

CZECH REPUBLIC 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The government continued to provide tax benefits and financial support to registered religious groups. Members of both registered and nonregistered religious groups were free to worship without government interference. The government took legislative steps to resolve long-standing religious communal property restitution claims.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Acts and expressions of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment included vandalism of Jewish monuments and cemeteries and opposition to the construction and opening of new mosques.

The U.S. embassy monitored the efforts of the government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims, and advocated for passage of restitution legislation. Embassy officials conducted outreach to religious groups, including Roman Catholic and Protestant groups, the Jewish and Muslim communities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The embassy supported the Immoveable Property Review Conference, funded by the U.S. special envoy for Holocaust Issues, and focused on outstanding Holocaust era restitution problems.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the Statistical Office, the population is 10.5 million. The population is largely homogeneous with a dominant Christian tradition. The 2011 census indicates 2.2 million people hold religious beliefs. Approximately 11 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 7 percent lists no specific religion, and 3 percent adheres to a variety of religious beliefs, including Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Eight percent of the population attends religious services regularly. There are approximately 3,500 persons officially registered as members of the Jewish community, although academics estimate there are approximately 10,000 Jews and the Federation of Jewish Communities estimates there are 15,000 to

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20,000. Leaders of the local Muslim community estimate there are 10,000 Muslims, most of whom are immigrants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The Department of Churches in the Ministry of Culture is responsible for religious affairs. All religious groups registering with the Ministry of Culture are eligible to receive tax benefits. Religious groups with second-tier registration are also eligible for government subsidies, although some decline to receive state financial support as a matter of principle and an expression of independence.

The law establishes a two-tiered system of registration for religious groups. To register at the first (lower) tier, a religious group must have at least 300 adult members permanently residing in the country. First-tier registration confers limited tax benefits, establishes annual reporting requirements, and requires a 10-year waiting period before a group may apply for full second-tier registration. For second tier registration, entitling a group to a share of state funding, the group must have membership equal to at least 0.1 percent of the population, or approximately 10,500 persons, and provide that number of signatures as proof.

There are 33 state-recognized religious groups. Only clergy of registered second-tier religious groups may perform officially recognized marriage ceremonies and serve as chaplains in the military and at prisons, although prisoners who belong to other religious groups may receive visits from their own clergy. Religious groups registered prior to 2002 are exempt from requirements for second-tier registration, such as minimum membership requirements. Although unregistered religious groups may not legally own community property, they often form civic interest associations to manage their property until they can meet the registration qualifications. The government permits this type of interim solution. Unregistered religious groups are free to assemble and worship.

The penal code contains provisions regarding hate crimes. It outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of six months to three years for public denial, questioning, approval of, or attempts to justify the Nazi genocide. The law also outlaws the incitement of hatred based on religion and provides for prison

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sentences of up to three years. The law designates January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Missionaries must obtain long-term residence and work permits to remain longer than 90 days. There is no special visa category for religious workers; foreign missionaries and clergy are required to meet the conditions for a standard work permit.

The Ministry of Culture permits nine of the 33 registered religious groups to teach religion in state schools. Although religious instruction is optional in public schools, school directors must introduce religious education choices if seven or more students of the same religious group in a class request such instruction.

The government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter Monday, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government continued to provide financial support to religious groups with second-tier registration and to sponsor religiously oriented cultural activities. The government passed legislation to resolve religious communal property restitution problems.

Religious groups received approximately 1.4 billion Czech crowns (\$70 million) from the government. The government divided these funds proportionally among the 17 religious groups that have second-tier registration and have elected to receive state assistance based on the number of clergy in each group. Approximately 1.3 billion crowns (\$65 million) was used to pay clergy salaries; churches directed the remainder toward church administration and the maintenance of church property.

The Hussite Church application for first-tier registration, originally filed in July 2010, rejected in October 2011, and resubmitted in November 2011, remained pending at year's end. Also pending at the Ministry of Culture were applications from the Ukrainian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church, Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator, Religious Association Unity of St. Kliment, and the Salvation Army.

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The Beer Church withdrew its application, filed in 2011. The government registered the Church of Faith in May.

The government continued to address religious communal property restitution problems. Jewish claims dated to the period of the Nazi occupation during World War II while Roman Catholic authorities and other religious groups pressed claims for properties seized under the Communist regime. Although the government returned most Roman Catholic churches, parishes, and monasteries in the 1990s, land and forests remained in state possession.

In November parliament passed legislation covering religious properties still in state hands. The legislation authorizes the government to return lands worth 75 billion crowns (\$3.75 billion) and pay 59 billion crowns (\$2.95 billion) in financial restitution for lands that cannot be returned, to be paid over 17 years to 17 separate religious institutions. The law allocates slightly more than 79 percent of the financial compensation to the Roman Catholic Church, and contains provisions for phasing out direct state support to religious groups over the 17-year period.

