

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

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor  
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

**ROMANIA**

**Section I. Freedom of Religion**

The Constitution provides for religious freedom, and the Government generally does not impede the observance of religious belief; however, several denominations continued to make credible complaints that low level government officials and Romanian Orthodox clergy impeded their efforts at proselytizing. Members of religious communities not officially recognized by the Government accused government officials of harassment again during 1998 and the first half of 1999--allegations denied by the Government.

Under the provisions of a 1948 decree, the Government recognizes 15 religions, all of them registered before 1990; only the clergy of these recognized religions are eligible to receive state support. Recognized religions have the right to establish schools, teach religion in the public schools, receive funds to build churches, pay clergy salaries and subsidize their housing expenses, access religious programming on radio and television, apply for broadcasting licenses for denominational frequencies, and enjoy tax-exempt status. The number of adherents each religion had in the last census determines the proportion of the budget each recognized religion receives. Representatives of minority religious groups dispute the 1992 census results, claiming that census takers in some cases argued with citizens over their religious affiliation or simply assigned an affiliation in some cases even without inquiring about religious affiliation.

The Government requires religious groups to register and establishes the criteria for registration. In order to be recognized as a religion, groups must register with the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs and present a list with the names, age, identity card numbers, addresses, and signatures of their followers. The State Secretary of Religions and the President must approve all registration applications. Representatives of religious groups that sought to register after 1990 allege that the registration process is arbitrary, changeable, and unduly influenced by the Romanian Orthodox Church. Applicants assert that they do not receive clear instructions concerning the requirements and allege that often the time frame in which a decision on their application has to be made is not respected by the State Secretary of Religions.

The Government registers religious groups that it does not recognize as "independent religions" either as religious and charitable foundations or as cultural associations. The State Secretariat for Religious Affairs reports that it has licensed 385 religious and charitable foundations, as well as cultural organizations, under 2 1924 laws on juridical entities, thereby entitling them to juridical status as well as to

exemptions from income and customs taxes. According to Article 18 of the 1948 Law on Religions, Religious and Charitable Foundations, in order to be recognized as juridical, entities must request and receive approval from the Government through the State Secretariat of Religions. To qualify for this status, a religious group must have a minimum of five members, financial backing, and an organizational structure. The State Secretary is required to respond to those requests within 15 days. Upon receiving approval, the religious organizations have to register with the local courts. Local courts have the ultimate authority under the law to register religious organizations, but the courts frequently defer to the opinion of the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs. Several religious organizations have complained that, in most cases, the courts do not accept their registration without the State Secretary of Religions' approval. These organizations receive no financial support from the State, other than limited tax and import duty exemptions, and are not permitted to engage in profit-making activities. Moreover, religious groups registered as foundations or charitable organizations are allowed to rent or build office space only; they are not permitted to build churches or other buildings designated as houses of worship or to have their rites of baptism, marriage, or burial recognized as valid. The official registration of religious associations is extremely slow because of bureaucratic delays; in this regard, smaller religious groups have criticized the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs for its obstructionist tactics in favor of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Members of some religious minorities complain that the revised law on religions, if enacted, would not recognize their status as religious groups.

According to the Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Romania-Helsinki Committee (APADOR-CH), the State Secretariat for Religions monitors all religious activities that are not part of the 15 recognized religions. In 1999 the Secretariat asked all religious foundations and associations for an exhaustive description of their activities under the threat of revoking their licenses if they did not comply with the request.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is the predominant religion in the country. According to the 1992 census, about 86 percent of citizens nominally adhere to the Orthodox Church. The country has a secular government but the Orthodox religion, partly due to its size according to the 1992 census, receives the largest share of governmental financial support. In addition, only Orthodox religious leaders preside over state occasions such as the opening of the Parliament. The Government agreed in February 1999 to lend financial and logistical support for the construction of a new National Orthodox Cathedral, something it has not done for any other religious group.

