

NORTH MACEDONIA 2022 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 and cites five Christian, Muslim, and Jewish religious groups that automatically receive tax exemptions and other benefits.

An interagency working group established in 2021 continued to consider amendments to law that would enable individual churches and mosques to acquire the status of legal entities, a longtime request of the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA) and the Islamic Religious Community in North Macedonia (IRC). The government and the Tetovo Bektashi Community continued to differ on that religious group's registration. The community did not resubmit its registration application from 2000 due to concerns it would have to change its name, which would threaten the group's continuity. Tetovo Bektashi members and members of the government-registered Bektashi Religious Community (BRC) continued to dispute the IRC's claim of full ownership of and its plans to renovate the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine, the traditional headquarters of the unregistered Tetovo Bektashi Community. Tetovo Bektashi members again reported harassment by the government, BRC members, and a splinter Tetovo group that sought to take over the shrine in August; police were called in to keep the peace. The Bektashi world leader asked the government to protect the Tetovo Bektashis' religious freedom and to respond to what he said were social media provocations and threats against the community. Christian and Muslim groups said the government's property denationalization (restitution) process continued to be slow and incomplete. The government, the MOC-OA, and the IRC worked together to resolve some differences on the regulation and accreditation of religious schools, but MOC-OA- and IRC-run high schools remained unaccredited at year's end, which prevented those students from enrolling in secular universities. In February, police announced criminal hate speech charges against a woman for her comment on social media during the visit of an Orthodox Jewish group. The Antidiscrimination Commission said the post was "an antisemitic incident." IRC leaders said relations

with the government continued to improve but that the government continued to show favoritism toward the MOC-OA.

In May, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church recognized the canonicity of the MOC-OA – that it is in community with the other Orthodox churches – ending a long period of nonrecognition by the global Orthodox Church and setting the MOC-OA on a path to autocephaly. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which the MOC-OA split from in 1967, recognized the autocephaly of the MOC-OA, although some church observers stated that only the Ecumenical Patriarch had the right to grant autocephaly. The new status of the MOC-OA was not fully resolved at year's end. The future of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid (OAO), which was to merge with the much larger MOC-OA, according to the SOC recognition document, was also pending at year's end. In August, the Jewish Community said the opening of two Bulgarian cultural clubs named after individuals who worked with the Germans in World War II insulted the memory of North Macedonia's Jews who died in the Treblinka death camp. Protestors and police clashed at the opening of one of the clubs. Following the protests, on November 2, the parliament amended the relevant laws to ban the registration and operation of entities that carried the names and symbols of Nazism, National Socialism, or the Third Reich, or espoused intolerance, hate, fascism. Media reported one incident of vandalism against a monastery located in a majority-Muslim area and 13 incidents of theft from churches, monasteries, and mosques during the year. The MOC-OA and the IRC did not attribute the thefts and vandalism to religious motives.

The Ambassador and other U.S. 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, embassy officials also discussed 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. Embassy officials met with the head of the MOC-OA, Archbishop Stefan of Ohrid and Macedonia, and IRC leader Reis Shaqir 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 2022). According to the 2021 national census, the total resident population is 1.8 million; the remainder are non-resident citizens who have been out of the country for a year or more; many of these individuals are working abroad. Of the usually resident population, 46.1 percent are Orthodox Christian, the overwhelming majority of whom are followers of the MOC-OA; 32.2 percent are Muslim, the vast majority of whom are Sunni and followers of the IRC; 13.2 percent are Christian, without specifying a denomination; and 7.2 percent are unknown. Other religious groups that combined constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Catholics from the Eastern and Roman traditions, a small number of Sufi groups with several Bektashi orders, the OAO, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, various other Protestant denominations, and Vaishnav Hindus. The Jewish Community estimates it has 200 members, although the 2021 census data showed that only 66 individuals claimed a Jewish ethnic affiliation.

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 in Macedonia (EMC), and the 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 secondary 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. Since 2021, the law 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.

