

# KOSOVO 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, subject to limitations to ensure public order, health, and safety or to protect the rights of others. The law does not provide a means for religious groups to acquire legal status. A draft bill to grant them such status, submitted to parliament in 2020, remained pending at year's end. The Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) said some schools continued to enforce a Ministry of Education and Sciences (MES) directive prohibiting religious attire, denying school access to Muslim students who wore a hijab. In September, the Constitutional Court referred the government's continued refusal to implement that court's 2016 decision recognizing the Serbian Orthodox Church's (SOC) ownership of land around the Visoki Decani Monastery to the state prosecutor. In response to the government's continued nonimplementation of both that ruling and a 2020 arrangement on road work within the Visoki Decani Monastery Special Protective Zone (SPZ), the SOC ceased official communication with the government in May. In October, media reported the MES and police were investigating a Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) following complaints the organization published photographs of children along with religious content without parental permission. Media reported the NGO denied violating laws prohibiting NGOs from conducting religious activity in the country. In August, the BIK and media reported police arrested author Gjin Morena in August on charges of publishing poems inciting intolerance towards Muslims. Morena subsequently pleaded guilty and received a fine. Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church (KPEC) representatives said a lack of institutional support for dedicated burial sites prevented them from conducting burial services according to their beliefs. According to the SOC, in June, police, without any explanation, ordered a bus with Serbian SOC pilgrims to return to Serbia. In April, the pan-European federation of cultural heritage civil society organizations, Europa Nostra, included the SOC Visoki Decani Monastery on its list of the seven most endangered heritage sites in Europe, a determination government officials said was "biased" and "incorrect." SOC members said some municipalities failed to provide adequate security or maintenance of SOC sites.

In June, a Montenegrin citizen chanted "Kill the Albanians" during a gathering of SOC members celebrating St. Vitus Day at the Gazimestan memorial near Pristina. A Pristina court sentenced him to a fine in lieu of imprisonment and banned him from entering the country for five years. The BIK said media reports continued to

portray their communities negatively, contributing to a climate of intolerance and discrimination. BIK and KPEC representatives said some of their adherents were reluctant to practice their religion openly due to fear of discrimination. National police said they received reports of 87 incidents during the year, mostly classified as aggravated thefts, primarily against Islamic or SOC religious sites or cemeteries but including one against the Roman Catholic community, compared with 57 in 2020. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported it continued advocating improved relations between religious communities and municipalities.

U.S. embassy officials continued to encourage the government to enact amendments permitting religious groups to acquire legal status, enforce mechanisms to protect freedom of religion, implement legislation and judicial decisions pertaining to SOC religious sites, and resolve SOC property disputes. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives discussed religious freedom issues, including equal protection and property rights concerns, with religious and civil society leaders and encouraged religious tolerance and improved interfaith dialogue. In June, the embassy hosted Iowa National Guard chaplains, Kosovo Security Force representatives, and several senior religious leaders to discuss plans for a Kosovo Security Force chaplaincy corps.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2011 census (the most recent), 95.6 percent of the population is Muslim, 2.2 percent Roman Catholic, and 1.4 percent Serbian Orthodox, with Protestants, Jews, and persons not answering or responding “other” or “none” together constituting less than 1 percent. Boston University’s 2020 World Religion Database estimates the population is 93 percent Muslim and 6 percent Christian, while 1 percent are atheist or agnostic, or belong to other religions. Local estimates of the total number of Jews range from 50 to 150. According to the SOC and international observers, lack of financial support for the census and a boycott of it by most ethnic Serbs resulted in a significant undercounting of ethnic minorities of all religious backgrounds, including SOC members, Tarikat Muslims, and Protestants. Other religious communities, including Tarikat Muslims and Protestants, also contested the registration data, stating they distrusted the census methodology and believed it resulted in undercounts of their communities’ members.

The majority of Kosovo Albanians are Muslim, although some are Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant). Almost all Kosovo Serbs belong to the SOC. The majority of ethnic Ashkali, Bosniaks, Egyptians, Gorani, Roma, and Turks are also Muslim, while most ethnic Montenegrins and some Roma are Christian Orthodox. Nearly all ethnic Croats are Catholic.