The government returned nearly all of the state-owned properties claimed by the Federation of Jewish Communities. The Brno Jewish community reclaimed a disputed property previously under the possession of the Ministry of Interior after settlement of a lawsuit. Another lawsuit in Brno concerning a property in the possession of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs was pending at year's end.

The Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, which received 300 million crowns (\$15 million) from the state in 2001, continued to support the preservation of communal property, educational programs, and community welfare. The fund contributed five million crowns (\$250,000) to 17 institutions providing health care for approximately 600 Holocaust survivors.

Local officials continued to challenge plans by small Muslim communities in Hradec Kralove and Brno to establish or expand mosques. The Islamic Foundation of Brno reported that local officials from the Christian Democratic Party publicly opposed the organization's planned expansion. The regional government provided funds to a group called Anti-Mosque in Hradec Kralove in 2011, but reportedly did not provide further funding in 2012.

The Ministry of Culture declined to approve the December 2011 request by the chairman of the Young Christian Democrats of Brno to cancel the registration of the Center of Muslim Communities, after the release of a video showing a member

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of the Muslim community citing the Quran and calling for violence against Jews. The ministry stated that only one person (the person shouting in the video) issued the call for violence, not the whole center. After the ministry's decision, police took no action against the individual in the video because the statute of limitations had expired.

The Ministry of Interior continued to counter right-wing groups espousing anti-Semitic views by monitoring their activities, increasing cooperation with police from neighboring countries, and shutting down unauthorized rallies. In general, public expressions of anti-Semitism were rare, and authorities vigorously pursued Holocaust-denial investigations and prosecutions.

The Ministry of Culture provided 2.8 million crowns (\$140,000) in grants for religiously oriented cultural activities during the year.

In May the government approved the 2012 Concept to Fight Extremism, which stressed the importance of implementing preventive measures, including specialized training for teachers and police. The concept paper included recommendations for the Ministry of Education on training educators how to properly teach students about the Holocaust and ensure texts are free of anti-Semitic and other extremist views.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice reflecting anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiments. However, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In April, Deputy Chairman of the Senate Premysl Sobotka and Lord Mayor of Prague Bohuslav Svoboda sponsored a march against anti-Semitism.

A small but persistent and organized extreme right movement included neo-Nazi groups with anti-Semitic views. Expressions of anti-Semitism also persisted among other elements of the population, including some small nationalist groups and certain Islamic groups.

There were no reported violent anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim incidents involving individuals. However, the Ministry of Interior reported nine anti-Semitic incidents during the year, a 50 percent drop from 2011. These included four incidents of defamation of a group based on nationality, ethnicity or race; four manifestations of sympathy for a movement aimed at suppressing human rights or freedoms; and

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one incident of founding, supporting, or promoting a movement aimed at suppressing human rights or freedoms.

In February an anti-Semitic blogger published an article accusing Jews of conspiracy and manipulation of the media. Representatives of the Federation of Jewish Communities, the Jewish Museum, and the Shoah Legacy Institute condemned the article in a joint statement. The chairman of the Green Party filed a criminal complaint based on alleged incitement to racial hatred. The Prague Municipal Prosecution Office rejected the complaint. Some observers expressed concern that right-wing politicians tacitly approved of the blogger's views.

Anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-Semitic attitudes, Holocaust denial, and the dissemination of Nazi propaganda characterized the activities of groups such as National Resistance and Autonomous Nationalists.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged the government on religious freedom problems and conducted outreach to religious leaders in the Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

Embassy officials encouraged government officials and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. They also encourage passage of religious restitution legislation addressing religious communal property confiscated under Communism. Parliament passed the legislation in November. The embassy emphasized the importance of restitution or fair and adequate compensation when return was no longer possible in pending cases regarding property wrongfully taken from Holocaust victims, the Jewish community, and churches. Embassy staff participated in meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the Federation of Jewish Communities on restitution matters. Embassy officials responded to individual requests for assistance from U.S. citizen Holocaust victims seeking compensation.

The U.S. special envoy for Holocaust issues and embassy officials met with officials of the Prague-based European Shoah Legacy Institute (ESLI) and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to monitor progress in fields specified in the Terezin Declaration, which appealed for governments to address problems relating to the welfare of Holocaust survivors, confiscated real estate, looted art, Judaica, and Holocaust education and remembrance. The U.S. Department of State funded and supported the Immovable Property Review

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Conference organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Forum 2000, and ESLI in November.

The embassy sponsored five interfaith dialogues throughout the country and organized an interfaith event in the Senate to foster understanding of minorities, including religious minorities. In addition, the embassy funded a film project documenting the lives of minority groups in the country, including Muslims. The films were screened in various cities throughout the country. The embassy also hosted an iftar for Muslims from the local community.