MONTENEGRO 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion as well as the right to change one's religion. It specifies there is no state religion and stipulates equality and freedom for all religious communities. The law prohibits religious discrimination and hate speech. On January 26, amendments to the law on religious freedom took effect, eliminating requirements that existing religious groups register to acquire legal status and that religious groups provide proof of ownership of certain religious property to retain title to it. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) had strongly opposed these requirements. Police clashed with individuals protesting the September 5 enthronement of SOC Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral Joanikije in Cetinje, resulting in what press reports described as minor injuries to approximately 50 persons, including protesters and police. The SOC said the protesters, who had the support of President Milo Djukanovic and key members of the government's political opposition, attempted to undermine its religious rights. Religious groups continued to dispute government ownership of some religious properties and the transfer of cemetery ownership to municipalities or other entities. The government again took no steps to resolve SOC and Montenegrin Orthodox Church (MOC) disputes over ownership of 750 Orthodox sites held by the SOC. After a public outcry, a teacher in Bar declined a government offer to become an acting principal at a school that had fired the teacher in 2020 for inviting her students to participate in a prayer service at an SOC church. At a conference on the Western Balkans in July in Slovakia, President Djukanovic stated that he recalled the 1990s, when "the Serbian Orthodox Church arrived before the army," and that "[t]hey followed the same path – first the Church, then the army and, in the end, they were responsible, among other things, for the genocide in Srebrenica." The SOC said the Ministry of Interior approved visas for clergy newly arrived in the country but did not address existing cases of clergy denied residence permits by the previous government.

Ahead of local elections in the city of Niksic in February, unidentified individuals defaced the Hadzi-Ismail Mosque with graffiti saying "Srebrenica," "Turks," and "Niksic will be Srebrenica," a reference to the 1995 genocide of thousands of Muslims at Srebrenica. The government, NGOs, and other religious groups condemned the vandalism, but there were no arrests. During the year, there were incidents of vandalism of an SOC theological school and a monastery, both in Cetinje, as well as reports of hate speech against Muslims and evangelical

Christians. In November, local news site *Berane Online* published an article criticizing the distribution of evangelical Christian literature and Bibles in the northeastern town of Berane. The news site quoted extensively a local SOC priest who condemned the evangelical literature and said the group's members were "demons who are nothing but wolves in sheep's clothing." Private individuals posted critical comments or disparaging material on social media about both the SOC and the MOC, for example, calling the SOC war criminals or the MOC a construct of the state.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed the government's implementation of the amended law on religion and general treatment of religious groups under it, details of instances of religious discrimination, rising religious tensions following the protests at the SOC Metropolitan's enthronement, property restitution issues, and relations between religious groups and the government. They also advocated religious tolerance with the President and other government officials, including officials in the Prime Minister's cabinet, the Ministry of Justice, Human, and Minority Rights (MJHMR), and mayoral and municipal offices throughout the country. The Ambassador and other embassy officials also met with representatives of all principal religious groups. After the defacement of the Niksic mosque in February, embassy representatives met with members of the Islamic Community of Montenegro (ICM), and the Ambassador met with the head of the ICM to express her concern and support. In April, the Ambassador met with senior representatives of the Jewish community to discuss their relations with the government, as well as the Jewish community's views on antisemitism. In May, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar at her residence, where she and other embassy officials discussed with leaders of the Muslim, Roman Catholic, Jewish, MOC, and SOC communities their general concerns, thoughts on the amended religion law, and ways for the embassy to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In November, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith Hanukkah celebration, where she and other embassy officials discussed increasing societal fragmentation and the need for greater interreligious cooperation with leaders of the Jewish, Muslim, MOC, and SOC communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 607,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2011 census, approximately 72 percent of the population is Orthodox, generally belonging to either the SOC or MOC, although the census does not differentiate between Orthodox groups. According to 2020 data from the NGO the Center for Democracy and Human Rights, the SOC accounts for

approximately 90 percent of the Orthodox population, while the MOC makes up the remaining 10 percent. The decennial 2011 census reports 19.1 percent of the population is Muslim, 3.4 percent Catholic, and 1.2 percent atheist. In addition, 2.6 percent of respondents do not report a religious preference, and several other groups, including Seventh-day Adventists (registered locally as the Christian Adventist Church), Jehovah's Witnesses, other Christians, Buddhists, and agnostics, together account for less than 1 percent of the population. According to the World Jewish Congress, approximately 400 to 500 Jews live in the country.

