

MOLDOVA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects the right of individuals to practice their religion and states religious groups are autonomous. The law cites the “exceptional importance” of Orthodox Christianity. Minority religious groups and civil society said authorities continued to favor the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC). On multiple occasions, particularly during the presidential election campaign, President Igor Dodon expressed his support for Orthodox Christianity. The Union of Pentecostal Churches said it remained unable to obtain a zoning permit from local government officials for a building it used for religious services in Copceac village but was able to obtain a permit for a newly built church in Scoreni village. At least 285 of 1,441 Orthodox churches continued to hold services in contravention of a government public health decree in March banning all public gatherings from March to May. In March, the Supreme Court of Justice reversed a government decision to dissolve the Falun Dafa and Falun Gong Associations. The two groups reregistered, but the Ministry of Justice retained the Falun symbol on its register of extremist material, in contravention of a 2019 court decision. Religious minorities reported no progress in obtaining government restitution or compensation for property confiscated prior to the country’s independence in 1992. The Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC) said the Public Services Agency (PSA) illegally registered an MOC religious community in a BOC-owned church. In December, the Chisinau Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the BOC and annulled agreements by which the government had transferred more than 800 monasteries and churches to the MOC for indefinite “protection and use.” The Islamic League said law enforcement was conducting an “unprecedented” investigation of its finances.

In the separatist Transnistria Region, Jehovah’s Witnesses said they remained unable to reregister as a religious organization, but, unlike in past years, there were no reports de facto authorities conscripted Jehovah’s Witnesses or forced them to engage in defense-related civilian service contrary to their beliefs. The Muslim community was unable to secure a site for a mosque after receiving a permit for one in 2019.

There were instances of vandalism and online hate speech against minority religious groups. In July, an unidentified person tried to set fire to a Pentecostal church by throwing a Molotov cocktail through a window. The Jewish Community of Moldova (JCM) reported anti-Semitic rhetoric on the internet, the hijacking of a Jewish religious website, and vandalism of Jewish cemeteries in

Chisinau, Orhei, and Balti. The BOC reported frequent harassment by the MOC as well as local officials in several communities. Unlike in previous years, other minority religious groups did not cite specific instances of discrimination or harassment, a change they attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and their reduced communal activities.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials urged the government and parliament to advance initiatives to establish a Jewish heritage museum. The Ambassador spoke at a government-hosted commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in January, noting the importance of ensuring such an atrocity is never repeated. The Ambassador welcomed progress on the national action plan for implementing the *Wiesel Commission Report's* recommendations and voiced support for further progress on Holocaust education. The Ambassador and other senior embassy staff urged the de facto authorities in Transnistria to respect the rights of religious minorities. The Ambassador held virtual meetings with religious leaders to encourage respect and tolerance for all religious groups, including during the fall presidential election. Embassy officials also discussed respect for religious freedom and enhanced interfaith cooperation with representatives of various religious groups throughout the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 3.4 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2014 census, which does not include Transnistria, the predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, with 90 percent of the population belonging to one of two Orthodox Christian Churches. Of Orthodox adherents, approximately 90 percent belong to the MOC, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the remaining 10 percent belong to the BOC, which falls under the Romanian Orthodox Church. Nearly 7 percent of the population did not identify a religious affiliation. The largest non-Orthodox religious groups, accounting for 15,000 to 30,000 adherents each, are Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals. Estimates of the Jewish population vary widely, ranging from 1,600 to 30,000 persons. According to the JCM, there are approximately 20,000 Jews in the country. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Muslims, and atheists.

Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Molokans, Messianic Jews, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus

Christ), the Salvation Army, the Evangelical Christian Church, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), other Christians, Falun Gong, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

In the separatist Transnistria region, the de facto authorities estimate 80 percent of the population belongs to the MOC. Other religious groups in the region include Catholics, followers of Old Rite Russian Orthodoxy, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and charismatic Christians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates the state shall recognize and guarantee all citizens the right to preserve, develop, and express their religious identity. It provides for equal treatment for all citizens regardless of religion and guarantees freedom of conscience, manifested in “a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect,” and of religious worship. It stipulates religious groups are independent from the state and free to organize and operate according to their own statutes. The constitution prohibits all religious groups, in their mutual relationships, from using, expressing, or inciting hatred or enmity. The constitution stipulates the state shall support religious worship, including facilitating religious assistance in the army, hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, and orphanages.

