

# **SLOVENIA 2022 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 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.

Some minority religious communities continued to report the government did not provide sufficient space or personnel for adherents to receive spiritual care in hospitals, prisons, and the military, despite requests. The government registered three new religious groups during the year, bringing the total number registered to 58. In January, the Commission for Medical Ethics reaffirmed its nonbinding 2011 decision opposing circumcision for nonmedical purposes. Although male circumcision was legal, many public hospitals acted on the commission's decision and refused to perform the procedure, requiring some Muslims and Jews to use private hospitals or travel abroad for medical care. A Muslim leader reported there was still no resolution to that community's requests to the government for halal meals in public institutions, allocation of special areas in cemeteries for Muslim graves, and allowing the gravestones to face Mecca. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) stated it had concluded its part of a joint research project with the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) to establish the scope of Jewish heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their collaborators during World War II and was awaiting WJRO input to finalize the report. Restitution efforts remained complicated by an earlier law addressing property nationalization claims that generally excluded property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945. In May, the government increased the government-paid portion of social security contributions for individuals working for religious organizations from 48 percent to 100 percent of contributions for average pay. In April, a Slovenian Democratic Party politician posted anti-Muslim remarks to Twitter, which other parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and media outlets condemned. In March, speaking at the inauguration ceremony for the new Mufti of the Islamic

Community of Slovenia, President Borut Pahor called for tolerance and coexistence and encouraged interfaith dialogue.

In September, the Leopold Weiss Institute published a report stating that during 2021, due to COVID-19 lockdowns, expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment shifted more to online media and were underreported. According to the report, conservative and nationalist political parties and movements used anti-Muslim rhetoric, and Muslim women experienced employment discrimination. Representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant communities continued to report productive interfaith relations. Unidentified individuals vandalized a crucifix next to the Catholic Church of St. Anthony in Smarna Gora multiple times between November 2021 and May 2022. Catholic groups objected to the August 29 cover of the magazine *Mladina*, which featured an image of the Madonna and Jesus that portrayed Jesus with feminine features. On October 19, the national broadcasting agency stopped the Christian network Radio Ognjisce from broadcasting in Bohinj, stating the network did not have a license for that location.

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials responsible for upholding religious freedom, including the Ministry of Culture (MOC), to discuss the concerns of religious groups regarding recognition of religious worker status for married workers, the legal requirement to stun animals before slaughter, circumcision, and the state of interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious leaders throughout the year to discuss their communities' concerns and the state of interfaith relationships. The embassy used social media to highlight its outreach to religious communities, posting about events such as the Ambassador's visit to Jewish cultural heritage sites, meetings with religious leaders, and National Religious Freedom Day.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (midyear 2022). The Slovenian government does not collect religious demographic data in its census. The Roman Catholic Church estimates its membership at 1.5 million (71 percent of the population). According to the secretary general of the Islamic Community of Slovenia (Islamic Community), the Muslim population is

approximately 100,000 (5 percent). A number of refugees and immigrants, including foreign workers, are part of the Muslim community. According to its representatives, the Serbian Orthodox Church has approximately 50,000 members. 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 400 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 identifies as Christian, 4 percent as Muslim, and 13 percent as 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 that 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 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 the 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 (\$24). 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.

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 monitors and maintains records on registered religious communities and provides legal expertise and assistance to religious organizations. The MOC establishes and manages 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 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 Office of the State Prosecutor, 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."

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 government registered three new religious groups during the year: the Gospel Center Koper (an evangelical Christian group), Liberal Jewish Community of Slovenia, and Jewish Association of Slovenia (an Orthodox Jewish group). This brought the total number of registered religious groups to 58, the largest of which were the Catholic Church, Islamic Community, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Evangelical Church. Another registered organization, the Slovene Muslim Community, also continued to represent Muslims in the country.

According to the secretary general of the Islamic Community, there was no resolution to outstanding issues of concern to the Muslim community, such as reservation of special locations in cemeteries for graves of Muslims, allowing the gravestones to face Mecca, and the unavailability of pork-free meals in hospitals, schools, prisons, and other public institutions. All cemeteries remained located on public land. Local governments continued to say lack of space was an impediment to granting the request for special locations in cemeteries for Muslim graves. MOC officials said each school district was responsible for the meals it offered, and the human rights ombudsman said public institutions generally accommodated religious food restrictions. According to government and NGO officials, most schools were flexible regarding the provision of halal meals. Religious leaders said prisons also adhered to rules regarding dietary restrictions.

