



Hungary

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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

There were increased reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, suggesting an increase of anti-Semitic rhetoric in a climate of political friction and economic uncertainty. Extremist groups grew in size and number, frequently staging anti-Roma and anti-Semitic public events. At the same time, the far right-wing political party Jobbik grew in popularity, potentially bolstered by its close affiliation with the extremist group Magyar Garda (MG) and its openly anti-Semitic positions.

The U.S. Government continued to discuss religious freedom with the Government and with all elements of society, and it promoted religious and ethnic tolerance as part of its overall policy to protect human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 35,919 square miles and a population of 10.1 million. Data on religious affiliation is regarded as sensitive information and may not be officially recorded. However, the 2001 national census, the latest survey available, included an optional question on religious affiliation, to which 90 percent of the population provided a response. According to the replies, the population is 55 percent Roman Catholic, 15 percent Hungarian Reformed, 3 percent Lutheran, and less than 1 percent Jewish. These four are the country's "historical" religious groups. In addition, 3 percent of respondents identified themselves as Greek Catholics, and 15 percent declared no religious affiliation. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the Congregation of Faith, a broad range of other Christian groups, five Orthodox Christian religious groups, seven Buddhist groups, and three Islamic communities.

Data protection regulations impede the collection of official statistics on popular participation in religious life; however, surveys suggest that citizens are less devout than the average central European. In a 2004 survey by the Economic Research Institute of Hungary, 58 percent of respondents declared themselves to be "believers," and 55 percent responded that they believe in "God or the supernatural." Fifteen percent of believers declared that they attended religious services at least once a week, and 25 percent stated that they never did.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private

actors.

The Constitution provides for the free choice or acceptance of a religion or other conscientious convictions, the freedom for one to practice or abstain from practicing, and the right to exercise or teach one's religion and beliefs in public or in private, either individually or with others, through religious acts and ceremonies or in other ways.

The Constitution separates church and state. The state should remain neutral in matters concerning ideology; however, the state has a duty to ensure the possibility of freely forming personal convictions. Citizens also have the right to sue the Government for constitutional violations of religious freedom.

The Criminal Code has a provision on the "Violation of the Freedom of Conscience and Religion," which states that whoever restricts another person by violence or threats, or prevents another person from freely exercising his religion by violence or by threats, commits a crime, which is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. If a person abuses someone because of his or her affiliation with a religious group, the crime is punishable by five years' imprisonment.

There is no state religion, and under the law every registered religious group is entitled to the same rights. The four "historical" religious groups (Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and Jewish) receive 93 percent of state financial support provided to religious groups. All registered religious groups also receive tax breaks.

Relations between the state and the Roman Catholic Church are regulated by the 1990, 1994, and 1997 Vatican treaties. These agreements also serve as a framework for regulating state relations with other religious groups.

Citizens may donate 1 percent of their income tax to the religious group of their choice and receive a tax deduction. This applies to every legally registered religious group. In addition to taxpayer contributions, the Government allocates public funds to registered religious groups. Until 2008 the Government supplemented taxpayer contributions to registered groups with an additional 0.9 percent of the total income taxes collected. In 2009 the Government replaced the former system with a one-for-one matching program. Under this program, the government contributions consist of individual taxpayer contributions plus a government match. The new practice resulted in an overall decrease in state funding of churches from \$60 million (HUF 11.9 billion) in 2008 to \$50 million (HUF 9.8 billion) in 2009.

Additional government funding to religious organizations is provided for a range of activities, such as the maintenance of public art collections, reconstruction and renovation of religious institutions, support for religious instruction, compensation for nonrestituted religious property, and assistance to church personnel serving the smallest villages. In 2009 this financial assistance increased to \$82 million (HUF 16.1 billion) as compared to \$74 million (HUF 14.6 billion) in 2008.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter Monday, Whit Monday, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

The state operates the army chaplain service for the four historical religious groups that have a significant number of members in the army. Free exercise of religion (not only in private but also in public) in the military is ensured for every denomination. The Ministry of Defense funds and maintains the chaplain service. The Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement regulates a similar system for the provision of religious services in prisons.

