

MOLDOVA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects the right of individuals to practice their religion and states religious groups are autonomous. The law cites the “exceptional importance” of Orthodox Christianity. According to minority religious groups and civil society leaders, authorities continued to provide preferential treatment to the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC). On several occasions, President Igor Dodon expressed his support for Orthodox Christianity. Minority religious groups said MOC priests lobbied local officials, frequently successfully, to deny minority religious groups permission to carry out public activities or build houses of worship. Minority religious groups reported favorable resolution of some longstanding legal cases when authorities issued permits allowing these groups to build or register houses of worship. The government developed and introduced into the school curriculum an optional high school course on the Holocaust based on recommendations of the Elie Wiesel International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust report. Contrary to what it announced in 2018, the government did not establish a national Holocaust museum or Jewish historical or cultural center or complete renovations of the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau. It did, however, commence those renovations. In January the cabinet issued a proclamation on “Condemning Anti-Semitism and Promotion of Tolerance,” and approved for official use the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism.

In the separatist Transnistria Region, minority religious groups continued to report the de facto authorities discriminated against or restricted their activities. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the de facto authorities denied the group’s attempts to reregister as a religious organization, continued to conscript young male Jehovah’s Witnesses or force them to engage in defense related civilian service contrary to their beliefs, and restricted the distribution of their religious literature. The Salvation Army stated the authorities closely surveilled their members and denied them permission to register a corps in Tiraspol. In contrast with previous years, the Muslim community reported the de facto authorities granted permission for the construction of a mosque and a Muslim educational and cultural center. Tiraspol municipal authorities offered a plot of land for the mosque but later rescinded the lot provision and did not offer an alternative location. Three Jehovah’s Witnesses’ complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee of discriminatory acts in Tiraspol involving the de facto authorities and the Russian Federation remained pending at year’s end.

Several minority religious groups said some MOC priests harassed their leaders or members. Jehovah's Witnesses reported incidents of verbal intimidation against their members, and the Islamic League stated Muslims, especially women, experienced harassment in schools, employment discrimination, and media and societal bias. The Jewish Community of Moldova (JCM) reported anti-Semitic rhetoric on the internet, in reference to which one Jewish leader said he had not "seen such poisonous language in years." On August 25, the Jewish community in Chisinau reopened the Wooden Synagogue after buying the property back from the state, bringing the number of synagogues in the country to six. The JCM also selected a contractor for the reconstruction of another synagogue and a yeshiva in Chisinau and received donations worth \$500,000 to begin reconstruction work. The JCM reported several cases of vandalism against Jewish gravestones and monuments during the year.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials urged government and parliament to move forward with initiatives to establish a Jewish heritage museum and develop a national school curriculum on the study of the Holocaust. The Ambassador discussed progress on the government's implementation of recommendations of the final report of the Elie Wiesel International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust at a roundtable organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with religious leaders during a visit in May. The Ambassador discussed religious freedom and treatment of the Muslim community in the country during a tour of the mosque in Chisinau. Embassy officials discussed respect for religious freedom and ways to enhance interfaith cooperation with representatives of various religious groups throughout the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 3.4 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2014 census, which does not include Transnistria, the predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, with 90 percent of the population belonging to one of two Orthodox Christian groups. Of Orthodox adherents, approximately 90 percent belong to the MOC, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the remaining 10 percent belong to the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC), which falls under the Romanian Orthodox Church. Nearly 7 percent of the population did not identify a religious affiliation. The largest non-Orthodox religious groups, accounting for 15,000 to 30,000 adherents each, are Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals. Groups that together

constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Muslims, Jews, and atheists.

Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Molokans, Messianic Jews, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Salvation Army, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), other Christians, Falun Gong, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

In the separatist Transnistria region, the de facto authorities estimate 80 percent of the population belongs to the MOC. Other religious groups in the region include Catholics, followers of Old Rite Russian Orthodoxy, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and charismatic Christians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates the state shall recognize and guarantee all citizens the right to preserve, develop, and express their religious identity. It provides for equal treatment for all citizens regardless of religion, and guarantees freedom of conscience, manifested in "a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect," and of religious worship. It stipulates religious groups are independent from the state and free to organize and operate according to their own statutes. The constitution prohibits all religious groups, in their mutual relationships, from using, expressing, or inciting hatred or enmity. The constitution stipulates the state shall support religious worship, including facilitating religious assistance in the army, hospitals, penitentiaries, nursing homes, and orphanages.

The law states every person has the right to belong or not belong to a religion, to have or not have individual beliefs, to change religion or beliefs, and to practice religion or beliefs independently or as a group, in public or in private, through teaching, religious practices, or rituals. According to the law, religious freedom may be restricted only if necessary to ensure public order and security, to protect public health and morality, or to protect a person's rights and freedoms. The law also prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation.

The law stipulates that the state recognizes the “exceptional importance and fundamental role” of Orthodox Christianity and particularly the MOC, in the life, history, and culture of the country.

The law does not require religious groups to register, and members of unregistered groups may worship freely. However, only registered religious groups possess status as legal entities, allowing them to build houses of worship, own land in cemeteries or other property, publish or import religious literature, open bank accounts, or employ staff. Registration also exempts registered religious groups from land taxes and property taxes and allows them to establish associations and foundations. The law permits local, registered religious groups to change their denominational affiliation or dissolve themselves.

The law allows individuals to redirect 2 percent of their income tax to nongovernment organizations (NGOs) or religious groups. Religious groups wanting to benefit from the provisions must: be officially registered and active for a minimum of one year before applying for the income tax benefit; register with the government’s Public Services Agency (PSA); use the amounts received only for social, moral, cultural, and/or charitable activities and certain administrative costs; and present reports on the use of the funds. The law exempts religious organizations from registration fees and from paying tax on the income received as donations under the 2 percent law.

Under the law, a religious group wishing to register must present to the PSA a declaration including its exact name, fundamental principles of belief, organizational structure, scope of activities, financing sources, and rights and obligations of membership. The law also requires a group to show it has at least 100 founding members. A religious group must present proof of having access to premises where it can conduct its religious activities, but it does not need to own this property. The PSA is required by law to register a religious group within 15 days if the registration request is made according to law. The applicant may request an extension if the government determines the documentation submitted is insufficient.

Under the law, the Ministry of Justice has the right to request a suspension of the registered status of a religious group if it “carries out activities that harm the constitution or laws” or “affects state security, public order, [or] the life and security of the people.” The law also provides for suspension or revocation of a religious group’s registration in case of violation of international agreements or for political activity.

The law bans religious entities from engaging in political activity and prohibits “abusive proselytism,” defined as the action of changing religious beliefs through coercion.

The constitution provides for freedom of religious education and stipulates the state educational system should be secular. According to the law, religion classes in state educational institutions are optional. Students may submit a written request to the school’s administration to enroll in a religion class. Religion classes are offered in grades one through nine. The religious curriculum offers two types of courses: one for Orthodox denominations and Roman Catholics; and the second for evangelical Christians and Seventh-day Adventists. The religious curriculum for Orthodox and Catholic groups derives from instructional manuals developed by the Ministry of Education with input from the MOC and includes teaching guidelines developed with the support of the BOC. Regular teachers and MOC and BOC priests teach these optional courses, which focus on Orthodox Christianity. Regular teachers and representatives of the Evangelical Christian Church teach the second course, which is based on translated religious manuals and literature from Romania, the United States, and Germany.

The law mandates immunization of all children before they may enroll in kindergarten. It does not provide an exception for religious reasons.