The law states every person has the right to belong or not belong to a religion, to have or not have individual beliefs, to change religion or beliefs, and to practice religion or beliefs independently or as a group, in public or in private, through teaching, religious practices, or rituals. According to the law, religious freedom may be restricted only if necessary to ensure public order and security, to protect public health and morality, or to protect a person's rights and freedoms. The law also prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation.

The law stipulates that the state recognizes the “exceptional importance and fundamental role” of Orthodox Christianity, and particularly the MOC, in the life, history, and culture of the country.

The law does not require religious groups to register, and members of unregistered groups may worship freely. However, only registered religious groups possess status as legal entities, allowing them to build houses of worship, own land for

cemeteries or other property, publish or import religious literature, open bank accounts, or employ staff. Registration also exempts registered religious groups from land taxes and property taxes and allows them to establish associations and foundations. The law permits local, registered religious groups to change their denominational affiliation or dissolve themselves.

The law allows individuals to redirect 2 percent of their income tax to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or religious groups. Religious groups wanting to benefit from the provision must be officially registered and active for a minimum of one year before applying for the income tax benefit; register with the government's PSA; use the funds received only for social, moral, cultural, and/or charitable activities and certain administrative costs; and present reports on the use of the funds. The law exempts religious organizations from registration fees and from paying tax on the income received as donations under the 2 percent law.

Under the law, a religious group wishing to register must present to the PSA a declaration including its exact name, fundamental principles of belief, organizational structure, scope of activities, financing sources, and rights and obligations of membership. The law also requires a group to show it has at least 100 founding members. A religious group must present proof it has access to premises where it can conduct religious activities, but it does not need to own this property. The PSA is required by law to register a religious group within 15 days if the registration request is made according to law. The applicant may request an extension if the government determines the documentation submitted is insufficient.

Under the law, the Ministry of Justice has the right to request a suspension of the registered status of a religious group if it “carries out activities that harm the constitution or laws” or “affects state security, public order, [or] the life and security of the people.” The law also provides for suspension or revocation of a religious group's registration in case of violation of international agreements or for political activity.

The law prohibits religious entities from engaging in political activity or “abusive proselytism,” defined as the action of changing religious beliefs through coercion.

The constitution provides for freedom of religious education and stipulates the state educational system should be secular. According to the law, religion classes in state educational institutions are optional. Students may submit a written request to a school's administration to enroll in a religion class. Religion classes

are offered in grades one through nine. The religious curriculum offers two types of courses: one for Orthodox denominations and Roman Catholics, and the second for evangelical Christians and Seventh-day Adventists. The religious curriculum for Orthodox and Catholic groups derives from instructional manuals developed by the Ministry of Education with input from the MOC and includes teaching guidelines developed with the support of the BOC. Regular teachers and MOC and BOC priests teach these optional courses, which focus on Orthodox Christianity. Regular teachers and representatives of the Evangelical Christian Church teach the second course, which is based on religious manuals and literature from Romania, the United States, and Germany.

The law mandates immunization of all children before they may enroll in kindergarten. It does not provide an exception for religious reasons.

The Anti-Discrimination Council, established by law, is an independent institution charged with reviewing complaints of discrimination, including discrimination of a religious character or based on religious affiliation. Parliament chooses council members through a competitive process, appointing them to five-year terms. The council does not have sanctioning powers; however, it may determine if an act of discrimination took place, offer advice on a remedy, and request prosecutors to initiate criminal proceedings. It may also suggest pertinent legislative amendments or participate in working groups authoring legislative initiatives.

According to the law, male citizens between the ages of 18 and 27 have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter runs counter to their religious beliefs. Those who choose civilian service may complete it at public institutions or enterprises specializing in areas such as social assistance, health care, industrial engineering, urban planning, road construction, environmental protection, agriculture or agricultural processing, town management, and fire rescue. There are no blanket exemptions for religious groups from alternative civilian service, but higher-ranking clergy, monks, and theology students are exempted from such service. Refusal to enroll in civilian service is punishable by a fine up to 32,500 lei (\$1,900) or between 100 and 150 hours of community service, and those punished are still obliged to enroll in civilian service.