The 1990 Act on the Freedom of Conscience regulates the activities of, and the benefits enjoyed by, religious communities; it also establishes the criteria for legal designation. The county courts implement the registration of religious groups. To register, a group must be founded by 100 private individuals and must have a charter and

elected organs of administration and representation. The court determines whether the new group complies with constitutional and legal requirements; if so, the court cannot reject the registration request. While any group is free to practice its faith, formal registration grants rights, imposes obligations on operating educational and social institutions, and provides access to several forms of state funding. All registered groups have the same rights and obligations.

Five new religious groups were registered during the reporting period, including the Merlin-Circle Church, Community Mission, Life's Talking Charismatic Christian Church, Hungarian Branch of the Hungarian Reformed Christian Church in Croatia, and Marie's Temple Church. A total of 366 religious entities were registered by the end of the reporting period.

Registered religious groups have the right to provide religious education in public schools if requested by the students or parents. Religious instruction is not part of the curriculum in public schools, but the Government permits primary and secondary school students to enroll in extracurricular religious education classes. Optional religious instruction is usually held after the normal school day and is taught in school facilities by representatives of various religious groups. While the Government makes provisions for minority religious groups to engage in religious education in public schools, the four "historical" groups provide the majority of after-hours religious instruction. Nonpublic schools are not obliged to ensure religious education.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

Educational and social institutions, such as schools and elderly homes, maintained by registered religious groups are entitled under the law to receive the same public support as institutions maintained by the state or municipalities. However, state financial subsidies to various churches for educational and social services continued to be the most important source of contention in church-state relations. In 2007 the State Audit Office released an official report concluding that in 2005 and 2006 the Government underpaid subsidies to schools operated by religious organizations by \$14 million (HUF 2.7 billion). The Minister of Education and Culture stated that there was no exact method to calculate supplementary funding to church-run schools. Although this support increased in 2009 to an estimated \$337 million (HUF 66.2 billion) as compared to \$320 million (HUF 63.7 billion) in 2008, the "historical" religious groups expressed their desire to resolve this issue and set the correct method of calculating state funding by adopting a parliamentary law. The issue remained unresolved at the end of the reporting period.

Churches were generally critical of the Government's practice of distributing EU subsidies allocated for school reconstruction and infrastructure development. They claimed that the selection was discriminatory because a disproportionately low number of religious schools received funding as compared to state or locally operated schools.

Church leaders continued to object to delays and reductions in state financing for the maintenance of public art collections and other public services. Many church-run art collections were closed in the past few years due to the lack of state financial support.

On July 3, 2008, the Constitutional Court issued its ruling on a complaint filed by three politicians in 2006. The complaint alleged that the 2006 budget discriminated against church-run public services with respect to central budget financing and thus violated the 1997 Vatican treaty. The Court agreed with the plaintiffs and voided the respective section of the Education Act. In its ruling, the Court emphasized that state funding for religious institutions must not be less than the amount paid to state and locally operated schools and kindergartens.

The Government continued to facilitate the restitution of religious properties confiscated by the state during the Communist era and ensured equal opportunity for all religious organizations to regain control over their former property (see also Improvements and Positive Developments). In 2005 the Government adopted a resolution making it possible to fast-track property restitution negotiations and close outstanding claims in 2006 instead of by 2011 as the original law had established. Three religious groups (Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Budai Serb Orthodox) chose to use the new procedure; neither the Reformed nor the Lutheran churches opted for the procedure. By the end of the reporting period, 2,576 properties had been restituted and \$342 million (HUF 67.4 billion) paid as compensation. The Protestant and Lutheran churches had 101 outstanding cases at the end of the reporting period. Participants generally considered the procedure satisfactory. Members of the Jewish community viewed the restitution process as generally fair but wanted to see compensation paid for the estimated \$2.3 to \$18.6 billion (HUF 430 billion to 3.44 trillion) worth of heirless Jewish properties specifically excluded from the restitution process.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government and politicians from all parliamentary parties continued their efforts to combat anti-Semitism by speaking out against extremism and social intolerance.