The Anti-Discrimination Council, established by law, is an independent institution charged with reviewing complaints of discrimination, including discrimination of a religious character or based on religious affiliation. Parliament chooses members through a competitive process, appointing them to five-year terms. The council does not have sanctioning powers; however, it may determine if an act of discrimination took place, offer advice on how to remedy the situation, and send requests to prosecutors to initiate criminal proceedings. It may also suggest pertinent legislative amendments or participate in working groups authoring legislative initiatives.

According to the law, male citizens ages 18 to 27 have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter runs counter to their religious beliefs. Those who choose civilian service may complete it at public institutions or enterprises specializing in areas such as social assistance, healthcare, industrial engineering, urban planning, road construction, environmental protection, agriculture or agricultural processing, town management, and fire rescue. There are no blanket exemptions for religious groups from alternative

civilian service, but higher-ranking clergy, monks, and theology students are exempted from such service. Refusal to enroll in civilian service is punishable by a fine up to 32,500 lei (\$1,900) or between 100 and 150 hours of community service, and those punished are still obliged to enroll in civilian service.

The law mandates restoration of rights and compensation for material damages for victims of the totalitarian regimes which controlled Moldovan territory between 1917 and 1992 and for citizens who were subject to reprisals based on political, national, religious, or social grounds. The law specifically refers to private property restoration for victims of the Soviet regime but makes no mention of Holocaust-era property confiscations. The law does not apply to communal property confiscated from religious groups.

The law defines as “extremist” and makes illegal any document or information justifying war crimes or the complete or partial annihilation of a religious or other kind of societal group, as well as any document calling for or supporting activities in pursuit of those goals.

Foreign missionaries may submit work contracts or volunteer agreements to apply for temporary residency permits and may reside and work in paid status or as unpaid volunteers. Only missionaries working with registered religious groups may apply for temporary residency permits. Foreign religious workers with these permits must register with the National Agency for the Occupation of the Workforce and the Bureau for Migration and Asylum. They must present documents confirming the official status of the registered religious group for which they will work, papers confirming their temporary residence, and proof of valid local health insurance. Other foreign missionaries belonging to registered religious groups may remain for 90 days on a tourist visa.

In separatist Transnistria, Transnistrian “law” affirms the special role of the Orthodox Church in the region’s culture and spirituality. The de facto law “recognizes respect” for Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religious groups historically present in the region. All religious groups, whether registered or not, officially have freedom to worship, but the law permits restrictions on the right to freedom of conscience and religion “if necessary to protect the constitutional order, morality, health, citizens’ rights and interests, or state defense and security.” Foreign citizens also have the freedom to worship.

Transnistrian “law” prohibits proselytizing in private homes and limits distribution of religious literature to houses of worship and special premises designated by the

authorities. The law requires the reregistration of religious groups to operate legally in the region. The 2009 law required the reregistration of all religious communities by December 31, 2010 with groups that failed to reregister by this deadline “subject to liquidation.” The region’s registration body registers religious groups and monitors their adherence to the goals and activities set forth in their statutes. Registration provides several advantages to religious groups, including the ability to own and build places of worship, open religious schools, and publish literature.

To register, a local religious group must present: proof of activity in the region for at least 10 years; a list comprising at least 10 members ages 18 years or older who have Transnistrian “citizenship” and permanent residence in one of the seven administrative-territorial units in the region; a list of founders and governing members and their personal details; the group’s charter, statutes, and minutes of its constituent assembly; basic religious doctrine; contact details of its governing body; and a receipt indicating payment of the registration fee. Local religious groups may also register as part of a centralized religious organization, which must consist of at least three local religious groups that have previously registered separately as legal entities. In that case, their application must additionally include a copy of the registration papers of the centralized organization. The central religious organizations must inform the registration authority on a yearly basis about intentions to extend their activities.

The de facto authorities must decide to register a religious group within 30 days of the application. If they decide to conduct a religious assessment, which is a law enforcement investigation of the group’s background and activities, registration may be postponed for up to six months or denied if the investigating authorities determine the group poses a threat to the security or morality of the region, or if foreign religious groups are involved in its activities.

