

# CROATIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits incitement of religious hatred. All religious communities have the same religious protections under the law. The government has written agreements with the Roman Catholic Church that provide state financial support and specific tax and other benefits; 19 other registered religious communities have agreements with the state offering benefits not available to registered religious communities without such agreements or to unregistered religious groups. Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) representatives said that although some property had been returned, the restitution of property seized by the Yugoslavia government remained an outstanding issue. This was echoed by representatives of the Catholic Church. The British newspaper *The Guardian* reported that some police officers spray-painted Christian crosses on the heads of presumably Muslim migrants attempting to illegally enter the country during Ramadan with the intent to “mark, humiliate, and traumatize” them. The Interior Ministry said *The Guardian*’s report was a “premeditated attack” against the government that incited religious intolerance without knowledge of the facts, as authorities maintained “excellent relations with the Islamic religious community.” Interior Ministry officials said they investigated all allegations and found no irregularities in the conduct of police in this case. In October, Minister of Culture and Media Nina Obuljen Korzinek attended the installation of the first of 20 *Stolpersteine* stones or “stumbling blocks” recognizing Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Zagreb and said the project would educate society regarding the Holocaust. Senior government officials, a representative from the Alliance of Anti-Fascists, and leaders of the Serbian, Roma, and Jewish communities jointly commemorated victims of the World War II concentration camp at Jasenovac for the first time since 2015. On January 23, the parliamentary Education, Science, and Culture Committee for the first time adopted a resolution encouraging state institutions and civil society organizations to promote the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism.

SOC representatives anecdotally reported incidents targeting individuals of Serbian ethnicity increased compared with 2019, including physical and verbal attacks, especially in the city of Vukovar, a site of intense fighting during the war in the 1990s, although they said they did not have detailed records on the number of incidents. According to SOC representatives, it was unclear if these incidents were religiously or ethnically motivated. As in recent years, members of some Jewish

groups reported hate speech, especially on the internet, and incidents such as graffiti on Jewish-owned buildings. Representatives of the Jewish community expressed concerns regarding the use of Ustasha (pro-Nazi World War II era government) insignia in society. On February 4-5, the country's Islamic leaders and the Muslim World League, in cooperation with the Croatian Conference of Catholic Bishops, organized an international conference entitled "Human Fraternity as the Foundation of Peace and Security in the World," focusing on world peace and coexistence.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the status and treatment of religious minorities, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust revisionism with cabinet ministers and other senior government officials. During the year, embassy officials attended major events that emphasized the importance of Holocaust remembrance and interreligious dialogue. Embassy officials continued to encourage the government to amend legislation covering Holocaust-era property restitution to allow for restitution and compensation claims with a revised deadline for new applications. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues, including freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination, with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives from a broad spectrum of religious groups. In January, the embassy launched a monthly diversity and inclusion initiative in which embassy staff engaged representatives from different religious and secular groups to promote tolerance and discuss challenges and cooperation among different religious communities.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census (the most recent), 86.3 percent of the population is Catholic, 4.4 percent Serbian Orthodox, and 1.5 percent Muslim. Nearly 4 percent identify as nonreligious or atheist. Other religious groups include Jews, Protestants, and other Christians. According to the World Jewish Congress, there are approximately 1,700 Jews.

Religious affiliation correlates closely with ethnicity. Ethnic Serbs are predominantly members of the SOC and live primarily in cities and areas bordering Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most members of other minority religious groups reside in urban areas.

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

## Legal Framework

The constitution provides for equality of rights regardless of religion, as well as freedom of conscience and religious expression. It prohibits incitement of religious hatred. According to the constitution, religious communities shall be equal under the law and separate from the state; they are free to conduct religious services publicly as well as open and manage schools and charitable organizations under the protection and with the assistance of the state.

The Roman Catholic Church receives state financial support and other benefits established by four concordats between the government and the Holy See. One of these agreements provides state financial support for some religious officials. Another agreement stipulates state funding for religious education in public schools.