Survey data reflects there is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion: ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs are predominantly associated with Orthodoxy, ethnic Albanians with Islam or Catholicism, and ethnic Croats with the Catholic Church. Many Bosniaks (ethnic Bosnians who are Muslim) and other Muslims live in the northern towns of Rozaje, Pljevlja, Bijelo Polje, Petnjica, Plav, and Gusinje near the border with Serbia and along the eastern and southern borders with Kosovo and Albania.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion as well as the right to change religion. It guarantees the freedom of all individuals to express their religion in public and private, alone or collectively, through prayer, preaching, custom, or rites, and states individuals shall not be obliged to declare their religious beliefs. The constitution states the freedom to express religious beliefs may be restricted only if required to protect the life and health of the public, peace and order, or other rights guaranteed by the constitution. It specifies there is no state religion and guarantees equality and freedom for all religious communities in religious activities and affairs. The constitution permits courts to prevent propagation of religious hatred or discrimination and prohibits political and other organizations from instigating religious hatred and intolerance.

By law, it is a crime to cause and spread religious hatred, which includes publication of information inciting hatred or violence against persons based on religion, the mockery of religious symbols, which according to Humanists International is considered a common dimension of blasphemy laws, or the desecration of monuments, memorial tablets, or tombs. Violators may receive prison sentences ranging from six months to 10 years. If a violation is committed through the misuse of an official position or authority or leads to violence, or if the

courts determine the consequences are detrimental to the coexistence of peoples, national minorities, or ethnic groups, the prison sentence ranges from two to 10 years.

The criminal code prescribes a fine of between 200 and 16,000 euros ($230-$18,100) or up to two years' imprisonment for restricting an individual's freedom to exercise a religious belief or membership in a religious group or for preventing or obstructing the performance of religious rites. The code also provides for a fine of 600 to 8,000 euros ($680-$9,100) or a maximum of one year in prison for coercing another person to declare his or her religious beliefs. Any government official found guilty of these crimes may receive a sentence of up to three years in prison.

A law amending the religion law, which went into effect on January 26, changes elements of a religious freedom law dating from January 2020. The amended law removes the requirement for religious communities to provide proof of ownership for religious land or other properties held prior to 1918 and deletes the stipulation in the previous version that the government must generate a list of religious properties that it believed to be of disputed ownership, stating instead that property disputes will be settled in accordance with the existing legal code.

The amended law also provides that any religious community that previously existed in the country under a prior law enacted in 1977 may register and obtain legal status as an existing religious community, altering the requirement in the 2020 law that existing unregistered religious communities must register as new organizations to obtain legal status. The religious communities and religious groups that registered under the 2020 law are entered into a registration book of enrolled religious communities. Religious communities that did not exist under the 1977 law or register under the 2020 law and are approved for registration are entered into a separate book for new religious communities. Both books exist within one "unified register," established in April under the supervision of the MJHMR. Groups listed in either book have legal status, which gives them the right to own or rent property; hold bank accounts in their own name; hire employees; receive a tax exemption for donations and sales of goods or services directly related to their religious activities; and receive judicial protection of their community, members, and assets. Unregistered religious groups may operate freely with the right to practice their faith, including proselytizing and receiving donations. Unregistered groups remain eligible to receive financial or other assistance from the state through the MJHMR.

The amended religious freedom law recognizes the *waqf*, which are endowments made within the Islamic community, as a source of revenue for religious communities and a potential basis for property claims in court proceedings. Other than the changes pertaining to property ownership, the groups required to register to obtain legal status, and the status of the waqf, the religion law remains largely unchanged.

To register, a religious group must have at least three adult members who are citizens or have legal status in the country, provide its name and organizing documents, the names of its officials, address of the group's headquarters, and location(s) where religious services will be performed. The group must have a headquarters in the country and a name that differs from groups already registered.

There are 21 registered or enrolled religious communities entered into the Unified Register of Religious Communities, including five enrolled since 2020. Twenty religious groups are enrolled into the Book of Enrolled Religious Communities: the Serbian Orthodox Church (the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and Littoral of the SOC; the Eparchy of Budimlje and Niksic of the SOC; the Eparchy of Zahumlje and Hercegovina of the SOC; the Eparchy of Mileseva of the SOC, registered as four groups); the MOC; the ICM; the Roman Catholic Church (Archdioceses of Bar and Kotor, registered as two groups); the Jewish Community of Montenegro (JCM); the Christian Adventist Church; Jehovah's Witnesses; the Diocese of Podgorica-Duklja of the Orthodox Church of Montenegro; the Church of Christ's Gospel; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Montenegro; the Evangelical Church of the Word of God; the Christian Lighthouse Center; the Mosaic Christian Community; the Biblical Christian Community; the Community of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and the Baha'i Community in Montenegro. One new group, the Evangelical Church Crossroads, is the only one registered in the Book of Registered Religious Communities rather than the Book of Enrolled Religious Communities.

The government has agreements with the ICM, JCM, and Holy See that further define the legal status of these respective groups and regulate their relationship with the state. The agreement with the Holy See recognizes Catholic canon law as the Church's legal framework and outlines the Church's property rights. The agreements with the ICM and JCM have similar provisions. The agreements establish commissions between each of the three religious communities and the government. The government has no such agreements with the SOC, MOC, or the other recognized religious groups.

The law allows all religious groups, including unrecognized ones, to conduct religious services and rites in churches, shrines, and other premises designated by local governments, but it requires approval from municipal police for such activities at any other public locations.