The law mandates restoration of rights and compensation for material damages for victims of the totalitarian regimes that controlled Moldovan territory between 1917 and 1992 and for citizens who were subject to reprisals based on political, national, religious, or social grounds. The law specifically refers to private property

restoration for victims of the Soviet regime but makes no mention of Holocaust-era property confiscations. The law does not apply to communal property confiscated from religious groups.

The law defines as “extremist” and makes illegal any document or information justifying war crimes or the complete or partial annihilation of a religious or other societal group, as well as any document calling for or supporting activities in pursuit of those goals.

Foreign missionaries may submit work contracts or volunteer agreements to apply for temporary residency permits and may reside and work in paid status or as unpaid volunteers. Only missionaries working with registered religious groups may apply for temporary residency permits. Foreign religious workers with these permits must register with the National Agency for Employment and the Bureau for Migration and Asylum. They must present documents confirming the official status of the registered religious group for which they will work, papers confirming their temporary residence, and proof of valid local health insurance. Other foreign missionaries belonging to registered religious groups may remain for 90 days on a tourist visa.

In separatist Transnistria, Transnistrian “law” affirms the special role of the Orthodox Church in the region’s culture and spirituality. The de facto law “recognizes respect” for Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religious groups historically present in the region. All religious groups, whether registered or not, officially have freedom to worship, but the “law” permits restrictions on the right to freedom of conscience and religion “if necessary to protect the constitutional order, morality, health, citizens’ rights and interests, or state defense and security.” Foreign citizens also have the freedom to worship.

Transnistrian “law” prohibits proselytizing in private homes and limits distribution of religious literature to houses of worship and special premises designated by the authorities. It requires the reregistration of religious groups to operate legally in the region and stipulates groups that failed to reregister by the end of 2010 are “subject to liquidation.” The region’s registration body registers religious groups and monitors their adherence to the goals and activities set forth in their statutes. Registration provides several advantages to religious groups, including the ability to own and build places of worship, open religious schools, conduct religious services in penitentiary institutions, and publish literature.

To register, a local religious group must present the following: proof of activity in the region for at least 10 years; a list of at least 10 members aged 18 years or older, who have Transnistrian “citizenship” and permanent residence in one of the seven administrative-territorial units in the region; a list of founders and governing members and their personal details; the charter, statutes, and minutes of its constituent assembly; basic religious doctrine; contact details of its governing body; and a receipt indicating payment of the registration fee. Local religious groups may also register as part of a centralized religious organization, which must consist of at least three local religious groups that have previously registered separately as legal entities. In that case, their application must additionally include a copy of the registration papers of the centralized organization. Central religious organizations must inform the registration authority on a yearly basis about intentions to extend their activities.

De facto authorities must decide to register a religious group within 30 days of the application. If they decide to conduct a “religious assessment” – a law enforcement investigation of the group’s background and activities – registration may be postponed for up to six months or denied if investigating authorities determine the group poses a threat to the security or morality of the region or if foreign religious groups are involved in its activities.

According to the “law,” foreign religious groups may not register or undertake religious activities. Foreigners may only worship individually; they may not be founders or members of religious groups.

Religious groups disband on their own decision or upon a “court’s” decision. The “prosecutor’s office” or the region’s de facto executive, city, or district authorities may request the courts to disband or suspend a religious group on multiple grounds. Such grounds include the following: disturbing public order or violating public security; conducting extremist activities; coercing persons into breaking up their families; infringing on citizens’ identity, rights, and freedoms; violating citizens’ morality and well-being; using psychotropic substances, drugs, hypnosis, or perverse activities during religious activities; encouraging suicide or the refusal of medical treatment for religious reasons; obstructing compulsory education; using coercion for alienation of property to the benefit of the religious community; and encouraging refusal to fulfill civic duties.

The “law” allows the use of private homes and apartments to hold religious services. It does not, however, allow religious groups to use homes and apartments as their officially registered addresses. The “law” also allows such groups to hold

religious services and rituals in public places, such as hospitals, clinics, orphanages, geriatric homes, and prisons.

De facto authorities screen and may ban the import or export of religious printed materials, audio and video recordings, and other religious items.

