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Czech Republic

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Occasional acts and expressions of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment were reported among some elements of the population.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. government continued to encourage the government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. Recent efforts have also included encouraging outreach to the growing Muslim community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 30,442 square miles and a population of 10.5 million. The population is largely homogeneous with a dominant Christian tradition. However, in part as a result of communist rule between 1948 and 1989, the majority of citizens do not identify themselves as members of any organized religion. In a 2009 opinion poll sponsored by the Stredisko Empiricky Vyzkumu (STEM) agency, 32 percent of respondents claimed to believe in God, while 38 percent identified themselves as atheists. Only 25 percent of citizens under the age of 29 professed a belief in God. According to STEM, the number of believers dropped by 5 percent compared with a poll 15 years ago. Similarly, in a 2007 poll by the Public Opinion Research Centre (Centrum pro vyzkum verejneho mineni, or CVVM), 55 percent of citizens voiced a mistrust of religious groups in general, while only 28 percent stated that they trust such groups. There was a revival of

interest in religion after the 1989 "Velvet Revolution"; however, the number of those professing religious beliefs or participating in organized religion has fallen steadily since then in every region of the country.

According to the decennial census of 2001, there are 3.3 million religious believers in the country. Twenty-seven percent of the population belongs to the Roman Catholic Church, 3 percent to Protestant churches, 1 percent to the Czech Hussite Church, and 2 percent to other religious groups. Five percent of the population attends Catholic services regularly, and most live in the Moravian dioceses of Olomouc and Brno. Practicing Protestants make up 1 percent of the population. In 2004 Islam was registered as an officially recognized religion, and leaders of the local Muslim community estimate there are 15,000-20,000 Muslims in the country at any given time. There are three mosques, located in Brno and Prague, and prayer rooms are scattered throughout the country. The vast majority of the historic Jewish community, which numbered approximately 100,000 before the Nazi occupation of the area of today's Czech Republic, was killed during the Holocaust. There are approximately 3,000 persons officially registered as members of the Jewish community.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

Religious affairs are the responsibility of the Department of Churches in the Ministry of Culture. All religious groups registered with the Ministry of Culture are eligible to receive tax benefits and government subsidies, although some decline to receive state financial support as a matter of principle and an expression of independence.

The 2002 Law on Religious Freedom and the Position of Churches and Religious Associations created a two-tiered system of registration for religious organizations. To register at the first (lower) tier, a religious group must have at least 300 adult members permanently residing in the country. First-tier registration confers limited tax benefits; in addition, it imposes annual reporting requirements as well as a 10-year waiting period before an organization may apply for full second-tier registration. To register at the second tier, which entitles an organization to a share of state funding, a religious group must have membership, with the requisite signatures, equal to at least 0.1 percent of the country's population.

There are 32 state-recognized religious organizations. The newest is the evangelical Word of Life Church, which applied in March 2009 and was registered in August 2010. The application for registration of the Hussite Church, filed in July 2010, was under consideration at the end of the reporting period.

Only clergy of registered second-tier organizations may perform officially recognized marriage ceremonies and serve as chaplains in the military and prisons, although prisoners of other religious groups may receive visits from their respective clergy. Religious groups registered prior to 2002, such as the small Jewish community, are not required to meet the conditions for second-tier registration. Unregistered religious groups may not legally own community property, but they often form civic-interest associations to manage their property until they are able to meet the qualifications for registration. The government does not interfere with or prevent this type of interim solution. Unregistered religious groups otherwise are free to assemble and worship in the manner of their choice.

Religious organizations receive approximately 1.4 billion Czech koruna (\$78 million) annually from the government. Funds are divided proportionally among the 17 religious organizations that have second-tier registration and have elected to

receive state assistance based on the number of clergy in each. Of this sum, approximately 1.3 billion Czech koruna (\$72 million) is used to pay the salaries of clergy. The rest goes to church administration and maintenance of church property.

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The new penal code, effective January 2010, confirms provisions of the previous code regarding hate crime. It outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of six months to three years for public denial, questioning, approval of, or attempts to justify the Nazi genocide. The law also outlaws the incitement of hatred based on religion and provides for prison sentences of up to three years. A 2004 law designates January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day in the country.

Missionaries must obtain a long-term residence and work permit if they intend to remain longer than 90 days. There is no special visa category for religious workers; foreign missionaries and clergy are required to meet the conditions for a standard work permit even if their activity is strictly ecclesiastical or voluntary in nature. Missionaries from EU member states do not require permits.

Of the 32 registered churches, 10 have permission from the Ministry of Culture (under the 2002 religious freedom law) to teach religion in state schools. According to the ministry, although religious instruction is optional in public schools, school directors must introduce religious education choices if there are at least seven students in one class of the same religious group who request such instruction.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter Monday, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day (December 26).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The government continued its effort to resolve religious communal property restitution problems. Jewish claims dated to the period of the Nazi occupation during World War II, while Catholic authorities pressed claims for properties that were seized under the former communist regime. Although most Catholic churches, parishes, and monasteries were returned in the 1990s, land and forests remain in state possession. Parliament failed to approve a government bill on church restitution proposed in April 2008 before the May 2010 parliamentary elections. The new government declared its intention to resolve church restitution in its program. No specific steps had been taken by the end of the reporting period.