The law does not provide for religious groups to file for restitution of, or compensation for, property confiscated during the communist era. Individuals and private entities may file such claims.

The MJHMR regulates relations between state agencies and religious groups and is charged with protecting the free exercise of religion and advancing interfaith cooperation and understanding. The MJHMR provides some funds to religious communities and oversees communication between the government and religious communities. The ministry is also in charge of drafting new legislation defining the status and rights of religious organizations.

The law forbids "the abuse of religious communities or their religious sites for political purposes."

The law provides prisoners the right to engage in religious practice and have contact with clergy. Prisoners may request a diet conforming to their religious customs.

The constitution recognizes the right of members of minority national communities, individually or collectively, to exercise, protect, develop, and express "religious particularities" (i.e., religious customs unique to their minority community); to establish religious associations with the support of the state; and to establish and maintain contacts with persons and organizations outside the country who share the same religious beliefs.

By law, religion may not be taught in public primary or secondary schools. The ICM operates one private madrassah at the secondary school level, and the SOC operates one secondary school, both of which offer religious instruction and follow the state curriculum in nonreligious matters.

The law prohibits discrimination, including on religious grounds. Offenses are punishable by a prison term of six months to five years. The Office of the Protector of Human Rights (ombudsman) is responsible for combating discrimination and human rights violations, including those against religious freedom, by government agencies, including public schools. Allegations of such

violations in the private sector are outside the jurisdiction of the ombudsman and must be litigated in court. The ombudsman may investigate complaints of religious discrimination and, if it finds a violation, may request remedial measures. Failure to comply with the ombudsman's request for corrective action within a defined period is punishable by fines of 500 to 2,500 euros ($570-$2,800). Government agencies generally implement the ombudsman's recommendations, although often with delays. If necessary, courts may enforce such recommendations.

The constitution exempts conscientious objectors, including those objecting for religious reasons, from military service. Alternative service is not required.

The constitution states that foreign nationals fearing persecution in their home countries on the grounds of religion have the right to request asylum.

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

Government Practices

On September 5, press reported that during the enthronement of SOC Metropolitan Joanikije, approximately 4,000 persons supported by President Djukanovic and including key political opposition figures, gathered to protest the location of the enthronement in Cetinje. The protesters opposed holding the ceremony in Cetinje, the historical capital of the country, with President Djukanovic calling the decision "just one of a series of events in which the state of Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church as an instrument of Greater Serbian nationalism is trying to humiliate and appropriate Montenegro." In an attempt to prevent the enthronement ceremony from moving forward, protesters used rocks, trash, and burning tires to set up roadblocks. The obstacles effectively closed all roads into Cetinje, forcing Metropolitan Joanikije and Patriarch Porfirije to arrive by helicopter and preventing some SOC clergy from attending the ceremony. Media reported that police used tear gas, flash-bang grenades, and rubber bullets – the latter which police denied using – to clear the crowd of protesters from the main square and the area near the monastery. According to media reports, 50-60 persons sustained minor injuries during the protests and were taken to the hospital for further examination, including 20-30 police officers. Opposition leaders and pro-opposition media criticized police for excessive use of force, as did numerous users on social media platforms who posted videos of the clashes, while members of the governing coalition generally praised the police response as restrained. The NGO Human Rights Action stated in a September 7 analysis that the government had

generally succeeded in ensuring respect for human rights, including both the freedom of religion or belief and the freedom of peaceful assembly. Following the protests, police arrested advisor to President Djukanovic and former national police chief Veselin Veljovic for what they said was attempting to violently break through the police barricade and destabilize police.

President Djukanovic, who called upon citizens to rally against the enthronement, said it was a "pyrrhic victory" for the government and the SOC and a disgrace not only for the state, but for the entire Orthodoxy. Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic called the protests "an attempted terrorist act." Following the enthronement, Metropolitan Joanikije in media interviews expressed gratitude to the government for ensuring he and Patriarch Porfirije reached Cetinje safely and stated that the SOC had made "maximum concessions" on the ceremony to prevent incidents from occurring. In light of protests against the location, he said, the SOC had decided to retain the venue but hold a smaller ceremony reserved for clergy only. Metropolitan Joanikije also said the incidents and divisions surrounding his enthronement were artificial and instigated by President Djukanovic, and that the SOC did everything in its power to overcome them. Prime Minister Krivokapic, and all parties in the governing coalition, accused the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of an attempted coup, stating that the organizers of the clashes in Cetinje were from the highest level of DPS leadership, "in cooperation with organized criminal groups." According to former NATO ambassador and political scientist Vesko Garcevic, the incidents were "a result of a clear weaponization and politicization of the Church on both sides."

On January 2, President Djukanovic vetoed the amended religion law, which parliament had passed by a vote of 41 to zero in December 2020. President Djukanovic justified his veto by citing the "open legal issue" of whether parliament had the authority to vote on the bill, given that it lacked the physical presence of 41 parliamentarians required to establish a quorum. Parliament then overrode the veto, and the bill became law on January 26. The SOC had vigorously opposed the registration and proof of property ownership requirements that the amended law abolished.