Religious organizations may choose to register as a "church," a "religious community," or a "religious group." The law treats these three categories equally, bestowing the same legal rights, benefits, and obligations on all of them. The government recognizes 43 religious organizations, including the five named in the constitution. The recognized organizations include 20 churches, 10 religious communities (four Christian, four Muslim, one Hindu, and one Jewish), and 13 religious groups (seven Christian and six Muslim). Once registered, a church, religious community, or religious group is exempt from property taxes on the property of the community only; they pay all other taxes, such as value-added tax and personal income tax on the salaries of their leaders. Groups are eligible to apply for restitution of properties nationalized during the Socialist era (provided the group or community existed and had property during that era), government funding to preserve religious objects or structures designated as cultural heritage,

and construction permits for preservation of shrines and cultural sites. 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 religious 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, the 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), as their graduation papers are not valid, and therefore are unable to enroll in secular 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 theologians 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. Parents choose which courses their children take. If students do not wish to take a course on religion, they may take a 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 apply for work permits and visas for their workers 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

During the year, a working group established in 2021 by the MOJ, CRRCG, the National Committee on Countering Violent Extremism and Combating Terrorism, the Agency for National Security, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Finance, and the Central Registry continued consideration of draft amendments to the 2007 Law on the Legal Status of a Church, Religious Community, and Religious Group. The amendments would enable larger religious communities' subdivisions, such as individual churches and mosques, 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, such as assisting with the preservation of culturally or historically significant religious sites. The government lacks that explicit authority under existing law. The working group also considered other proposed changes to the 2007 law that would make it more consistent with existing provisions of the criminal code and other laws. These changes would specify 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; incite religious, ethnic, national or racial hatred; or promote religious radicalism. The working group was consulting with religious groups about the draft amendments at year's end.

The Skopje Basic Civil Court reported it received six applications during the year related to registering churches and religious communities or groups. Five of those were requests from already registered groups to change data, such as the name of a group's leader, legal representative, or headquarters; the court resolved two of those requests. The remaining three modification requests and a separate application for the registration of a new religious community – the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Pehchevo – were pending at year's end.

The IRC again said it remained concerned with the functioning of two registered groups it said were “suspicious Muslim organizations” – a Salafi group in Skopje, and an Ahli Sunnah Wal Jemaah (ASWJ) group in Kumanovo. The IRC asked that these two groups be brought under the IRC, or the IRC would continue to oppose them. IRC asked the government to de-register these two groups and help limit their ability to spread “radical views” that did not match local traditions. The Salafi and ASWJ groups said they did not wish to be brought under the IRC. The government took no action on the two Muslim groups during the year.

The government and the Tetovo Bektashi Community continued to differ on that religious group's registration during the year. In January, the Skopje Basic Civil Court extended until February 24 the deadline for the community to resubmit its request, pending since 2000, to register as a religious group. This was in accordance with a 2020 appellate court ruling that the group be allowed to do so. The community requested further deadline extensions as it considered the court's offer, but it then decided in July not to resubmit the registration application because under the law, that would require the group to take a completely new

name so as not to conflict with the already-registered Bektashi Religious Community (BRC). The Tetovo Bektashi said it would be amenable to adding something to its current name as long as the new registration ensured its continuity as a religious group in line with its original application in 2000. In a letter on August 7, Bektashi world leader Hajji Dede Edmond Brahimaj asked the government to protect the religious freedom of the Tetovo Bektashi Community and to register it under the name “World Bektashi Headquarters – Bektashi Community of North Macedonia.” In November, the Skopje Basic Civil Court postponed a hearing on the issue; no further action was taken on it 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 Tetovo Bektashi, including officially recognizing them as a religious group. The group continued to say its nonregistered status restricted its ability to acquire or use property, such as the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, for religious activity.

For the 11th year in a row, the Tetovo Bektashi reported to police that their members were harassed by individuals affiliated with the IRC who were occupying part of the Harabati Baba Teqe compound in Tetovo.

