as places of worship by another religious group.

A separate statute on the reinstatement of the Greek Catholic Church regulates the restitution of properties to the Church from the ROC. Restitution decisions are made by a joint commission representing the two Churches and based on “the will of the believers from the communities that possess these properties.” The Greek Catholic Church may pursue court action if attempts to obtain restitution of its properties through dialogue are unsuccessful.

The law establishes a points system of compensation in cases where in-kind restitution is not possible. Religious groups may use the points only to bid on other properties in auctions organized by the National Commission for Real Estate Compensation (NCREC). The NCREC also validates compensation decisions of other local or central authorities, including those of the Special Restitution Commission (SRC), which decides on restitution claims filed by religious denominations and national minorities. The law establishes a 240-day deadline by which claimants must submit additional evidence in their cases at the specific request of the entity in charge of resolving their restitution claim. If a claimant does not meet the deadline, the administrative authority may reject the case. The authority may extend the deadline by an additional 120 days if the claimants prove they made a concerted effort to obtain the evidence, usually in the possession of other state authorities, but were unable to do so.

The law nullifies acts of forced “donations” of Jewish property during World War II and the Communist era and lowers the burden of proof for the previous owners or their heirs to obtain restitution. The law designates the present-day Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania as the legitimate inheritor of forfeited communal Jewish property and accords priority to private claims by Holocaust survivors. The law does not address heirless or unclaimed property left by Holocaust victims. According to the country’s various civil codes adopted between World War II and subsequently, heirless property and unclaimed property devolves to the government.

A law passed in October prioritizes compensation to Holocaust survivors for immovable properties confiscated during the Communist regime. Under the law, the National Authority for Property Restitution (NAPR) must make a one-time compensation payment to successful claimants who are Holocaust survivors, as opposed to other claimants who receive compensation in several tranches over a period of five years. The law expands access to prioritized processing of claims by persons residing outside of the European Union who can prove their status as Holocaust survivors with documents issued by an entity designated by the government of their country of residence. The bill also entitles original owners and their inheritors to compensation based on current-day market prices, rather than 2013 market prices, as provided for in an earlier government decision.

Romanian and foreign citizens persecuted based on ethnic criteria between 1940 and 1945, defined in the law to include Jews, are entitled to a monthly pension. The amount of the pension varies, depending on the type and length of persecution endured. The pension is available to survivors and their families who are no longer Romanian citizens, thus entitling U.S. citizen Holocaust survivors and U.S. citizen family members of Holocaust victims to the same benefits as Romanian citizens.

A law that went into effect in 2019 allows Holocaust survivors residing in foreign countries and who are eligible for compensation in Romania to prove they were victims of racial and ethnic persecution based on official documents released by institutions of the country of residence. The law exempts Holocaust survivors residing in foreign countries from having to physically submit their applications for compensation at the pension offices in Romania and allows them to use other means of communication, such as electronic mail or express mail, to apply.

By law, religious education in schools is optional in both public and private schools. Each of the 18 legally recognized religious denominations is entitled to offer religion classes, based on its own religious teachings, in schools. A denomination may offer classes regardless of the number of students adhering to the denomination in a school. The law allows for exceptions where the right of students to attend religion classes cannot be implemented “for objective reasons,” without specifying what these reasons may be.

Under the law, participation in religion classes is not obligatory. Parents of students younger than age 18 must request their children’s participation in religion classes, while students 18 and older may themselves ask to attend religion classes. Although a student normally takes a school course based on the religious teachings of the denomination to which the student belongs, it is also possible for a student to take a religion course offered by his or her denomination outside the school system and submit a certificate from the denomination to receive academic credit.

Religion teachers in public schools are government employees, but each religious denomination approves the appointment and retention of the teachers of its religion classes.

The law forbids proselytizing in public and private schools. If teachers proselytize, the school management determines the appropriate discipline, based on the conclusions of an internal committee.

The law states the religion of a child who has turned 14 may not be changed without the child’s consent; from age 16, a person has the right to choose her or his religion.

The law bans discrimination on religious grounds in all areas of public life. It also bans religious defamation and stirring conflict on religious grounds, as well as public offenses against religious symbols. Penalties may include fines varying from 1,000 to 100,000 lei (\$250-\$25,200), depending on whether the victim is an individual or a community.

