

SLOVENIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their religious beliefs in public and private. It states all religious communities shall enjoy equal rights and prohibits incitement of religious hatred or intolerance. The World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) and Ministry of Justice (MOJ) continued a joint research project to establish the scope of Jewish heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their collaborators during World War II. The resulting report was expected in 2022. Restitution efforts remained complicated by an earlier law addressing property nationalization claims that generally excluded property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945. The government registered one new religious group during the year, bringing the total number registered to 55. Muslims continued to ask the government to provide halal meals in public institutions such as schools and hospitals. Some minority religious communities continued to report the government did not provide space or personnel for adherents to receive spiritual care in hospitals, prisons, and the military, despite requests. The government again did not respond to the Muslim community's request to reserve special areas in cemeteries for Muslim graves and allow gravestones to face Mecca. Although male circumcision was legal, some hospitals, acting on a nonbinding opinion by the government's Commission for Medical Ethics, refused to perform the procedure, requiring some Muslims and Jews to travel overseas for that service. On May 20, the government established a council for dealing with unresolved issues between the state and the Roman Catholic Church, including the Church's desire for greater autonomy on internal matters. The Archbishop of Ljubljana complained that charitable organizations connected with the religious community were by law unable automatically to participate in public tenders, since they first had to prove their status as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) to the government. Media reported that in October and December, Prime Minister Janez Jansa generated Twitter posts regarding a Jewish American businessman that were criticized as antisemitic. The country held multiple events on and around International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

On October 26, the Slovenian-based NGO Peace Institute published a study that found 41 percent of respondents who identified as religious minorities reported experiencing discrimination based on their faith, particularly at work, in public, and on the internet. Orthodox Christians and Muslims reported the highest number of incidents. The vice chair of the Jewish Community of Slovenia expressed

concern regarding what he described as negative attitudes towards Jews. The editor in chief of the National Press Agency, a privately run media platform, tweeted, “Hitler is [a] hero.” A former justice minister tweeted in response that glorifying Hitler was a criminal act, and the police and State Prosecutor’s Office in Ljubljana initiated a criminal investigation that was pending at year’s end. In separate incidents, unknown individuals vandalized a Christian NGO, a Catholic cathedral, and three Muslim graves. On November 9, the Jewish community reopened the Ljubljana Synagogue following a renovation that spanned several years; during the renovation, the only synagogue in the country had been located in Maribor.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials responsible for upholding religious freedom, including the Ministry of Culture’s (MOC) Office for Religious Communities, to discuss the concerns of religious groups regarding the legal requirement to stun animals before slaughter and the state of interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials met with Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders, including the Catholic Archbishop of Ljubljana and the former and current muftis of Ljubljana Mosque. The embassy used social media to highlight its outreach to religious communities, posting about events such as embassy officials attending a ceremony to honor the memory of Ljubljana’s Jews deported to concentration camps during World War II and the reopening of Ljubljana’s only synagogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (midyear 2021). The Catholic Church estimates its membership at 1.5 million (71 percent of the population). According to the secretary general of the Islamic Community in Slovenia, the Muslim population is approximately 100,000 (5 percent). A number of refugees and immigrants, including foreign workers, are part of the Muslim community. Estimates of the Serbian Orthodox Church community’s size range from 30,000 to 45,000. The Orthodox and Muslim communities include a large number of immigrants from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The head of the Protestant community estimates its size at 10,000 persons. The Buddhist community, made up mostly of ethnic Slovenians, is estimated to number 2,000. The Jewish community estimates its size at 300 persons. There also are small communities of adherents of Slavic pagan religions, also known as Slavic Native Faiths. According to Boston University’s 2020 World Religions Database, 82 percent of the population is Christian, 4 percent Muslim, and 13 percent atheist or agnostic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their beliefs in public and private. It declares all religious communities have equal rights and provides for the separation of religion and state. The constitution affords equal human rights and fundamental freedoms to all individuals irrespective of their religion; it also prohibits incitement of religious discrimination and inflammation of religious hatred and intolerance. The constitution recognizes the right of conscientious objection to military service for religious reasons.

The law states individuals have the right to freely select a religion and to freedom of religious expression or rejection of expression. They have the right to express – alone or in a group, privately or publicly – their religious beliefs freely in “church or other religious communities,” through education, religious ceremonies, or in other ways. The law states individuals may not to be forced to become a member or to remain a member of a religious group nor to attend (or not attend) worship services or religious ceremonies. The law stipulates the right to refuse to comply with legal duties and requirements that contradict an individual’s religious beliefs, provided such refusals do not limit the rights and freedoms of other persons.