According to the BIK, most Muslims belong to the Hanafi Sunni School, although some are part of the Sufi Tarikat community. There is also a Sufi Bektashi religious community; no official estimate exists for the number of its adherents. Kosovo Albanians represent the majority in 28 of the country's 38 municipalities, and Kosovo Serbs make up the majority in the remaining 10. Most SOC members reside in the 10 Serb-majority municipalities. The largest Catholic communities are in Gjakove (Albanian-language name)/Djakovica (Serbian-language name), Janjeve/Janjevo, Kline/Klina, Pristina, and Prizren. Evangelical Protestant populations, representing multiple traditions including Baptists, Pentecostals, Reformed, nondenominational, and others, are located throughout the country, concentrated in Pristina and Gjakove/Djakovica. There are small Jewish communities in Prizren and Pristina, although exact numbers are unavailable.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion for all residents, including the right to change, express, or not express religious belief; practice or abstain from practicing religion; and join or refuse to join a religious community. These rights are subject to limitations for reasons of public safety and order or for the protection of the health or rights of others. The constitution provides for the separation of religious communities from public institutions, including the right of religious groups to regulate independently their own organizations, activities, and ceremonies. It provides for equal rights for all religious communities, stipulates the country is secular and neutral regarding religion, declares the state shall ensure the protection and preservation of the country's religious heritage, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The constitution states the law may limit freedom of expression to prevent violent and hostile provocations on racial, national, ethnic, or religious grounds. It allows courts to ban organizations or activities that encourage racial, national, ethnic, or religious hatred.

The law on religious freedom stipulates there is no state religion and provides for freedom of nonreligious belief. It states, "All religions and their communes in

Kosovo, including the Kosovo Islamic Community, Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Hebrew Belief Community, and Evangelical Church shall be offered any kind of protection and opportunity in order to have rights and freedom foreseen by this law.” The law does not prescribe any additional rights or benefits to these five named communities as compared with other religious groups. Authorities interpret the term “Evangelical Church” as encompassing all Protestant groups, regardless of denomination.

The constitution provides for rights and protection for all citizens, including maintaining, developing, and preserving their religion using their own language. The constitution also states religious communities have the right to establish religious schools and charitable institutions, with the possibility of being funded with government financial assistance “in accordance with the law and international standards.” It guarantees all ethnic communities access to public media. The law on religious freedom provides the right for religious groups to establish and use their own media, maintain unhindered peaceful contacts with persons outside the country with whom they share a religious identity, and have equitable access to public employment.

The constitution guarantees 20 of 120 seats in parliament to representatives from ethnic minority communities, a majority of whose members are often associated with a single religious group, such as Muslims or Orthodox Christians. It also stipulates the adoption, amendment, or repeal of all laws pertaining to religious freedom or cultural heritage requires approval by a majority of the parliamentarians representing minority communities, as well as by a majority of all parliamentarians.

The constitution provides for the Ombudsperson’s Institution, which is responsible for monitoring religious freedom, among other human rights, and recommending actions to correct violations. It stipulates the state shall take all necessary measures to protect individuals who may be subject to threats, hostility, discrimination, or violence because of their religious identity. The law criminalizes hate crime, which includes inciting discord and intolerance between religious groups, as well as crimes where religion is a motivating factor or aggravating circumstance.

The law does not require registration of religious groups, but it also does not provide a legal mechanism or specific guidance for religious groups – including the five communities named in the law on religious freedom – to obtain legal status through registration or other means. Without legal status, religious communities

may not own property, open bank accounts, employ staff, or access the courts as a collective entity. Individual congregations or individuals, however, may do so and perform other administrative tasks in their own name. Local communities often recognize religious groups' possession of buildings; however, the law generally does not protect these buildings as property of a religious community, but rather as the private property of citizens or NGOs. SOC property is an exception; the law on SPZs acknowledges and protects the integrity of SOC property ownership and stewardship over designated areas within the SPZs.

The law stipulates the rights to establish humanitarian/charity organizations, accept voluntary financial contributions from individuals and institutions, and engage in national and international communication for religious purposes. The law on registering NGOs, however, does not apply to "religious communities, religious centers, or temples," which prevents religious groups from registering as NGOs and also prohibits NGOs from conducting religious activity in the country.

The law provides safeguards for sites of religious and cultural significance and prohibits or restricts nearby activities that could damage the surrounding historical, cultural, or natural environment. According to the law, the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC) is responsible for arbitrating disputes between the government and the SOC concerning SPZs and other matters related to protecting the SOC's religious and cultural heritage. The IMC is a special body originating from the 2007 Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (also known as the Ahtisaari Plan) and established by law. IMC members include the Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning, and Infrastructure (cochair); Special Representative of the European Union (cochair); Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport; SOC; and the OSCE.