According to amendments to a law that went into effect in 2019, deceased adherents of Judaism are exempted from autopsy upon the request of their families or the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania and if law enforcement determines there are no suspicious circumstances surrounding their death.

By law, anti-Semitism is defined as a perception of Jews expressed in the form of anti-Jewish hatred, as well as speech and physical acts motivated by hatred that target Jews, non-Jews or their belongings, Jewish community institutions, or Jewish places of worship. Penalties for publicly promoting anti-Semitic ideas and doctrines or manufacturing and disseminating anti-Semitic symbols range from three months’ to three years’ imprisonment and the loss of certain rights such as the right to vote and run for election. Penalties for establishing anti-Semitic organizations range from three to 10 years of imprisonment and the loss of certain rights.

The law prohibits the establishment of fascist, Legionnaire (the country’s interwar fascist organization), racist, or xenophobic organizations, which it defines in part as groups that promote violence, religiously motivated hatred, or extremist nationalism, the latter term undefined. Penalties for establishing such organizations range from three to 10 years of imprisonment and the loss of certain rights. Criminal liability is waived if the person involved in establishing such an organization informs authorities before the organization begins its activity; penalties are halved if the individual helps authorities with the criminal investigation. Legislation also makes manufacturing, selling, distributing, owning with intent to distribute, and using racist, fascist, xenophobic, and Legionnaire symbols illegal. Penalties range from three months’ to three years’ imprisonment.

Publicly denying the Holocaust or contesting, approving, justifying, or minimizing it in an “obvious manner” as determined by a judge is punishable by six months’ to three years’ imprisonment or by a fine, depending on circumstances, of up to 200,000 lei (\$50,400). Publicly promoting persons convicted of genocide, crimes against

humanity, or war crimes may incur fines and prison terms ranging from three months to three years and from six months to five years if done online. The same penalties apply to publicly promoting anti-Semitic, fascist, Legionnaire, racist, or xenophobic ideas, worldviews, or doctrines.

The law allows religious workers from legally recognized religious organizations to enter and remain in the country under an extended-stay visa. Visa applicants must receive approval by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs and submit evidence they represent religious organizations legally established in the country. The secretariat may extend such visas for up to five years.

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

Government Practices

The government approved four applications for religious association status during the year, compared with two religious associations approved in 2019. Approved applications were for the “Universal Reformed” Christian Apostolic Center, Belin Vale Association, Holy Trinity Christian Center, and “House of Jacob” Pentecostal Christian Union of Roma. As of December, 40 entities with diverse religious affiliations were registered as religious associations, up three from 36 in 2019.

Some minority religious groups continued to state they viewed the 300-person membership requirement and the need to submit their members’ personal data for registration as a religious association as discriminatory because other types of associations required only three members and did not have to submit the personal data of their members. They also continued to criticize the three-tier classification system for religious organizations.

The government issued a ban on several types of public events, including public church services, during the March 15-May 14 state of emergency to contain the spread of COVID-19. A military ordinance adopted by the Ministry of Interior on March 17 banned religious activities in closed spaces. A subsequent military ordinance adopted on March 21 allowed religious groups to perform religious services in places of worship without public attendance. The ordinance allowed for private religious services such as baptisms, weddings, and burials to be held inside places of worship as long as they were attended by no more than eight participants, as well as communion services for hospitalized patients or sick persons at their homes. Following a military ordinance adopted on March 24, individuals were not allowed to travel outside their homes except for a limited number of purposes, such as for work, but not including religious activities, including visiting places of worship or cemeteries. Some members of the ROC called for lifting restrictions on religious activities. In March, ROC priest Andrei Rosca sent a letter to the government requesting it to reopen churches and stating, “It hurts to see that shops are crowded while the Church is closed; it hurts to see that food markets are filled with people while the Church is empty.”

In April, President of the Union of Baptist Churches in Romania Viorel Iuga released a public letter asking the President and the Prime Minister to ease restrictions on religious activities.