On August 8, according to the legal representative of the Tetovo Bektashi, police summoned two of its dervishes (clerics) away from the Harabati Baba Teqe and held them at a local police station for almost three hours. While they were away from the shrine, members of the rival government-registered BRC entered the facility to begin the Ashura ceremony, which normally required the presence of Tetovo Bektashi clergy. The Tetovo Bektashi said police held their two dervishes “hostage” and that the Ministry of Interior (MOI) “conspired” with the BRC to allow that group to take over the shrine. The Tetovo Bektashi also said the BRC members who entered the shrine did not have a permit to do so, but that police allowed them to enter because the BRC was government registered.

On August 11, the MOI deployed a dozen police officers to keep the peace when a group from the BRC, along with members of a Tetovo splinter group, attempted to evict the resident Tetovo Bektashi dervish from the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine and prevent Bektashi leader Brahimaj and his followers from observing the Ashura holiday at the facility.

On August 4, Bektashi leader Brahimaj wrote Tetovo’s chief of police and basic

prosecutor to request government action in response to what he said were social media “provocations and threats” to the Tetovo Bektashi from individuals the World Bektashi headquarters had previously dismissed for inciting intolerance toward other religious groups, and for attempting to take over the Harabati Baba Teqe by force in 2010. Brahimaj did not provide details on the provocations and threats.

According to a BRC member, the BRC’s appeal of a Gostivar court decision granting ownership of the Harabati Baba Teqe to a private company was pending in the Supreme Court at year’s end. Court staff and BRC leadership could not confirm this report, however.

The MOC-OA said the denationalization (restitution) process for property claims continued to be slow and that more than 90 percent of total positive decisions made by the Denationalization Commission, which adjudicates claims, were appealed by the State Attorney’s Office. The MOC-OA stated that from its point of view, the local restitution committees throughout the country were not functional. The MOC-OA said that over the last two years, the committees decided only one restitution case related to the church’s property and that it was appealed by the State Attorney’s Office and was under review by a court. MOC-OA leaders said they found it strange that other religious communities claimed the MOC-OA was privileged in the restitution process, as only 65 percent of its property had been returned or compensated for since restitution began in 2000.

According to the IRC, the government had restored less than 50 percent of its property that was seized by the state before 1991. The properties in dispute included the Husamedin Pasha Mosque in Shtip (nationalized in 1955 and believed by the MOC-OA to have been a church historically), several mosques in Skopje, the Yeni Mosque in Bitola, and the central mosque in Prilep (which remained in ruins). The IRC continued to say that the level of compensation for its claimed property was often below market value. The IRC said government authorities, specifically the Ministry of Finance, appealed its own property restitution decisions with the courts in order to delay or prevent the actual restitution of the properties.

The IRC again stated municipal authorities continued to deny construction permits for a mosque in the ethnically and religiously mixed village of Lazhec due

to opposition from its Orthodox residents, 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.

Media outlets reported in September that authorities transferred the ownership of Muslim cemeteries in the municipality of Lipkovo to the MOC-OA without the knowledge of local residents, the municipality, or the IRC. Media reports characterized the action as “scandalous” and done in the name of property restitution for parcels that never belonged to the MOC-OA. The IRC said it was working with the MOC-OA to resolve the dispute.

The EMC, part of the United Methodist Church in the United States, continued to say that restitution of church property remained incomplete. 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 continued to say it faced similar problems in other towns.

The MOC-OA said the municipality of Tetovo’s new administration continued to ignore its earlier commitments to pave a street to an MOC-OA church in one neighborhood, to build a chapel at a cemetery elsewhere in Tetovo, and to collect 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. The MOC-OA told the CRRCRG that there was no progress in the construction of another church in Tetovo and a church in the neighboring village of Falishe.