On June 23, 2009, Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai paid a 2-day official visit to Israel. During his consultations with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Bajnai carefully distanced himself and his administration from the Jobbik party, whose politics he described as "unacceptable, extremist, aggressive, and antidemocratic." Bajnai also visited the Yad Vashem Museum to commemorate the country's Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

On April 19, 2009, more than 10,000 persons, including the Prime Minister and high-level politicians from every parliamentary party, participated in the March of the Living torchlight procession commemorating the 65th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust. On April 16, 2009, the official Holocaust Remembrance Day in Hungary, government officials paid tribute to the country's victims of the Holocaust at commemorations held at various venues around Budapest.

On April 7, 2009, Parliament Speaker Katalin Szili and then-Minister of Local Governments Istvan Gyenesei attended the "Righteous Among the Nations" award ceremony organized by the Jerusalem Yad Vashem Institute.

On January 26, 2009, various public figures attended the commemoration of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp at the Holocaust Documentation Center.

On September 29, 2008, former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany published a public letter marking the Jewish New Year Rosh Hashanah in which he underlined the importance of peace and reconciliation.

The Prime Minister, senior government officials, and representatives of other parties routinely countered various far-right demonstrations by initiating and participating in several demonstrations supporting tolerance and religious freedom during the reporting period.

The Government continued to restore the religious properties confiscated during the Communist era to the religious groups that owned them. According to a 1991 law, in the case of a reciprocal agreement, the monetary claim relating to the religious property may be transformed into a source of annuity, which can be used for financing the religious and public purpose activity of the church. Through the end of the reporting period, the Government had restituted 2,576 religious properties (worth up to \$528 million or HUF 104 billion) and paid as compensation \$342 million (HUF 67.4 billion); 101 such properties remained unresolved.

The Government continued to process petitions under Act XLVII, which allowed compensation claims from individuals whose immediate relatives were killed in the Holocaust or in Soviet forced labor camps, or lost their lives between 1939 and 1989 due to politically motivated despotic action of government authorities, as well as from those who performed forced labor due to racial, religious, or political reasons during World War II. The deadline for submitting claims expired in December 2006. Eligible individuals could apply for a lump sum worth up to \$2,000 (HUF 400,000) for each spouse, parent, or child; a lump sum worth \$1,000 (HUF 200,000) for each sibling who was killed; and compensation notes or a monthly life annuity for forced labor. More than 97,600 claims from 60 countries were submitted to the Separate Compensation and Documentary Department of the Central Office of Justice. By the end of 2008, 49,481 decisions had been issued and \$7.6 million (HUF 1.6 billion) transferred to eligible applicants.

During the reporting period, cooperation between authorities and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to provide access to the Holocaust-era archives continued. In October 2008 the Ministry of Finance transferred a previously closed collection of compensation and restitution records relating to the Holocaust era to the country's National Archives, where the records became available to researchers. The archives also became part of the USHMM microfilming project.

On December 16, 2008, the Budapest Municipal Court issued a ruling that disbanded the Magyar Garda Association (MGA) for failing to meet legal requirements to form an association and for conducting operations that infringe on the freedom and rights of the Romani people. The MGA, which was formed in 2007 by the Jobbik party to "preserve the country's traditions and culture," caused anxiety within the Jewish communities, as MGA members dressed in uniforms and carried flags associated with a World War II fascist organization, the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party. Although the MGA is primarily focused on calling the public's attention to so-called gypsy crime, members of the paramilitary group frequently chanted anti-Semitic slogans during their regular demonstrations. The MGA appealed the ruling, and the case was pending at end of the reporting period.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were several reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period.

On June 15, 2009, unidentified perpetrators placed pig's feet amid the bronze sculptures of shoes on the embankment of the Danube commemorating the thousands of mostly Jews who fell into the river after being shot by members of the Arrow Cross party in 1944-45. In response to the defamation of the Holocaust memorial monument, over the following days, several thousand persons demonstrated against racism, including the Prime Minister and various other politicians.