The penal code’s definition of hate crimes includes publicly provoking religious hatred and diminishing the significance of the Holocaust. Punishment for these offenses is imprisonment for up to two years, or, if the crime involves coercion or endangerment of security – defined as a serious threat to life and limb, desecration, or damage to property – imprisonment for up to five years. If officials abuse the power of their positions to commit these offenses, they may be subject to imprisonment for up to five years. Members of groups that engage in these activities in an organized and premeditated fashion – “hate groups,” according to the law – may also receive a punishment of up to five years in prison.

The law on hate speech prohibits the incitement to hatred, violence, and intolerance based on religion, among other factors, in a way that could threaten or disrupt public order.

The law enables churches and other religious groups to register with the government to obtain status as officially recognized religious entities, but it does not restrict the religious activities of unregistered religious groups. Unregistered

religious groups may establish legal associations or entities to purchase property but are required to pay taxes on such property, whereas property owned by registered religious groups used for religious purposes is exempt from taxation. According to the law, the rights of registered and unregistered religious groups include autonomy in selecting their legal form and constituency, freedom to define their internal organization and to name and define the competencies of their employees, autonomy in defining the rights and obligations of their members, latitude to participate in interconfessional organizations within the country or abroad, and freedom to construct buildings for religious purposes. Registered religious groups may provide religious services to military, police, prisons, hospitals, and social care institutions. Registered religious groups are also eligible for rebates on value-added taxes and government cofinancing of social security contributions for their religious workers. The law states religious groups have a responsibility to respect the constitution and the legal provisions on nondiscrimination.

To register with the government, a religious group must submit an application to the MOC providing proof it has at least 10 adult members who are citizens or permanent residents; the name of the group, which must be clearly distinguishable from the names of other religious groups; the group's address in the country; and a copy of its official seal to be used in legal transactions. It must pay an administrative tax of 22.60 euros (\$26). The group must also provide the names of the group's representatives in the country, a description of the foundations of the group's religious beliefs, and a copy of its organizational act. If a group wishes to apply for government cofinancing of social security for clergy members, it must show it has at least 1,000 lay members for every clergy member.

There are 55 registered religious groups, the largest of which are the Catholic Church, Islamic Community of Slovenia, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Evangelical Church. The Slovene Muslim Community also represents Muslims in the country.

The government may refuse the registration of a religious group only if the group does not provide the required application materials in full or if the MOC determines the group is a "hate group" – an organization engaging in hate crimes as defined by the penal code.

By law, the MOC's Office for Religious Communities monitors and maintains records on registered religious communities and provides legal expertise and assistance to religious organizations. The MOC establishes and manages the

procedures for registration, issues documents related to the legal status of registered communities, distributes funds allocated in the government's budget for religious activities, organizes discussions and gatherings of religious communities to address religious freedom concerns, and provides information to religious groups on the legal provisions and regulations related to their activities.

Charitable organizations connected with a religious community are unable automatically to participate in public tenders. Such organizations must first prove their NGO status to the government and then formally request consideration, as must NGOs that are not connected with religious groups.

In accordance with the law, citizens may apply for the return of property nationalized between 1945 and 1963. The government must provide monetary compensation to former owners who cannot receive restitution in kind; for example, it must authorize monetary compensation if government institutions are using the property for an official purpose or for a public service such as education or health care.

According to the constitution, parents have the right to provide their children with a religious upbringing in accordance with the parents' beliefs. The government requires all public schools to include education on world religions in their curricula, with instruction provided by a school's regular teachers. The government allows religious groups to provide religious instruction in their faiths in public schools and preschools on a voluntary basis outside of school hours. The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools as part of the curriculum or during school hours, but it does not prescribe penalties for violations. Private schools may offer religious classes during or after school hours.

The law mandates Holocaust education in schools. This instruction focuses on the history of the Holocaust inside and outside the country. Schools use a booklet published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Holocaust education curriculum to create awareness of the history of Jews and antisemitism in Europe before World War II and of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. The booklet emphasizes the responsibility of everyone to remember the victims of the Holocaust.