The MOC-OA and the government continued to differ on some education issues. The MOC-OA said it wanted graduates from its secondary theological school to receive diplomas recognized by the state, but it did not agree with the proposed plan of the Ministry of Education, which would reduce the school’s full course of study from five years to four, the standard length for a secular secondary school diploma. The MOC-OA said the course duration should remain five years, which the church said was the optimal amount of time for high school students to complete the theological courses desired by the MOC-OA and all the secular courses required by the state for a recognized diploma. The issue remained

unresolved at the end of the year.

The MOC-OA also said it was “extremely dissatisfied” that Ethics of Religions would not be taught as a separate course in primary schools after the 2022-23 school year and its contents incorporated into other courses instead. According to the MOC-OA, this would mean that some theology graduates with specialization in religious education who usually taught this course would lose their jobs.

The government, the MOC-OA, and the IRC worked together during the year to resolve some differences on the regulation and accreditation of religious schools. Members of parliament from the governing coalition said they drafted amendments to the 2020 Law on High School Education that were supported by the two religious groups and that would institutionalize religious high schools. Once adopted, the amendments would give state school status and state funding to orthodox Christian high schools and Islamic madrassas and permit the schools to operate without government interference. The government, the MOC-OA, and the IRC reached a compromise in July for religious secondary school curricula to contain 55 percent general secular subjects and 45 percent religious subjects. Parliament, however, did not hold the required committee session on the amendments before the end of the year.

MOC-OA and IRC religious high schools remained unaccredited at year’s end, and their graduates could not enroll in secular universities because they were not eligible to take the national final examination that the Law on Higher Education required all high school students to pass to enroll in those universities. Graduates from MOC-OA and IRC religious high schools, however, could enroll without taking the national examination in the Faculty of Orthodoxy and the Faculty of Islamic Science, respectively, because those institutions interpreted the examination requirement as only applying to students from accredited high schools. The Ministry of Education allocated a total of approximately 25 million denars (\$434,000) to these two faculties for the 2022-23 school year.

IRC representatives said that despite the ongoing negotiations on the amendments to the education law, the government continued to delay the certification of IRC-run madrassas that wished to receive accreditation. This was another reason, in addition to the national examination requirement, that

students from those schools could not enroll in secular universities.

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. School children from secular and nonpracticing families were often bullied by peers for “lack of religious education.”

On February 1, at the Prime Minister’s request, Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski, First Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi, Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski, and CRRCG Director Darijan Sotirovski met with the leaders of the five religious groups named in the constitution – Archbishop Stefan of the MOC-OA; Reis Fetahu of the IRC; Monsignor Kiro Stojanov of the Catholic Church; Pepo Levi of the Jewish Community; and Marjan Dimov of the EMC – who expressed their appreciation for top government-level attention to the interests of their religious communities. Kovachevski vowed to continue “the good cooperation with the religious communities,” and stated there would be “no issues that cannot be resolved” through respect and dialogue. Kovachevski further said the government was determined to promote its “One Society for All” policy to help establish trust among all religious, ethnic, and other communities. In a statement after the meeting, the religious leaders supported Kovachevski and the government and looked forward to continuing to work with them with an “open, honest, and dignified approach” on issues of importance for the country’s citizens and its future. The leaders did not provide further details.

IRC leaders said that relations with the government continued to improve for their community, but some ministries and the judiciary continued to treat the IRC unfavorably. According to the IRC, the MOI did not finalize any investigations of incidents affecting the Muslim community and its leadership, such as the 2015 and 2019 attempts to violently take over the IRC headquarters.

Smaller Protestant churches said the government extended more privileges to the MOC-OA and the IRC and that these two larger groups had more rights than other religious groups. For example, the smaller churches said they had more difficulty building churches because local authorities were more accommodating to the MOC-OA on zoning and construction issues. They also said that government

officials met more often with the five constitutionally recognized groups than with smaller groups. MOC-OA and IRC leaders said complaints of government favoritism were a misperception due to their communities' larger size and broader presence in the country.