Municipalities, not the central government, are legally responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of all public cemeteries, including those designated for specific religious communities.

According to the law, "Public educational institutions shall refrain from teaching religion or other activities that propagate a specific religion." This law is unenforceable in schools operated under Serbian government-run parallel structures, over which the Kosovo government has no control.

An MES administrative circular on the code of conduct and disciplinary measures for elementary and high school students, which carries the force of law, prohibits

students from wearing religious attire on elementary and secondary school premises.

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

### **Government Practices**

The government again did not enact amendments to the law on religious freedom that would permit religious groups to acquire legal status, conduct business and acquire real and personal property in their name, open bank accounts, and gain import tax benefits. The cabinet approved the amendments and sent them to parliament in September 2020, but in February, extraordinary general elections reset Kosovo's legislative amendment process, reverting the amendments back to the newly elected government, which had not resubmitted them to parliament by year's end. Absent enactment of the legislation, all religious communities said they continued to operate bank accounts registered to individuals instead of communities. The KPEC continued to state that Protestant churches were taxed as for-profit businesses.

The BIK and several media outlets reported police arrested author Gjin Morena in August after he published a book entitled *Thunder in the Soul* that, according to BIK and media reports, contained poems inciting discord and intolerance towards Muslims. On August 16, the KPEC wrote on Facebook that Morena is Protestant and that authorities had not followed proper legal procedures when taking him into custody. Morena pleaded guilty to hate speech in the Basic Court of Gjakova and was fined 1,640 euros (\$1,900) in lieu of six months' imprisonment, following deductions and credit for time served in pretrial detention.

According to the BIK, some elementary schools denied access to individual female Muslim students who attempted to attend school wearing a hijab as a result of the enforcement of the MES administrative circular prohibiting religious attire on school property. Imam Labinot Maliqi, head of the NGO Kosovo Center for Peace, reported multiple cases in several municipalities in which female elementary school students were denied entrance to school for wearing a hijab. According to Maliqi, some school officials reversed their decision after the Kosovo Center for Peace inquired into the situation. In September, Maliqi publicly called on parents to report cases in which female students wearing religious attire were denied access to schools. At year's end, the ban remained in place.

Muslim community representatives said there were cases of discrimination against Muslim women who wore religious attire while working in public institutions, including one incident in September of a public school director threatening to fire a teacher if she wore religious attire to work. The teacher asked the Kosovo Center for Peace to mediate, and the school director subsequently reversed the decision and allowed the teacher to wear a hijab to work.

In October, online news site *Balkan Insight* reported the MES and police were investigating a global Christian humanitarian NGO after the municipality of Lipjan/Lipljan terminated a 2018 agreement with the NGO in January. *Balkan Insight* reported parents had complained that the organization published photos of children along with religious content without parental permission, and that international sponsors sent children in Kosovo letters containing religious content. *Balkan Insight* reported the NGO denied any allegations of misconduct and was cooperating with local authorities. Officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is responsible for registering NGOs, said the law prohibited any NGO from conducting religious activity in the country. Officials said they worked with NGOs to ensure compliance, including requiring NGOs to change articles of association and remove content indicating an organization's religious affiliation.

The KPEC again stated the Kosovo Immigration Office continued to deny recognition of foreign missionaries engaged by its member churches. The KPEC said the Customs Service continued to require its members to pay taxes on humanitarian aid they received from abroad during the year, while exempting some other religious communities, such as the BIK, from the taxation. In addition, according to the KPEC, some businesses did not respect the value-added tax exemption for goods purchased by its member churches due to what it stated was religious prejudice.

Decan/Decani municipal officials and the central government continued to refuse to implement a 2016 Constitutional Court decision upholding the Supreme Court's 2012 ruling that recognized the SOC's Visoki Decani Monastery's ownership of approximately 24 hectares (59 acres) of land in the monastery's vicinity. There was no progress during the year, despite repeated appeals by the SOC and international community to the Kosovo Cadastral Agency and, more broadly, the government, to register the SOC's ownership of the land. In September, the Constitutional Court stated all government institutions were obligated to enforce its decisions and referred the issue to the state prosecutor. At year's end, the prosecutor had not initiated criminal proceedings against the officials responsible for refusing to implement the decision. In September, Decan/Decani mayor

Bashkim Ramosaj publicly reaffirmed he did not intend to execute the court's decision. NATO troops in the country continued to provide security at the Visoki Decani Monastery. In October, Viola von Cramon, European Parliament rapporteur on Kosovo, posted to Twitter, "Tolerance and mutual respect are the essence of multiethnic society. The Serbian Orthodox Church heritage in Kosovo must be protected and enjoy full rights. I thus urge Kosovo govt to implement the long overdue C[onstitutional] C[ourt] judgment as the rule of law means equal treatment of all."