On April 14, the ROC Patriarch and the Interior Minister signed an agreement to allow Orthodox believers to go to church on April 17 (Orthodox Good Friday) and 18 to receive communion. The agreement also mandated that ROC representatives, police, and military personnel distribute the Holy Light (Orthodox candle-flame-passing ceremony normally conducted in church) to believers at their homes on April 18. Leaders of the Save Romania Union Party said the agreement was detrimental to social distancing efforts. The Chair of the Hungarian Democrat Union in Romania asked for the repeal of the agreement, citing public health concerns and discrimination against Protestants and Roman Catholics who did not benefit from similar exceptions for their Easter celebrations that took place the previous weekend. On April 15, the Ministry of Interior reached a new agreement with the ROC that changed key provisions from the original version, specifying that on the Thursday before Easter, volunteers and clergy, rather than police forces, would distribute blessed bread (sprinkled with holy water and wine and also called paste) and deliver the Holy Light (or flame) to the homes of believers instead of having them go to church. On May 18, the government downgraded the state of emergency to a state of alert, allowing open-air public church services. Religious services with no more than 16 participants were permitted inside all places of worship. On September 30, the National Council for Combating Discrimination reviewed the April 14 agreement between the ROC Patriarch and the Interior Minister and ruled that the lack of an agreement with all recognized religious denominations on Easter celebrations constituted discrimination. The council recommended the Ministry of Interior be impartial towards all religious denominations and establish nondiscriminatory rules concerning the exercise of freedom of belief.

Following the ban on public church services to contain the COVID-19 outbreak, the government-owned television network TVR began broadcasting Roman Catholic masses. In March, representatives of the Greek Catholic civic group ACUM (the word “now” in Romanian) reported that the Greek Catholic Church had requested that TVR broadcast the Greek Catholic Mass. ACUM collected more than 1,300 signatures on a petition supporting its request. Throughout April, TVR broadcast Greek Catholic masses and other Greek Catholic religious ceremonies.

On October 5, the National Committee for Emergency Situations issued a decision establishing that religious celebrations could be organized only for residents of the municipality where the event takes place and that persons were not allowed to attend religious celebrations outside their place of residence. Under this decision, persons residing outside the city of Iasi could not attend the traditional Saint Parascheva Orthodox celebration and pilgrimage to Iasi, which took place on October 14. On October 9, the ROC Patriarch released a public statement saying the ban on pilgrimages was disproportionate, discriminatory, and was decided without prior consultation with the ROC. According to media, during the October 14 celebration in Iasi, members of the gendarmerie checked the

identity documents of persons who wanted to approach the relics of Saint Parascheva and banned access to nonresidents. Following a protest by several hundred persons on the same day, members of the gendarmerie allowed nonresidents access to the relics. On October 14, the ROC Patriarch stated that granting only Iasi residents the right to venerate Saint Parascheva “was unparalleled in history” and that the holiday was observed “with sadness.”

On October 22, the ROC and Bucharest municipal government signed an agreement to allow only Bucharest residents to attend the Saint Dimitrie Orthodox celebration scheduled for October 25-27, citing COVID-19-related health concerns. On November 11, the Constanta County Committee for Emergency Situations adopted COVID-19-related restrictions on several types of public gatherings and banned persons from attending religious processions and pilgrimages outside their place of residence. Citing plans to organize a pilgrimage on the November 30 celebration of Saint Andrew, the Constanta-based Archbishopric of Tomis challenged the county committee’s decision in court, but on November 25, the Constanta Tribunal rejected the Archbishopric’s suit. On December 14, the Bucharest Court of Appeal issued a nonfinal ruling repealing regulations included in the October 5 decision of the National Committee for Emergency Situations that barred attendance of religious celebrations outside a person’s place of residence. The court explained in its ruling that only laws passed by Parliament could restrict religious freedom and that the decision of the National Committee for Emergency Situations was discriminatory, since it imposed additional regulations on religious activities compared with other activities that posed similar health risks.

In October, the Targu-Mures Court of Appeal rejected an application by the town of Darmanesti challenging the jurisdiction of Sanmartin, which according to the 2011 census is 99 percent Roman Catholic, over the cemetery, and it settled the property dispute by confirming Sanmartin’s ownership. The cemetery was the site of 2019 protests and tensions between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians over the construction of a monument and placement of Orthodox-style crosses on the graves of the predominantly Hungarian Catholic World War I soldiers believed to be buried there. On December 10, the Moinești court repealed a prosecutorial decision to dismiss the inquiry into the cemetery incident and ordered the Moinești Prosecutor’s Office to resume criminal investigations for property damage, incitement to hatred and discrimination, and breach of public peace. According to the Greek Catholic Church, the ROC continued to deny it access to the ROC cemetery in Sapanta, which had previously belonged to the Greek Catholic Church.