Foreign religious groups may not register or undertake religious activities. Foreigners may only worship individually; they may not be founders or members of religious groups.

Religious groups disband on their own decision or upon a “court’s” decision. The “prosecutor’s office” or the region’s de facto executive, city, or district authorities may request the courts to disband or suspend a religious group on multiple grounds. Such grounds include: disturbing public order or violating public security; conducting extremist activities; coercing persons into breaking up their families; infringing on citizens’ identity, rights, and freedoms; violating citizens’

morality and well-being; using psychotropic substances, drugs, hypnosis, or perverse activities during religious activities; encouraging suicide or the refusal of medical treatment for religious reasons; obstructing compulsory education; using coercion for alienation of property to the benefit of the religious community; and encouraging refusal to fulfill civic duties.

The “law” allows the use of private homes and apartments to hold religious services. It does not, however, allow religious groups to use homes and apartments as their officially registered addresses. The “law” also allows such groups to hold religious services and rituals in public places such as hospitals, clinics, orphanages, geriatric homes, and prisons.

The authorities screen and may ban the import or export of religious printed materials, audio and video recordings, and other religious items.

According to the “law,” citizens have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter contradicts an individual’s religion and beliefs. The government prioritizes alternative civilian service in armed forces units, so it may assign conscientious objectors to perform their civilian service in military units. Another alternative is service at institutions subordinate to the “executive bodies of the state or local administration.”

The de facto authorities do not allow religious groups to participate in elections or other political party activities or to support NGOs involved in elections.

Moldova is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The PSA registered 34 religious entities during the year, consisting of new religious subgroups that are part of existing religious denominations, including the Baptist Church, MOC, BOC, Evangelical Church, Union of Pentecostal Churches, Old Rite Russian Orthodox Church, and Rabbinate of the Jewish community in Moldova. The PSA did not reject any registration applications, and religious groups reported the process was simplified and efficient.

An appeal against the government’s decision to liquidate the Falun Gong Association remained pending at the Supreme Court of Justice at year’s end. The order to liquidate the association derived from a 2013 court decision that the group violated the law on extremist activity by using swastikas as symbols, which Falun

Gong use based on Buddhist and Chinese tradition. Following previous court rulings against the Falun Gong Association by the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court of Justice, the association appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in 2015. During the year the ECHR asked the government to come to an amicable resolution with the Falun Gong. In July the government agent at the ECHR requested a review of the case by the Supreme Court of Justice of Moldova. The court ruled in October that previous rulings had violated the Falun Gong Association's rights and ordered the case be retried. The ECHR appeal also remained pending at year's end.

The second case before the ECHR involved the authorities' 2010 cancelation of a performance by Shen Yun Performing Arts, a Falun Gong affiliated performance group from New York, reportedly because of pressure from the Chinese government. This case also remained pending at year's end.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Research developed an optional high school curriculum on the Holocaust, which it introduced during the academic year. Contrary to what it announced in 2018, the government failed to establish a Jewish museum in Chisinau and a Yad Vashem-style Jewish historical and cultural center. The two initiatives were part of a government action plan to implement recommendations of the report of the Elie Wiesel International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust. According to the Jewish community, authorities failed to reach an agreement with it on the site for the new museum.

The government began work on another part of the action plan, the renovation of the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau, one of the largest in Europe, with more than 40,000 graves. The near-total removal of trees and other vegetation in the first stage of the state-sponsored restoration revealed the extent of damage to the site. According to Jewish Heritage Europe, the state damaged 80 to 100 grave markers during this initial process. These included "several of the graves of the Kishinev Pogrom 1903 victims – the oldest on the extant part and, probably, historically the most valuable ones," Irina Sikhova, a researcher with the Cultural Heritage Institute of the Moldovan Academy of Science, told Jewish Heritage Europe.