In May, the SOC halted official communication with the government, citing the government's nonimplementation of both the Visoki Decani Monastery Constitutional Court decision and a November 2020 Italian-brokered arrangement between the IMC and Decan/Decani municipal authorities on the Decani SPZ roads. The SOC released a statement saying it was "facing a deliberate legal obstruction by Kosovo institutions both on central and local levels, under the strong influence of formal and informal Kosovo Albanian centers of power which apparently remain determined that the Constitutional Court decision will never be implemented... the institutions are firmly in hands of those who make justice on their own regardless of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts' decisions as well as laws." As a result of breaking off discussions, the IMC did not meet during the year. The arrangement included development of both a bypass road external to the SPZ boundaries, which would connect Decan/Decani to Montenegro, and a separate local road within the SPZ. Liburn Aliu, the Minister of Environment, Spatial Planning, and Infrastructure (and cochair of the IMC), publicly opposed the agreed arrangement, saying the construction of a bypass road was a "dangerous precedent." Local authorities continued additional road construction works outside the SPZ, which, the SOC said, was an attempt to create a situation in which local authorities could subsequently strengthen their justification for construction within the SPZ.

The Ministry of Local Government Administration (MLGA) reported most municipalities covered funeral expenses for all religious groups and were responsible for costs associated with cemetery administration. Several municipalities, including Klokot/Killokot, Gjilan/Gnjilane, Mitrovice/a North, Mamushe/Mamusa, and Gračanica/e, stated a need to expand capacity at existing cemeteries. The MLGA stated the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have an impact on funeral ceremonies, as the government's health restrictions limited participation across the country.



The KPEC said a lack of institutional support for dedicated burial sites prevented members from conducting burial services in accordance with their beliefs. The KPEC said many municipalities contracted cemetery maintenance to the BIK and that the BIK often denied KPEC members the ability to conduct burial services, as the BIK required Islamic burial rites. The KPEC said the cemetery management officer in Prizren told the local pastor in March that he could bury his deceased father in the cemetery only if the deceased were a Muslim or Catholic, but not a Protestant. In 2020 (the most recent year for which it provided data), the MLGA reported 23 out of 38 municipal government sites had service contracts with the BIK to provide landscaping, maintenance, and burial services at public cemeteries. Pristina's Catholic, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities continued to use separate public cemeteries that these groups independently maintained and operated.

The SOC and Kosovo-Serb communities continued to state that in many Kosovo-Albanian majority municipalities, local governments did not provide adequate maintenance for their cemeteries and police did not provide sufficient security, allowing for occasional acts of vandalism. According to Serbian-language media reports and the SOC, some tombstones and crosses in the Orthodox cemetery in Rahovec/Orahovac were vandalized in June and October. In July, media reported on the lack of care, vandalism, and desecration of some SOC churches and graveyards.

At year's end, Jewish groups had not yet decided on a suitable location for a synagogue for which the Pristina Municipality had issued a construction permit in 2016. The municipality stated it was ready to allocate land once the question was resolved.

The Jewish community in Prizren said it received approval from the government in August to start renovation of a building dedicated to the Jewish Cultural Center/Synagogue in Prizren. The Jewish community said renovation work depended on funds yet to be raised, adding the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport allocated 80,000 euros (\$90,700) during the year for the project.

In August, the Basic Court of Pristina ruled the Pristina Municipality could not be a party to a 2017 lawsuit brought by the University of Pristina against the municipality and the SOC. The suit seeks annulment of a 1991 grant of land on the university campus to the SOC by the former Yugoslav government and demolition of the uncompleted, but consecrated, SOC Church of Christ the Savior built on that land parcel. The university's lawsuit against the SOC remained under

consideration in the Basic Court at year's end. Both the Pristina Municipality and the university disputed the SOC's land ownership.