Baha’i leaders continued to seek alternative arrangements for the burial of deceased followers in accordance with their religious practices. According to the Baha’is, some burial practices of existing cemeteries were contrary to the Baha’i tradition, and they therefore preferred to have their own places of burial. Baha’is continued to be registered as a religious association and not as a denomination because they did not meet the minimum requirements for membership and activity. During the year, the Baha’i community reported it was able to perform a funeral ceremony in a public cemetery under the authority of the Bucharest Municipality according to its own traditions. Although officials of the cemetery initially tried to persuade the family to organize a ceremony with an ROC priest, eventually the cemetery allowed the funeral to take place according to the Baha’i tradition and the deceased’s will, which Baha’is stated they regarded as a positive change compared with previous years.

There were continued reports of the slow pace of restitution of confiscated properties, especially to the Greek Catholic Church and the Jewish community. NAPR, the government agency responsible for overseeing the restitution process, reported the SRC had approved 26 requests for the restitution of “immovable properties” (land or buildings) to religious denominations, approved compensation in 57 cases, and rejected 500 other claims during the year, compared with 14 requests for restitution, 57 approved compensations cases, and 474 rejected claims in 2019. All the claims were submitted before the 2006 deadline. In 13 cases, the filers withdrew their claims. According to data provided by NAPR, the number of cases the SRC reviewed increased from 777 in 2019 to 816.

According to NAPR, religious denominations appealed 62 decisions the SRC submitted to the courts during the year, compared with 63 in 2019. The Roman Catholic Church made five appeals (four in 2019); the ROC made 12 (24 in 2019); the Greek Catholics made 16 (18 in 2019); the Evangelical Augustinian Church made six (four in 2018); and the Jewish community made seven (10 in 2019). Information concerning court decisions on these cases was unavailable.

During the year, NAPR reviewed 557 claims submitted by the Greek Catholic Church, compared with 335 claims in 2019, but it did not restore any property to the Church or grant it compensation in any cases. Greek Catholic Church officials reported that NAPR rejected all of their claims, mostly because the properties now belonged to the ROC and were subject to a different law, making restitution possible only through a joint commission representing the two Churches and based on “the will of the believers from the communities that possess these properties.” During the Communist regime, all places of worship and parish houses were transferred to the ROC, and most other properties (land and buildings) to the state. According to Greek Catholic officials, there was no progress on forming a joint commission by year’s end, a request the Greek Catholic Church made 18 years ago.

The Greek Catholic Church continued to report delays on restitution lawsuits. Church representatives stated there were no court decisions on Greek Catholic restitution cases again during the year and that in several cases, local government committees in charge of transferring the ownership of certain lands to the Greek Catholic Church following a restitution decision failed to do so.

ACUM continued to request that the government create an entity to combat religious discrimination. In 2019, ACUM sent a letter to the President and Prime Minister making the request and stating that 30 years after the fall of the Communist regime, the Greek Catholic Church continued to be the victim of religious persecution that began in the 1940s. According to ACUM, 90 percent of its churches and assets confiscated during the Communist regime had

not been returned; the ROC, via its media and communication channels, continued to campaign against Greek Catholics; Greek Catholic students were pressured to take ROC religion classes; history textbooks and academic publications distorted or minimized the history of the Greek Catholic Church; commemorations honoring important leaders from the country's history who were Greek Catholic deliberately overlooked those leaders' religious affiliation; and the ROC had not asked for forgiveness for Securitate collaborators who jailed, tortured, and killed Greek Catholic priests who refused to convert to the Romanian Orthodox faith. The government had not responded to the letter by year's end.

Restitution of a property in Bixad, previously restored to the Greek Catholic Church by the government and confirmed by earlier court decisions, continued to be delayed in light of a revived claim for the property by the Satu Mare County Council filed in 2016. The case remained pending at year's end.

Although implementing regulations to officially prioritize property restitution cases for Holocaust survivors remained pending, NAPR approved priority status for 163 such applications. Since the passage of the legislation, NAPR had awarded compensation to Holocaust survivors in 91 cases, rejected the claims in nine cases, and not issued a decision in 63 cases by year's end.