According to the “law,” citizens have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter contradicts an individual’s religion and beliefs. The government prioritizes alternative civilian service in armed forces units, so it may assign conscientious objectors to perform their civilian service in military units. Another alternative is service at institutions subordinate to the “executive bodies of the state or local administration.”

De facto authorities do not allow religious groups to participate in elections or other political party activities or to support NGOs involved in elections.

Moldova is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

During the year, the PSA registered all 29 religious entities – all that applied – consisting of new religious subgroups belonging to existing religious denominations, including the Baptist Church, MOC, BOC, Evangelical Church, and Union of Pentecostal Churches.

On March 25, the Supreme Court of Justice reversed the government’s decision to dissolve the Falun Gong and Falun Dafa Associations. The two associations shared the same founders and members. The government’s decision was based on first instance (trial) and appellate courts’ findings, the first from 2013, that the associations violated the law against extremism by using the swastika – based on Buddhist and Chinese tradition – as symbols. In September, the Falun Gong and Falun Dafa Associations were able to reregister with the PSA.

On September 17 and December 10, Falun Dafa members protested in front of the Ministry of Justice, requesting the enforcement of the 2019 Supreme Court of Justice ruling to remove the Falun symbol from the register of materials of extremist nature. At year’s end, the government had not removed the symbol from the register. Two cases filed by the Falun Dafa Association before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) remained pending at year’s end. One sought compensation for the government’s prior decision to dissolve the two associations,

and the other sought compensation for the authorities' 2010 cancelation of a performance by Shen Yun Performing Arts, a Falun Gong-affiliated performance group from New York, reportedly because of pressure from the Chinese government. In 2019, the ECHR asked the government and Falun Dafa to try to reach an agreement on compensation in the two cases, but the two parties had not agreed to a settlement by year's end. In December, Falun Dafa submitted a new case to the ECHR, alleging a violation of the right to peaceful assembly after the Chisinau mayor's office denied the group members permission to hold a rally during the visit of a Chinese delegation in 2017. Falun Dafa had exhausted all legal remedies pertaining to the case in local courts.

In October, BOC representatives accused the PSA of illegally registering a church belonging to the BOC in Dereneu village, Calarasi Region, under the MOC's authority. BOC officials stated the church in Dereneu had been a subject of dispute between the MOC and BOC since 2017, when the parish and parishioners decided to switch legally and canonically from the MOC to the BOC. According to BOC Secretary Andrei Buclis, upon a request submitted by Dereneu Mayor Vasile Revenco and several MOC parish councilors in August, the PSA reregistered the church in the absence of a protocol signed by the community members in violation of the law, which made possible the transfer of the Dereneu church to the MOC's authority. The BOC also stated the PSA made the change upon consulting with the MOC several days after it had agreed to reactivate the Dereneu church under the BOC.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Chisinau said it had sent a number of letters to the government complaining that the registration law provisions pertaining to the organization of religious groups was incompatible with Catholic canon law. The rector of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Chisinau, Father Petru Ciobanu, stated that canon law grants bishops the authority to organize new parishes and appoint priests, while Moldovan law requires that newly registered religious communities be created through the initiative of community members, with leadership chosen by the members. The diocese said the issue remained unresolved at year's end.

The JCM said the government did not properly maintain most Jewish cemeteries across the country or protect them from acts of vandalism. The community also stated that some of the government work conducted in 2018-19 to rehabilitate the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau, one of the largest in Europe with more than 40,000 graves, significantly damaged the tombstones and the cemetery's fence. In August, the JCM sent a request to the Office of the Prosecutor General to investigate work that it said "caused large-scale damages, including the destruction

and vandalism of tombstones, which are monuments of cultural and religious value” and how more than 13 million lei (\$761,000) in public funds for the cemetery renovation were spent. On November 27, the Office of the Prosecutor General decided not to open a criminal case regarding the cemetery renovation spending, citing a lack of elements constituting a crime, a decision the JCM said it planned to challenge.

The project announced by the government in 2018 to open a Jewish museum that would include the Jewish cemetery and a Yad Vashem-style Jewish historical and cultural center in Chisinau remained on hold at year’s end following disagreement between the JCM, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research, and the Chisinau mayor’s office over the museum location and concept. According to the JCM, work on the cemetery stopped in January 2019 and work on the museum had not yet started at year’s end.