The KPEC said municipalities, which are responsible for allocating land to religious communities, refused to provide it land for church buildings. The KPEC said it requested land from 38 municipalities during the year but received an allocation from only two, in Gjilan/Gnjilane and Vushtrri/Vucitrn Municipalities. The KPEC reported it had not received a response from the remaining municipalities.

The SOC said that on June 19, police stopped a bus with Serbian pilgrims and returned the group to Serbia after border police had allowed the bus to enter the country. The SOC said authorities had ordered the pilgrims, who had planned to visit SOC sites and attend religious services, to leave without offering any valid explanation, and that such action violated the pilgrims' rights to freedom of movement and religion.

According to the BIK, the central government continued to provide some funding for Islamic education in the BIK madrassah in Pristina and its branches in Prizren and Gjilan/Gnjilane. Some University of Pristina law faculty members again said this funding was discriminatory because the government did not provide funding for religious education to any other religious group.

Most ethnic Serbs and some Bosniaks, Gorani, Croats, and Roma continued to attend Serbian-language public schools operated and funded by Serbian government parallel structures. The schools offered Christian Orthodox classes, and the Serbian government paid for the instructors, who were members of the SOC. Students were allowed to opt out of these classes.

The KPEC said government officials' public recognition or celebration of Islamic holidays such as Eid al-Adha was discriminatory against religious minorities because government officials did not make similar statements to celebrate non-Islamic holidays. The KPEC also said the government's official calendar of holidays referred to "Catholic" or "Orthodox" holidays, but not "Christian" or "Protestant" holidays. The KPEC stated the government's lack of vocal advocacy for religious minorities contributed to a perceived climate of discrimination. The KPEC also said the presence of Islamic imagery in some public buildings contributed to a perception of Muslim influence over government institutions.

In November, the Associated Press reported government health authorities were working with the Muslim community to encourage persons to get COVID-19 vaccinations. According to the report, imams were encouraging worshippers at Friday prayers to get inoculated, while medical personnel waited in the mosques' yards, ready to administer the vaccines. It cited Imam Burhan Hashani of the Sultan Mehmed 2 Mosque in Pristina as saying his pro-vaccine message was well received. A man attending prayers at the mosque stated, "It's the first time I have heard the imam calling for vaccination. Everybody should get vaccinated ...."

The OSCE continued to monitor implementation of legislation on protecting SPZs around Serbian Orthodox religious and heritage sites. The Police Unit for the Security of Religious and Cultural Heritage Buildings continued to provide 24-hour security to 24 SPZs countrywide.

On May 10, the SOC issued a press release stating it was concerned about incidents of theft and vandalism targeting several of its sites across the country, citing a recent incident in which stones were thrown at the Church of St. Petka in Vitina and other examples. The SOC said most incidents had ethnic and religious motives and criticized what it labeled as aggressive rhetoric against the SOC coming from some senior Kosovo-Albanian institutional and political leaders, including Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Minister of Environment, Spatial Planning, and Infrastructure Liburn Aliu, that might have contributed to these incidents. A representative of the SOC told media outlet *Kossev*, "Complaints to Kosovo institutions are pointless because this violence is the product of aggressive rhetoric that comes from the very top of Kosovo institutions, which instead of solving the problems of the population, economy, and facing the covid pandemic, attack Serbia with the harshest words and collectively accuse the Serb people and even our Church." In response, the spokesperson for the Kosovo Police in Gjilan/Gnjilane told *Kossev* that nothing was damaged in the St. Petka incident and that, although there was no criminal case, police were monitoring the situation. The SOC also publicly raised concerns regarding break-ins and thefts at six SOC sites (churches and auxiliary buildings) over 10 days in March. The incidents occurred in Klokot/Kllokot, Partes/Partesh, Gracanica/Gracanice, Peja/Pec, and Strpce/Shterpce municipalities.

In April, the nongovernmental pan-European federation of cultural heritage civil society organizations, Europa Nostra, included the SOC Visoki Decani Monastery on its list of the seven most endangered heritage sites in Europe, citing risks to the monastery from local development efforts. Senior government officials, including President Vjosa Osmani and Prime Minister Kurti, rejected statements that the

