

NORTH MACEDONIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and religious expression. It grants equality before the law for all individuals regardless of religious belief. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and other government ministries discussed amendments to the 2007 law governing religion that would enable larger religious communities to acquire the status of “legal entities,” but the MOJ again postponed consultations with religious groups on the amendments. On February 18, the Islamic Religious Community in North Macedonia (IRC) publicly condemned the government’s official registration of the Islamic Salafi community in December 2020, saying it would be detrimental to Muslim unity. IRC leaders said relations with the government improved following a meeting in January between IRC leader Reis Shaqir Fetahu and President Stevo Pendarovski, but that some government ministries and the judiciary continued to treat the organization unfavorably. The Skopje Appellate Court upheld a lower court’s rejection of the registration application of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO) because the application had not been submitted by the deadline. The OAO continued to state there was detrimental government interference in Church affairs. The Skopje Basic Civil Court ruled in May that the Tetovo-based Bektashi Community (a Sufi group) could resubmit its application to register as a religious group; the community did not resubmit its application during the year. Bektashi Community (Tetovo) members again reported harassment by the government and the IRC. The IRC said the government continued to show favoritism toward the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), and smaller religious groups continued to report unequal government treatment compared with the five constitutionally named groups. IRC representatives said that the government delayed accreditation of IRC-run Islamic high schools, which prevented those students from enrolling in state-funded universities. In an interview in April, the country’s first Jewish woman to become a Minister since the country’s independence said she faced antisemitism when she was dismissed from the cabinet in 2020 following her appearance at a press conference in front of a backdrop displaying the country’s former name, Republic of Macedonia.

OAO officials continued to say their clergy and their family members were often targets of insults in media and victims of physical attacks by individuals considered close to the MOC-OA. The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community continued to dispute the IRC’s claims to full ownership of, and plans to renovate, the

Harabati Baba Teqe, a complex the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community used as its headquarters. Media reported one incident of vandalism against a monastery located in a majority-Muslim area and 18 incidents of theft from churches during the year. The MOC-OA did not attribute the thefts and vandalism to religious motives.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed interfaith dialogue and the importance of tolerance and understanding among the various religious groups with government representatives, including the director of the Committee on Relations between Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), mayors, and other officials. With members of parliament, they also discussed the status of religious freedom in the country, religious property restitution, and the amendments to the law on high schools, including the accreditation of religious schools. Embassy officials met with MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan and IRC leader Fetahu to discuss religious freedom issues, including perceived government favoritism toward certain religious groups. They also met with representatives of other religious groups to discuss the government's treatment of smaller groups and respect for their religious freedom. Throughout the year, the embassy used social media to disseminate messages that emphasized the importance of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (midyear 2021), excluding the diaspora. According to the 2021 national census, 46.1 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian, the overwhelming majority of whom are followers of the MOC-OA; 32.2 percent Muslim (the vast majority of whom are Sunni); 13.2 percent Christian (without specifying a denomination); and 7.2 percent unknown. Other religious groups that combined constitute less than 2 percent of the population include a small number of Sufi groups with several Bektashi orders, the OAO, Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Jewish community estimates it has 200 members.

The majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and southeastern regions. Most Muslims live in the northern and western parts of the country. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation: the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian and most Muslims are ethnic Albanian. Most Roma and virtually all ethnic Turks and ethnic Bosniaks are Muslim, and most ethnic Serbs and Vlachs are Orthodox Christian. There is also a correlation

between religious and political affiliation, as political parties are largely divided along ethnic lines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equal rights for all citizens regardless of religious belief. It grants freedom of religion and the right of individuals to express their faith freely and in public, individually, or with others. The constitution also protects the religious identity of all communities. The constitution states restrictions on freedoms and rights may not be applied to personal conviction, conscience, thought, or religious confession. An amendment to the constitution cites five religious groups that automatically receive tax exemptions and other benefits: the MOC-OA, IRC, Catholic Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, and Jewish community. It stipulates these five groups, as well as other registered groups, are separate from the state, equal before the law, and free to establish schools, charities, and other social institutions. The law allows other religious groups to obtain the same legal rights and status as these five groups by applying for government recognition and registration through the courts. The constitution bars political parties or other associations from inciting religious hatred or intolerance.

