



Czech Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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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 period covered by this report.

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Occasional acts and expressions of anti-Semitism 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 30,442 square miles and a population of 10.2 million. The population is largely homogeneous with a dominant Christian tradition. However, in part as a result of 40 years of communist rule between 1948 and 1989, the vast majority of citizens do not identify themselves as members of any organized religion. In a 2007 opinion poll sponsored by the Stredisko Empiricky Vyzkumu (STEM) agency, 28 percent of respondents claimed to believe in God, while 48 percent identified themselves as atheists. Only 18 percent of citizens under 29 professed a belief in God. Similarly, in a May 2007 poll by the Public Opinion Research Centre (Centrum pro vyzkum verejneho mineni, or CVVM), 55 percent of citizens voiced a mistrust of churches, while only 28 percent stated that they trust them. 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.

Five percent of the population attends Roman Catholic services regularly, and most of them live in the southern Moravian dioceses of Olomouc and Brno. One percent of the population are practicing Protestants. In 2004 Islam was registered as an officially recognized religion, and leaders of the local Muslim community estimated that there are several thousand Muslims in the country. There is only one mosque, located in Brno, but prayer rooms are scattered throughout the country. The vast majority of the historic Jewish community, which numbered approximately one hundred thousand 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. Judaism is an officially registered religion because of its recognition by the state before 1989.

The immigrant population was relatively small and included persons from Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Slovakia, and Vietnam. Immigrants did not report any difficulties in practicing their respective faiths.

Section II. Status of 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 sought to protect this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Religious affairs are the responsibility of the Department of Churches at the Ministry of Culture. All religious

groups officially 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 as an expression of their independence.

Recognized national holidays include Easter Monday, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day (December 26).

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 and imposes annual reporting requirements, as well as a ten-year waiting period before the organization may apply for full second-tier registration. To register at the second tier, a religious group must have membership, with the requisite signatures, equal to at least 0.1 percent of the country's population (approximately ten thousand persons). Many smaller and less established religions were unable to obtain the signatures necessary for second tier registration. Second-tier registration entitles the organization to a share of state funding.

There are 30 state-recognized religious organizations. In 2004 the Center of Muslim Communities was officially registered, gaining first-tier status; this was the first such registration of a Muslim organization in the country.

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 1991, such as the small Jewish community, are not required to meet these conditions for registration. Unregistered religious groups may not legally own community property but often form civic-interest associations for the purpose of managing their property and other holdings 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.

In November 2005 the lower house of Parliament passed an amended Church Law that came into effect the following month. The law governs the establishment and regulation of church-sponsored charities, schools, and other institutions. In January 2006 a group of 25 mainly Christian Democratic Parliamentarians submitted a complaint against the new law before the Constitutional Court. The complaint includes charges that the new law contradicts Article 16, Paragraph 2 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Basic Freedoms that stipulates that "...churches and religious associations...found [establish or create] religious orders and other church institutions, independent of state authorities." The Parliamentarians' complaint focused upon the constitutionality of the law's wording and the level of state regulation over church-sponsored institutions. In October 2007 the complaint was rejected.

Religious organizations receive approximately \$68 million (CZK 1.1 billion) annually from the Government. Funds are divided proportionally among the 17 religious organizations that have second-tier registration and elected to receive state assistance based on the number of clergy in each. Of this sum, approximately \$32 million (CZK 818 million) is used to pay salaries to clergymembers. The rest of the funding goes to church administration and maintenance of church property.

In 2004 Parliament approved a law designating January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day in the country. A 2000 law outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of 6 months to 3 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.

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 stringent conditions for a standard work permit even if their activity is strictly ecclesiastical or voluntary in nature.

Of the 30 registered churches, ten have obtained permission from the Ministry of Culture (under the 2002 Law on Religious Freedom and the Position of Churches and Religious Associations) to teach religion in state schools. According to the Education 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 classes.

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 period covered by this report.

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. In April 2008 the Government unanimously approved a bill on church restitution, allowing for the return of properties to religious orders and financial compensation for properties that belonged to churches, and sent it to Parliament. The bill was intended to resolve the issue of church restitution as well as financing of churches. The bill faced opposition from the Communists and Social Democrats, as well as from some coalition members in the Chamber of Deputies. In May 2008 the attempt to pass the bill on the first reading failed. In June 2008 a parliamentary commission was established to review the proposed bill.

Since 1989, the Government has, by decree, returned most of the state-owned properties claimed by the Federation of Jewish Communities; the city of Prague and many other communities took a similar approach. Two claims filed against the Brno municipality were resolved during the reporting period; another law suit pending in Brno at the end of the reporting period concerned properties in the possession of the Ministry of Interior. In 1994 the Federation of Jewish Communities identified 202 communal properties as its highest priorities for restitution, although it had more than one thousand potential property claims. Of these 202 cases, 80 had been resolved, and the Jewish community tacitly agreed to forego claims on the remaining estimated 800 properties.

In 2000 the Federation of Jewish Communities established a Foundation for Holocaust Victims in which the Government invested approximately \$19.5 million (CZK 300 million) from the Government's National Property Fund to pay for those properties that cannot physically be returned. Funds were earmarked to help meet the social needs of Holocaust survivors, to support the restoration of synagogues and cemeteries, and to carry out educational outreach programs. The Foundation was expected to provide partial compensation in cases where the Government needs to retain the property or is no longer in possession of it.