On April 18, Prime Minister Krivokapic announced he was prepared to sign a previously undisclosed framework agreement with the SOC, under the auspices of the revised religious freedom law, on a date to be determined. The SOC first proposed a draft agreement in 2012 but was unable to successfully negotiate its signature with the previous government. Prime Minister Krivokapic's announcement was followed by an immediate public reaction, with both ruling and

opposition parties calling for the document's publication. At year's end, the document remained unsigned.

In May, the online news site *Balkan Insight* reported that Andrija Mandic, a leader of the Democratic Front coalition and member of the ruling majority, accused Prime Minister Krivokapic of avoiding signing a framework agreement with the SOC. The Prime Minister reportedly proposed postponing signing of the agreement until October 30, the first anniversary of the death of former Metropolitan Amfilohije. In response, the news site quoted Mandic as saying, "This government and its prime minister didn't fulfill promises given to the Serbian Orthodox Church or our expectations, and they don't have our trust." Then-Bishop Joanikije called on the government to sign the agreement as soon as possible, stating, "It's a kind of political maneuver and cannot be classified as a well-intentioned gesture that would lead to longstanding tensions being eased." On May 30, the SOC's Holy Assembly issued a press release stating, "This government decision discriminates against the Serbian Orthodox Church in relation to all other religious communities in Montenegro."

In June, in an interview with *Euronews*, Prime Minister Krivokapic said he would sign the framework agreement but that "Certain legal elements defined by the agreement are not in line with Montenegro's constitution and laws." Concurrently, pro-opposition newspaper *Pobjeda* reported that the draft agreement discriminated against the MOC, stipulating that no Orthodox churches could be built in the country without SOC approval, and allowing the SOC, rather than the MOC, to claim continuity with the autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church as defined by the 1905 constitution.

In August, media reported that the SOC Patriarch Porfirije confirmed that he had forwarded the government's reply to the draft framework agreement to the SOC Expert Commission. Deputy PM Dritan Abazovic, responsible for reviewing the document, stated the revised framework agreement fully protected the country's national interests and would be made public once it becomes an official document. At year's end, the agreement remained unsigned. Religious groups other than the MOC said they were generally satisfied with the amended law, although they wished they had been included more at the discussion stage.

In May, Prime Minister Krivokapic told press that his government would not arrest any SOC clergy for violating COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings and that no one could prevent religious processions from taking place in Niksic on St. Basil's Day on May 12. Responding to questions about the government's lack of enforcement

of COVID-19 measures during Easter, Krivokapic said activities of a spiritual nature could not be subject to earthly laws. The opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) criticized the Prime Minister for what it said was his involvement in theological contemplations and favoritism toward the SOC.

Religious groups, including the Catholic Church and the ICM, said they continued to advocate clearly written laws to regulate religious property ownership and to raise the issue of restitution or compensation for properties, particularly places of worship or cemeteries, that governments wrongfully seized from religious groups or their members.

Catholic Church officials continued to state that, as one of the largest property owners in the country, it remained engaged in numerous property disputes with the government and the SOC. The communist Yugoslav government confiscated many of the Catholic Church's properties in Bar and Ulcinj, and the government had not restituted the properties or compensated the Church. Instead, according to Church officials, during the 1990s, the government registered some properties previously held by the Catholic Church as belonging to the SOC. Church officials also stated the SOC had designs on Catholic Church properties in Bar and Ulcinj. They added that after the SOC took over ownership and management in the 1990s of a cemetery in Ulcinj that had previously been divided into areas for Catholic parishioners, SOC believers, and nonbelievers, the SOC disputed the right of Catholics and nonbelievers to bury their dead there. The Catholic officials said the SOC had decided to permit Catholics and nonbelievers to continue burying their dead in the cemetery but that the response was not a permanent solution to the issue.

On October 15, the Office of the Cadastre and State Property Administration changed the registration of Cetinje Monastery, whose ownership was contested between the MOC and SOC, from the municipality of Cetinje to the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (the SOC). The Office of the Cadastre noted the property was incorrectly registered to the municipality because of a data entry error when records were digitized in 1996. The SOC stated that the decision did not give it any new rights, but only corrected the past mistake. According to the SOC, after the decision, the municipality of Cetinje retained ownership of the land on which the monastery is situated but it granted the SOC the right to use the monastery.

The DPS filed criminal complaints on October 17 in response to the Cadastre office's decision to register the Cetinje Monastery to the SOC, contending the

courts, not the government, should decide the ownership issue. On October 18, protesters, including MOC clergy and others who opposed the change in ownership registration of the monastery, gathered in front of the government building in Podgorica. MOC Metropolitan Mihailo attended the protest and called on authorities to resolve fairly the ownership of the Cetinje Monastery and register it to the state.