According to the disputed 1992 census, the following historical religions (those recognized under the provisions of a 1948 decree) have the following numbers of followers: The Romanian Orthodox Church has 19,762,135 Orthodox believers (of which 66,835 are ethnic Ukrainians and 30,000 are ethnic Serbs); the Catholic Church of Romania of Latin Rite has 1,144,820 followers; the Catholic Church of Romania of Byzantine Rite (Greek Catholics) has 228,377 followers (however, the census was taken in an atmosphere of intimidation that equated Greek Catholics with Hungarians, not Romanians. According to reliable estimates, the Greek Catholic Church probably has between 500,000 and 750,000 members. The country's Greek Catholics were members of the Orthodox Church who accepted the four principles that were required for union with Rome in 1697, but observed the Orthodox festivals and many traditions from their Orthodox past.); the Armenian Rite Catholic Church has approximately 200 followers; The Armenian Eparchy of Romania (Orthodox) has about 4,000 followers; the Old Christian Rite Church of Romania has 23,634 ethnic Romanian believers and

31,914 ethnic Lippovan (Russian) believers; the Reformed Church of Romania has 801,577 followers; the Evangelical Church of Romania has 39,552 followers; the Lutheran Evangelical Church Synod-Presbyterian of Romania has 21,160 members; the Unitarian Church of Romania has 76,333 believers; the Christian Baptist Churches of Romania have about 110,000 believers; the Apostolic Church of God of Romania (Pentecostal Church) has 220,051 believers; the Seventh-Day Christian Adventist Church of Romania has 78,658 members; the Jewish community has 14,000 members, according to the Jewish Federation of Romania; and the Muslim community has 55,988 members.

According to the State Secretariat for Religions, most religions have followers dispersed throughout the country, but a few religious communities are concentrated in particular regions in the country: the Old Rite (Lippovans) in Moldavia and Dobrogea; the Muslims in the southeastern part of the country, in the Dobrogea area; most of the Greek Catholics in Transylvania but also in Moldavia; Protestant and Catholic Churches in Transylvania, but also around Bacau; the Orthodox or Greek Catholic ethnic Ukrainians in the northwest area; the Orthodox ethnic Serbs in Banat; and the Armenians in Moldavia and the south.

According to published sources, the following religious denominations are also active in the country: the Baha'i Faith, established in 1990; the Family (God's Children), established in 1990; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), which sent more than 100 missionaries to the country immediately after 1989; the Unification Church; the Methodist Church, established in 1990; the Presbyterian Church, established in 1995; Transcendental Meditation, legally registered in 1992; and the Romanian Association of the National Society for Maharishi Ayur-ved Meditation.

According to a 1998 poll by Metro Media, 3 percent of citizens claim that they go to church every day, 14 percent report that they go a couple of times a week, 39 percent say a couple of times a month, and 43 percent say once a month.

According to the State Secretary of Religions, 1,000 missionaries per year who enter the country as tourists can renew their residence without special formalities. They require only a formal letter of request from the religious group for whom they work. However, a representative of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints alleged that the State Secretary for Religions is often late in granting visa extensions. Consequently, many of the missionaries have to pay penalties for staying over 30 days without a visa.

Proselytizing that involves denigrating established churches is perceived as provocative. Individuals have the right to free speech under the Constitution, except for "calumny" against the Government. Although persons are legally free to speak about their religious beliefs, some low level government officials strongly discourage proselytizing. Representatives of some religious groups recognized only as religious associations have alleged that local officials, with the support of leaders of the majority religion, pressure them to refrain from speaking out. There seems to be no clear understanding of what activities constitute proselytizing. Therefore, an activity such as purchasing property may be permitted in one instance but forbidden in another as proselytizing.

The Government's approach to the building of places of worship by organized churches varies, depending upon whether the organized religion is one of the 15 recognized religions or not. Several

nonrecognized religious groups have made credible allegations that their efforts to acquire property, including getting building permits and other documents, have been delayed or impeded for lengthy periods of time by local officials. They further allege that this obstruction is encouraged by local Orthodox Churches (see Section II).

The law does not prohibit or punish assembly for peaceful religious activities. However, two different nonrecognized religious groups had complained in previous years that on separate occasions local authorities prevented religious activities from taking place, even when they had been issued permits. Nonrecognized religious groups have asserted that local authorities impeded efforts to acquire or construct properties for their use. On March 25, 1997, it became official government policy to restrict the acquisition of properties by any group, when the State Secretary for Religions sent an internal notice requesting prefects and mayors to refuse or to annul any building permit issued to any religious foundation and cultural association. Consequently, all the associations are now prevented from building places of worship.

The Government permits but does not require religious instruction in public schools. While the law permits instruction according to the faith of students' parents, some parents who practice minority religions complain that they have been unable to have classes offered in their faith at public schools. Teachers of religion are permitted to teach only those students who adhere to the same religion as the teacher.