In reaction to vandalism at Jewish cemeteries in Chisinau, Orhei, and Balti, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research, which oversees the Jewish museum and cultural center project, announced the installation of video surveillance equipment at the cemetery in Chisinau to prevent similar incidents in the future. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration condemned the vandalism at the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau, stating “the destruction of Jewish gravestones and monuments is a barbaric attack not only on the memory of the Jews... but is also challenging the entire Moldovan society.” On December 4, parliament enacted amendments to the criminal code, increasing penalties for “acts of vandalism and desecration of tombs, monuments or places revered by persons belonging to various religious groups” to up to two years’ imprisonment or 180-240 hours of community service and a maximum fine of 47,500 lei (\$2,800).

On July 21, JCM President Alexandr Bilinkis, Cahul Regional Council President Marcel Cenusă, Cahul mayor Nicolae Dandis, and State Secretary for Culture Andrei Chistol officiated at the opening of a memorial to Holocaust victims in Cahul. The memorial was erected on the site of a former ghetto where the Nazis detained more than 1,000 Jews and carried out killings in 1941-44. In a message sent on the occasion, Prime Minister Ion Chicu encouraged authorities to include a chapter about the Holocaust in the school curriculum so that “children could learn about the horrors of this unjust war.”

Leaders of the Islamic League stated that, starting in August, the Police National Investigations Inspectorate conducted “unprecedented” investigations of the league’s finances and assets. Law enforcement officers interviewed and requested

documents from the Islamic League's president, Imam Sergiu Sochira, and were reportedly investigating the source of funds the league used for the 2010 purchase of the building that houses the Chisinau Mosque. Law enforcement requested the names and contact information for all the persons who donated money to buy the building. The investigations were underway at year's end.

Unlike previous years, minority religious groups did not report obstacles obtaining construction permits for houses of worship from local authorities, as most construction was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government again rejected the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran communities' attempts to regain title to property confiscated during the Soviet era or to obtain similar properties. In contrast, the MOC continued to have use of and exercise control over most confiscated "historic" religious properties under an agreement with the Ministry of Culture, but the government retained title to the properties. On December 30, after more than 10 years of litigation, the Chisinau Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the BOC's suit challenging the 2003 agreement, annulling it and the 2008 lease agreement between the Ministry of Culture and MOC that transferred more than 800 monasteries and churches held as national heritage monuments from the state to the MOC for "indefinite use and protection." The decision was subject to appeal within 30 days. According to the BOC's lawyer, if the decision stood, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research would be obliged to sign separate agreements with individual religious communities for the use of each property.

A property dispute case the Roman Catholic Church filed against the government before the ECHR in 2012 remained pending. The property, currently part of the Presidency building complex, was a Catholic school nationalized by the Soviet regime. The ECHR's requests for information on the government's position on the case or the possibility of reaching an amicable settlement remained unanswered.

Jehovah's Witness leaders reported that several cases related to obtaining zoning permits for Kingdom Halls remained underway. On June 26, the Vulcanesti City Court dismissed a fine that the chief architect (urban planner) of Ceadir-Lunga had issued in 2018 against Jehovah's Witnesses for unauthorized construction (building without a permit). The Supreme Court had already ruled in 2018 that the group had a valid permit, allowing it to complete the construction and use the building as a place of worship.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches successfully obtained a zoning permit from local authorities for its newly built church in Scoreni village, Straseni Region. New local council members elected in October 2019 issued a permit in 2020, reversing a 2019 local council rejection of the Church's initial request.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches stated that it remained unable to obtain a zoning permit for a building in Copceac village it bought in 2006 and used for religious services. While the Comrat Court ruled in favor of granting a zoning permit for the building in March, local authorities did not comply with the ruling and insisted that the church be moved to a different location in the village. The Pentecostal Church sued the local authorities, but in August the Comrat Court dismissed the case. In September, the Church appealed the dismissal to the Comrat Court of Appeals. At year's end, the case was pending. The Church continued to use the building for religious services.