Responding to media criticism, the JCM stated on March 21 that clearing the vegetation was only the first stage of the rehabilitation and "the restoration phase and necessary repairs have not yet begun." It said the "long-awaited decision of the authorities [to restore the cemetery] was perceived positively by the Jewish community, which expressed willingness to provide methodological support and expertise for the restoration and conservation of monuments." The government

approved a new contract for the maintenance of the cemetery in June, but it did not initiate any further renovation work. The JCM said the government did not properly maintain most Jewish cemeteries across the country or protect them from acts of vandalism. In January Irina Sikhova told Balkan Insight that “Jewish cemeteries continued to be vandalized. Swastikas appear on graves, tombstones are destroyed or simply ruined over time.” Sikhova added that “the cemetery in Chisinau is in a terrible state.”

Minority religious groups, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, said they faced a burdensome process of obtaining construction permits for houses of worship from local authorities. According to representatives from Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Baptist Church, Orthodox priests, mostly from the MOC, continued to successfully pressure local mayors or councilors to refuse the permit applications and to impede the religious groups’ public activities.

Under previous agreement between the Ministry of Culture and the MOC, the government transferred control of most churches and monasteries confiscated during the Soviet era to the MOC. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research remained responsible for the remaining churches and monasteries not under the control of the MOC. Local authorities working through the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research could arrange with local parishes to return or lease those churches or monasteries to religious groups. Other religious groups, including the Lutheran and Jewish communities, reported they had not benefitted from a similar agreement with the government to reclaim religious property confiscated during the Soviet era. The government rejected the Jewish and Lutheran communities’ renewed attempts to regain title to previously confiscated property and their requests to the government and parliament to adopt a law enabling restitution of historically owned properties and sites remained unheeded.

Jehovah’s Witness leaders reported that several cases related to obtaining zoning permits for Kingdom Halls, including in Olanesti, Mereni, and Ceadir-Lunga, were resolved, while others remained ongoing. In Olanesti and Mereni, the community was able to commission and use the Kingdom Halls following favorable court decisions. The Ceadir-Lunga case was partially resolved after the Supreme Court of Justice upheld a decision in July recognizing the validity of a building permit for a Kingdom Hall in that city. After more than two years of opposition from local authorities, Jehovah’s Witnesses were able to finalize the building’s construction. Jehovah’s Witnesses, however, were still contesting a fine for unauthorized construction (building without a permit) issued in 2018 by the chief architect of Ceadir-Lunga, responsible for urban planning and issuing building permits. The

chief architect failed to attend scheduled hearings several times during the year. In December, following the recusal of a Ceadir-Lunga judge, the case was transferred to the Vulcanesti city court in the absence of qualified judges. The case remained pending at year's end. The next hearing was scheduled for April 2020.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders said police failed to investigate individuals who threatened or verbally abused members of Jehovah's Witnesses in rural localities. They also reported an increase in opposition to their activity in Firladeni Village, Hincesti Raion (Region), where the local Orthodox priest was reported to have expressed hostility towards the community on numerous occasions. According to Jehovah's Witnesses leaders, each time the group arrived in the village to preach, a group of local residents led by the priest gathered with the purpose of intimidating them. During one of those confrontations, a Jehovah's Witness member was physically assaulted by a local villager. Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint against the priest, but the police reportedly refused to take any action. In July following several complaints, the Hincesti police department fined the priest on a charge of obstructing religious freedom. In August, however, the Jehovah's Witness member who was assaulted received a citation under the Administrative Code (insulting the religious feelings of individuals, abuse of venerated objects, premises, monuments, conceptual symbols) and was fined \$40. According to the citation, the victim in this case was the local priest. In September the Jehovah's Witness member submitted a complaint against the police in the Hincesti City Court. The case remained pending at year's end.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches stated that representatives of the Calarasi branch office of the PSA unjustifiably refused to rezone a house in Sipoteni Village, Calarasi for use as a prayer house. The rezoning was approved only after the lawyer representing the Union of Pentecostal Churches sent a request to the PSA headquarters in Chisinau, which ordered resolution of the case and issued the necessary documentation. The Union reported that it remained unable to obtain a zoning permit for a building in Copceac Village it bought in 2006 and used for religious services. In 2018 the Union challenged the local authorities' refusal to issue the zoning permit in the Ceadir-Lunga court, but the case remained pending after it was transferred to the Comrat court. The Comrat court scheduled a new court hearing on the case for April 2020.