The law provides that the State Secretary for Religions must approve every piece of religious literature for publication in advance. This gives the State Secretary de facto censorship power. Minority religious groups not recognized by the State allege that applications for permission to publish documents that challenge the majority religion often are delayed without explanation or never receive permission.

In the early 1990's the Government granted evangelical Christians and Adventists broadcasting licenses for radio stations in six cities. However, in late 1998, the National Committee on Audiovisual Affairs notified the six stations that their licenses would not be renewed when they expired after their 5-year terms.

The Government does not prohibit links with coreligionists elsewhere; however, the law requires that religions obtain the approval of such links from the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Religious leaders occasionally play a role in politics. For example, a monastery was the site and a priest a key moderator of negotiations between the Government and the striking coal miners in January 1999.

There is no law establishing procedures for restituting religious or communal property. Some of the properties in these categories, which were seized by the Communist regime, have been returned to former owners as a result of government ordinances or agreement of local religious leaders. However, religious minorities have not succeeded in regaining actual possession of the properties. In fact many of the properties returned by ordinance house state offices, schools, or hospitals that would require relocation.

The Greek Catholic community has been less successful than any other group in regaining its properties. The Greek Catholic Church was disbanded by the Communists in 1948 and forced to merge with the Romanian Orthodox Church. The latter received most of its properties, including over 2,000 churches and other facilities. The Greek Catholic Church, which suffered discrimination in years past from the Romanian Orthodox Church and the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, made some progress in 1998 in recovering some of its former properties. Since 1990 Greek Catholics have recovered a number of their churches. However, of the 2,000 former Greek Catholic churches and other facilities that were transferred to the Orthodox Church by the Communist regime, only a handful have been returned. The Greek Catholic Church has very few places to worship. Many followers are compelled to hold services in public places or parks because most of the former Greek Catholic churches have not been returned. Except in the Diocese of Lugoj in the southwestern part of the country, where local Orthodox Church representatives have reached agreement on the return of an estimated 160 of 2,000 churches, for the most part the Orthodox have refused to return to the Greek Catholics those churches that they acquired during the Communist era. The Government issued a decree in 1990 that provided for the creation of a committee made up of members of both the Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities to decide the fate of churches that had belonged to the Greek Catholic Church before 1948. However, the Government has not enforced this decree and the Orthodox Church has resisted efforts to resolve the issue. Talks between the two Churches continued in 1998 and the first half of 1999, but the Government has not been able to resolve the conflict between the two Churches (see Section II). In 1992 the Government adopted an ordinance that listed 80 properties owned by the Greek Catholic Church to be returned. However, to date not one property on that list has been returned to the Church. In August 1998, the Government adopted an ordinance on returning buildings belonging to ethnic and religious minorities, such as Jewish schools in Bacau and Cluj, and the Presbyterian Theology Institute in Cluj. The Government approved an ordinance in May 1999 restoring ownership of several buildings to various ethnic and religious minorities. An estimated 140 formerly Greek Catholic churches have been returned in the Banat region. In this region, the Orthodox Archbishop of Timisoara Nicolae Corneanu was responsible for returning some of the churches, including the cathedral in Lugoj, to the Greek Catholic Church. However, due to his actions, the Orthodox Holy Synod marginalized Archbishop Corneanu, and his fellow clergymen criticized him. In some cases, Orthodox priests whose families had been Greek Catholics converted back to Greek Catholicism and brought their parishes and churches back with them to the Greek Catholic Church. In several counties in Transylvania local Orthodox leaders have given up smaller country churches voluntarily. The Episcopal seat in Cluj was returned to the Greek Catholic Church by court order on March 13, 1998.

Several Protestant Churches have not received their properties back from the Government. Although their churches were not seized by the Communist regime (only closed), the Communist regime confiscated many of their secular properties, which still are used for public schools, post offices, and student dormitories. The Catholic Church is in the same situation, especially in Transylvania.

The Jewish community reported in June 1999 that 20 of its properties had been returned to it by government decree. This marks a substantial improvement in the situation compared with late 1998, when few Jewish properties actually had been restituted, although this was provided for in government decrees.