The law defines hate crimes as criminal offenses against a person, legal entity, or related persons or property, committed because of a real or assumed characteristic of the victim, including nationality, ethnic origin, and religion or belief. Hate speech and hate crimes are criminal acts; perpetrators of other crimes may receive harsher sentences when hate crime elements are involved. Penalties range from one to 10 years in prison and a minimum of 10 years' imprisonment for hate crimes leading to death.

Religious organizations may apply to register as a "church," a "religious community," or a "religious group." These classifications are based on group size, internal organization, and internal hierarchy. The law treats these three categories equally, bestowing the same legal rights, benefits, and obligations on all of them. The government recognizes 40 religious organizations, including the five named in the constitution. The total consists of 18 churches, 10 religious communities, and 12 religious groups. Once registered, a church, religious community, or religious group is exempt from taxes and is eligible to apply for restitution of properties nationalized during the Communist era (provided the group or community existed

and had property during that era), government-funded projects, and construction permits for preservation of shrines and cultural sites. It may also establish schools. Unregistered groups may hold religious services or other meetings and proselytize, but they may not engage in certain activities such as establishing schools or receiving donations that are tax-deductible for the donor, and such groups are not tax-exempt.

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

The court forwards approved applications to the CRRCG, a government body responsible for fostering cooperation and communication between the government and registered religious groups, which adds the organization to its registry. The CRRCG has no oversight or ability to influence the registration process. If the court denies the application, the organization may appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the appellate court rules against the appeal, the organization may file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court, which is the highest court in the country having jurisdiction over human rights cases. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization may further appeal the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The law does not permit religious organizations to operate primary schools but allows them to operate schools at the secondary level and above. Religious high schools use their own curricula and need not be certified by the Ministry of Education and Science, although some are certified. Students in religious high schools without certification are not permitted to take the required national matriculation examination (baccalaureate) and therefore are unable to enroll in universities. The ministry's curriculum requires sixth grade students to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content – Introduction to Religions and Ethics in Religions. According to the ministry's description, these courses teach religion in an academic, nondevotional manner. The Ministry of Education and Science often accredits priests and imams, depending on the request

of parents, to teach these courses. The ministry mandates that all teachers of these subjects have completed training from accredited higher education institutions taught by professors of philosophy or sociology. If students do not wish to take a course on religion, they may take the third option, Classical Culture in European Civilization.

All foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a work visa before arrival, a process that normally takes approximately four months. The CRRCG maintains a register of all foreign religious workers, and various government offices may approve or deny them the right to conduct religious work within the country. The CRRCG issues approvals for temporary residence permits and/or work visa applications for missionaries and religious workers on behalf of registered churches, religious communities, and religious groups; the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy verifies their compliance with the country's labor laws; and the Ministry of Interior reviews security aspects. Unregistered groups may submit applications for work permits and visas according to the normal procedure. Work visas are valid for six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent renewals are valid for one year. There is no limit to the number of visa renewals for which a religious worker may apply.

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

Government Practices

In February, the MOJ met with CRRCG and other government ministries and agencies to discuss amendments to the 2007 Law on the Legal Status of the Church, Religious Community, and Religious Groups that would enable larger religious communities to acquire the status of "legal entities." This change, a longtime request of the MOC-OA and IRC, would enable the government to support religious groups' projects when doing so was deemed to be in the public interest. Under existing law, the government lacks explicit authority to, for example, assist with the preservation of culturally or historically significant religious sites. Other proposed changes to the 2007 law would make it more consistent with existing provisions of the criminal code and other laws by specifying that religious groups may not incite intolerance against other religious groups or promote stereotypes of other groups; use/abuse their names, titles, or insignia; act against the legal order, public morality, or health and lives of their own or believers of another religious group; or incite religious, ethnic, national or racial hatred, or promote religious radicalism. The MOJ decided, as it did when

the 2007 law passed, to bring religious groups, including the MOC-OA and the IRC, into the discussion at a later, unspecified time once the amendments had been drafted.

The Skopje Basic Civil Court reported it received 10 applications during the year related to registering churches and religious communities/groups. The court issued decisions on nine of those cases and one, related to the registration of a new church, remained pending at year's end. There were no further details on the pending case.

On February 18, the IRC publicly condemned the December 2020 registration of the Islamic Salafi Community, calling the ruling of the Skopje Basic Civil Court “a biased, shameful act to the detriment of Muslims’ unity,” and “an attempt to create parallel institutions.” IRC officials said the Salafi group was “an offspring of malicious structures” and called on the country’s Muslims to “not fall prey” to the group. The leader of the Salafi community said he considered his group’s registration a matter of the right to “freedom of religious expression and practice” and that his group had “a different form of organization and administration.”