Through an earlier agreement with the Ministry of Labor, Social Protection, and Family, the MOC maintained a network of social assistance sites, including daycare centers and temporary shelters within churches and monasteries. The MOC also maintained agreements with other state institutions such as the Ministry

of Internal Affairs and National Penitentiary Administration to provide spiritual guidance and services to police officers, state workers, and prison inmates. Other registered religious groups, including the BOC, Baptists, Pentecostals and others had access to state facilities upon request.

According to minority religious groups, including the JCM, the Islamic League, the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches, and civil society leaders, authorities continued to exhibit preferential treatment toward the MOC compared with other religious groups. The government invited MOC priests to officiate at state-sponsored events, national holidays, and blessing ceremonies at schools. On several occasions, the government also invited leaders of the BOC and the Roman Catholic Church to official events.

In January the cabinet issued a proclamation on “Condemning Anti-Semitism and Promotion of Tolerance,” and officially adopted the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism for all government purposes.

The government strictly enforced requirements that children receive certain mandatory immunizations prior to enrolling in school, and could not attend classes until the school received certification that they received the required vaccines. There remained no religious exemption to this requirement.

The Islamic League said there were instances in which authorities denied or delayed, without explanation, the naturalization applications of Muslim residents, even though the applications met all the necessary criteria. The Attorneys’ Legal Center, an NGO working with immigrants and refugees, stated the Security and Intelligence Service was holding up many naturalization applications on what the service said was security-related grounds.

On multiple occasions during the year, President Dodon voiced support for the Orthodox faith and the MOC. For example, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Russian Patriarch Kirill’s enthronement in Moscow, President Dodon said, “Moldovan people would always keep unity with the Russian Orthodox Church...” In most of his trips outside of Chisinau, Dodon visited MOC churches, provided contributions for the churches’ construction, and reiterated the need to preserve Orthodox traditional values. In his address in July during a ceremonial service at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Chisinau, President Dodon stated “Over 90 percent of Moldova’s citizens are Christian Orthodox and the country has a future only by keeping and promoting the Orthodox faith – a pillar of statehood.” During his meeting with Patriarch Kirill in Moscow in April

President Dodon said, “Orthodoxy was and will always be one of Moldovan statehood’s pillars and keeping and strengthening traditional values is our primary task.”

During the year, 97 religious groups (versus 83 in 2018), received funds from income tax payments voluntarily directed toward religious groups.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Several religious groups were denied registration or reregistration, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Salvation Army. Jehovah’s Witnesses said the Transnistrian de facto authorities continued to refuse to reregister two local Jehovah’s Witnesses groups, in Tiraspol and Rybnitsa. They said local authorities refused several times to accept the required documents. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses report, on April 10, Jehovah’s Witnesses submitted a revised charter to the de facto ministry of justice, after the de facto ministry “found new reasons to deny” registration in February. The report did not specify what those reasons were. On April 12, 2018, the de facto Ministry of Justice filed a claim in the Rybnitsa city court against the Jehovah’s Witnesses and requested that the community be liquidated. The two cases were still pending in court at year’s end. The Salvation Army reported that de facto authorities refused registration of a corps (parish) in Tiraspol but had allowed it to register a corps in Dubasari.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to report instances of members’ being conscripted into the Transnistrian de facto armed forces or forced to undertake alternative civilian service within the Transnistrian “Ministry of Defense.” On May 25, three Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objectors filed complaints in courts in their respective places of residence against military service to which the Military Enrolment Committee assigned them, contrary to their religious beliefs, for failure to submit a request for civilian service in due time. Their cases were ongoing at year’s end.