The law defines the legal position of religious communities and determines eligibility for government funding and tax benefits. Registered religious communities are exempt from taxes on the purchase of real estate, the profit/capital gains tax, and taxes on donations. According to the law, a religious community previously active as a legal entity before enactment of the current law in 2002 (amended in 2013) need only submit its name, the location of its headquarters, information on the office of the person authorized to represent it, and the seal and stamp it uses to register. To register as a religious community, a religious group without prior legal status as a religious community must have at least 500 members and have been registered as an association, with at least three members, for at least five years. To register as a religious community, a group submits a list of its members and documentation outlining the group's activities and bylaws and describing its mission to the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration. Nonregistered religious groups may operate freely but do not receive tax benefits. They may conduct financial transactions as legal entities. A contractual agreement with the state, which grants a registered religious community eligibility for further funding and benefits, defines the community's role and activities and provides for collaboration with the government in areas of joint interest, such as education, health, and culture.

There are 55 registered religious communities, including the Roman Catholic Church, SOC, Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Christian Adventist Church, Church of Christ, Church of God, Croatian Old Catholic Church, Catholic Old Church, Evangelical Church, Macedonian Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Church, Reformed Christian Church, Union of Baptist Churches, Seventh-day Adventist Reform

Movement, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Union of Pentecostal Churches of Christ, Coordination Committee of Jewish Communities in Croatia (an umbrella group of nine distinct Jewish communities), Jewish Community of Virovitica, Bet Israel (a Jewish group), and the Islamic Community of Croatia. In addition to the Roman Catholic Church, 19 of the registered religious communities have formal agreements with the state that more clearly define activities and cooperation, such as in the areas of marriage and of religious education in public schools. These groups may access state funds for religious activities.

The state recognizes marriages conducted by registered religious communities that have concluded agreements with the state, eliminating the need for civil registration. Marriages conducted by registered communities that have not concluded agreements with the state, or by nonregistered religious groups, require civil registration.

Registered religious communities that have not concluded agreements with the state and nonregistered religious groups may not conduct religious education in public schools. Nonregistered religious groups have no access to state funds in support of religious activities, including charitable work, counseling, and building costs. Registered religious communities that have not concluded agreements with the state and nonregistered religious groups may engage in worship, proselytize, own property, and import religious literature. Only registered religious communities, with or without agreements with the state, may provide spiritual counsel in prisons, hospitals, and the military.

Public schools at both the primary and secondary levels must offer religious education, although students may opt out without providing specific grounds. The Catholic catechism is the predominant religious text used. Other religious communities that have agreements with the state may also offer religious education classes in schools if there are seven or more students of that faith. Eligible religious communities provide the instructors, and the state pays their salaries. Private religious schools are eligible for state assistance and follow a national curriculum. Registered religious communities may have their own schools. Unregistered religious groups may not have their own schools.

Education regarding the Holocaust is mandatory in the final year of elementary school (eighth grade) and during the final year of high school.

The law allows foreign citizens whose property was confiscated during and after the Holocaust era to seek compensation or restitution if the applicant's country has a bilateral restitution treaty with the state; however, no such bilateral treaties currently exist. Two court cases have held that such treaties are not required; however, the law has not changed. The law does not allow new property claims because the deadline expired in 2003.

The ombudsperson is a commissioner appointed by parliament responsible for promoting and protecting human rights and freedoms, including religious freedom. The ombudsperson examines citizens' complaints pertaining to the work of state bodies, local and regional self-governments, and legal persons vested with public authority. The ombudsperson may issue recommendations to government agencies regarding human rights and religious freedom practices but does not have authority to enforce compliance with his or her recommendations.

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

### **Government Practices**

In May, during Ramadan, an article with photographs in the British newspaper *The Guardian* stated local police officers spray-painted Christian crosses on the heads of (presumably Muslim) migrants attempting to enter the country illegally. According to the article, the police officers intended to "mark, humiliate, and traumatize" the migrants, since the migrant population is predominantly Muslim. In a press release responding to the allegations, the Interior Ministry said, "The publication of such an article during the month of Ramadan, which incites religious intolerance, is especially worrisome and warrants scathing denunciation. The fabrication that migrants are marked in the sign of the cross because of their faith demonstrates the author's ignorance and a premeditated attack against Croatia without any knowledge of the basic facts. Croatian authorities have excellent relations with the Islamic religious community, which is greatly valued in the Croatian society and which the worldwide public recognizes as an exemplary cooperation between religious communities." Interior Ministry officials said they investigated all allegations and found no irregularities in the conduct of police in this case.