Commenting on the transfer of the monastery, Vice President of the SDP Nikola Duraskovic said Deputy Prime Minister Abazovic "must take responsibility for the decision of the Real Estate Administration by which the Cetinje Monastery is taken away from Cetinje and enrolled in the Church of Serbia," adding that Abazovic "repeatedly guaranteed that the property of Cetinje and Montenegro could not be endangered." The Democratic Front defended the decision of Koca Durisic, Director of the Office of the Cadastre and State Property Administration, saying "[t]he orchestrated chase of extremist circles, which tried to carry out a coup d'etat on September 5 and prevent the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije in the Cetinje Monastery, obviously has its continuation in the confrontation with Durisic, and only because he respected the constitution and existing laws of this country." Boris Muratovic, a member of the Executive Board of DPS, tweeted that attributing the change in registration to a clerical error was "lies and theft" and called the transfer a "classic occupation … under the direction of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the treacherous Government of Montenegro." On September 17, the local parliament of Cetinje supported an initiative signed by 600 Cetinje residents calling for the Cetinje Monastery to be returned to the MOC, which stated it had an historic claim on the property.

The MOC continued to be engaged in numerous property disputes with the government and the SOC. MOC officials stated that they had only two churches in the entire country, one in Kotor and one in Cetinje, in which they could conduct services, while the SOC used more than 750 Orthodox shrines. The MOC stated that the SOC and the government infringed on their religious rights by not allowing MOC members to use Orthodox churches built by their ancestors, because "they were illegally transferred to the Serbian Church, indirectly to the state of Serbia," following the absorption of Montenegro into the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes after World War I. According to MOC representatives, the government "protects this illegal property with police forces in favor of the Serbian church." They said that during the year, the government again took no action to resolve the disputes between the SOC and MOC over ownership of these religious sites.

On August 19, for the first time in 20 years, MOC Bishop Boris Bojovic presided over the Holy Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Transfiguration in Ivanova Korita to mark the Transfiguration of Christ. MOC priests were able to enter without incident. In previous years, police banned members of both the MOC and SOC from celebrating the Transfiguration of Christ holiday at the church, citing concerns about potential clashes, a prohibition that the MOC had protested. The SOC issued a press release stating it regretted that police had not reacted in time to "secure integrity of SOC's property and its right to serve the liturgy [at the church] unobstructed."

The ICM raised concerns that the past transfer of two Islamic cemeteries in Podgorica and Berane from the ICM to the municipality of Tuzi and the Berane utility company, respectively, were addressed in a manner that did not provide a permanent legal solution. The ICM said it received a significant share of its revenue from funeral services it provided for worshippers, but with cemeteries under the control of municipal authorities, local governments could exert significant influence over the revenue stream of the ICM. Officially, management of the cemeteries remained with the Berane utility company and the Tuzi municipality. Due to public pressure, however, neither took official ownership of the cemeteries, instead allowing the ICM to continue their operations.

In August, the municipality of Bijelo Polje completed expansion of a municipality-owned cemetery in Bijelo Polje dedicated to the ICM for Islamic burials only, using 165,200 euros ($187,000) it received from the government in 2020 to purchase 10,600 square meters (114,000 square feet) of land for the expansion. The ICM began burying their dead in the expanded space in November.

At year's end, the Basic Court (first instance combined civil and criminal court) in Podgorica had not issued a ruling on the status of a parcel of land that the municipality of Podgorica had granted in 2020 to the MOC to build a religious facility and which the SOC had contested, stating that it had evidence of its prior ownership of the land. In late 2020, the newly elected national government cancelled the transfer to the MOC, citing the contested ownership, and asked the municipality to cede a different parcel to the MOC. The Basic Court was expected to issue its ruling on the case by June 17 but did not do so. According to the 2020 proposal, the value of the land was estimated at 658,920 euros ($747,000), and the MOC planned to construct a 4,848 square meter (52,200 square foot) facility. In May, Podgorica municipal officials told media that they were looking for a new parcel that the municipality could grant to the MOC but they had not identified one by year's end.

On September 17, the local daily *Vijesti* reported that an unofficial text of the framework agreement between the government and the SOC included an article alluding to the possibility that Orthodox religious topics would be included in the public school curricula, as regulated by a separate agreement. The Center for Civic Education, Human Rights Watch, and Anima released a statement criticizing the proposal as unconstitutional in addition to favoring one religious group over all others registered in the country. On September 7, Metropolitan Joanikije had noted in an interview with the Belgrade-based *Politika* newspaper that it was the obligation of the SOC to advocate the introduction of religious education because the country was among only a few in Europe that did not offer any form of religious education in schools, particularly education covering the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Islamic faiths. In a November interview with *Vijesti*, when asked about introducing religious education in schools, Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport Vesna Bratic stated it was a "sensitive issue" and that discussion of the issue should occur after the signing of the framework agreement with the SOC. She added the ministry stood for "broad consensus" on the issue, both in the professional community and society writ large.