Local authorities continued to refuse to carry out a 2010 court ruling that ordered the issuance of a zoning permit for a Pentecostal Church prayer house built in Pirlita village, Falesti Region. In February, in a secret vote that the Church said violated the law, village councilors again rejected the enforcement of the 2010 court ruling. On October 6, the Pentecostal Church filed an appeal requesting the Falesti court to provide the reasons for its failure to enforce the ruling for more than 10 years. On November 13, the court dismissed the case, stating that the 2010 court ruling was clear and it was the bailiff's duty to ensure its enforcement. In December, the bailiff sent a request to the local authorities in Pirlita to enforce the 2010 decision. Local authorities postponed examination of the request to 2021. The Church continued to use the prayer house for worship despite the lack of a permit.

The MOC continued to maintain a network of social assistance sites, including day-care centers and temporary shelters within churches and monasteries, and provide spiritual guidance and services to police officers, state workers, and prison inmates. Other registered religious groups had access to state facilities upon request.

According to minority religious groups, including the JCM, the Islamic League, the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches, and civil society groups such as the Promo-LEX Association, authorities continued to exhibit preferential treatment toward the MOC compared with other religious groups. The government invited MOC priests to officiate at state-sponsored events and major holidays. For example, on Chisinau City Day in October, MOC Metropolitan Vladimir officiated at the

ceremonies along with President Dodon and Mayor Ion Ceban. On a few occasions, the government also invited BOC leaders to official events, such as ceremonies at schools marking the opening of the academic year. The new presidential administration invited the MOC, BOC, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, and other religious leaders to the swearing-in ceremony of President Maia Sandu on December 24.

In December 2019 and January 2020, the Hincesti City Court dismissed two fines of 750 lei (\$44) each that authorities had levied on a Jehovah's Witness couple on charges of obstructing religious freedom by insulting religious feelings. Authorities had issued the fine after a complaint by a local Orthodox priest who, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, repeatedly harassed and, on one occasion in 2018, attacked the Jehovah's Witness couple; the couple had appealed the fine.

On multiple occasions during the year, particularly during the electoral campaign for the November 1 presidential election, President Dodon voiced support for the Orthodox faith and the MOC. For example, on October 20, Dodon started his electoral campaign agenda in Balti with a visit to the Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helena stating, "We must preserve our national values, Moldovan traditions and Christian faith – which is the basis of Moldovan statehood."

According to the PSA, 111 religious groups (versus 97 in 2019), received funds from income tax payments voluntarily directed to religious groups.

A March 17 government-issued state of emergency decree in response to COVID-19 included a ban on all public gatherings, including religious services, until May 15. The Public Health Agency warned that the high proportion of elderly persons in enclosed spaces and certain church customs, including kissing the priest's hand and sharing the communion spoon, posed a risk for COVID-19 transmission. Clerics, parishioners, and several political leaders, including President Dodon, criticized the ban on religious gatherings, especially during Lent and the Easter holiday. MOC leaders openly lobbied the government to lift what it called "drastic measures." MOC Metropolitan Vladimir stated that the Church was being "subjected to political intrigues." On March 24, some national and local authorities began levying fines of 22,500-25,000 lei (\$1,300-\$1,500) on priests who continued holding religious services. On March 29, Prime Minister Ion Chicu, who described churches as among the locations with the highest risk of infections, expressed concern that traditional services continued in at least 285 of the country's 1,441 Orthodox churches.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Jehovah's Witnesses said Transnistrian "authorities" continued to refuse to reregister two local Jehovah's Witnesses groups in Tiraspol and Rybnitsa. They said local authorities refused several times to accept the required documents. The Jehovah's Witnesses community in Tiraspol applied for reregistration on January 20. On August 27, de facto authorities rejected the application, stating it did not conform to the new required format. On September 29, the group filed a new application, which remained pending by year's end. A 2018 case by the de facto Ministry of Justice filed in the Rybnitsa City Court seeking the liquidation of the Jehovah's Witnesses group there remained pending in that court at year's end.

Contrary to previous years, there were no reports of Jehovah's Witnesses members' being conscripted into the Transnistrian de facto armed forces or forced to undertake alternative civilian service within the Transnistrian "Ministry of Defense." In December 2019 the Tiraspol city "court" dismissed as moot the case of one of three Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors who filed complaints against the Military Enrollment Committee during that year following his removal from the military eligibility register. The other two cases remained pending but were temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interim, the two Jehovah's Witnesses were exempted from serving.