SOC representatives said their community still had outstanding issues with the government, mainly regarding repossession of property and residential buildings that the government appropriated during the Yugoslav period. The government reported that since 1999 the state had returned in-kind or provided compensation

for 323 properties, including businesses and agricultural and forest land, to the SOC. Representatives of the Eparchy of Slavonia (a territorial division of the SOC) said the government returned 383 hectares (946 acres) of forest during the year, which belonged to the SOC's Pakra Monastery. Some SOC representatives reported problems with enforcement of legal decisions in their favor regarding return of their properties, which in some cases, such as for properties with tenants, led to delays in the SOC being able to physically take possession of the properties.

Catholic Church representatives also said there remained a significant number of outstanding claims for Catholic properties appropriated during the Yugoslav period.

In September, the ombudsperson for children said her office "sees a problem in religious content being practiced often in some schools even outside religious education classes, for example at school events and during the school lessons, which are intended for all pupils," and said this was unacceptable. In response, media quoted Prime Minister (PM) Andrej Plenkovic, who said he "did not understand the criticism, noting that religion was part of the Croatian tradition and identity." The ombudsperson also said some elementary students not enrolled in religious studies courses were required to attend those classes because due to COVID-19 restrictions, there were no alternative spaces within the schools while the religious studies classes were in session. She stated that religious education, like any other elective subject, should be held at the start or end of the day, with an alternative elective offered to elementary students who do not attend such classes, similar to the practice in secondary schools, which offer ethics as an alternative subject.

Atheist, Jewish, and Serbian Orthodox organizations continued to report that although the law allows students to opt out of religious education, in practice most public primary schools did not offer any alternatives to Catholic catechism.

Atheist groups continued to complain that Roman Catholic symbols remained prevalent in government buildings such as courtrooms, prisons, and public hospitals. They said they believed this practice was inconsistent with the constitution, which states religious communities shall be separate from the state.

On July 23, President Zoran Milanovic held talks with Porfirije Peric, Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana, on the activities and concerns of the Church and its relationship with the government, as part of the government's regular engagement with leaders of the country's major religious groups.

On June 3, the High Misdemeanor Court in Zagreb ruled the use of the slogan *Za Dom Spremni* (For the Homeland, Ready) by singer Marko “Thompson” Perkovic contained in one of his songs was not illegal. The slogan was used by the pro-Nazi World War II-era government of the Independent State of Croatia. According to a majority ruling, Perkovic’s use of the slogan did not violate the Law on Misdemeanors against Public Order and Peace because it was used in the context of a song. In its statement on June 3, the Zagreb-based chapter of NGO Human Rights House said the decision was contrary to the article of the constitution prohibiting incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred. In 2019, the court ruled in a separate case that the slogan “conveyed hatred towards people of different races, religions, and ethnicities” and fined a singer who performed Perkovic’s song.

On October 1, Minister of Culture and Media Nina Obuljen Korzinek attended the installation of the first of 20 *Stolpersteine* stones or “stumbling blocks” recognizing Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Zagreb. Obuljen Korzinek said the project would educate society regarding the Holocaust, and such education was a vital component to nurturing a modern, democratic society in the European Union. The Center for Promotion of Tolerance and Preservation of Holocaust Remembrance, the Bet Israel Jewish community, and the Spuren Foundation organized the installation.

On April 22, PM Plenkovic and President Milanovic attended the annual commemoration for the victims killed by the Ustasha regime at the Jasenovac World War II prison camp. The Jewish community, along with the Serb National Council, a representative of the Roma minority, and the Alliance of Antifascist Fighters joined the official commemoration for the first time since 2015. PM Plenkovic said his government had no tolerance for historical revisionism, while President Milanovic said the commemoration “sent a message with no speeches.” Head of the Jewish Community of Zagreb Ognjen Kraus said he attended to “extend the hand of friendship and goodwill” but still sought tangible results from the government in the fight against historical revisionism. Serbian Independent Democratic Party President and Member of Parliament Milorad Pupovac stated the participation of the victims’ groups, in spite of a March earthquake in Zagreb and the COVID-19 pandemic, represented a show of solidarity.