Some minority religious communities said they continued to experience difficulties providing spiritual care to their members in the military, hospitals, prisons, and other public institutions. 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 in hospitals and prisons. This, as well as staffing limits, created fewer prayer

opportunities for members of other religious groups while hospitalized or incarcerated.

The Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF) employed full-time Catholic and Protestant clergy to provide religious services, but no imams, Orthodox priests, or rabbis. Muslim community leaders said the Ministry of Defense continued to not employ an imam in the SAF, despite their requests to do so. The Ministry of Defense stated it could not hire an imam due to staffing issues, with recruitment focused on meeting NATO commitments. 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.

Some minority religious groups said there was no provision to provide state insurance support to dependents of religious workers. In addition, according to the Religious Freedom Act, state financial assistance for priests without a full employment relationship with their church was limited to “priests who have at least a secondary education and religious workers who have vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience,” which excluded married religious workers. Lutheran and Muslim religious leaders complained that their religious workers under employment contracts did not receive state support given to Catholic workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MOJ stated it had concluded its part of a joint, two-stage research and valuation project done with the WJRO to determine the scope and financial value of heirless properties seized by the Nazis or their collaborators. A lead researcher for the WJRO said in 2021 that the joint research was in its concluding phase, but the MOJ stated it had still not received the WJRO input needed to finalize the report. Restitution efforts remained complicated by an earlier law on property nationalization claims that generally excluded property seized from Jewish families prior to 1945.

The Islamic Community continued to provide certificates to companies producing meat from stunned animals affirming the meat as halal. The Jewish community remained concerned 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 EU regulations to prevent unnecessary suffering to animals.

In January, in response to a request from the Ministry of Health, the Commission on Medical Ethics reaffirmed its non-binding 2011 opinion opposing circumcision. Muslim and Jewish leaders objected to the decision, saying it was still a problem. The MOC and leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities said that as a result of continuing confusion regarding the legal status of circumcision, due to the Commission on Medical Ethics' opinion, many public hospitals did not offer the procedure. As a result, Muslims and Jews continued to rely on private hospitals or traveled to Austria for the procedure.

In May, the Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Open Questions with the Catholic Church, composed of representatives from the Catholic Church and government, concluded its work to address unresolved issues between the church and the state and was terminated. The MOC said the council recommended changing the tax law for all religions to allow individuals to donate to any registered religious community through income tax deductions. The change went into effect in September 2021. In May, the government adopted new regulations increasing the government-paid portion of social security contributions for religious workers from 48 percent to 100 percent of the contributions for average pay. According to the MOC, during the year, the ministry fully financed social security contributions for 762 religious workers from seven religious communities.

On April 10, Zan Mahnic, State Secretary for National Security in then Prime Minister Janez Jansa's office, on Twitter criticized Freedom Movement politician and human rights advocate Faila Pasic, calling her a "radical Islamist" and saying the party was inviting the "shariaization" of the country. The Freedom Party, media outlets, and NGOs condemned the post. Freedom Movement politician Tereza Novak said Mahnic's post was an act of "inciting religious intolerance and spreading lies and hatred." Pasic said Muslims were part of Slovenian society. Freedom Movement did not pursue further action against Mahnic.

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 led

by Pahor laid a wreath at the Jewish cemetery in Dolga Vas in the northeast of the country. The President then visited Erika Furst, a Holocaust survivor.

In March, President Pahor spoke at the inauguration ceremony for the new Mufti of the Islamic Community, Nevzet Porić. The President called for religious tolerance and coexistence and encouraged interfaith dialogue.