The constitution provides for an independent national human rights ombudsman to investigate and report on alleged human rights violations by the government, including those involving religious freedom. The President nominates and the national assembly appoints the human rights ombudsman and allocates the office's

budget, but otherwise the ombudsman operates independently of the government. Individuals have the right to file complaints with the ombudsman to seek administrative relief regarding abuses of religious freedom committed by national or local authorities, but individuals must exhaust all regular and extraordinary legal remedies before turning to the ombudsman. The ombudsman's office may forward these complaints to the State Prosecutor's Office, which may then issue indictments, call for further investigation, or submit the claims directly to a court, whereupon the complaints become formal. The ombudsman also submits an annual human rights report to the national assembly and provides recommendations and expert advice to the government.

The law allows for circumcision, but a 2011 nonbinding opinion by the government's Commission for Medical Ethics, a consultative body to the Ministry of Health, states the commission does not support circumcision for nonmedical purposes. The opinion states, "The Commission on Medical Ethics is of the opinion that the ritual circumcision of boys for religious reasons is unacceptable in our country for legal and ethical reasons and that doctors should not perform it." Some hospitals do not offer circumcision because of this opinion. In 2012, the human rights ombudsman also issued a nonbinding opinion that circumcision violated the rights of children.

The law requires that animals be stunned prior to slaughter, with no exceptions for ritual slaughter.

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

Government Practices

The WJRO and the MOJ continued a joint, two-stage research and valuation project to determine the scope and financial value of heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their collaborators. The MOJ stated from the outset in 2018 that the report would produce a limited number of cases of heirless property in the country. A lead researcher for the WJRO said the joint research was in its concluding phase and would finish in early 2022, one year later than originally expected. The researcher attributed delays to the revision process and the search for solid legal arguments to justify findings. The MOJ agreed to a one-year timeline for evaluating with the WJRO the current values of heirless property after completion of the research. Restitution efforts remained complicated by an earlier law on property nationalization claims that generally excluded property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945.

The government registered one new religious group during the year: Eno (One). This brought the total number of registered religious groups to 55.

All cemeteries remained located on public land. A 2019 request to the government by the Muslim community to reserve special locations in cemeteries for graves of Muslims and allow gravestones to face Mecca remained under review at year's end. The central government had delegated the review to local governments, which stated lack of space was an impediment to granting the request. In 2019, the Muslim community also requested the government make pork-free meals readily available in hospitals, schools, prisons, and other public institutions. The secretary general of the Islamic Community said all these issues remained unresolved at year's end, noting the community and the government did not actively pursue discussions due to its focus on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some minority religious communities continued to experience difficulties providing spiritual care to their members in the military, hospitals, prisons, and other public institutions. Prisoners had access to multireligious prayer rooms. While many hospitals had Catholic chapels, members of other faiths had fewer opportunities to attend collective religious services while hospitalized. Other faiths shared multireligious prayer rooms.

The Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF) employed full-time Catholic and Protestant clergy to provide religious services, but no imams, Orthodox priests, or rabbis. While Muslims and Orthodox Christians in the SAF had access to their local religious communities while serving domestically, such opportunities were not always available during deployments or training abroad. The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the country, Reverend Aleksandar Obradovic, again attributed the SAF's lack of Orthodox clergy to the low number of qualified Orthodox priests in the country rather than to inadequate government support. Muslim community leaders said the Ministry of Defense had not employed an imam in the SAF, despite their requests to do so. Catholic officials again said their request for the government to employ an ordained bishop in the SAF to oversee the organization of Catholic chaplains in the military remained pending. An SAF source stated most of its budget went towards meeting NATO commitments but that it would in future address religious personnel issues.

The Islamic Community of Slovenia continued to provide certificates to companies producing meat from stunned animals affirming the meat as halal. The Jewish community raised concerns about the law requiring stunning prior to slaughtering, stating this violated kosher laws, and it continued to import kosher meat from

neighboring countries. The government defended the law as necessary to comply with European Union (EU) regulations to prevent unnecessary suffering to animals.

The MOC's Office for Religious Communities and leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities said that continuing confusion regarding the legal status of circumcision resulted in many public hospitals not offering the procedure. As a result, Muslims and Jews continued to rely on private hospitals or traveled to Austria for the procedure. Muslim and Jewish leaders objected to the 2011 Commission on Medical Ethics nonbinding opinion opposing circumcision and to the human rights ombudsman's 2012 nonbinding opinion that circumcision violated the rights of children, calling them religious discrimination.