In March, the IRC stated the government continued to grant the MOC-OA unique privileges, such as providing it with public properties free of charge. Both the MOC-OA and the IRC also said that despite religious workers' key role in ministering to those in prison or hospitals, the Ministries of Health, Justice, and Defense often did not allow priests and army chaplains access to prisoners and patients. The MOC-OA and IRC said the government justified these actions by citing the separation of state and religion.

In February, police in Ohrid announced criminal hate speech charges against a woman who had posted on social media, "The hotel should be set on fire with the Jews in it," referring to the visit of a Lev Tahor Orthodox Jewish group to that city. The Antidiscrimination Commission said the post was "an antisemitic incident comprising elements of discrimination." If convicted, the woman faced one to five years in prison. Police questioned the woman, who deleted her social media post afterwards, but no further information was available on the case at the end of the year.

On February 1, the government reviewed and adopted the requirements to become a full member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). It said the IHRA's 2021 decision to admit the country was recognition of the government's policies and achievements in the area of Holocaust remembrance, research, and education as well as in the fight against antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion.

The Ministry of Education and Science continued to make the IHRA *Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust* available in Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Serbian (the languages of instruction in public schools) and disseminated the publication in schools across the country. The ministry's Bureau for the Development of Education and the Holocaust Museum also continued to publish the recommendations on their websites.

On September 27, the CRRCG led a charity effort with the participation of the

MOC-OA, the IRC, and a Protestant group delivering food to persons in need.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On May 9, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Eastern Orthodox Church recognized the canonicity, but not the full autocephaly, of the MOC-OA and established community with that church. The Patriarch's decision ended a long period of nonrecognition of the MOC-OA by the other Orthodox Churches. On May 17, the SOC celebrated the MOC-OA's recognition in a joint Mass in Belgrade and later in a joint Mass in Skopje. On June 5, the SOC announced that it was granting the MOC-OA full autocephaly, although some church observers stated that only the Ecumenical Patriarch had the right to do so. The MOC and SOC had been separated since 1967. On August 25, the Russian Orthodox Church followed the SOC in recognizing the MOC-OA's autocephaly. Later, MOC-OA bishops celebrated joint masses with bishops from the Jerusalem, Russian, Bulgarian, and Greek Orthodox Churches.

As of year's end, Patriarch Bartholomew had not issued the *tomos* (decree) which would finalize autocephaly for the MOC-OA. Media outlets reported that the MOC-OA would have to be recognized under the historic Archbishopric of Ohrid and drop "Macedonia" internationally from its name in order to receive autocephaly. The Patriarch told Greek television in May, "We have named their church [the MOC-OA] the Ohrid Archbishopric and excluded the term 'Macedonian Church' and any word derived from the word 'Macedonia'." According to media, MOC-OA spokesman Bishop Timotej said, "The Ohrid Archbishopric is not a humiliating name; it has a history of 10 centuries."

The future of the OAO, which would cease to exist and merge with the much larger MOC-OA once Patriarch Bartholomew recognized the MOC-OA's autocephaly, was pending at year's end. The OAO did not react publicly to the MOC-OA's recognition or the prospective merger, but MOC-OA officials said the OAO was positive about the merger. MOC-OA officials said they were willing to incorporate OAO bishops into the MOC-OA, and offered dioceses in Delchevo, Porech and Kreshevo. Unlike in previous years, OAO officials did not state that the government was interfering in its affairs or report attacks or insults against their clergy, family members, or facilities. Historically, the OAO has had no more than 100 to 200 followers.

