

MACEDONIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of religion and religious expression. It provides for equality before the law for all individuals regardless of religious belief. Five religious groups are cited by name in the constitution; other religious groups may register with the government to receive benefits equivalent to those received by the five named groups. The court in charge of registering religious entities accepted two applications and had not yet ruled on two others. In March a court convicted the head of the Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO) in his retrial for money laundering and sentenced him to seven months in prison, although it ordered his release after the verdict, crediting the time he had already spent in prison. The court also ruled the government could confiscate OAO land, valued at 140,000 euros (\$168,000), which the government did. The OAO remained unable to register as a religious entity. In November the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled the government had violated the OAO's rights by refusing to register it and ordered the government to pay the OAO a fine. The government did not retribute any previously-confiscated properties to religious groups during the year. The Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia (ICM) said the government favored the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), and smaller religious groups reported unequal government treatment as compared with the five constitutionally-named groups. Civil society and minority religious communities stated the previous government, which left office in June, politicized religion.

In March the ICM claimed full ownership of the complex where the unregistered Sufi Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) was headquartered. The Bektashi objected to the ICM's plans to renovate the complex and reported harassment by ICM-affiliated individuals. There were instances of anti-Semitic speech on social media, and individuals threw anti-Semitic flyers into the courtyard of the offices of the Jewish community. There were several incidents of vandalism or theft of property of Orthodox churches, one case of vandalism of an Orthodox cemetery, and one incident of looting of a mosque.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with representatives from government and parliament to discuss religious freedom issues. The Ambassador met with the justice minister to discuss draft legislation on hate crimes, including those motivated by religion, and the prime minister, minister of internal affairs, and the counterterrorism coordinator to discuss interfaith tolerance, the importance of

open dialogue, and partnering with religious leaders to counter violent extremism. The Ambassador also discussed these issues with the heads of the ICM and MOC-OA and with the head of the Methodist Church in Strumica. Embassy officials met with representatives from a variety of minority religious groups, including the Bektashi and Christian minority denominations, and with the country's Helsinki Committee and NGOs concerned with religious freedom. The embassy supported Holocaust education efforts and sponsored civil society and government representatives on visits to the United States for programs that included a focus on promoting religious tolerance. The embassy also funded a television documentary series that featured prominent religious leaders, academics, and citizens promoting tolerance of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the last national census, in 2002, an estimated 65 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian and 33 percent Muslim. The Muslim community includes a small number of Sufi orders. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Roman Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The Jewish community estimates it has 200-250 members. According to an April Brima/Gallup poll, 1 percent of the population identifies as atheist.

The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, and most live in the northern and western parts of the country. The majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and southeastern regions. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation: the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian, and most Muslims are ethnic Albanians. Most Roma, and virtually all ethnic Turks and ethnic Bosniaks, are Muslim, and most ethnic Serbs and Vlachs are Orthodox Christian. There is also a correlation between religious and political affiliation, as political parties are largely divided along ethnic lines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality of rights for all citizens regardless of religious belief. It guarantees freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their faith freely and in public,

individually or with others. It guarantees the religious identity of nationalities and communities in the country. The constitution specifically cites five religious groups: the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community. The law allows other religious organizations to obtain the same legal rights and status as these five groups by applying for government recognition and registration through the courts. The constitution states the five named religious groups “and other religious communities and groups” are separate from the state, equal before the law, and free to establish schools, charities, and other social institutions. The constitution bars political parties or other associations from inciting religious hatred or intolerance.

Religious organizations may apply to register as a “church,” a “religious community,” or a “religious group.” These classifications are based on group size, internal organization, and internal hierarchy. According to judicial authorities, the law treats these three categories equally, bestowing the same legal rights, benefits, and obligations on all of them. The government has recognized 35 religious organizations (consisting of 17 churches, nine religious communities, and nine religious groups). Once registered, a church, religious community, or religious group is exempt from taxes and is eligible to apply for property restitution for those properties nationalized during the communist era, government-funded projects, and construction permits for preservation of shrines and cultural sites. It may also establish schools. Failure to register does not prevent a religious group from holding meetings or proselytizing, or result in legal punishment or fines, but prevents the group from engaging in certain activities, such as establishing schools or receiving donations that are tax-deductible for the donor.

Skopje Basic Court II accepts registration applications and has 15 business days to determine whether a religious organization’s application meets the legal registration criteria. These criteria are: a physical administrative presence within the country, an explanation of its beliefs and practices that distinguish it from other religious organizations, and a unique name and official insignia. An applicant organization must also identify a supervisory body in charge of managing its finances and submit a breakdown of its financial assets and funding sources and minutes from its founding meeting. The law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. Registered leaders or legal representatives of religious groups must be citizens of the country.