On April 18, 2009, a day ahead of the March of the Living procession organized by the Jewish communities, far-right demonstrators marched to the German Embassy in Budapest to deny the Holocaust and protest against the "Zionist world rule." An estimated 250 persons, including 60 wearing MG uniforms, carried posters and wore shirts with anti-Semitic messages. Renegade MGA captain Istvan Dosa said in his speech that "nothing from the Holocaust is true," and a petition directed to the German Embassy was read. Although Holocaust denial is not illegal, police

initiated procedures against Dosa and another speaker for "incitement against a community." Their case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

On April 4, 2009, Jobbik, the MG, and the Hungarian National Front coorganized an event commemorating the 1882 "blood libel" trial in which residents of Tiszaeszlár accused the local Jewish community of killing a 14-year-old Christian peasant girl to use her blood at their religious ceremony. Police ordered an investigation into the event after the media reported that the approximately 80 participants made anti-Semitic comments. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

On February 24, 2009, the World Jewish Congress joined the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary (MAZSIHISZ) in denouncing the anti-Semitic comments made by a local government official from the town of Rajka. The official, Attila Kiss, called on other officials to take up "sickles and swords" and exorcise the synagogue on Kossuth Street. MAZSIHISZ lodged an official complaint against Kiss, but the Prosecutor's Office closed down the investigation, noting the lack of "clear and present danger" for any physical abuse, a precondition set by laws protecting freedom of speech.

On December 23, 2008, neo-Nazi protesters disrupted a Hanukkah celebration in Budapest by shouting anti-Semitic epithets not far from an outdoor ceremony.

On September 28, 2008, seven masked, far-right extremists threw acid and animal feces at patrons at the Budapest Jewish Theater. A neo-Nazi blogger claimed responsibility for the attack but said the intended target was the show's Jewish playwright, Zoltan Toepler. The theater had reportedly requested police security for the performance after several persons associated with the production received threatening messages. Police were scheduled to provide security but reportedly received information that the event had been cancelled. They arrived later, but not in time to apprehend the attackers.

On July 17, 2008, members of a Budapest district council informed police of the reported screening of the 1941 Nazi propaganda and anti-Semitic film *Jud Suss*. Police investigated two brothers who were suspected of showing the film without the required permission from the German Foundation. The brothers also allegedly sold Nazi and neo-Nazi objects as part of a business venture. The brothers responded by filing a complaint with the Budapest Chief Prosecutor's Office, claiming that the investigation lacked legal merit. Referring to freedom of speech regulations, the Prosecutor's Office agreed with the brothers, stating that their acts did not constitute "hate mongering." Police continued the investigation despite the Prosecutor Office's decision. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

The weekly newspaper *Magyar Demokrata* continued to publish anti-Semitic articles, as did the more radical weekly *Magyar Forum*. Using coded language, the national daily *Magyar Hirlap* also published several anti-Semitic opinion pieces. There were numerous far-right websites in the country, many of which were openly anti-Semitic. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that the Government monitored the websites for content, because by law public display of symbols such as the swastika, hammer and sickle, and red star is prohibited.

During 2008 there were 365 reports of vandalism or destruction of Jewish and Christian properties (31 in houses of worship and 334 in cemeteries), as compared to 287 reported cases in 2007. Police and religious authorities claimed that many of the incidents were acts of youthful vandalism and not necessarily manifestations of religious intolerance.

On December 26, 2008, 20 graves were vandalized in a Jewish cemetery in Veszprem.

On November 9, 2008, unknown perpetrators broke the window of the Jewish religious community headquarters

adjacent to the synagogue in Debrecen. The Jewish community suspected the attack was motivated by anti-Semitism, noting that it occurred on the day of the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht, when Nazi storm troopers set synagogues and Jewish stores on fire in Germany and Austria.

On October 30, 2008, three teenage boys admitted to vandalizing 13 headstones in a Catholic cemetery as well as a Calvinist cemetery in Nagyigmand.