There were violent acts against a visiting Jewish group, however. In February, approximately 30 members of the Lev Tahor Orthodox Jewish group were threatened and harassed by local residents shortly after their arrival from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The group, comprising members from Canada, the United States, Belgium, and other countries, first stayed in Kumanovo, then moved to Skopje and Ohrid “for its safety,” a member told the media, after unidentified individuals threw stones and eggs at the group’s temporary residences and tore at the door of one of their houses. In Skopje, officers patrolled outside the group’s hotel “for their safety,” according to police. Police appealed for more public “tolerance” towards them. A member of the group said, “There is a wrong public impression about our religion. Being different from the others does not mean that we are dangerous.” Once the group moved to Ohrid, it took “hours” to find a hotel that would accept them, members said, and another group of protesters gave the owner of the hotel that took them in a 24-hour ultimatum to evict them. The Lev Tahor group left the country for Greece in early May, at the expiration of their 90-day visitor permits.

The Tetovo Bektashi continued to dispute the IRC’s 2017 claim to full ownership of the Harabati Baba Teqe complex, which the Tetovo Bektashi used as its headquarters. The Tetovo Bektashi continued to oppose the IRC’s plans to renovate the complex (with Turkish government assistance), which prevented renovation from starting. Tetovo Bektashi representatives said renovating the complex without their consent would displace them from it entirely, in addition to destroying valuable heritage. They remained unable to assert a legal claim of ownership to the compound because the group remained unregistered.

According to the CRRCG, citizens in multiple areas where different religious groups lived close together frequently complained to municipal authorities or police about the volume of daily calls for prayer from mosques. In one instance, residents in the neighborhood of Sveti Jovan complained about the volume of noise from an illegally constructed mosque in an adjacent Roma neighborhood. The CRRCG passed complaints it received from citizens to police or to the communal inspectors of the municipalities. Members of the CRRCG also spoke with representatives of the IRC, who were sympathetic about the noise complaints, according to the CRRCG. Many mosques, however, did not lower the volume of their calls to prayer.

The Jewish community reported no violent acts against its members in the country during the year but said Jewish children were sometimes bullied for their Jewish identity. The community also said that their children and members were harassed by those who believed that Western support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion in February was part of a “global Jewish conspiracy.”

The Jewish Community and independent observers reported a significant increase in antisemitic speech and incidents compared to the previous year, especially during the Lev Tahor group’s visit. In a statement on February 22, the Jewish Community said it was shocked by the “incredible” and “unprecedented” antisemitism and xenophobia against the members of the group on social media, especially the post which called for the hotel where the group was staying to be “set on fire along with the Jews in it,” which caused “fear and anxiety” among the members of the Jewish community. The Jewish Community urged authorities to take measures against the instigators and for journalists to be “extremely cautious” in their reporting about the group, so as not to stir up what they called anti-Jewish “phobia.”

In late February, a Skopje-based imam accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of colluding with the Jews against Palestinians, claiming this was due to Zelensky’s “Jewish origins.” The IRC cautioned the imam, who later apologized to IRC leadership for his remarks. In March, former national public service MRTV journalist Emilija Geleva posted on social media that the “Nazis” whom President Vladimir Putin said Russia was fighting in Ukraine were American Jews in the current U.S. administration, including the Secretary of State.

On April 18, the Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from North Macedonia issued a press release in reaction to the opening of a Bulgarian cultural club in Bitola named after Vancho Mihajlov, who, they said, was a fascist and a Nazi collaborator. The then Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Kiril Petkov, and other Bulgarian government officials attended the opening, which took place on April 16, a Shabbat and the first day of Passover. The Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund said this was an “act of insult” and Holocaust denial. The Jewish Community also said opening the club was a threat to human rights and freedoms, a violation of the democratic character and values of modern Europe, an act that threatened multiculturalism, and a classic example of disrespect and

distortion of history. The Jewish Community demanded that the government of Bulgaria apologize, and that the parliament amend North Macedonia's criminal code, as proposed by the Jewish Community in 2017, to criminalize the spread of antisemitism, Holocaust denial and distortion, glorification of fascism and Nazism, and the use of Nazi symbols or greetings.