In July, *Vijesti* reported that Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports Bratic appointed Rada Visnjic as acting director of the Jugoslavija primary school in Bar, prompting public criticism, including from NGOs, politicians, and members of the public. Following public pressure, including from the youth-oriented NGO Juventus and opposition affiliated media, Visnjic told the press that she decided not to accept the position. In 2020, the same school fired Visnjic as a teacher after she invited her students to join her in a service at an SOC church to pray for a good school year. At the time, Visnjic's action was severely criticized by the government, NGOs, and the ICM, the latter stating it found the teacher's actions especially troubling because she was in a position of authority and did not think about the effect of her invitation on children of a different faith.

In March, the Office of the Ombudsman released an opinion stating that state-owned Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG) had discriminated against its employee, journalist Nevenka Cirovic, because of her religion. In her complaint, Cirovic stated RTCG had fired her due to her participation in the 2020 protest marches, or *litije*, against the 2020 religious freedom law. Cirovic did not return to RTCG.

The SOC said the Ministry of Interior approved residence visas for its new foreign clergy, but that old cases where the Ministry of Interior under the previous

government had denied residence permits for clergy were still unresolved. The SOC stated that these denials were based on discriminatory procedures that required work documentation from a registered employer, although the SOC was not legally required to register and was fully recognized. The SOC stated it had 100 legal cases open on priests who could not obtain public documents, identification cards, driver's licenses, or work permits or could not access public health services or schooling. The government granted the priests temporary residence status while they awaited a decision on their cases.

Several religious groups, including the Catholic, Islamic, and SOC communities, continued to express a desire for broader and clearer tax exemption rules and said they hoped to raise the matter with the new government. On May 24, the acting head of the Tax Administration met with Islamic, Catholic, and SOC representatives to discuss taxation and benefit issues for clergy and other members of religious communities. It did not announce any changes following the meeting or later in the year. SOC officials often stated that religious communities did not truly benefit from a tax-free status because they generally paid value-added tax (VAT) on all their purchases, and private individuals could not deduct donations they made to religious organizations from their taxes. In its September call for proposals, the government allowed religious organizations to access certain benefits as civil society organizations, including applying, as owners of cultural heritage, for government funding in support of cultural conservation and preservation and, as landowners, for agricultural subsidies.

The MJHMR continued to provide funding to some religious groups, which they could use for maintenance of religious shrines, educational or cultural projects, or social and medical insurance for clergy. Groups applied for funding to the MJHMR Minister, who made decisions based on the recommendations of a three-person commission that he appointed and that evaluated all funding requests. The MOC received 23,045 euros ($26,100), the ICM 40,084 euros ($45,400), the SOC 74,107 euros ($84,000), the JCM 18,000 euros ($20,400), the Catholic Church 10,000 euros ($11,300), and the Diocese of Podgorica-Duklja of the Orthodox Church of Montenegro 4,100 euros ($4,600). Recognized religious communities also continued to receive in-kind assistance from other government ministries and from local governments.

At a July conference in Slovakia organized by the NGO GLOBSEC entitled "Western Balkans: The key puzzle piece of the European Security," President Djukanovic stated that he recalled the 1990s, when "the Serbian Orthodox Church arrived before the army," and that "[t]hey followed the same path – first the

Church, then the army and, in the end, they were responsible, among other things, for the genocide in Srebrenica." He went on to call SOC ideology similar to "clerical fascism" and the SOC itself a "dangerous weapon in the hands of retrograde nationalism."

During a question and answer session in parliament on March 26, when asked whether he was willing to admit and accept that the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in which more than 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed, was a genocide, then-Minister of Justice, Human, and Minority Rights Vladimir Leposavic responded that he would admit it was a genocide once it was established unequivocally. He added that "[t]he issue of the qualification of the crime committed against Bosniaks in Srebrenica, as well as many other issues from the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, are still the subject not only of emotional actions and inappropriate reactions, but also of professional controversies." He said he would "not dispute the feelings of Bosniaks and Muslims who continue to perceive the crime in Srebrenica as their own, but also the tragedy and warning of all of us and for all of us." Several NGOs, members of the opposition, and members of the ruling coalition, including the Prime Minister, subsequently demanded Leposavic's resignation. The Reis of the ICM, Rifat Fejzic, responded to the statement on March 26, tweeting that "[i]f we in Montenegro do not know that genocide took place in Srebrenica, based on the decision of the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, and if that is the position of the government, then I am afraid that our path is not the EU."

In September, MOC Bishop Bojovic said the statement by Prime Minister Krivokapic referring to the "so-called MOC" and calling it a "nongovernmental organization" was an unprecedented attack on the MOC.

Speaker of Parliament Aleksa Becic met with Reis Fejzic on the eve of Eid al-Adha on July 19. According to media reports, topics of discussion included parliament's successful hosting of the Sixth Plenary Session of the International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace in July and the importance of messages of tolerance, love, and peace. Becic also sent a congratulatory message to all celebrating the holiday, calling for forgiveness, solidarity, and mutual respect for diversity.