The court sends approved applications to the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), a government body responsible for

fostering cooperation and communication between the government and religious groups, which adds the organization to its registry. If the court denies the application, the organization may appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the State Appellate Court denies the application, the organization may file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court, the highest human rights court in the country, on grounds of denial of religious rights. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization may appeal the case to the ECHR.

The law does not permit religious organizations to operate primary schools, but allows them to operate schools at the secondary level and above. The Ministry of Education requires sixth grade students and above to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content: Introduction to Religions and Ethics in Religion. According to the ministry's description, these courses teach religion in an academic, nondevotional manner. The courses are usually taught by Orthodox priests or imams, whose salaries are paid by the state. The Ministry of Education states all teachers of these subjects receive training from accredited higher education institutions taught by professors of philosophy or sociology. If students do not wish to take a course on religion, they may take the third option, Classical Culture in European Civilization.

All foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a work visa before arrival, a process that normally takes approximately four months. The CRRCG maintains a register of all foreign religious workers and may approve or deny them the right to conduct religious work within the country. Work visas are valid for six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent visa renewals are valid for one year. There is no limit to the number of visa renewals for which a religious worker may apply. Clergy and religious workers from unregistered groups are eligible for visas.

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

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: In March a court convicted the archbishop who heads the OAO of money laundering and ruled the state could confiscate OAO land, which the state did. The ECHR ruled the government violated the OAO's rights by refusing it registration and ordered it to pay the religious group 9,500 euros (\$11,400). A court approved the registration of two religious groups, while two other applications remained pending. The government did not retribute any

previously-confiscated properties during the year to religious groups. The ICM reported the government continued to block construction of a mosque in Lazhec and reconstruction of a mosque in Prilep. An unregistered preschool closed after the government investigated it in July and said it had carried out unauthorized religious activities. A school lifted a ban on the wearing of headscarves by students after intervention by the ombudsman. Smaller religious groups said the government treated them unequally, and the ICM said the government favored the MOC-OA. Civil society and smaller religious groups stated the previous government of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) politicized religion and interfered in religious matters. MOC-OA clergy participated in VMRO-DPMNE political events, and the ICM participated in support of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and Movement Besa parties.

According to various university professors, nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders, and legal and political analysts, religious differences continued to play a role in criminal and civil court cases. In March Skopje Basic Court convicted Archbishop Jovan Vraniskovski, the head of the OAO, of money laundering. The court sentenced Vraniskovski to seven months in prison and acquitted two other defendants. The court also ruled the state could confiscate OAO land valued at 140,000 euros (\$168,000), which it did. The court ordered Vraniskovski's release after sentencing based on time he had served in prison after an earlier conviction on the same charge. Vraniskovski was originally convicted in a money laundering case in 2015, but the Supreme Court vacated the conviction and sent the case to the lower court for retrial. The OAO accused the government of bias in the case and stated the previous government had ordered the court to "convict Vraniskovski at any cost," while his lawyer cited what he said were substantive and procedural irregularities in the case. These included the court's failure to take into account the recommendations of the Supreme Court to determine the origin of the acquired property and money, political interference, and the absence of a written verdict.

Separately the OAO had been awaiting a ruling from the ECHR regarding its application to register as a recognized religious organization, which national courts had denied on grounds that it could not substantiate the difference between its name and symbols and those of the MOC-OA. On November 16, the ECHR ruled in favor of the OAO, stating that, by refusing to register the OAO (commonly referred to locally as "the Church of defrocked Bishop Jovan Vraniskovski") as a separate religious group, the government had violated the OAO's right of assembly and freedom of religion and conscience. The ECHR further stated the government had violated the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Human

Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which includes an obligation to act in a neutral and unbiased manner towards religious groups. The ECHR ordered the government to pay 4,500 euros (\$5,400) in compensation and 5,000 euros (\$6,000) for court expenses to the OAO. By year's end the government had not paid either sum.

The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order, continued to await an ECHR ruling on its 2013 appeal to overturn the Constitutional Court's denial of its registration. The country's Helsinki Committee stated the ECHR had not yet ruled in the Bektashi case because it was reviewing the case with three others of a similar nature before offering a ruling. The Bektashi community reported an ECHR official had visited to discuss the case during the year. The government continued to issue visas to foreign members and spiritual leaders of the Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo).

In May Basic Court Skopje II approved the registration of the Church of Scientology of Macedonia, and the Home of Prayer religious group. Applications from the Christian Community in Macedonia and the Community of Muslims remained pending.

In August the OAO issued a statement alluding to the U.S. government's report on international religious freedom in the country for 2016, citing from the report the past imprisonment of Archbishop Vraniskovski and the Helsinki Committee's statement the archbishop was a political prisoner. It also cited references in the report to statements by various sources that religious differences played a role in criminal and civil court cases and references by religious groups that the government favored the MOC-OA.