On February 5, PM Plenkovic opened a Holocaust exhibition in Zagreb entitled “If I forget you...The Holocaust in Croatia 1941-1945 – Final destination Auschwitz” near the site where Jews were transported to concentration camps in the country

and across Europe. Plenkovic highlighted the Ustasha in his speech, noting, “We forget every time we fail to clearly speak about the Holocaust, notably about the consequences of the undemocratic, totalitarian, and racist Ustasha regime in Croatia.”

In January, in remarks at the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland, Plenkovic said, “Awareness and education of young people about historical atrocities, particularly about the Holocaust, is key so that present and future generations can build a society in which there is no room for exclusion, intolerance, and violence.” He also stated, “The unspeakable pain of Auschwitz and many other Nazi camps commits us to strongly resist any such attempts and all forms of discrimination and hatred, and to advocate the values of peace, tolerance, and dialogue.”

PM Plenkovic and other officials laid wreaths in the Jewish section of the Mirogoj Cemetery in Zagreb on January 24 to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Plenkovic said the country needed to work not only on a culture of remembrance, but also on protecting human rights and promoting tolerance in society.

In January, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a press statement saying the country, as a member of the IHRA, had been recognized as actively involved in Holocaust education, research, and commemoration. On January 19, together with ministers from other member countries, Minister of Foreign Affairs Gordan Grlic-Radman participated in an IHRA ministerial conference and said, “Croatia attaches great importance to educating the youth about the causes and consequences of the Holocaust. Holocaust education is a part of Croatia’s school curriculum. The IHRA’s recommendations on Holocaust education have been translated to Croatian and will be presented at the national conference on Holocaust education.”

On January 23, the parliamentary Education, Science, and Culture Committee for the first time adopted a resolution on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day and the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The resolution encouraged state institutions and civil society organizations to promote the working definition of anti-Semitism adopted by the IHRA. The committee emphasized that education, particularly of children and young people, has an essential role in the prevention of intolerance and xenophobia, and highlighted the need for remembering the victims of the Holocaust in a dignified manner.



During the year, the government did not take action to adopt amendments to legislation providing for restitution of private property from the Holocaust era for foreign claimants or reopen the deadline for potential new claims.

On January 20, as part of an event hosted during the country's EU presidency, PM Plenkovic met with European bishops who underscored the importance of the EU in promoting and protecting the right to religious freedom both within its borders as well as in relations with third countries.

According to the Office of the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, the government budgeted 293.1 million kuna (\$49.26 million) during the year for the Roman Catholic Church for salaries, pensions, and other purposes, compared with 299.5 million kuna (\$50.34 million) in 2019. The government provided funding to other religious communities that had concluded agreements with the state, a portion of which was based on their size, in addition to funds provided to support religious education in public schools and the operation of private religious schools. The government budgeted 22.7 million kuna (\$3.82 million) to these groups, compared with 22.0 million kuna (\$3.7 million) in 2019. Atheist groups again criticized the government for allocating more to the Roman Catholic Church than to other groups.

Some minority religious and secular groups, including atheist groups, continued to say the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed a special status in relation to other religious communities, in part because of its concordats with the government, which provided the Church with significant financial support, and in part because of its far-reaching cultural, educational, and political influence as the majority religion.

The ombudsperson's 2019 report released in April stated that as in previous years, there were not many complaints regarding discrimination on the grounds of religion. The complaints mostly referred to religious symbols and religious content in public institutions and the inability to use nonworking days for religious holidays. Amendments to the Law on Holidays, which entered into force in January following recommendations from the Ombudsperson's Office, stipulated more precisely that Muslims who celebrated Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha and Jews who celebrated Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah had the right not to work one day of their choice for each of these holidays with full salary compensation, while Orthodox Christians who celebrated Easter according to the Julian calendar had the right not to work on Easter Monday, also with the right to full salary. The Ombudsperson's Office said it also received several complaints of potential

discrimination against persons who did not belong to the majority Catholic Church because of the overt display of Catholic religious symbols in public spaces, primarily in schools and hospitals. The office received a complaint that one county official held an event on official premises during working hours that included a blessing offered by a priest.