Government officials expressed good wishes to the Jewish community on the occasions of Passover and Yom Kippur. On September 2, President Djukanovic sent his public congratulations on the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the JCM, stating the community was a very important stronghold of Jewish national

and cultural identity in the country and southeastern Europe. Prime Minister Krivokapic congratulated the President of the JCM on the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, stating that traditionally good relations between the government and the Jewish community were reflected through mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding. In October, at an annual conference of Jewish communities in southeast and central Europe, President of the JCM Nina Ofner Bokan awarded a medal to Prime Minister Krivokapic as a sign of gratitude for his support of the Jewish community. In his opening remarks, Krivokapic said he would do whatever was possible to ensure that the synagogue in Podgorica was built as soon as possible, referring to ongoing delays in construction of the synagogue, due to challenges from COVID-19 and changing project plans.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 20, authorities arrested Zorislav Lekovic after he carried a Chetnik flag down the main street in front of the mosque in Pljevlja and attacked Sabina Talovic, an activist of the Safe Women's House, and Belisa Pojatic, executive director of the Vitomir Srbljanovic Art Gallery, who were trying to film him. Authorities later sent Lekovic to the Special Hospital for Psychiatry in Kotor for treatment, after which the Basic State Prosecutor in Pljevja ordered his detention for 72 hours.

The Bosniak Party responded to the incident by saying that "The latest incident … in which Pljevlja resident Zorislav Lekovic provoked passers-by in front of the mosque, carrying a Chetnik flag, and then attacked two Bosniaks, is a continuation of the torture suffered by Pljevlja Muslims in the last year.... When we all remember the antifascist struggle and when we thought that the fascist and Chetnik movements were forever defeated, unfortunately, something is happening that does not contribute to the multiethnicity of Pljevlja and Montenegro."

The Bosniak Party stated that as of August 30, 2020 (the date of the previous year's national parliamentary elections), Muslims in Pljevlja lived in constant fear of individuals who disturbed harmony, telling Muslims they were not welcomed in Pljevlja. On November 27, Acting Supreme State Prosecutor Drazen Buric ordered the Bijelo Polje Higher State Prosecutor's Office to determine whether Lekovic had committed the crime of inciting national, racial, and religious hatred. The Bijelo Polje Higher State Prosecutor's Office had not made a determination by year's end.

On November 17, the Higher State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica issued an order to police to collect information on online hate speech made by the director of the Piva Hydroelectric Power Plant, Radomir Radonjic. Radonjic's Facebook posts included language that was anti-Islamic as well as anti-Albanian and endorsed convicted war criminal Ratko Mladic. In one post, Radonjic called ICM Reis Fejzic "Allah's Montenegrin." Reis Fejzic responded in a tweet that he "couldn't believe that there might come a time when state officials would celebrate criminals and call dissidents *Shiptars* [derogatory term for Albanians] and Ustashas [term for Croatian ultranationalist-fascist groups active from 1929-1945], Allah's Montenegrins…" The posts drew condemnation from members of both opposition and ruling parties.

Speaker of Parliament Becic tweeted, "I strongly condemn the hate speech of the director of HPP Piva, Radomir Radonjic. Any sinister nationalist views, no matter which side they come from, will never again defeat the spirit of civil and multiethnic Montenegro." Members of Parliament Slaven Radunovic of the Democratic Front and Dusko Markovic of the DPS, among others, also criticized Radonjic, who resigned from his position on November 19.

On November 10, in response to an unidentified woman distributing Bibles and evangelical Christian literature in Berane, local news site Berane Online published a story titled, "Ignore these people with a wide arc!" next to a photo of the woman, face obscured, beside her stand. The article stated, "certain religious structures have appeared in Berane that give themselves the right to abuse the Name of the Lord in order to promote literature and teachings that are harmful to the human soul." It quoted extensively a local SOC priest who condemned the evangelical literature as belonging to a "sect," and stated that the group's members were "demons who are nothing but wolves in sheep's clothing."

Private individuals posted critical comments or disparaging material on social media about both the SOC and the MOC, for example, calling the SOC war criminals or the MOC a construct of the state. In April, an individual posted a vulgar cartoon online depicting SOC then-Bishop Joanikije with Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport Bratic. Police investigated but were unable to determine the author of the cartoon.

On April 15, a group vandalized the SOC youth theological boarding school in Cetinje. The group approached the front of the school at approximately 2:00 am, shouting threats and breaking school windows and doors. After they were unable to enter the premises, the group set containers in front of the school on fire before

departing, promising to return. The group also broke windows on a vehicle near the school. On April 19, police arrested five individuals in connection with the incident, charging them with violent behavior and damaging and vandalizing a car. The former school principal stated the attack was the result of a negative public campaign by political elements close to the former government against the SOC.