On September 25, 2008, vandals destroyed two religious statues in the garden of the Catholic parsonage in Kiskunhalas.

In 2009 the Jerusalem-based Simon Wiesenthal Center downgraded the country for lagging behind in its efforts to prosecute alleged Nazi war criminal Sandor Kepiro. Kepiro was convicted in 1944 and 1946 by Hungarian courts for his role in the January 1942 Novi Sad massacre in Serbia in which more than 1,000 persons were killed, most of whom were Jews; however, his punishment was never carried out. In 2006 Kepiro was discovered living in Budapest by the U.S.-based Simon Wiesenthal Center, and in 2007 the Prosecutor's Office opened a new case against Kepiro after the court ruled that the old records attesting that the verdict had been lost and thus the sentence could not be carried out. Government authorities requested legal assistance from the Republic of Serbia to collect relevant records and evidence kept in Serbian archives. Investigation of war crimes charges against Kepiro continued throughout the reporting period.

Christian churches and the Jewish community continued to organize regular events under the auspices of the Christian-Jewish Society, which brings together religious academicians for discussions. Religious groups also demonstrated strong willingness to work together across a wide range of other areas to achieve common social and political goals. On November 13, 2008, the Budapest conference of the Catholic-Jewish Relations International Committee issued a statement declaring that the Catholic and Jewish dialogue that results in growing friendship and understanding is a "sign of hope and inspiration for our troubled world."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government regularly discussed with the Government the issue of anti-Semitic public incidents organized by extremist groups as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. Government discussed religious freedom with Members of Parliament, political party leaders, and representatives of local and international NGOs that address matters of religious freedom. U.S. embassy officers closely tracked anti-Semitic incidents and regularly consulted with leaders of religious groups to assess the threat.

The Embassy continued to speak out against anti-Semitism and hate speech and urged all parties to do the same. The U.S. Ambassador and Chargé d'Affaires frequently attended events organized by religious communities. On April 19, 2009, the Chargé joined more than 10,000 others at the March of the Living torchlight procession organized by the Jewish community. On April 16, 2009, the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Day, the Chargé participated in an awards ceremony for the "Faces of the Victims" photograph competition organized by the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest.

On March 19, 2009, the Embassy sponsored an international anti-Semitism conference at the Central European University in Budapest. Conference speakers assessed topics such as the state of anti-Semitism in contemporary Europe, legal responses to hate speech, and anti-Semitism in the media and on the Internet. Participants also shared examples of combating anti-Semitism in education, society, and the political arena.

In March 2009 the Embassy concluded its video competition to promote tolerance among young persons. The

competition invited high school students to submit a short video on YouTube that conveyed the message of tolerance. The 75-plus video submissions were viewed on YouTube more than 20,000 times by the end of the reporting period.

In January 2009 embassy officers canvassed the country and met with more than 1,200 high school students to promote tolerance. During the visits, officers gave the students embassy-produced yellow wristbands embossed with the word "tolerance."

On December 9, 2008, the Embassy hosted a seminar on teaching the Holocaust in the classroom. Conducted by [USHMM](#) expert Stephen Feinberg, the seminar gave teachers unique approaches to teaching the Holocaust to their students.

On November 20, 2008, the Ambassador participated in the commemoration of the Jewish victims of the 1956 revolution. On November 13, 2008, the Ambassador met with Jewish leaders in Debrecen and publicly denounced violence and intolerance in the wake of the attack on the Jewish community headquarters there four days earlier. On September 15, 2008, the Ambassador delivered opening remarks prior to the lecture of visiting American Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis.

The Embassy held successful consultations with the Ministry of Finance on transferring the Holocaust-related records from the Ministry to the country's National Archives, which would grant the USHMM improved archival access. The Embassy also remained active on issues of compensation and property restitution for Holocaust victims. Embassy officers worked with MAZSIHISZ, other local and international Jewish organizations, Members of Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Minister's Office on restitution issues to promote fair compensation.

The Embassy maintained an active agenda of events with the Romani community as well, underscoring the importance of tolerance for all minorities.