In contrast with previous years, in February the Muslim community was able to obtain a permit from the Transnistrian de facto authorities to build a mosque and a Muslim educational and cultural center in Tiraspol. In July Tiraspol municipal authorities offered land for the site in the city center, but later rescinded provision and did not offer an alternative location.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Minority religious groups, including the Muslim community, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches, reported fewer cases of verbal aggression than in previous years and no cases of physical aggression during the year, but said cases of verbal abuse persisted, mostly in rural areas. The Islamic Community noted that negative portrayals of Muslims by the media remained common. Jehovah's Witnesses and members of the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches also said there were instances in which priests and other MOC members directly harassed their communities' religious leaders or members. For example, the Baptist Church reported conflicts between community members and local Orthodox priests in Drasliceni, Hruseva, Dimitrovca, and Chiriet-Lunga Villages. Orthodox priests, often regarded as authority figures in rural areas, reportedly instigated residents against minority religious groups and led residents in physically impeding these groups' religious activities.

Property disputes between the MOC and BOC continued; however, there were no new cases initiated during the year. Legal proceedings continued between the BOC and the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research and the MOC over lease contracts signed by the MOC with the then Ministry of Culture (in 2003 and 2008) under which the MOC obtained the exclusive, indefinite right to use all historic religious properties (more than 800 churches and monasteries). According to the BOC lawyer, those agreements led to numerous property disputes between the BOC and the MOC, including the most recent in Ursoaia Village, Cahul, Olanesti, Dereneu, Gavanoasa, and others. Several cases submitted by the BOC in previous years were still pending before the ECHR.

Jehovah's Witnesses stated there were incidents of societal abuse against their members, consisting mainly of verbal intimidation, cases of property destruction, and obstruction by local residents of Jehovah's Witnesses activities. They did not cite the number of incidents or specific examples but said there were fewer such instances than in 2018.

Leaders of the Pentecostal Church reported several cases of harassment by Orthodox priests of community members in rural areas. For example, in Petresti Village, Ungheni Raion, community members were reported to have faced harassment by the local MOC priest. In September, with an authorization from the mayor's office, local Pentecostal Church leaders organized religious activities involving adult residents and social activities for children at the village stadium. A total of 600 people attended the events. The local priest reportedly used all means to prevent people from taking part in the event, threatening those attending with retaliation and the denial of Orthodox funeral services. The harassment continued

in December, when the Pentecostal Church finalized the construction of a prayer house and began using it for religious services and educational activities. The priest, supported by several local councilors, requested that the mayor's office "remove the Pentecostal church" from the village, a request the local mayor rejected.

According to the Islamic League, societal attitudes toward Muslims (which they characterized as cautious and at times unwelcoming) remained unchanged, and local media continued to exhibit a critical attitude and bias against Islam. The league reported Muslims, particularly women, faced discrimination when seeking employment. Employers, they said, were often reluctant to employ Muslim women wearing a hijab. They said in one case, after repeated attempts to get a job, a Muslim woman had to give up wearing a hijab in order to get employed. No one went to court, even though discrimination in employment based on religious affiliation is banned by law. Muslim women, particularly in rural areas, were subject to societal prejudice and verbal harassment, according to the league. Negative attitudes and bias against women wearing a hijab continued in public places, including passers-by shouting insults or mockingly yelling "Allahu Akbar." League officials said the women reporting these instances of discrimination and harassment did not want their names or details of the incidents disclosed. The league also reported incidents and verbal harassment of Muslim students by schoolmates but again declined to provide details to protect the students from further harassment.

The JCM reported in July that three tombstones at the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau were vandalized and damaged. The perpetrators were not found by year's end. In December unknown vandals destroyed the historical information board about the Chisinau Pogrom of 1903 near the monument to the pogrom victims in Chisinau.