Approximately one-third of the funds was dedicated to individual property claims. By March 2005 the Foundation announced payments totaling more than \$6.49 million (CZK 100 million) to approximately 500 individual claimants residing in 27 foreign countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs assisted the Foundation in its efforts to locate and contact survivors abroad. Having expended these efforts, and depleted the allocated funds, the authorities closed this part of the program during the period covered by this report. The remainder of the funds was being used for the preservation of communal property, educational programs, and community welfare. From these assets, the state supported numerous social welfare projects. In 2006, for example, the state contributed \$389,105 (CZK 6 million) to institutions providing healthcare for approximately 503 Holocaust survivors. (Note: Since applications were first accepted in 2001, the number of survivors has dropped from approximately 2,500 to just over 500.)

The legal dispute between the state and the Catholic Church over the St. Vitus Cathedral continued during the reporting period. In October 2007 the District Court of Prague 1 confirmed the February 2007 decision of the Czech Supreme Court, which overturned the Prague City High Court's ruling from September 2006 that Prague Castle's St. Vitus Cathedral belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and not the state. The Catholic Church appealed the decision to the Prague City High Court. The Church and the Government have fought over ownership rights of the cathedral since 1993. The Catholic Church maintained that the nationalization of the cathedral in 1954 by the communist government was illegal and should be nullified.

In 2000 the Parliament enacted a law enabling it 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. Of the artwork belonging to the religious community, all but two items were returned. Of the 7,000 works belonging to individuals, fewer than one thousand have been returned. The primary obstacle to resolving these claims was practical (tracing ownership or cases where 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.

Another provision of the law authorized the return of certain agricultural property in the Government's

possession to its original owners. The deadline for filing claims for agricultural property under this law has expired.

The Ministry of Culture sponsors religiously oriented cultural activities through a grant program. The Ministry sponsored some interfaith activities during the period covered by this report, including partial funding of the Christian and Jewish Society.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In April 2008 the Government approved a bill on church property restitution. The bill was designed to facilitate the restitution of properties to religious orders and compensation to churches as well as future financing of churches. Parliament was considering the bill at the end of the reporting period.

Holocaust Remembrance Day was observed in January 2008 in public events and throughout the country. The public and media response to these events was very positive.

In November 2007 political leaders and society widely condemned a neo-Nazi rally held in Prague on the anniversary of Kristallnacht.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

There were no reported violent anti-Semitic incidents against individuals in the country during the reporting period; however, there were isolated reports of property damage, vandalism, and hate speech. A small but persistent and fairly well-organized extreme right movement with anti-Semitic views existed within the country.

In March 2008 and October 2007, Sparta Prague soccer club fans made anti-Semitic comments toward their opponent, Slavia.

In November 2007, on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, neo-Nazi groups attempted to march through the Jewish quarter of Prague; police stated that they arrested 396 persons. The municipal authorities initially tried to ban the march, but based on a court decision upholding the neo-Nazi's claimed freedom of assembly, the municipal authorities diverted the march to an alternate location. A number of ministers and parliamentarians took part in protests against the neo-Nazi march. Other lower-profile neo-Nazi rallies and concerts occurred throughout the reporting period.

On August 17, 2007, Sparta Prague soccer club fans chanted "Jude" (Jew) against the visiting British Arsenal team.

On July 27, 2007, the Jewish cemetery in Pisk was desecrated. On July 16, 2007, the Jewish cemetery in Bohumin was desecrated. Both cases were investigated by the police but closed since they were unable to identify the perpetrator(s).

Anti-Semitism persisted among some elements of the population, including neo-Nazi groups and Islamic extremists. In general, public expressions of anti-Semitic sentiment were rare, and authorities vigorously pursued Holocaust denial investigations and prosecutions.

The activities of groups such as National Resistance ("Narodní odpor") and National Corporativism ("Narodní korporativismus") were characterized by racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim attitudes,

disseminating Nazi propaganda, and Holocaust denial.

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

Czech auction websites reportedly offered thousands of Nazi-related items for sale.

Extremist expressions were rare in political discourse. However, a small fringe party (the National party) that did not have representation in Parliament issued some extremist statements.

There were reports of several neo-Nazi concerts. The Ministry of Interior continued its efforts to counter the 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. The police intervened in several incidents where hate speech was used. On occasion, the police and other authorities ignored neo-Nazi actions. Sometimes police appeared to offer protection to neo-Nazis from anarchist demonstrators.

In March 2008 unknown persons illegally hung dozens of posters in the city of Brno featuring one of the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published in Denmark in 2005. In June 2008 the same type of posters appeared in Prague.

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. U.S. government efforts on religious issues focused largely on encouraging the Government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims and registration of religious organizations.

During the reporting period, U.S. government and embassy officials emphasized 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.

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. Embassy officials met on several occasions with representatives of the Ministry of Culture to discuss the law on religious registration, as well as with representatives of smaller religious groups affected by the law, including the local Muslim community. Embassy and State Department officials met with the Deputy Prime Minister and officials from his office to discuss a possible follow-up conference on Holocaust-era assets that would be held in the country in 2009. Several meetings were held with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Federation of Jewish Communities on restitution matters. Embassy officials also responded to individual requests for assistance from Czech-American Holocaust victims seeking compensation.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