monastery was endangered as “biased” and “incorrect” and urged the organization remove the monastery from the list. In a letter to Europa Nostra, Osmani and Kurti stated, “We are fully committed to the protection of all monuments of our country, and in particular of Orthodox churches and monasteries . . . the Municipality of Decan[/Decani], as part of its [spatial and development] plan, has committed to treat the special area of the Monastery of Decan[i] with special priority and a high level of seriousness. . . . The Monastery of Decan[i] is in good condition, it enjoys full constitutional and legal guarantees, as well as complete security, without any danger that threatens it.” In June, Europa Nostra published a response to “some misguided and inaccurate information” put out on social media and provided additional clarification regarding its decision to include the Decani Monastery on its list. Europa Nostra stated the monastery had been on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger since 2006 and that the monastery “has a special significance for the cultural and spiritual identity and heritage of Serbian people and it is also important for all citizens in Kosovo, as an invaluable element of the multicultural and multireligious heritage in Kosovo.” The SOC publicly expressed support for the Europa Nostra decision and rejected the Kosovo officials’ statements, saying the monastery was the only religious site under military protection in the country. In December, Europa Nostra excluded the Decani Monastery from a shortlist of 12 European heritage sites from which the organization planned to select its list of the seven most endangered heritage sites in Europe for 2022.

The OSCE reported relations between religious communities and municipalities improved – citing improved maintenance of cemeteries by some municipal governments – as a result of OSCE advocacy, for example, of interfaith dialogue with government institutions and its facilitation of joint outreach by government and religious officials to local communities. The OSCE said the Pristina Municipality removed graffiti from the Jewish cemetery, and religious communities partnered with local government to clean cemeteries in Mitrovica/e North and South. The OSCE continued to advocate inclusion of representatives of all major religious communities in municipal community safety councils, which meet to discuss security issues.

The Water Services Regulatory Authority stated it once again waived water utility fees during the year for religious buildings belonging to all religious communities.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In July, the Basic Court in Pristina sentenced Montenegrin national Risto Jovanovic to six months in prison for inciting intolerance by chanting nationalist slogans such as “Kill the Albanians!” during the June 28 observance of Vivodan, which commemorates the 1389 Battle of Kosovo between Serbs and Ottomans at Gazimestan, Pristina. The court fined Jovanovic 6,700 euros (\$7,600) in lieu of imprisonment and banned him from entering the country for five years.

The SOC again stated media reporting contributed to a climate of interethnic and interreligious intolerance during the year. For example, in June, SOC officials complained about negative media reactions following SOC Bishop Teodosije Sibalic’s liturgy on the occasion of Orthodox Holy Ascension in the contested Christ the Savior Church. During the service, Bishop Teodosije reportedly said, “By serving the liturgy today in this cathedral, we testify who we are, who we were, and who we should be in the future. We testify that we will never give up our holy sites, that they belong to us, representing a pledge of our eternal life.” The SOC said unknown persons wrote graffiti on the church’s doors reading “Jesus Hates Serbs” after the liturgy was completed. The SOC said it did not report the vandalism to the police because the media widely reported the incident and police were present at the time. A group of students subsequently staged a protest in front of the church, which they said was associated with the Slobodan Milosevic regime. According to media, some Kosovo politicians and students criticized the bishop’s liturgy, and local NGO Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms called it an “insult” and a “provocation.”

The BIK again stated there were media reports and statements on social media that portrayed Muslims negatively but did not cite examples.

National police said they received reports of 87 incidents targeting religious sites during the year, compared with 57 incidents in 2020. The incidents targeted 56 Muslim, 30 SOC, and one Roman Catholic property. Police classified two cases as incitement of discord and intolerance but did not give details. The BIK said incidents targeting mosques were likely financially motivated, citing, for example, a cash charity box in the Kacanik Mosque that was robbed several times during the year. According to the BIK, the thefts negatively affected their humanitarian activities. The SOC stated that some of the incidents involving its property in the country were religiously and ethnically motivated. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents as solely based on religious identity.

In March, the SOC said unknown individuals broke into its parsonage under construction in Vitomirice/Vitomirica and stole construction materials worth 4,000 euros (\$4,500). In May, the SOC said unknown individuals looted the Churches of Forty Martyrs of Sebaste and St. Dimitrije in the Strpce/Shterpce area. Media reported that on June 28, unknown individuals took away an SOC flag that was flying at the entrance of Gračanica Monastery, and subsequently posted an image to social media of a masked person holding an Albanian flag and trampling the stolen SOC flag and setting it on fire. Media reported that in July, unknown persons broke into the SOC Church of St. Peter and Paul in Strpce and wrote “Kosovo Liberation Army” on the wall. The SOC said it reported these incidents to the police but were concerned about the ability or willingness of authorities to protect Serbian Orthodox Church facilities.