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

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

SOC representatives anecdotally reported increased incidents targeting individuals of Serbian ethnicity compared with 2019, including physical and verbal attacks, especially in Vukovar, a site of intense fighting during the war in the 1990s. They said, however, it was unclear to what extent religious motivations played a part.

According to the Ombudsperson's Office, the Croatian Bishops' Conference complained of what it said were sensational or untrue media articles regarding the Catholic Church. As in recent years, members of some Jewish groups reported hate speech, especially on the internet, and incidents such as graffiti on Jewish-owned buildings. Representatives of the Jewish Community of Zagreb expressed concerns regarding the inappropriate use of Ustasha insignia in public.

On February 4-5, the country's Islamic leaders and the Muslim World League, in cooperation with the Croatian Conference of Catholic Bishops, organized an international conference entitled "Human Fraternity as the Foundation of Peace and Security in the World," focusing on world peace and coexistence. The conference was held under the auspices of the country's EU presidency. At the event, the mufti of the Islamic community, Aziz Hasanovic, said that there was no alternative to religious dialogue, highlighting the value of systematic dialogue between the Islamic community and Catholic Church. Then-President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic said, "This valuable initiative was an opportunity for Croatia to present itself as a country that promotes the highest standards of religious rights and dialogue."

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

The Ambassador and embassy staff regularly discussed religious freedom issues, including the status and treatment of religious minorities, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust revisionism, with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs,

Justice and Public Administration, and Culture and Media; the ombudsperson; representatives of parliament; youth representing different religious groups; and other officials.

The Ambassador and embassy staff met with the Ministers of Justice and Administration, Education and Science, senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, staff from the Ministry of Culture and Media, and leaders of Jewish organizations to discuss a wide range of issues, including restitution of private and communal properties from the Holocaust era, restitution of art, and Holocaust education and remembrance. U.S. officials continued to encourage the government to adopt amendments to legislation to provide for restitution of private property, including provisions that would unequivocally allow for foreign claims and reopen the deadline for potential new claims. Embassy engagement also focused on the restitution of Jewish communal properties, including resorts, land, cultural centers, synagogues, and cemeteries.

During the year, embassy officials attended major events that emphasized the importance of Holocaust remembrance and interreligious dialogue. On October 1 in Zagreb, embassy officials, along with city and national government officials, select other foreign diplomats, and Jewish group members, attended the installation of the first of 20 *Stolpersteine* stones recognizing Jewish victims of the Holocaust. During the event, embassy officials discussed with participants the importance of the Holocaust remembrance activities. On February 5, the Ambassador and embassy staff attended the opening of the Holocaust exhibition in Zagreb, during which embassy officials discussed challenges and priorities with the Jewish representatives and the importance of Holocaust remembrance with government officials. Also in February, embassy officials attended the international conference organized by the leadership of the Islamic community and the Muslim World League in cooperation with the Croatian Conference of Bishops. During the conference, embassy staff engaged with senior government officials and religious leaders on the importance of interfaith dialogue.

In January, the embassy inaugurated a diversity and inclusion program that brought representatives from different religious and secular groups each month to speak to the embassy community and share personal views and experiences. The program deepened embassy engagement on religious freedom issues with the invited groups, which included a Jewish group, the SOC, the Islamic community, an atheist group, the Roma community, and the Church of Jesus Christ.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues, including freedom of expression and efforts to counter discrimination, with NGOs such as Human Rights House, Documenta, and Protagora, as well as with representatives from Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, Baptist, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic and March 22 earthquake in Zagreb that damaged or destroyed many religious buildings, embassy officials discussed with religious community representatives their challenges and new opportunities for utilizing social media (rather than meeting in person) to support their members and the most vulnerable within their respective communities. Embassy representatives provided grants to local NGOs for the advancement of education on Holocaust issues in the country. The embassy used social media platforms to highlight a range of religious freedom issues, including support for Holocaust commemorations, and a pluralistic view of faith and religion, particularly among youth in the country.