On May 20, the government established the Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Open Questions with the Catholic Church, composed of government and Catholic Church representatives. The council was charged with addressing unresolved issues between the state and the Church, including the Church's desire for greater autonomy on internal matters in relation to the state, financing for religious staff, financing for religious education for children, and regulations regarding government maintenance of the Church's cultural heritage. The council also was charged with addressing negative attitudes towards religion in the media by undertaking tolerance initiatives.

In April, the government allowed religious venues, along with other public venues, to reopen, after having closed them on March 13, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious venues and other public venues closed again on October 16 as a pandemic control measure. On December 10, Catholic Archbishop of Ljubljana Stanislav Zore stated the government should not include religious services in decrees banning public gatherings, saying this impinged on the Catholic Church's and other religious communities' autonomy. The government stated such bans were necessary pandemic control measures.

Under the government's November 2020 COVID-19 pandemic assistance package, during the year it provided 100 percent of social security contributions to religious-based social workers of all religious groups, compared with 48 percent of Catholic social workers' social security prior to the pandemic. In practice, however, most Islamic Community of Slovenia workers were not eligible for this assistance because they were not citizens. The government did not create a comparable COVID-19 pandemic assistance mechanism for such workers.

Archbishop Zore stated he was generally pleased with how the Catholic Church and the National Institute for Public Health had coordinated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledging the size and strength of the Catholic Church in the country in negotiations with the government, Archbishop Zore said the Church fought for all religious communities to receive aid. He expressed regret, however, regarding how charity organizations connected with a religious community could not automatically participate in public tenders but at each instance were obliged to prove their NGO status to the government and request to be treated equally with other NGOs. The majority of state tenders excluded humanitarian organizations connected with the Church.

On May 14, the government flew an Israeli flag alongside the Slovenian and EU flags on a government building as an expression of solidarity with Israel amid the escalating armed conflict between the Israeli government and Palestinian groups at the time. On May 18, the Slovene Muslim Community, one of the two organizations representing Muslims in the country, sent an open letter to Prime Minister Jansa in which it described the flying of the Israeli flag on a government building as an “abuse of power” and support for “Israel’s genocidal policy.” The letter, signed by the organization’s president Muhamed Cerkez, asked, “Do you not care how 50,000 Muslims in Slovenia feel?” Jansa responded on Twitter by saying that the Slovene Muslim Community was making “a big mistake by supporting terrorists” and that “ Hamas attacked first, shelling civilian targets in [Israel] while hiding behind its own civilians.”

Media reported in October that Prime Minister Jansa posted to Twitter an image of a Jewish American businessman surrounded by members of the European Parliament with a caption suggesting that members of the European Parliament were his “puppets.” A spokesman for the European Parliament, as well as the European Jewish Congress, criticized the post as perpetuating antisemitic tropes. At the time of the post, Slovenia held the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. The Prime Minister subsequently deleted the tweet. On December 11, he posted to Twitter that the same businessman should “stay away from [the] EU and Europe, please. Your dirty money for so-called NGOs is the strongest generator of conflicts on the continent, destroying trust among people and democracy.”

On March 19, Prime Minister Jansa met with then Mufti of Ljubljana Nedžad Grabus to discuss interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Jansa called such dialogue “a pillar of trust-based relations among members of different religions and cultures. On November 5, the Prime Minister met with representatives of the

European Muslim and Jewish Leadership Council in Ljubljana, where he highlighted the role of religious freedom and dialogue in promoting tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding. The meeting featured council cochair Mufti Grabus, who was then Mufti of Sarajevo, Mufti Nevzet Poric of Ljubljana, Elie Rosen, the head of the Jewish communities in Graz and Ljubljana, and senior religious leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities in Austria, Italy, Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

The country held multiple events on and around International Holocaust Remembrance Day (January 27). The main ceremony was held on January 26, when President Borut Pahor called in his keynote address for the preservation of peace, security, tolerance, and coexistence, and for reason and diplomacy to prevail so that future generations would be spared from conflict. A delegation featuring Pahor and Israeli Ambassador Eyal Sela laid a wreath at the Jewish cemetery in Dolga Vas in the northeast of the country. The President then visited Erika Furst, a Jew from the region of Prekmurje and a Holocaust survivor.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Government officials stated the country supported the IHRA Working Definition of Anti-Semitism, which it adopted in 2018.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On October 26, the Slovenian-based NGO Peace Institute published a study on discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, skin color, and religion in the country, finding such discrimination was particularly prevalent in the areas of employment and access to housing and health. The study, carried out between May and September, consisted of an online survey of 814 randomly selected participants and included 400 hypothetical scenarios and 16 expert interviews. Forty-one percent of respondents who identified as religious minorities said they had experienced discrimination based on their faith, particularly at work, in public, or on the internet. Orthodox Christians reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of religion in 60 percent of cases, Muslims 44 percent, and Catholics 20 percent.