The Jewish community reported instances of anti-Semitic rhetoric on social media and in certain online publications, particularly in the form of comments on news related to Israel or the case of politician of Jewish descent Ilan Shor, charged with involvement in a major bank fraud case who fled the country in June. The JCM released a statement in August 2018 condemning "hate speech's use as an instrument of political struggle" following the controversial Facebook post made by former sports minister Octavian Ticu, reported *The Times of Israel*. The post called Shor a "thief" who "drinks wine and eats the bread of a country that has received him and many others generously, yet he curses us in Russian and considers us a herd of sheep." He also wrote that Shor "didn't bother to learn" the local language, Romanian. According to *The Times of Israel*, "the reference to

Russian provoked outrage in Moldova, where nearly all of the country's some 2,000 Jews and about 20 percent of the general population speak Russian as a mother tongue." In August Evgheni Bric, director of the country's Judaica Institute, told the Jewish Telegraph Agency that Shor's behavior "fit into anti-Semitic stereotypes of hate, about Jews being thieves," and that articles about him online "invariably come with a cascade of anti-Semitic rhetoric in the comment section." He added that he had not "seen such poisonous language in years." According to the JCM, no one took responsibility to remove anti-Semitic content online and there were no avenues or legal provisions to address the issue.

On August 25, *The Times of Israel* reported the local Jewish community in Chisinau reopened the Wooden Synagogue. Also known as the Lemnaria Synagogue, and located in the cellar of the Kedem Jewish Community Center, Soviet authorities seized the building nearly 80 years ago. This brought the number of synagogues in the country to six, including two in the Transnistria region, compared with more than 80 before the Holocaust, according to Rabbi Shimshon Daniel Izakson of the JCM and the Wooden Synagogue. *The Times of Israel* stated that approximately 300 people attended the reopening ceremony. The government did not restitute the synagogue property; rather, the Jewish community in Chisinau purchased it from the state.

In September the JCM launched a solicitation of bids for the reconstruction of the Rabbi Tsirelson Synagogue and Yeshiva following the issuance of a building permit by the mayor's office in Chisinau in 2018 and selected a contractor in December. The JCM was also able to attract donations worth \$500,000 to begin reconstruction work.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues, including the protection and preservation of Jewish heritage sites, in meetings with the president, prime minister, and members of parliament.

In January the chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad and the Ambassador participated in Holocaust remembrance events hosted by parliament, including a ceremony to commemorate Holocaust victims at the Monument to Victims of Fascism in Chisinau. Both also delivered remarks at a roundtable to discuss the implementation of the Action Plan on commemorating the Holocaust in Moldova, attended a photo and book exhibit on the Holocaust in Moldova, and underscored U.S. support for the authorities' plans

to set up a Jewish heritage museum in Chisinau and develop a school curriculum on the study of the Holocaust.

In March the Ambassador discussed religious freedom and treatment of the Muslim community in the country with leaders of the Islamic League and toured the mosque in Chisinau.

In May at a roundtable organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, the Ambassador discussed progress on the government's 2017-2019 Action Plan on the implementation of parliament's declaration regarding the acceptance of the final report of the Elie Wiesel International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust. The Ambassador highlighted the importance of preserving Jewish historic and cultural heritage and the need to strengthen the legislative framework to combat anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

During a visit to the country May 11-12, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with leaders of the MOC and BOC and discussed prospects for a more active involvement of the Orthodox Church in promoting religious freedom and in protecting the rights of citizens, including of religious minorities. Both ambassadors visited the Chisinau Jewish cemetery, attended ceremonies at Baptist and Catholic churches, and spoke with the media about the importance of religious freedom.

Embassy officials met with leaders and representatives of the MOC, BOC, JCM, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Islamic League, Baptist Church, Lutheran Church, Pentecostal Church, and Salvation Army to discuss the state of religious freedom and ways to enhance interfaith cooperation.

In October the Ambassador announced an embassy grant of \$379,600 to continue preservation work at the Assumption of the Virgin Mary Church in Causeni, a cultural site and the oldest church in the country.