Since 1989 the government has, by decree, returned most of the state-owned properties claimed by the Federation of Jewish Communities. In 1994 the Federation of Jewish Communities identified 202 communal properties as its highest priorities for restitution, although it had more than 1,000 potential property claims. Of these 202 cases, 80 had been resolved, and the Jewish community agreed to forego claims on the remaining cases. Following the Rychetsky Commission's recommendations in 2000, parliament enacted legislation that authorized the government to transfer approximately 200 additional properties to the Jewish community, of which all but two were concluded. Two lawsuits in Brno concerning properties in the possession of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs were pending at the end of the reporting period.

In 2000 parliament enacted a law enabling the government to return more than 60 works of art in the National Gallery to the Jewish community and an estimated 7,000 works of art in the government's possession to individual Jewish citizens and their heirs. The law states no time limit for filing claims. Of the artwork belonging to the religious community, all but two items were returned. Of the 7,000 works belonging to individuals, fewer than 1,000 had been returned by the end of the reporting period. An obstacle to resolving these claims was the difficulty in tracing owners in cases in which no heir survives. In 2006 the government extended the law indefinitely, allowing individuals at any time to file claims for art in the state's possession.

The Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, which received 300 million Czech koruna (\$16.6 million) from the state in 2001, continued to assist in the preservation of communal property, educational programs, and community welfare. From these assets, the fund supported numerous social welfare projects. In 2009, for example, the fund contributed six million Czech koruna (\$333,000) to 18 institutions providing health care for approximately 500 Holocaust survivors. (Note: Since applications were first accepted in 2001, the number of survivors has dropped from approximately 2,500 to slightly more than 500.)

The Ministry of Culture sponsors religiously oriented cultural activities through a grant program. In 2010 the ministry provided 4.6 million Czech koruna (\$255,000).

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice reflecting residual anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiments. However, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

A small but persistent and fairly well-organized extreme right movement with anti-Semitic views existed in the country. Anti-Semitism also persisted among other elements of the population, including neo-Nazi groups and Islamic radicals. In general, public expressions of anti-Semitism were rare, and authorities vigorously pursued Holocaust-denial investigations and prosecutions.

During the reporting period there was growing opposition throughout the country to the construction or opening of new Muslim houses of worship. Individuals in Hradec Kralove signed petitions, created social media pages, and operated Web sites opposing the local Muslim community's plan to purchase a property and establish an Islamic center. Many of the Internet sites contained xenophobic and racist statements. In October, 30 persons held a demonstration in Hradec Kralove against the proposed center and presence of Muslims in the community.

There were no reported violent anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim incidents against individuals in the country during the reporting period; however, there were isolated reports of property damage, other vandalism, and hate speech.

The activities of groups such as National Resistance (Narodni odpor) and Autonomous Nationalists (Autonomni nacionaliste) were characterized by racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim attitudes as well as Holocaust denial and the dissemination of Nazi propaganda.

A loose network operated between neo-Nazis not in prison and neo-Nazi prisoners sentenced for racially motivated crimes. Those not in prison sent presents and letters to the prisoners. The network of supporters, which calls itself Prisoners of War, included a women's group, Resistance Women Unity.

Extremist expressions were rare in political discourse. The small fringe Workers Party (DS), which was banned by the Supreme Administrative Court in February, transformed itself into the Workers Party of Social Justice (DSSS). The DSSS issued extremist statements as part of its parliamentary and local election campaigns during the year. The party remained without any representation on the national, regional, or local level.

There were reports of neo-Nazi concerts. The Ministry of Interior continued its efforts to counter neo-Nazis, which included monitoring of their activities, close cooperation with police units in neighboring countries, and concentrated efforts to shut down unauthorized concerts and gatherings of neo-Nazi groups. Police efforts to counter the neo-Nazis continued to force

local neo-Nazi concert organizers to conduct them outside the country, mostly in the border regions of Slovakia and Poland.

In May the government approved a strategy to fight extremism that stresses the importance of preventive measures, especially education. The police are trained to deal with various forms of extremism, while school teachers participate in specialized seminars focused on teaching elementary and high school students tolerance and respect for human rights and freedoms. The Ministry of Interior and other government agencies actively implemented the strategy during the reporting period.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. government continued to encourage the government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. Recent efforts also included encouraging outreach to the growing Muslim community.

U.S. government officials continued to emphasize to the government and religious groups the importance of restitution (or fair and adequate compensation when return is no longer possible) in pending cases regarding property wrongfully taken from Holocaust victims, the Jewish community, and churches. Embassy representatives participated in meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, the Catholic Church, and the Federation of Jewish Communities on restitution matters. Embassy officials responded to individual requests for assistance from Czech-American Holocaust victims seeking compensation.

The embassy maintained close contact with the Office of the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, representatives of various religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations.

Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues Douglas Davidson and embassy officials met with officials of the Prague-based European Shoah Legacy Institute and representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to monitor progress in fields specified in the Terezin Declaration. The declaration appeals for governments to address the areas of the welfare of Holocaust survivors, confiscated real estate, looted art, Judaica, and Holocaust education and remembrance.

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