On February 11, unknown persons defaced the Hadzi-Ismail Mosque in Niksic with graffiti saying "Srebrenica", "Turks," and "Niksic will be Srebrenica." The Hadzi-Ismail Mosque is the only mosque serving Niksic's Muslim community of approximately 1,500 persons. Dzemo Redzematovic, the Imam of Podgorica and Niksic, told press on February 10 that "[t]his is not an incident, this is a trend that has been going on for a long time. It started in Pljevlja, across Berane, now in Niksic. The state authorities should have found all the perpetrators by now." The government, NGOs, and other religious groups condemned the vandalism. There were no arrests or prosecutions of the vandals.

According to the SOC, on February 6, unidentified vandals stole the cross on the gate leading to Cetinje Monastery. The SOC, in publicly calling for the cross' return, stated that the vandalism had "dozens and hundreds of inspirers, who persistently falsely accuse the Church of all social problems and present it as the enemy of Montenegro." Police conducted a preliminary investigation but made no arrests.

The trial of Muslim politician Sanin Rascic in the Basic Court in Pljevlja, which began in December 2020, did not resume during the year. The Basic State Prosecutor's office in Pljevlja had charged Rascic with causing panic among citizens by making misleading statements about an alleged assault against him on the night of the August 30 parliamentary elections. The prosecutor said an investigation found the assault was neither by those celebrating the election results nor motivated by ethnic hatred and cited what he said were discrepancies in Rascic's account of the alleged assault.

In January, Chief Rabbi of Montenegro and Croatia, Luciano Mose Prelevic, told the NGO Balkan Investigative Reporting Network that "Antisemitism has never become or been part of the state ideology in Montenegro, so it has never taken root among citizens." In October, the Jewish community hosted the eighth annual Maher ("tomorrow" in Hebrew) Conference in the Adriatic Sea town of Budva, an initiative it said aims to strengthen Jewish communities in southeast and central Europe.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to meet both in person and virtually with government officials responsible for religious issues at the MJHMR and at local mayoral and municipal offices, including Cetinje and others, throughout the country, with officials in other ministries, including the Prime Minister's cabinet, and with President Djukanovic. Issues included relations between the government and religious groups, the government's implementation of the amended religious freedom law and the general treatment of religious groups under it, the seeming increase in societal and religious tensions, and advocacy for religious tolerance, particularly surrounding the September 5 SOC enthronement ceremony, and property restitution of religious groups.

The embassy used social media to promote religious freedom and tolerance, including highlighting and celebrating religious holidays, including Orthodox and Catholic Easter and Christmas, Hanukkah, and Eid al-Fitr, and commemorative dates, such as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and encouraging all to embrace and strengthen the country's multi-religious diversity.

Embassy officials had regular contact with representatives of all major religious communities in the country, such as the SOC, MOC, Jewish community, ICM, and Catholic Church, to discuss their challenges, concerns, and perceptions of treatment under the government and their views of the amended religion law.

Following the February attack on the Niksic mosque, embassy officials met with members of the ICM to learn more about the attack and to convey ongoing U.S. support for the ICM. The Ambassador reiterated this message during her March 10 meeting with Reis Fejzic. Other topics of discussion at the meeting included the treatment of the ICM generally by society and the government.

On April 1, the Ambassador met with President of the JCM Ofner Bokan and Chief Rabbi Mose Prelevic, to discuss relations between the JCM and government, as well as the Jewish community's views on antisemitism in the country.

On May 7, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith *iftar* at her residence, which was attended by leaders of the Islamic, Catholic, Jewish, Montenegrin Orthodox, and Serbian Orthodox communities, as well as members of the embassy. Among the topics discussed during the iftar were general concerns of the various religious groups, the amended religious freedom law, and ways the embassy could continue to champion religious freedom and tolerance.

On November 23, the Ambassador launched a series of engagements with leaders of the five country's largest religious communities, first meeting with Reis Rifat Fejzic. During the meeting, she congratulated him on his re-election, conveyed strong embassy support for the ICM in light of the incidents of hate speech on November 17 and 20, and emphasized U.S. government commitment to promoting interreligious tolerance and harmony.

On November 26, the Ambassador met with Metropolitan Joanikije and congratulated him on his September enthronement. They discussed the government's treatment of the SOC, and the Ambassador underscored U.S. support for interreligious tolerance.

On November 30, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith Hanukkah celebration, attended by President of the JCM Ofner Bokan, as well as other representatives of the JCM, the ICM, the MOC, and the SOC, to celebrate the JCM, discuss ongoing societal tensions between different political and religious identity groups, and call on each religious community to help foment greater peace and tolerance.

On December 13, the Ambassador met separately with Metropolitan Mihailo of the MOC and the Catholic Bishop of Kotor, Ivan Stironja. During the meetings, the Ambassador discussed with Metropolitan Mihailo the MOC's main challenges, including its relations with the government. The Ambassador and Bishop Stironja discussed the treatment of the Catholic diocese of Kotor and its engagement with the government.