In April, local Kosovo-Serb civil society organizations and Kosovo-Serb political representatives criticized the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms (CDHRF), which had stated that the Visoki Decani Monastery was turned into a military base and Kosovo Albanians were held hostage there during the 1999 war and requested an investigation of the monastery’s Abbot, Father Sava Janjic, for “possible violations of the Law of War and Humanitarian Law.” Sixteen civil society organizations in a joint statement strongly condemned CDHRF’s allegations, which, they said, were “groundless” and called on the government to clearly condemn the CDHRF position and provide all necessary protection to the monastery and Father Janjic.

The KPEC said the media disproportionately covered humanitarian aid from secular or non-Protestant sources but rarely reported on KPEC’s humanitarian work; representatives said the omission contributed to societal intolerance of Protestants and other minority religions.

According to an International Republican Institute (IRI) report entitled *Antisemitic Discourse in the Western Balkans* released during the year, antisemitic statements in media were rare. Of 1,548 online media items studied between January 2019 and May 20, 2020, 70 (4.5 percent) contained what the IRI determined was antisemitic content. Most media focused on Holocaust remembrance and the role ethnic Albanians played in saving Jews during World War II. The IRI stated some “more conservative and radical Muslim communities accuse Israel of controlling the world, its security, financial and banking sectors, the health industry, etc.”

According to Imam Maliqi, Muslim women were reluctant to wear the hijab, fearing potential employment and societal discrimination.

The KPEC said the majority of people in the country respected Christians, including Protestants, but a small percentage of “radical” Muslims did not. In addition, it said its members in rural areas, many of whom converted to Christianity from Islam, were hesitant to practice their religion openly due to fear of discrimination.

Following delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and disputes over privately-owned land expropriations, construction continued on a Turkish-government-funded Grand Mosque in Pristina. Some citizens continued to oppose construction of the mosque, saying its design was based on an archaic Ottoman style rather than traditional Kosovo mosque architecture. Some local imams continued to state existing downtown mosques fulfilled the needs of their constituency and that there was no demand for such a large mosque in the area.

Religious group leaders continued interfaith discussions on property rights, legislative priorities, and local community issues. On December 30, the OSCE condemned the vandalism of the SOC cemetery in Gracanica/e Municipality, where unknown persons damaged seven tombstones. Police initiated an investigation.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed and advocated with government officials, including the President, Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Speaker of the Assembly, and political party leaders for enactment of amendments to the law on religious freedom that would allow religious groups to acquire legal status. They also urged government officials to respect religious freedom and pluralism and increase their communication with religious groups. The Ambassador and other embassy officials urged central and local government officials, including the Prime Minister, to respect the law on SPZs, particularly in the case of the road near Visoki Decani Monastery. Embassy officials advocated with all levels of government for implementation of the 2016 Constitutional Court decision ordering the registration of ownership of land to the Visoki Decani Monastery, urging the government and the judiciary to hold accountable officials responsible for failing to implement the ruling.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials urged increased dialogue between ethnic Albanian members of the government and SOC members. They conveyed this message in both private meetings and public statements, calling for

cooperation between local governments and the SOC on issues such as property ownership, human rights, religious freedom, and overall security. In May and November, the Ambassador and Charge d' Affaires, respectively, joined the heads of the diplomatic missions of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom in statements supporting implementation of the Constitutional Court decision on the Visoki Decani land dispute. In September, the embassy joined the heads of the missions of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom in a statement welcoming the Constitutional Court's referral of the government's nonimplementation of the same decision to the state prosecutor.

Embassy officials met with all major religious communities and discussed the amendments to the law on religious freedom, social issues of common concern, religious freedom issues, and governmental relations with religious communities. In May, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith discussion with religious leaders on religious pluralism and interethnic reconciliation. In June, the embassy hosted Iowa National Guard chaplains, Kosovo Security Force representatives, and several senior religious leaders to discuss plans for a Kosovo Security Force chaplaincy corps.

The embassy frequently issued messages in the press and on social media in support of religious freedom. For example, the Ambassador wrote an op-ed in January that appeared in Albanian- and Serbian-language media entitled "Respecting Court Decisions is Vital to Kosovo's Democratic Future," stating that the Visoki Decani Monastery case "is not about ethnicity, politics, or religion; it is about property rights and respect for the law." The embassy also posted the op-ed on its web site.