The Skopje Basic Civil Court ruled on May 18 that the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community could resubmit its request to register as a religious group, following an appellate court’s ruling in September 2020 that the group be allowed to do so. The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community, however, did not resubmit its registration application during the year. In 2019, the European Commission annual report on the country called on the government to implement earlier ECHR rulings to respect the rights of the Bektashi (Tetovo) Community, including officially recognizing it as a religious group. The group said its nonregistration effectively restricted the community’s ability to acquire property and use premises, such as the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, for religious activity.

The OAO continued to state there was detrimental government interference in its affairs. OAO authorities continued to say the government refused to register the group, interfered in the work of the judiciary in cases involving the OAO, and exerted pressure on the OAO to reapply for registration under a new name despite the ECHR ruling it should be allowed to register under its current name. Government officials said the ECHR rulings did not change the country’s legal requirement that an applicant’s name be different from an already registered religious group. In 2020, the Skopje Basic Civil Court stated that the OAO’s name was too similar to the MOC-OA’s name and would have to be changed for the OAO to register. In March, the Skopje Appellate Court confirmed the rejection of

the OAO's registration, pending since 2009, without comment.

The MOC-OA said the denationalization (restitution) process for property claims continued to be slow, noting more than 90 percent of positive decisions made by the Denationalization Commission, which adjudicates claims, were appealed by the State Attorney's Office. They said the restitution process was stalled for a year because the commission was closed due to COVID-19, and pending cases were redistributed to local denationalization commissions for adjudication. The local commissions did not act on any MOC-OA restitution requests during the year.

For the 10th year in a row, the Bektashi (Tetovo) community reported to police acts of harassment by individuals occupying the Harabati Baba Teqe compound in Tetovo, and by a group of supporters of the registered Hader Baba Teqe Bektashi (Kichevo) Order, who tried to evict the leaders of the Tetovo community from their shrine. The Bektashi (Tetovo) group stated that on July 22, unauthorized individuals entered its compound and stole donated money. The unauthorized group tried twice to evict the resident cleric – the dervish – in August and in September. In the September incident, a public prosecutor associated with the unauthorized group accompanied by two police inspectors threatened the dervish and other Bektashi (Tetovo) community employees with eviction from the shrine. The Bektashi (Tetovo) community also said that on September 13, police harassed and interrogated one of its clerics. The Bektashi (Tetovo) community remained in the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine at year's end.

On January 13, President Pendarovski paid a courtesy call on the head of the IRC, Reis Shaqir Fetahu. During the meeting, Pendarovski said he believed Fetahu would make a significant contribution in promoting religious coexistence and respect for diversity. The two also discussed religious freedom and the possibility of organizing the next World Conference on Dialogue Among Religions and Civilizations (the last having been held in Bitola/Manaster in 2016).

IRC leaders said that relations with the government improved following the Pendarovski-Fetahu meeting, but that some ministries and the judiciary continued to treat the IRC unfavorably. The IRC said that during the year, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) did not finalize any investigations of incidents affecting the community and its leadership, some of which dated from 2015. IRC officials also said the MOI Cyber Crime Unit closed a website that contained antisemitic comments but took no action against online hate speech or calls for violence against the leaders of the IRC, despite the fact the IRC filed charges.

The IRC said the government had restored less than 50 percent of its property seized by the state before 1991. Among the disputed properties was the Husamedin Pasha Mosque in Shtip (nationalized in 1955), several mosques in Skopje, the Yeni Mosque in Bitola/Manastir, and the Carshi Mosque in Prilep (which remained in ruins). The IRC added that the level of compensation for its claimed property was often below market value.

In May, the IRC regained title to several of its properties in Skopje's Old Bazaar and certain parcels of land in Gostivar through the denationalization process.

The IRC stated municipal authorities continued to deny it construction permits for a mosque in the ethnically and religiously mixed village of Lazhec, as well as for the reconstruction of a mosque in Strumica and the central mosque in Prilep, on the grounds the latter two were cultural monuments under government, not IRC, jurisdiction.

The Evangelical Methodist Church in Macedonia (EMC), part of the United Methodist Church in the United States, said restitution of Church property remained incomplete, while the MOC-OA restitution process ended long ago. The EMC said it could not build a church in Prilep because the municipality had refused for more than 20 years to issue a permit, even though there had previously been a church on the property for more than 100 years and zoning plans provided for the inclusion of a church. The EMC said it faced similar problems in other towns.