The government did not reconstitute any properties to religious groups during the year that the state had previously confiscated, and religious groups, including the Muslim and Catholic communities, reported continuing problems with property restitution. For example, the ICM stated the government had only restored 15 percent of property the state previously seized, and that it was still seeking ownership rights to the Yeni Mosque in Bitola, which the state declared a cultural monument and seized in 1950. The Catholic Church continued to call on the government to return a property the state seized before the communist era in the southern village of Paliurci, where the Church wanted to build a church and a monastery. The dispute over the Paliurci property had been continuing in the courts for 10 years.

The ICM stated the government continued to prevent construction of a mosque in the ethnically mixed village of Lazhec by denying a construction permit because of pressure from local residents opposed to the mosque. The ICM also reported the government continued to block reconstruction of the mosque in Prilep, which burned down during armed conflict in 2001. According to the ICM, the government denied a permit to rebuild the mosque on the grounds that the Prilep site was a monument of culture under the government's jurisdiction. The ICM also said local authorities in Kriva Palanka opposed construction of a mosque there.

The MOC-OA stated the Municipality of Struga had not issued a decision on the construction of an Orthodox church in the village of Belica and that the Municipality of Tetovo refused to build a road leading to the city chapel. The application had been pending since 2013.

In July the Ministry of Social and Labor policy initiated an investigation into an unregistered Muslim religious preschool. During the first inspection, the ministry found that "both the children and two teachers confirmed that religious activities were part of the preschool's education program," which was not permitted by law. The ICM condemned the "abuse of children," and said it would work to institutionally combat what it called unlawful establishments such as that one. The preschool closed without further government intervention.

In September the Committee on Protection from Discrimination, a government advisory body appointed by parliament, and the ombudsman determined Muslim elementary school students from Ohrid were discriminated against for their religious beliefs and attire after being told they could not attend class wearing headscarves. After intervention by the ombudsman, the school lifted its headscarf ban and allowed the students to attend classes.

The ICM stated the government favored the MOC-OA by granting it unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge, funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches, and exclusive invitations for its representatives to attend government functions. The MOC-OA denied allegations of favoritism, but said such a perception might exist, since it was the largest religious community in the country. Additionally, the MOC-OA denied any affiliation with the outgoing VMRO-DPMNE government and stated it did not involve itself in politics.

Smaller religious organizations, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Church, Bektashi Community (Tetovo), and OAO continued to state the

government did not treat them as equals of the five religious organizations recognized in the constitution. For example, they stated the government excluded them from official events, such as official holiday celebration events or government building ground-breaking ceremonies, and did not grant them the same level of access to government officials. The OAO and the Bektashi said that, as unregistered communities, they often faced discrimination and intimidation.

Some civil society groups, such as the country's Helsinki Committee, and smaller religious communities, including the Protestant Evangelical Church and the Bektashi, stated the previous VMRO-DPMNE government interfered in religious matters and often politicized religion. According to media reporting, MOC-OA clergy participated in progovernment rallies and political functions, including protests, before the formation of the new government, which assumed office on June 1, and in campaign events for the VMRO-DPMNE before October local elections. Other political parties and civil society organizations stated the MOC-OA violated the government's ban on interference by religious communities in state affairs. Media also reported the ICM participated in events in support of DUI, an ethnic Albanian party, and, to a lesser degree, the Movement Besa party. A June field research report on the levels of religious tolerance, jointly conducted by the ZIP Institute, the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, and Civica Mobilitas, cited abuses of religious discourse and politicization of religious components, primarily by the MOC-OA and the ICM. In addition, a joint survey by the Institute for Political Research Skopje and Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation concluded that political parties, especially Movement Besa, used religion for political purposes.

A Muslim doctor from Gostivar reported border police continued to subject him to harassment and undue scrutiny, most recently in September, because of his long beard and the short pants he wore for religious reasons, which delayed his border crossings whenever he entered and exited the country.

From June to July, following the lapse of the government's memorandum of understanding with Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs facilitated negotiations between the ICM and the Saudi government to allow pilgrims to obtain visas to travel on the Hajj.

During a meeting with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in July, representatives of the Catholic Church voiced concerns about procedural delays in obtaining visas and residence permits for foreign clergy.

The CRRCG reported it issued letters of consent to all foreign missionaries and clerics who submitted requests for religious work during the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Bektashi continued to report to the police harassment by ICM-affiliated occupants of the Harabati Baba *teqe* (shrine) compound in Tetovo. In March the ICM claimed full ownership of the compound, and announced plans for its renovation in partnership with the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency. Bektashi representatives expressed concerns the renovation of the complex would displace them from the compound entirely. Bektashi representatives reported they and visitors to the complex were often verbally harassed, and told to leave the compound. The Bektashi could not assert a claim of ownership to the compound because they remained unregistered.