Several religious communities have regained ownership of some of their schools, hospitals, residences, and other properties. However, this sometimes has been quite disadvantageous. For example, the

Government returned to the Greek Catholic Church a former residence currently used as a library. Local officials assert that they have no funds to move the library and cannot vacate even one room for the Greek Catholics, who as the new owners, are obliged to pay maintenance costs. Similarly, the Jewish community has regained ownership of a theater for which it is now obliged to pay taxes and maintenance, while the operations, proceeds, and employee salaries are under government control.

The State Secretary for Religions stated that the Government does not have a policy of sponsoring or promoting interfaith programs. Nevertheless, several significant interfaith events that were facilitated by the Government took place during the period covered by this report. Most notable was Pope John Paul II's May 7-9, 1999, visit to the country, the first visit of a Pope to Romania. Over one-half million persons attended Papal events in the capital. The Presidency, along with the Saint Egidio community, and the Orthodox Church sponsored the 12th international meeting of "Peoples and Religions," which was held in Bucharest between August 30 and September 1, 1998.

The State Secretary organized together with the Association for Defense of Freedom of Religion an international seminar, "Freedom of Religion and of Convictions in a Democratic Society" on November 16-18, 1998.

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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

## **Section II. Societal Attitudes**

There are generally amicable relations among the different religious groups. However, the fringe press continued to publish anti-Semitic harangues. Most mainstream politicians publicly have criticized anti-Semitism.

Talks between Orthodox and Greek Catholic Church representatives over restitution of church properties continued during 1998 and the first half of 1999 (see Section I). These negotiations were suspended in the months before the Pope's visit. At a meeting on this issue held on June 10, 1999, Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Vatican officials made little progress during their discussions on property restitution. The Greek Catholic officials presented the Orthodox Church with a list of 230 properties, including 160 churches, that they would like returned. The Orthodox Church did not respond directly to the list but called on the Government to build new churches for the Greek Catholics. The parties agreed to continue local level negotiations and to meet at the national level in November 1999.

Pope John Paul II's 3-day ecumenical visit to Bucharest, the first visit by a Pope to the country, was received enthusiastically by over one-half million persons, including members of many religious communities. Over 600 clergy from both the Orthodox and Catholic communities participated in the Pope's May 9, 1999 Catholic Mass. However, in order to receive permission for the Pope's trip, the

Vatican had to make several key concessions to the Romanian Orthodox Church, including restricting the Pope's visit to Bucharest and avoiding the areas of the country where Catholics are concentrated (Transylvania, Cluj, Moldavia). In March 1999, several members of the Greek Catholic community protested the restriction on the Pope's travel to Transylvania at a meeting of the ruling National Peasant Party Christian Democratic. In March 1999, Senator Ioan Moisin also sent a letter to President Emil Constantinescu protesting the restrictions on the Pope's travel. Moisin claimed to be acting on behalf of Metropolitan Lucian Muresan of the Greek Catholic Church and blamed the Romanian Orthodox Church for this restriction.

Religious minorities have reported isolated incidents of discrimination by local authorities.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has attacked the "aggressive proselytism" of Protestant groups. Prominent members of society publicly criticized proselytizing. In April 1998, a group of Baptist missionaries was attacked by a mob in Cornereva until their van was rescued by police and escorted out of the area.

In spring 1999, the Emmanuel Baptist Church of Oradea tried to establish a sister church in Marginea and obtained all the necessary building permits from government officials. However, the Orthodox Church was opposed to the construction of the new church and responded with sharply negative articles in the press and lawsuits against the church construction. In April 1999, an Orthodox clergyman criticized the Baptists in a newspaper article, accusing them of "buying souls," promoting pornography and homosexuality, and desecrating graves. In May 1999, a local court agreed with the Orthodox Church's claim and prohibited the construction of the new Baptist church.

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

The U.S. Embassy maintains close contact with a broad range of religious groups in the country. Embassy staff, including the human rights officer, political counselor, and the Ambassador, have met with religious leaders and government officials who work on religious affairs in Bucharest and in other cities. Additionally, embassy staff members are in frequent contact with numerous nongovernmental organizations that monitor developments in the country's religious life. U.S. officials have lobbied consistently in government circles for fair treatment of property restitution issues, including religious and communal properties. The Embassy has a core group of officials who focus on fostering good ethnic relations, including relations between religious groups. Embassy officials participated in events such as Pope John Paul II's visit and the St. Egidio conference, in which Senator Gordon Smith also participated.

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