The MOC-OA said the municipality of Tetovo had failed for two years to honor its earlier commitments to pave a street to one of its churches in a neighborhood, to build a chapel at the cemetery, and to collect the garbage at the cemetery's entrance. The MOC-OA also said the municipality of Struga had still not ruled on an application, pending since 2013, for construction of an Orthodox church in the village of Oktisi.

Smaller religious groups continued to say the government treated them unequally and favored the religious groups listed in the constitution over others. They said Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, President Pendarovski, and other government officials often met with only the five constitutionally recognized groups.

The EMC said the government extended more privileges to the MOC-OA and the IRC and these groups had more rights than other religious groups. In October, the IRC stated that the government advocated for the MOC-OA obtaining international

recognition and continued to grant it unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge. MOC-OA and IRC leaders said complaints of government favoritism arose from was a misperception due to their communities' larger size and broader presence in the country.

The OAO continued to accuse the government of bias and of failure to respect domestic and international law. OAO officials said that as representatives of an unregistered entity they did not have the right to open a bank account and that they continued to face other legal obstacles.

The EMC and IRC said the Interreligious Council, composed of the heads of the five constitutionally recognized religious groups, was not as active as it should be, and held only two meetings during the year: a meeting in January related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a formal meeting with President Pendarovski in April.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) continued to recognize the smaller OAO and refused to recognize the MOC-OA, which left the latter, the largest Orthodox community in the country, unrecognized by Orthodox churches around the world. In June, President Pendarovski met in Istanbul with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I to discuss the status of the MOC-OA. Pendarovski stressed the special role the Ecumenical Patriarch could play in overcoming the autocephaly dispute between the MOC-OA and the SOC. The MOC-OA requested autocephaly from the SOC so it could be recognized by the Church authorities in Istanbul.

The IRC said it supported the MOC-OA's autocephaly and, in a sign of solidarity, it continued to avoid events organized by the SOC unless the MOC-OA participated.

Although parliament amended the Law on High School Education in 2020, some issues related to certifying religious high schools, final exams, and the ability of students graduating from these schools to enroll in the country's universities remained unaddressed. The MOC-OA said in September that graduates from the MOC-OA high school technically should not be able to enroll at the MOC-OA School of Theology because it is considered a state-funded school that could not admit graduates from the religious high schools. However, the school continued to enroll them.

IRC representatives said that despite ongoing negotiations among stakeholders, the government delayed the accreditation of IRC-run madrassahs that wished to receive accreditation, and that as a result, those students could not enroll in state-

funded universities. On September 22, students of the girls' madrassah in Tetovo protested against the government's continued delay in granting their school accreditation as an educational institution.

Some religious groups and parents continued to say that Orthodox priests and imams hired to teach the required nondenominational introductory courses on religion and ethics often emphasized the practice of their own religions instead of presenting a neutral overview of different faiths. Officials from churches and from the government said those courses faced numerous additional problems because local governments, which oversee the schools, used the results of parent surveys conducted at the beginning of the school year to assign classes to teachers preferred by parents.

On January 27, parliament adopted a law on violence against women and domestic violence that allows for fines against religious groups promoting gender-based violence and further stipulates that media and religious communities should promote policies against gender-based violence. The law is in accordance with the Council of Europe 2011 Convention Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention.

On March 5, Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani, together with the directors of the State Statistical Office and the CRRCG, met with the country's principal religious community leaders to discuss preparations for the 2021 census, which was completed on September 30. Osmani briefed them on the census process, stressed its importance, and asked them to encourage their members to participate.

In an April 5 interview with *European Jewish Press*, Rashela Mizrahi, the country's first-ever Jewish woman to become a Minister since the country's independence, discussed the antisemitism she said she faced when she was dismissed from her position in the cabinet as Minister of Labor and Social Policy in 2020 following her appearance at a press conference which displayed a backdrop using the country's former name, Macedonia. "I received a lot of threats. I was asked to wear the yellow star. There were comments published in the media like 'Treblinka was not wrong,' 'We should have finished with them completely,' and 'It is a mistake that some of them are still alive.'" Mizrahi said she regretted that the Prime Minister never took "an official stance" concerning the threats. "This campaign lasted for around six weeks until my dismissal by the parliament on the grounds that I stood in front of a board with the country's old name." Mizrahi said the governing party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, was distorting the history of the country's Jews by refusing to acknowledge the role of

Bulgaria (which, at the time, occupied the territory that became North Macedonia) in their deportation. She said, “People born between 1980 and 1990 are generally ignorant about history because of a lack of education. Children should be educated about the facts of what happened during World War II.”