Vice chair of the Jewish Community of Slovenia Igor Vojtic expressed concern regarding what he described as negative attitudes towards Jews, especially, he said,

among left-leaning citizens. He said these attitudes likely stemmed more from sympathy towards Palestinians and opposition to Israeli policies than from pure antisemitism.

On February 2, unknown individuals spray-painted two swastikas and the word “Corruption?” on the door of Zavod Iskreni, a Christian NGO. The NGO, best known for promoting “family and Christian values” and organizing antiabortion rallies, had received publicity for receiving funding from the Labor Ministry to conduct COVID-19 mitigation activities. Similar funding went to other NGOs. Authorities investigated the matter but took no enforcement action.

Media reported that on August 1, Urban Purgar, editor in chief of the privately run National Press Agency and president of its backer, the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Values, posted on Twitter, “Hitler is [a] hero.” Ales Zalar, a former justice minister, tweeted in response to Purgar that glorifying the Nazi dictator was a criminal act. “It is on the state prosecution to make a move,” he said. “The reaction of the state’s criminal apparatus must be immediate and strict.” Several political parties also condemned Purgar’s tweet. The opposition party Marjan Sarec List demanded that the government and relevant authorities launch appropriate proceedings against Purgar. The police and State Prosecutor’s Office in Ljubljana initiated a criminal investigation that was proceeding at year’s end.

On January 25, unknown individuals threw a balloon filled with paint on one of the exterior frescoes of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Ljubljana, a designated cultural monument, causing several thousand euros in damage. Police investigated the incident as a suspected violation of the criminal code for damaging an asset of special cultural or natural value, which could lead to a maximum eight-year prison sentence, but they had not apprehended the culprits as of year’s end. On January 26, a fire was set in the vicinity of a Catholic pastoral center in Ljubljana-Rudnik parish. The Church described the incident as “Christianophobic.”

In March, Tadej Strehovec, secretary general of the Slovene Bishop’s Conference, stated that the community maintained good cooperation with the country’s police, and he cited a police program that teaches bishops self-defense and how to implement security measures for religious properties.

In May, an unknown individual poured red liquid and scattered pieces of meat over three Islamic graves in a cemetery in Domzale. Police investigated the incident as a crime of public incitement of hatred, violence, or intolerance. The Muslim

community condemned the incident, which remained under investigation at year's end.

In June, Mufti Grabus said there were no serious restrictions on religious freedom in the country and expressed interest in seeing a madrassah established so that Muslims could be “better rooted” in the country.

The Orthodox community's only church remained in Ljubljana. Orthodox representatives in Koper and Celje continued to express interest in establishing additional churches. The Orthodox community in Koper held services at a local Catholic church, in keeping with the Catholic Church's practice of routinely granting access for local Orthodox communities to host events and religious ceremonies.

On November 9, the Jewish community reopened the Ljubljana Synagogue following a renovation that spanned several years. President Pahor, Rabbi for Slovenia Ariel Haddad, Archbishop Zore, and Mufti Poric were among the attendees. During the renovation, the only synagogue in the country had been located in Maribor.

Representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant communities continued to report productive relations among members of different religious groups, including active interfaith dialogues at virtual and in-person workshops and conferences.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with government officials responsible for religious freedom, including the MOC's Office for Religious Communities, to discuss the concerns of religious groups regarding the legal requirement to stun animals before slaughter, antisemitism, heirless properties, and the state of interfaith dialogue.

Embassy officials continued to meet with Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic community leaders. In March, embassy officials met with Archbishop Zore to discuss the Catholic Church's relations with the government, including regarding public tenders. On June 15, embassy officials visited the Ljubljana Mosque and spoke with Mufti Grabus and Mufti Poric about issues important to the country's Islamic community.

On January 27, the embassy posted to social media a message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In September, embassy officials attended a ceremony to honor the memory of Ljubljana's Jews, who were deported to concentration camps during World War II, and the opening of an exhibit on the Holocaust. In November, embassy officials attended the reopening of the Ljubljana Synagogue. Both events were amplified through social media posts and together reached more than 5,600 individuals. The embassy used social media to highlight meetings with representatives of religious communities, as well noting key dates, such as International Religious Freedom Day on October 27.