The SRC approved 21 pending claims from previous years by the Jewish community— all through compensation — and rejected 45 others, compared with 21 during the same period in 2019. In nine other cases, compared with 10 in 2019, claimants withdrew their requests. Religious groups said it was difficult to obtain required documentation from the National Archives demonstrating proof of ownership in time to meet the 120-day deadline to submit an appeal. The Caritatea Foundation stated the SRC continued to avoid assuming responsibility for restitution and preferred to pass decisions on to the courts, reportedly to avoid being potentially charged with making decisions on illegal claims. The foundation also continued to state the claims procedure was overly bureaucratic and unreasonable, in particular because the SRC often requested the submission of numerous additional documents, which sometimes were found only in government-managed archives, giving Jewish claimants insufficient time to meet the deadline for document submission. Caritatea stated access to government-managed archives holding the required documents for the restitution process remained difficult.

According to the Caritatea Foundation, as of December 14, the NCREC issued 63 final approvals on decisions during the year. Caritatea stated it challenged 40 of these decisions because the compensation amounts awarded were significantly lower than the value of confiscated property. As of mid-December, 99 decisions were pending final approval, of which 33 had been issued before 2013, according to Caritatea.

According to the Transylvanian Diocese of the Reformed Church, delays continued in addressing its property restitution lawsuits. According to the diocese, over the past 15 years, the SRC had reviewed claims concerning 461 of its 835 properties confiscated during the Communist era. The diocese reported that since 2018, the SRC had rejected restitution claims on buildings previously owned by schools under the authority of the Reformed Church. According to the diocese, the SRC said land records, some dating from the 19th century, listed the schools, not the Reformed Church, as rightful owners. According to data provided by NAPR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, since 2002 the SRC had reviewed 912 of the 1,191 claims submitted by the Reformed Church and had approved 512 requests for compensation or restitution in kind.

The Reformed Church said the government continued to reject its restitution claims on the grounds the entities registered as the former property owners were not the contemporary churches. Church leaders said the Communist regime had dismantled the former church entities while confiscating their property, meaning the former property owners no longer existed as such, but the contemporary churches, as the successors to the dismantled churches, were in effect the same entities whose property the Communist regime had seized. Twenty claims submitted by the Roman Catholic Church were resolved as of year's end, compared with 14 in 2019. The government granted compensation or restitution in kind in five cases and denied 13 claims, compared with eight and six claims, respectively, in 2019. The government reviewed 38 claims submitted by the Reformed Church and denied 19 others, compared with six and four claims, respectively, in 2019.

During the year, nearly 90 percent of schoolchildren continued to take religion classes offered by the ROC. According to some NGOs and parents' associations, this enrollment continued to be the result of pressure by the ROC, as well as the failure of school directors to offer parents alternatives to religion classes.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church reported that following a decision by the National Council for Combating Discrimination, confirmed in June by the High Court of Cassation and Justice, the Faculty of Medical Science and Pharmacy in Iasi exempted Seventh-day Adventist students from taking exams on Saturday. The Church reported, however, that the Body of Expert and Licensed Accountants of Romania continued to schedule exams on Saturdays without providing the option for Seventh-day Adventist students to take the exams on another day.

Religious groups reported military chaplains continued to be ROC priests, with the exceptions of one Roman Catholic priest and one pastor from the Evangelical Alliance.

According to the government-established Wiesel Institute and the NGO Center for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism in Romania (MCA), prosecution of anti-Semitic speech and Holocaust denial continued to be infrequent. The MCA stated that throughout the years, individuals who engaged in anti-Semitic acts were not held legally accountable and said law enforcement failed to prosecute those who committed various acts of vandalism directed against cemeteries, synagogues, and memorials. Statistics released by the government for the first half of the year

showed that the national-level Prosecutor General’s Office had 53 unresolved cases, which also involved fascist speech, compared with 42 during the same period in 2019. According to the Wiesel Institute, many of the cases included anti-Semitic elements. Of those cases, the office concluded indictments or plea bargains in two cases and dismissed 10 cases; no information was available on the nature of the cases. On October 20, the Prosecutor’s Office attached to the Bucharest Court of Appeal dropped a 2014 case against the self-declared leader of the anti-Semitic Legionnaire Movement, stating there was no public interest in prosecuting the suspect and that his behavior had a limited impact and did not lead to violence or material damage. The charges were for the public use of fascist, racist, and xenophobic symbols, according to the Wiesel Institute. In 1940-41, the Legionnaire Movement adopted anti-Semitic legislation and carried out various anti-Semitic attacks, including a pogrom in Bucharest in 1941. The court was scheduled to review the prosecutor’s decision in January 2021.