There were instances of anti-Semitic speech in social and print media. In one instance, individuals stated on social media that a prominent American Jewish businessman had collaborated with the Nazis in the extermination of Jews during World War II. In another, a January edition of the weekly *Republika* described the same businessman as a “Nazi Jew” in a piece titled “The Divine Lucifer.” In March the Jewish community reported that flyers with anti-Semitic content, including swastikas and the phrase “Jews Out,” were thrown in the yard of its association’s headquarters.

The Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia, an NGO, continued to work with the Ministry of Education to implement Holocaust education and Jewish history programs and promote interfaith cooperation. The project provided teachers with tools to teach secondary school students about the Holocaust and Jewish history. The Holocaust Memorial Center, a museum overseen by members of the Jewish community and the government that commemorates the 7,200 Jews sent to the Treblinka death camp, also conducted Holocaust education programs in partnership with the Ministry of Education and organized a number of regional seminars on Jewish culture, tolerance, and respect for diversity with Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Greece.

A Brima/Gallup poll published in April found 84 percent of citizens considered themselves to be “religious” and 10 percent “not religious.” The survey, conducted between November 25 and December 2, 2016, included 1,210 respondents aged 15 and above.

There were reports of vandalism at religious sites. MOC-OA reported acts of vandalism of Orthodox churches, including an attempt in February to burn the door of a church in Saraj. In September individuals threw stones at an Orthodox church in Cair, and unknown vandals looted a mosque and an Orthodox church in Struga. In January and November unknown perpetrators stole the bells of the Orthodox churches in Kochani and Saraj, respectively. ICM officials said they did not want to give small-scale incidents too much publicity so as not to fuel extremism or invite more trouble. In July unknown perpetrators spray painted and broke tombstones at the Orthodox cemetery in the Skopje village of Ljuboten. The ICM condemned the vandalism as “a cowardly act of provocation” intended to disturb cohabitation.

The MOC-OA reported more than a dozen robberies of Orthodox churches in various towns during the year, most often involving money from church collections. Police also reported a theft of money in September at a mosque in Struga.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials met with government and parliamentary representatives, including the speaker, to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. In June the Ambassador met with then-Minister of Justice Bilen Saliji to discuss draft legislation on hate speech and hate crimes, including those based on religion. The Ambassador also discussed interfaith tolerance, the importance of open dialogue, and countering religiously based violent extremism with senior government officials, including Prime Minister Zaev, Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski, and new National Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism Borche Petrevski.

In June the Ambassador hosted an iftar with religious leaders, local and central government representatives, officials engaged in combating religiously-based violent extremism, and civil society activists. In his remarks the Ambassador expressed support of religious tolerance and religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with the heads of the ICM and MOC-OA to discuss religious freedom issues, including charges of political interference and favoritism toward certain religious groups and efforts to combat violent extremism related to religion. In June the Ambassador met with the head of the Methodist church in Strumica to convey a public message of support for tolerance and respect for religious diversity. In June a delegation from the

Department of State and embassy officials met with ICM Head Sulejman Rexhepi and imams in Skopje and Tetovo to discuss countering religiously-based violent extremism and ways of promoting religious tolerance. Embassy officials met with representatives from smaller religious communities, such as the Bektashi, Christian Evangelicals, and Mormons, and civil society, including the country's Helsinki Committee and the NGO Balkans Institute for Faith and Culture, to discuss ways to further religious freedom and tolerance. These included the organization of a regional conference in October to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which brought together religious representatives, scholars, and journalists.

In March a Department of State official visited Skopje for meetings with government ministries, the ICM, MOC, religious minorities, academics, and analysts to discuss religious freedom in the country. Topics discussed included registration issues, property restitution, religious instruction in schools, government respect for and treatment of minority religious groups, and interfaith dialogue.

The embassy supported the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia with a grant to fund a seminar for teachers on Sephardic Jewish history and the Holocaust. Forty-five primary and secondary school teachers of different ethnicities from all over the country and the region learned how to teach their students about Jewish life before the war and the Holocaust, using digital technology and social media. The seminar also provided an opportunity to share best practices for implementation of Holocaust education in schools.

The embassy covered the cost of three participants to attend an international summer academy focused on Holocaust education, 20th century Jewish history, and civil society in Budapest and Belgrade.

The embassy sponsored the participation of seven community and civil society leaders, local government representatives, and a representative from the Ministry of Interior in a visit to the United States concerning projects focusing on community-based responses to violent extremism, including the promotion of religious tolerance.

The embassy partnered with a team of journalists and film professionals to produce and broadcast a documentary series that presented a tolerant and multicultural account of the country's ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. The show, *On the Same Side*, comprised 30-minute episodes containing Macedonian and

Albanian dual-language content. It featured prominent members of the religious community, academics, and citizens from locations throughout the country. The series, in its second season, aired on Sitel, the largest privately owned television station in the country.