The JCM expressed concern that a ruined historical synagogue in Rascov village, Camenca Region, had been sold or legally transferred by Transnistrian de facto authorities to an Israel-based organization without the input or consent of the local Jewish community. The synagogue was the object of an EU-funded restoration project, but the project was on hold due to uncertainty over the legal status of the building and site.

The Muslim community was unable to secure a location for a mosque and a Muslim educational and cultural center in Tiraspol. In 2019, de facto authorities in the city granted the community a building permit and offered a plot of public land to build on, but later they withdrew their offer of public land.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The JCM reported instances of anti-Semitic hate speech and multiple incidents of vandalism. Pentecostals reported an instance of attempted arson and the obstruction of religious services by a local mayor and an Orthodox priest during the year, and the BOC reported harassment by the MOC. Unlike in previous years,

most other religious minorities, including the Muslim community, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baptist Church, did not report religiously motivated incidents against their members, attributing their absence to COVID-19 restrictions that shifted attention away from religious minorities and made them less visible.

Numerous property disputes from prior years between the MOC and BOC remained unresolved in the courts. According to BOC Secretary Andrei Buclis, MOC priests, local authorities, and MOC followers continued to exert pressure and impede the activity of the church in Dereneu village, which in 2017 switched from the MOC to the BOC. Upon the registration of a new "St. Nicholas" BOC community in Ocnita on January 3, MOC Edinet and Briceni Bishop Nicodim publicly called BOC priest Sergiu Grosu "uncanonical," banning MOC priests from engaging in any communication with him. The local and regional public administration also criticized the activity of the new BOC church in Ocnita. According to the BOC lawyer, Father Archimandrite Vartolomeu Puitirziu, priest and senior abbot of a new BOC monastery registered in May in Marandeni village, Falesti Region, received two visits from unknown individuals in the summer with warnings "not to serve in Marandeni and find a job elsewhere." The lawyer also stated the local MOC priest from Marandeni, which is part of MOC's Balti and Falesti Bishopric, and local elected officials also exhibited hostility towards the BOC priest. The lawyer said that, on several occasions, the local MOC priest called on the parishioners to avoid going "to a monastery that is schismatic and not canonical." Several cases submitted by the BOC in previous years were still pending before the ECHR.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches reported one attempted arson case during the year. On July 23, an unknown individual tried to set fire to the prayer house in Pirlita village, Falesti Region. A masked individual threw a Molotov cocktail through the church window and ran away. The church watchman quickly extinguished the fire and alerted a church representative, who called the police. Citing a heavy workload, police did not arrive on the scene until almost 11 hours after the incident was reported. The officer refused to take one of the Molotov cocktail bottles found on the scene as evidence, citing a lack of necessary biometric identification equipment at the Falesti Police Inspectorate. At year's end, police had not identified any suspects. Authorities also never identified arsonists who set fire to the same church in 2018. The Union of Pentecostal Churches sent complaints to the Falesti prosecutor's office and the Office of the Prosecutor General's requesting an investigation and prosecution of the arsonists. The prosecutor's office said it had not found the perpetrators and suspended the cases.

According to the lawyer of the Union of Pentecostal Churches in Moldova, on March 8, International Women’s Day, the Pentecostal church in Petresti village, Ungheni Region, organized a social, cultural, and religious program for local women. During the event, a group of 10 local residents led by the local mayor and an Orthodox priest disrupted the program, entered the church, and began removing the chairs where churchgoers were seated. The mayor said he was “the master” in the locality and promised to “destroy the building.” Meanwhile, the Orthodox priest with a group of Orthodox adherents impeded persons from entering the church premises to attend the festivities. The Pentecostal church filed a complaint with police, but it did not receive a response.

According to the JCM, individuals and groups made anti-Semitic statements or posted comments online blaming the Jewish community for the spread of COVID-19 and insulting the community. The JCM stated no one took responsibility to remove anti-Semitic content online and there were no avenues or legal provisions to address the issue. In April, unknown individuals obtained unauthorized access to an online daily Torah lesson led by a Jewish community rabbi and for several minutes disseminated what the JCM described as intimidating and insulting photographs and videos.

The Jewish community reported several acts of vandalism during the year. In July, unknown individuals wrote the inscription “Read the Bible to see who the Yid is” at an exhibit dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the Chisinau-Tel Aviv Sister Cities Agreement. The JCM filed a complaint with police. The case was pending at year’s end. Between October 30 and November 1, unknown individuals vandalized and drew Nazi symbols on more than 82 tombs at the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau. The Chisinau police department opened a criminal case. The JCM reported similar grave desecration incidents in Orhei and Balti during the year.