In February, the standing bureaus of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies appointed parliamentarian Silviu Vexler to the honorary position of “High Representative of the Parliament for Fighting Antisemitism, Protecting the Memory of Holocaust Victims and Developing Jewish Life.” In October, Vexler said the Bucharest Military Court of Appeal had rejected a request to review a judgment issued in the 1940s that found the late general Nicolae Macici guilty of war crimes. According to media, the court found that there were no newly discovered facts or circumstances that could justify reopening the case. According to historians and members of the Jewish community, Macici coordinated the killing of tens of thousands of Jews during the Odessa massacre of 1941. During the October 9 ceremony to commemorate Holocaust victims, Vexler stated that the ruling of the Bucharest Military Court of Appeal represented a positive development.

The Wiesel Institute reported some local authorities continued to name streets, organizations, schools, and libraries after persons convicted of Nazi-era war crimes or crimes against humanity and to allow the erection of statues and busts depicting persons convicted of war crimes. According to the institute, several cities and towns continued to name streets after Ion Antonescu, the country’s dictator during World War II who was responsible for the Holocaust in the country, and some local governments refused to change the name despite requests from the institute. In June, the city council of Ramnicu Sarat in Buzau Country changed the name of Ion Antonescu Street to General Nicolae Ciuperca, who served in World Wars I and II. The local government in Cluj-Napoca, however, chose not to change the name of a street named in 2017 for Radu Gyr, a commander of the Legionnaire movement and apologist for anti-Semitism, who was convicted of war crimes for “contributing to the political aims of Hitlerism and Fascism.”

The Wiesel Institute continued to organize several online educational activities for students, informed the public about the Holocaust, and posted several teaching materials on the history of the Holocaust in the country on its web page. In June, the Ministry of Education posted on its website the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Recommendations on Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust, for teachers and educators to use when teaching about the Holocaust.

Historians and Holocaust experts said the general history curricula provided few mandatory classes on the country’s Holocaust history. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, the mandatory curricula for primary, middle, and high schools included explicit references to the Holocaust or other more general topics that allowed teachers to teach about it. A high school course, “History of the Jews – The Holocaust,” remained optional, and during the 2019-20 school year, 3,209 students took the course.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an interministerial committee established in 2019 and tasked with drafting a national strategy on combating anti-Semitism, xenophobia, radicalization, and hate speech held several meetings throughout the year and produced a draft strategy. The committee was coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and included representatives of the Justice, Interior, Education, and Culture Ministries, as well as the Wiesel Institute. On October 9, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released online for public consultation the draft strategy and an action plan. The strategy’s stated goals included improving protection for groups vulnerable to anti-Semitism, promoting societal tolerance and resilience against anti-Semitism, and continuing and expanding international programs to combat anti-Semitism. The main action points included developing a methodology to allow the identification of hate crimes; conducting surveys to assess Jews’ perceptions of their safety, and societal perceptions about anti-Semitism and xenophobia; assessing educational programs available to police and intelligence officers and the general population to combat anti-Semitism; and establishing postgraduate-level programs related to combating anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

Pursuant to its pledge to implement the recommendations of the Wiesel Commission report, the government again commemorated the annual National Holocaust Remembrance Day on October 9, marking the day when Romanian authorities began deporting the country’s Jews to Transnistria. To mark the day, President Klaus Iohannis issued a public statement paying tribute to the victims of the Holocaust and condemning contemporary anti-Semitism and hate speech. The Wiesel Institute held a wreath-laying ceremony at the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest, while Prime Minister Ludovic Orban delivered remarks saying that it was the country’s duty to pay tribute to the victims of the Holocaust and to counter extremism and fundamentalism. On January 27, President Iohannis hosted a public ceremony to decorate Roma Holocaust survivors, during which he renewed his commitment to combat anti-Semitism and preserve the memory of the Holocaust.

