



Czech Republic

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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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 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 majority of citizens do not identify themselves as members of any organized religion. In a 2008 opinion poll sponsored by the Stredisko Empiricky Vyzkumu (STEM) agency, 34 percent of respondents claimed to believe in God, while 39 percent identified themselves as atheists. Only 25 percent of citizens under the age of 29 professed a belief in God. 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 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.

Thirty-three 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 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 estimate that there are several thousand Muslims in the country. There are two mosques, located in Brno and Prague, but 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

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 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 their independence.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: 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; 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. Many smaller and less established religions were unable to obtain the signatures necessary for second-tier registration.

There are 30 state-recognized religious organizations. Two evangelical groups applied for registration during the reporting period--the Word of Life Church in March 2009 and the New Hope Church in October 2008. Both applications were being considered at the end of the reporting period. Judaism is an officially registered religion because of its recognition by the state before 1989.

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 they often form civic-interest associations for the purpose of managing 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 \$70 million (CZK 14 billion) 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 \$60 million (CZK 1.2 billion) is used to pay salaries to clergy members. The rest of the funding goes to church administration and maintenance of church property.

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

Of the 30 registered churches, 10 have obtained 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.

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.

The legal dispute between the state and the Catholic Church over the St. Vitus Cathedral continued during the reporting period. In March 2009 the Supreme Court rejected the appeal by the Catholic Church against the 2008 ruling of the Prague City High Court that the Cathedral belonged to the state. In May 2009 the Catholic Church appealed the decision to the Constitutional Court; no decision had been made by the end of 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. 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. In April 2009 the commission recommended that the Chamber of Deputies reject the bill. At the end of the reporting period, the Chamber had not voted on the 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. A lawsuit 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 1,000 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 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. 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. The primary obstacle to resolving these claims was practical (tracing ownership or 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 Foundation for Holocaust Victims continued to assist in the preservation of communal property, educational programs, and community welfare. From these assets, the state supported numerous social welfare projects. In 2007, for example, the state Foundation contributed \$300,000 (CZK 6 million) to institutions providing healthcare for approximately 500 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 Ministry of Culture sponsors religiously oriented cultural activities through a grant program. In 2008 the Ministry provided \$210,000 (CZK 4.2 million). The Ministry sponsored some interfaith activities during the reporting

period, including the ecumenical gathering Prayer for Home on Rip Hill.

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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.

A small but persistent and fairly well-organized extreme right movement with anti-Semitic views existed within the country. Anti-Semitism also persisted among other 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.

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, other vandalism, and hate speech.

In January 2009 vandals damaged the Monument to Holocaust Victims in Teplice. Police were investigating the case at the end of the reporting period.

Several racially motivated marches occurred, organized mostly by the extreme right-wing Workers' Party. In March 2009, 200 neo-Nazis marched through Pilsen shouting anti-Semitic slogans. Police investigated one participant for propagating Nazism. In November 2008 extremists clashed with police in Janov.

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

In April 2009 members of the National Resistance (associated with the right-wing extremist Workers' Party) invited former U.S. Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke to speak at Charles University, the most prestigious university in the country. When they learned of the event, Jewish groups successfully urged university officials to cancel Duke's speech. Duke's local sponsors reorganized the event at a Prague restaurant they disclosed on short notice to a select audience. The police raided the establishment and detained Duke. Using the Penal Code, the Government charged Duke with Holocaust denial and ordered his immediate departure.

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.

Extremist expressions were rare in political discourse. However, two small fringe parties (the National Party and the Workers' Party), neither of which had representation in Parliament, issued 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. However, at times the police and other authorities ignored neo-Nazi actions. Sometimes police appeared to offer protection to neo-Nazis from anarchist demonstrators.

In May 2009 the Government approved a strategy to fight extremism. The strategy prepared by the Ministry of Interior stressed the importance of preventive measures, especially education.

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 U.S. State Department officials worked with the Deputy Prime Minister and officials from his office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a follow-up conference on Holocaust-era assets that took place on June 26-30, 2009. As a result of the conference, the newly created Terezin Institute is expected to keep track of what governments are doing on Holocaust issues. Embassy representatives participated in several meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, the 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.