On June 25, the country submitted its official application for full membership in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which the IHRA approved in November, during its winter session in Thessaloniki, Greece.

On October 13, President Pendarovski, in his address to the International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism in Malmo, Sweden, highlighted the need to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and the fate of 7,144 Jews from North Macedonia who perished in Treblinka in occupied Poland in World War II, and to educate young generations on the Holocaust. Pendarovski said the government would make mandatory and increase the number of classes on antisemitism and the Holocaust in the final years of elementary education and mandate elementary and high school visits to the Holocaust Memorial Center in Skopje. Pendarovski also noted the government had already adopted the IHRA working definitions on antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, and antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination.

On May 19, the national coordinator on the IHRA co-organized a virtual multilateral education webinar on the practical implementation of the IHRA definitions in multicultural societies on May 19. As tasked by the government in 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science made the 2019 IHRA *Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust* available in Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Serbian (the languages of instruction in public schools), with the purpose of disseminating them in schools across the country. The Bureau for the Development of Education and the Holocaust Museum also published the recommendations on their websites.

On April 28, the Ministry of Education and Science, Holocaust Memorial Center, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and UNESCO organized a seminar on combating antisemitism in schools. The Holocaust Memorial Center translated OSCE- and UNESCO-written toolkits for combating antisemitism into Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Serbian.

On March 15, the IRC issued a public call to Muslims to adhere to the government recommendations and anti-COVID-19 guidelines. Following government guidelines, the IRC of Skopje decided on April 8 to keep mosques closed for

traditional Ramadan evening prayers and to ban iftar dinners in mosques for as long as the COVID-19 curfew was in place. Where possible, it organized online sermons and outdoors prayers instead. In May, also in accordance with government guidelines, the IRC Presidency ordered imams to limit the duration of activities in mosques as much as possible and to ban large gatherings during the pandemic.

The IRC's Fatwa Council issued a statement on April 9 informing the country's Muslims that receiving COVID-19 vaccines would not violate the Ramadan fast. On August 30, IRC head Fetahu and Deputy Minister of Health Ilir Hasani issued a joint call to the public to get vaccinated and to strictly respect the government's continuing measures against the spread of COVID-19. Hasani told the press he asked Fetahu to urge the imams to advocate for mass vaccination, adding that vaccination was not against the laws of the faith.

In April, President Pendarovski and the director of the CRRCG met with the leaders of the four of the five religious communities listed in the constitution: Archbishop Stefan of the MOC-OA, IRC head Fetahu, Bishop Kiro Stojanov of the Catholic Church, and Superintendent Marjan Dimov of the EMC. (The president of the Jewish community was invited but could not attend due to illness.) They discussed how best to proceed with Easter and Ramadan holiday celebrations under COVID-19 conditions. The leaders of the religious communities each subsequently appealed to their members for responsible behavior, serious and unconditional observance of public health measures and recommendations, and the need for vaccinations.

On April 26, Prime Minister Zaev, First Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, Minister of Health Venko Filipche, and Director of the CRRCG Darijan Sotirovski thanked MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan and IRC leader Fetahu for supporting the government's efforts to fight the pandemic. The meeting participants said the government's public health protection measures helped reduce the number of infections and hospitalizations, which created opportunities for a safer celebration of the Orthodox Easter and Eid al-Adha. The officials reiterated the importance of religious facilities continuing to observe the government's COVID-19 limitations.

In June, the MOC-OA released a message in support of the government's COVID-19 immunization campaign and condemned the call of one priest who urged parishioners to avoid vaccination because it was "against the will of God." In public statements, the MOC-OA Synod appealed to the faithful, the clergy, and the monks not to be misled by such views.

Atheists, Muslims, and Jews expressed dissatisfaction that in addition to the state holidays granted to all citizens, the Law on Holidays granted the former groups fewer days off than it did to Orthodox Christians.