On August 10, the Jewish Community and the Holocaust Fund of the Jews condemned the registration of a Bulgarian cultural club in Ohrid named after King Boris III of Bulgaria and said it was "a glorification of Nazism and fascism." In a statement, they said that Boris III, who led Bulgaria when it allied with Germany in World War II, was directly linked with the deportation of North Macedonia's Jews to the Treblinka death camp, and they demanded that the government provide a legal framework that would prevent the establishment of such organizations. The statement also said, "Our country can and must stand in the way of the more frequent cases of registering these kinds of associations, which through their provocations spread hate speech ... under the veil of freedom of speech." Jewish Community President Levi said such associations were "a provocation from the Bulgarian side," and "not in the spirit of good neighborliness." Media reported that several hundred protestors clashed with police outside the club's building when it opened on October 7.

Following the protests, on November 2, parliament unanimously adopted amendments to the Law on Associations and Foundations and the Law on Political Parties banning the registration and operation of associations, foundations, or political parties that carried the names and symbols of Nazism, National Socialism, or the Third Reich or that espoused, encouraged, or approved of intolerance, hate, or fascism. Existing entities were given three months to make corrections in accordance with the amendments or risk being deregistered.

In February, former imam Skender Buzaku, who announced in 2020 that he was running for leader of the IRC, said police had not acted on text-message threats against him in 2021. Buzaku said unknown individuals set his car on fire in late January and were likely to continue threats against him, but he did not publicize the incident in order to avoid trouble. Police were still investigating the threats at year's end. The IRC expelled Buzaku in 2015 for his role in the temporary takeover of the IRC headquarters in Skopje that year by armed individuals.

The Holocaust Fund 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.

From September 30 to October 2, the Holocaust Memorial Center (a different organization from the Holocaust Fund), with the support of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Centropa, held a three-day seminar for elementary and high school teachers from Southeastern Europe to master new skills and learn new techniques to teach about the Holocaust and the history of the Jews in North Macedonia. The center, reopened 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. The Holocaust Memorial Center reported, however, that the ministry had not done enough to facilitate required school visits to the center's museum by secondary and high school students.

The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, an NGO based in the country that tracks citizens' reports of hate speech, registered two cases of religion-based hate speech during the year, compared to 30 in 2021. The cases registered did not include the incidents during the Lev Tahor group's visit. The committee stated that religion-based hate speech emerged during major religious holidays. The committee registered 51 additional instances of ethnicity-based, online, hate speech during the year, noting that this was becoming more prevalent than religion-based hate speech.

Media outlets reported 13 incidents of theft from churches, Orthodox monasteries, and mosques during the year, compared to 18 in 2021. Neither the MOC-OA nor the IRC attributed the thefts and vandalism to religious motives. The MOC-OA continued to report occasional vandalism of the infrequently used medieval Matejche Monastery in a municipality populated mainly by Muslims.

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 February, the Chargé d’Affaires spoke in support of religious pluralism, human rights, cultural and spiritual heritage, and respect for diversity at an event in Skopje marking the 484th anniversary of the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine. In March, the Ambassador spoke at the commemoration of the 79th anniversary of the deportation of Jews to Treblinka. She called for unity to forge greater bonds with neighbors and to showcase the values of humanity and respect, which would help end antisemitism. She also called for an end to Holocaust denial and distortion as well as divisive, factually and historically inaccurate narratives manipulated for political gain.

Embassy officials met with IRC leader Fetahu in March and May and with MOC-OA Archbishop Stefan in March to discuss religious freedom issues, including perceived government favoritism toward certain religious groups. Embassy officials also met with representatives of other religious groups, including the Catholic Church, the Jewish Community, the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Bektashi, and the Baptist community to discuss religious freedom issues, including the government’s treatment of smaller groups and respect for their religious freedom.

During the year, the embassy posted 14 messages on social media regarding religious freedom, reaching more than 60,000 followers, and generated over 4,000 engagements. Topics included International Religious Freedom Day and the U.S. National Religious Freedom Day, as well as meetings of the Ambassador and other embassy officials with the country’s religious leaders.