On August 23, President Pahor joined Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, and Protestant religious leaders to lay wreaths and mark the European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of All Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes. Before the event, the President met with the religious leaders to discuss issues of religious freedom in the country.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

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

In September, the Austria-based Leopold Weiss Institute published a report titled *European Islamophobia Report 2021* covering 27 countries. In its discussion of Slovenia, author Maja Pucelj of the University of Novo Mesto said societal opposition to immigration from North Africa and the Middle East manifested as anti-Muslim sentiment in the country. According to the report, during 2021, due to COVID-19 lockdowns, expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment shifted more to online media and were underreported. Conservative and nationalist political parties and movements used anti-Muslim rhetoric. Pucelj said challenges for the country's Muslim community included "fewer and limited-in-scope employment opportunities for Muslim women, lack of adequate time for worship in the workplace, lack of adequate spiritual care, lack of access to halal food and official leave on Islamic holidays, lack of access to pork-free meals in public institutions, and the option of religious circumcision of male offspring."

Media outlets reported that on April 29, unknown individuals vandalized the Ljutomer parish church by writing "Liberation front!?! The truth" on the door. The Liberation Front was the name of the Slovene communist partisan organization during World War II.

According to media reports, unidentified individuals vandalized a crucifix next to the Catholic Church of St. Anthony in Smarna Gora multiple times between November 2021 and May 2022. On separate occasions, vandals drew a target on Jesus's chest, hung a protective mask around his neck, covered his head with a glove, and covered his head with a plastic bag.

Catholic groups objected to the August 29 cover of the magazine *Mladina*, which featured a digitally altered image of a painting of the Madonna holding the child Jesus that is located at Brezje, an important pilgrimage site. The doctored image portrayed Jesus with female features. The image also showed a rainbow behind the figures of Mary and Jesus. Under the image was the title, "Fight for Holy Law." The magazine article concerned the Catholic Church's opposition to a July 9 Constitutional Court decision allowing same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex couples. The rector of the Slovenian National Shrine of the Virgin Mary called the magazine cover "an attack on one of the deepest sanctities that Slovenian Christians carry within us."

Media outlets reported that on October 19, the Agency for Communication Networks and Services of the Republic of Slovenia (AKOS) ordered the Christian network Radio Ognjisce (Radio Hearth) to stop broadcasting in Bohinj, saying it did not have a license for that location. Church and radio representatives accused AKOS of discriminating against the station because it broadcast Christian content. Radio Ognjisce stopped transmitting in Bohinj to avoid fines but continued to broadcast in many cities across the country.

According to media outlets, in September, the Catholic Church and the Muslim community marked the conclusion of a two-year cooperation project with an event at the Muslim Cultural Center in Ljubljana. Mufti Porić pointed to the Catholic Church's help with the construction of the Ljubljana Mosque as evidence of cooperation between the two communities. Leaders from both religions agreed to continue cooperation and dialogue in the future.

Representatives of the Orthodox community in Koper and Celje, whose sole church was located in Ljubljana, 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.

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**

In November, the Ambassador met with Minister of Culture Asta Vrečko to discuss access to religious services in state institutions and state benefits for married religious workers. U.S. embassy officials met with government officials from the MOC and MOJ responsible for religious freedom to discuss the concerns of religious groups regarding the legal requirement to stun animals before slaughter, circumcision, heirless properties, state benefits for religious workers, and the state of interfaith dialogue. In the course of discussing religious freedom and tolerance with the government, embassy officials also raised antisemitism, although they did not receive any reports of antisemitic activity from the Jewish community.

Embassy officials continued to meet with Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic community leaders throughout the year. On July 11, the Ambassador attended the Commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide at the Ljubljana Muslim Cultural Center and met with Mufti Porić on July 12 to discuss issues important to the country's Islamic community, including access to pork-free meals in public institutions and requests that the Slovenian Armed Forces hire an imam. The Ambassador met President Eli Rosen of the newly registered Jewish Association of Slovenia in July to discuss the Jewish community's concerns. In October, the Ambassador and Rosen undertook a joint trip to Maribor and Lendava to visit cultural heritage sites and discuss their preservation. On September 23, the Ambassador met with Archbishop Stanislav Zore to discuss the Catholic Church's relations with the government and the state of interfaith dialogue. In November, the Ambassador met with the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Reverend Aleksandar Obradovic, to discuss interfaith dialogue and discrimination based on religion. The Ambassador also discussed religious freedom with Lutheran Bishop Leon Novak in November.

On January 27, the embassy posted to social media a message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The embassy used social media to highlight meetings with representatives of religious communities, such as the Ambassador's visit to Jewish cultural heritage sites and meetings with religious leaders, as well noting key dates, such as National Religious Freedom Day on January 16.