In May, the IRC Presidency urged imams and muftis to refrain from participating in political functions wearing religious garments and to refrain completely from participating in electoral rallies. The ethnic Albanian opposition parties and the media had stated that some IRC representatives interfered in the 2017 and 2020 elections by participating in political party rallies, and that they actively lobbied on behalf of the governing parties in those elections.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

OAO officials continued to say their clergy and their family members were often targets of insults in media and victims of physical attacks by individuals considered close to the MOC-OA. In August, personnel at a cemetery in Skopje refused to allow Bishop David of the OAO to officiate at a funeral despite the family's insistence.

In May, protesters in support of a Palestinian state gathered at the Holocaust Museum. A large number of the protesters chanted antisemitic slurs. The Jewish community reported no violent acts against them but said that during the escalation of the conflict in Gaza, some of its members complained their children had been bullied for their Jewish identity – especially those attending international schools alongside the children of diplomats and businessmen from the Arab world. There was an increase in antisemitic social media posts during the conflict.

Holocaust Museum representatives said in September they noticed an increase in antisemitic posts on social media and the use of the yellow Star of David in anti-vaccination disinformation, which blamed COVID-19 on “Bolsheviks, Satanists, and Jews.”

In September, former imam Skender Buzaku, who announced he was running to become leader of the IRC, reported receiving threats via text messages from unknown persons telling him he would never become leader and would instead be imprisoned and killed. According to Buzaku, the messages also called on him to immediately withdraw the embezzlement charges he had filed in 2019 against former head of the IRC Sulejman Rexhepi and current head of the IRC Fetahu or else he (Buzaku) would be “liquidated.” Buzaku reported the case to police officials dealing with violent crime. Police had taken no action on the case by

year's end. The IRC expelled Buzaku in 2015 for his role in the temporary takeover of the IRC headquarters in Skopje by his armed followers.

On October 15, the IRC condemned what it said was the mockery of Islamic religious rites for political purposes by Shuto Orizari mayoral candidate Tefik Mahmut, a member of opposition party Levica. Mahmut organized a mock Islamic call to prayer on the street in front of a government building in Skopje on October 14. The IRC called Levica's gathering a "primitive act."

The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community continued to dispute the IRC's claims to full ownership of the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, which the Bektashi (Tetovo) used as its headquarters. The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community also opposed the IRC's plans to renovate the complex, with Turkish assistance. Bektashi (Tetovo) Community representatives continued to express concern that the renovation would be conducted without their consent and that it would displace them from the compound entirely, in addition to destroying valuable heritage. The Bektashi (Tetovo) Community remained unable to assert a claim of ownership to the compound because the group remained unregistered.

Media reported several incidents of theft from Orthodox monasteries, and the MOC-OA reported 18 acts of theft or vandalism of Orthodox sites during the year, including one in a majority-Muslim area. The MOC-OA did not attribute the thefts and vandalism to religious motives.

On May 11, unknown individuals vandalized for the second time in less than 12 months the tombs of Mehmet Pashe Deralla and Ali Vishko, prominent Albanian Bektashi leaders, at the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine in Tetovo.

The Helsinki Committee in the country registered 30 incidents of hate speech with a religious component during the year, compared with 38 in 2020. The IRC added that incidents were generally limited to false items on social media and news portals.

The Holocaust Fund, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), continued to work with the Ministry of Education and Science on a project to train educators to teach secondary school students about the Holocaust and Jewish history. The fund held three online and two in-person seminars during the year.

On September 28, the Holocaust Memorial Center opened an exhibition adapted for persons with hearing and visual impairments. The center, opened in 2020,

continued to commemorate the country's Jewish population and those sent to the Treblinka death camp during World War II. To the extent COVID-19 restrictions permitted, the center conducted Holocaust education programs in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and understanding among the various religious groups with government representatives, including the director of the CRRCG, mayors, and other officials. They also discussed with members of parliament the status of religious freedom in the country, religious property restitution, and amendments to the law on high schools, including the accreditation of religious schools.

In March, embassy officials provided information for the country's application for full membership in IHRA, which was supported by the Holocaust Memorial Fund and participants in a U.S.-funded visitor exchange program as well as by civil society activists, educational institutions, religious communities, and NGOs around the country working on interfaith dialogue and religious freedom.

Embassy officials met with IRC leader Fetahu and MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan to discuss religious freedom issues, including perceived government favoritism toward certain religious groups. Embassy officials also met with representatives of other religious groups to discuss religious freedom issues, including the government's treatment of smaller groups and respect for their religious freedom.

The embassy posted 15 messages on social media regarding religious freedom during the year, reaching more than 64,000 followers. Topics included International Religious Freedom Day and the country's National Religious Freedom Day.