In August, the government provided additional funding to the Wiesel Institute for the development of a planned Jewish History and Holocaust Museum. In October, the Wiesel Institute launched a public competition for the design of the museum’s building and permanent exhibition.

In September and December, local governments of the Ilva Mare and Tarlisua Villages, located in Bistrita-Nasaud County, organized ceremonies to inaugurate monuments dedicated to World War I heroes and invited ROC members to perform religious services. Greek Catholic adherents criticized the events, stating that Greek Catholic priests were not invited, even though the overwhelming majority of the villages’ residents, including the commemorated heroes, were Greek Catholic adherents until 1948.

The State Secretariat for Religious Denominations provided funding for the publication of several books on the history and heritage of religious groups in the country, including but not limited to Jews, Seventh-day Adventists, and Baptists.

The government approved increased salaries for imams that went into effect in May. In previous years, members of the Muslim community and other observers said the government’s inadequate financial support, primarily in the form of salaries for imams, made the Muslim community vulnerable to radicalization and outside influence from countries such as Turkey, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.

The country is a member of the IHRA.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to non-Orthodox religious groups, ROC priests continued to prevent them from burying their dead in ROC or public cemeteries, or otherwise continued to restrict such burials by requiring they take place in isolated sections of a cemetery or follow Orthodox rituals. Representatives of the Christian Evangelical Church said such cases included them as well, although local observers did not always provide details because they said they feared ROC reprisals.

According to Greek Catholic leaders, the ROC, in conjunction with local authorities, continued to deny the Greek Catholic Church access to the ROC cemetery in Sapanta, which had previously belonged to the Greek Catholic Church.

On September 10, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights released a report providing an overview of data on anti-Semitic incidents recorded in EU member states between 2009 and 2019. According to the report, 16 anti-Semitic incidents were registered in the country by the General Prosecutor’s Office in 2019, compared with 13 in 2018. According to data provided by the Directorate of Criminal Investigations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were two cases concerning anti-Semitic bias in 2019, compared with seven cases in 2018.

As reported by the Superior Council of Magistracy, in 2018, 76 files with an “antisemitism motive” and “first instance case” as their procedural stage were registered in the courts’ files. Of these, 55 cases were resolved, and 34 persons were sentenced. The number of cases with the ‘antisemitism attribute’ registered in 2019 was not available at the time of the report’s release.

In June, the NGO Impreuna Agency for Community Development released a survey on how Roma and other ethnic and religious minorities, including Jews, are perceived in the country. According to the findings, 10 percent of respondents would accept Jews as relatives and 20 percent as friends; 44 percent had little or no trust in Jews; 13 percent would accept Jews as neighbors, 15 percent as residents of the same town, and 31 percent as residents of the country. According to the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, located in London, Romania’s Jewish population declined by approximately 87 percent from its 1970 level.

Some private media outlets depicted religious minority groups as a threat. In October, an article published by the online newspaper *activenews.ro* mentioned the purported religious affiliation of several government officials, stating they were members of the Baha’i, Unitarian, Reformed, Muslim, or Roman Catholic faiths and calling them “anti-Orthodox Talibans” for imposing COVID-19-related restrictions on religious activities. A posting on the outlet’s social media page promoting the article contended that one of the officials in charge of proposing COVID-19-related restrictions was a member of the Baha’i Faith. The posting characterized the Baha’is as a group that “wants all religions to disappear.” The Baha’i community reported several outlets published offensive articles about the Baha’i Faith and about the alleged Baha’i affiliation of several public figures.

Material promoting anti-Semitic views and glorifying Legionnaires, as well as messages promoting Holocaust denial and relativism, continued to appear on the internet. In March, the online magazine *Art-emis.ro* published an excerpt of a book claiming Jewish businesspersons had taken over through fraudulent means various Romanian companies, including a website that, according to the book, promoted pornography aimed at children. The book also said Jews believed they did not have a duty to act morally towards non-Jews. According to a study released by the Wiesel Institute in May, several articles published online stated Jews or the state of Israel were responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak and were profiting from the health crisis. One of the articles mentioned in the study stated, “Jews who own the world’s pharmaceutical companies” benefit from the COVID-19 outbreak, and another article stated COVID-19 was the result of an “Israeli bioterrorist attack.”