On December 8, the JCM issued a public statement expressing its concern regarding an increase in hate speech directed against the community and its members by opinion leaders, politicians, news portals, and journalists and the growth of anti-Jewish statements that contribute to the incitement of interethnic hatred and anti-Semitism in public discourse. Examples the JCM cited included comments responding positively to the desecration of Jewish tombs and negatively to the inauguration of the memorial in Cahul to Jews killed in the Holocaust and chartering of flights to Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The JCM called on television channels and other media, online portals, human rights organizations, and law enforcement to uphold standards protecting human rights and the rights of

religious and ethnic minorities. The Equality Council said it would examine the matter, while the Audiovisual Council found no violations of the Audiovisual Code – a decision the JCM said it would challenge. According to the JCM, no media reacted to its statement.

The JCM reported reconstruction of the Rabbi Tsirelson Synagogue and Yeshiva in Chisinau continued but faced delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse of one of the walls, which required a redesign of the project. In November, authorities issued a new construction permit based on the updated blueprint.

According to the Islamic League, biased and at times discriminatory societal attitudes toward Muslims remained unchanged. The league did not report any religiously motivated incidents against Muslims, unlike in previous years.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials raised religious freedom issues, including freedom of worship for religious minorities in the Transnistria region, the protection and preservation of Jewish heritage sites, and the need to advance religious and communal property restitution, as well as initiatives to establish a Jewish heritage museum, in meetings with Prime Minister Chicu, cabinet ministers, members of parliament, and the de facto authorities in Transnistria.

In August and September, the Ambassador met with Minister of Education, Culture, and Research Igor Sarov to discuss issues of religious freedom and the U.S. Department of State's Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today Act report to Congress on actions taken to provide restitution for property confiscated during the Holocaust and the Communist era. The Ambassador encouraged the government to take action to advance the restitution of seized communal and religious property. He offered U.S. expertise and assistance with this process and agreed to continue discussions on the issue. In September, the embassy held an additional meeting with State Secretary for Culture Andrei Chistol to further advance restitution efforts.

In November, the Ambassador raised the subject of Jewish cemetery desecration with Prime Minister Chicu, Minister of Foreign Affairs Aureliu Ciocoi, Minister of Interior Pavel Voicu, and Minister of Education, Culture, and Research Igor Sarov, encouraging them to act swiftly to bring the perpetrators to justice and to ensure that religious monuments are adequately protected.

In September, a senior embassy representative sent a letter to the Transnistrian chief negotiator and de facto foreign minister Vitaly Ignatiev urging Tiraspol authorities to respect fundamental human rights, including those of religious minorities.

In January, the Ambassador spoke at an event marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and noted “the importance of considering the lessons of the past and ensuring that the world never witnesses again such an atrocity.” The Ambassador welcomed the country’s progress on the National Action Plan for the implementation of the *Elie Wiesel Commission Report*’s recommendations and voiced his hope for further progress on Holocaust education and the creation of a museum of Jewish history. The Ambassador noted the U.S. government’s readiness to provide assistance to teach young people about the Holocaust, combat anti-Semitism, and preserve the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau as a properly maintained and respected place of reflection. As part of the Holocaust remembrance week in January, a senior embassy officer gave remarks at an event honoring the “Righteous Among the Nations” held at the Jewish cultural center KEDEM and welcomed “the chance to pay tribute to the memory of those non-Jewish heroes who saved countless lives – those we call the ‘righteous among the nations.’”

In January, the acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor met with Jewish community representatives in Transnistria to discuss challenges facing the community and opportunities for enhanced cooperation with the United States and institutions in the rest of the country.

Embassy officials met with leaders and representatives of the MOC, BOC, JCM, Roman Catholic Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, Islamic League, Falun Gong Association, Baptist Church, Lutheran Church, and Pentecostal Church to discuss the state of religious freedom and ways to enhance interfaith cooperation.

In January and February, the embassy hosted showings of a documentary on Holocaust remembrance and displays about Righteous Among the Nations in Chisinau. The embassy also amplified messages related to religious freedom via social media platforms.