In September, media reported anti-Semitic messages were painted on a fence belonging to a relative of a mayoral candidate from the village of Domesti, in Suceava County. The messages included the candidate’s name, a swastika, and an anti-Semitic slur. The Suceava prefect issued a statement condemning the incident as an expression of anti-Semitism and asking law enforcement to open an investigation.

The Wiesel Institute reported that in May, two persons video recorded themselves placing a mask on a statue of Elie Wiesel in Bucharest and saying that he was responsible for spreading a virus that destroyed lives and had a catastrophic effect on Romanian history and society, implying Wiesel’s work promoting human rights and countering anti-Semitism was equivalent to the coronavirus causing the public health crisis. The Wiesel Institute filed a complaint with the National Council for Combating Discrimination, but the council did not issue a decision by year’s end.

According to media, in September, unidentified individuals shattered the marble panels of a monument dedicated to the approximately 7,500 Jews transported to concentration camps from Targu Mures, located in the northern part of the country.

Observers reported that many investigations of anti-Semitic acts were closed after law enforcement officers established suspects were either minors or insane and, consequently, were not responsible for their actions.

According to the Prosecutor’s Office, there were 18 reported anti-Semitic incidents in 2020, compared with 16 in 2019 and 13 in 2018. At year’s end, the Prosecutor’s Office of the Vaslui Tribunal continued its investigation of three suspects reportedly involved in destroying dozens of headstones in a Jewish cemetery in Husi in 2019. The president of the Jewish Communities stated the vandalism was the culmination of a series of anti-Semitic incidents that had occurred in Husi. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, law enforcement conducted an investigation to determine how the gravestones were destroyed; no one was arrested by year’s end.

In January, prosecutors closed a case involving the destruction in 2017 of 10 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Bucharest. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prosecutors dropped the charges against several underage suspects because one of them had diminished capacity and the others were too young to prosecute. Prosecutors established that the minors were not provoked by others and their acts were not motivated by anti-Semitism or xenophobia.

The MCA reported that online shops sold items, books, including *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and other publications promoting anti-Semitic messages.

According to Greek Catholic believers, some ROC archdioceses distorted the history of the Greek Catholic Church in their public messaging. They said that on ROC websites of the ROC deaneries of Bistrita, Nasaud, and Beclean, in the northern part of the country, the ROC presented historical details about several formerly Greek Catholic churches that the Communist regime had transferred to the ROC without mentioning the churches and some of their previous priests or their founders were Greek Catholic. In August, the Greek Catholic Bishop of Cluj-Gherla, Florentin Crihalmeanu, stated publicly that ROC officials planned to dismantle and relocate a formerly Greek Catholic church located in the Nicula Monastery that had belonged to the Greek Catholic Church before the Communist regime transferred it to the ROC. Bishop Crihalmeanu stated that such measures were part of a deliberate plan to delete historical traces of the Greek Catholic Church. A spokesperson of the ROC Archbishopric of Cluj published a statement saying that the church would be consolidated and subjected to a “rational rebuilding process.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to advocate for improved property restitution processes. The Ambassador met with government officials to highlight the importance of religious freedom, particularly in light of reports that some reactions to the pandemic had contributed to a lack of religious tolerance.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to hold meetings with Muslim and Jewish community leaders to discuss ways of promoting religious diversity and curbing religious discrimination. Embassy officers also continued to meet with ROC officials to discuss issues of religious freedom and tolerance, in particular encouraging the Church to reach out to other religious communities to jointly address social issues.

In January, the Ambassador participated in an event with the Federation of Jewish Communities commemorating the 1941 Bucharest pogrom. In October, at a ceremony for National Holocaust Commemoration Day held in Bucharest, a senior embassy official spoke about the importance of Holocaust remembrance and education and laid a wreath. Throughout the spring, embassy officials participated in a series of virtual discussions with high school students from around the country, which included the topic of religious freedom.

Using social media, the embassy emphasized respect for religious freedom, stressed the importance of combating anti-Semitism, and paid tribute to Holocaust victims. In June, for example, the embassy posted Facebook messages about the anniversary of the 1941 Iasi pogrom and the deportations of Jews from Northern Transylvania. The embassy also helped organize and sponsored the annual Elie Wiesel Study Tour in July, which provided students the opportunity to attend several online classes and to understand the political, social, and cultural forces that created the Holocaust.

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