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## Czech Republic

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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

#### 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. One percent of the population is practicing Protestants. In 2004

Islam was registered as an officially recognized religion, and leaders of the local Muslim community estimate there are several thousand Muslims in the country. There are two 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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 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.

There are 31 state-recognized religious organizations. The evangelical New Hope Church, which applied in October 2008, was registered in September 2009. The application for registration by the evangelical Word of Life Church, filed in March 2009, 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 \$70 million (1.4 billion Czech koruna) 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 \$65 million (1.3 billion Czech koruna) is used to pay the salaries of clergy. The rest goes to church administration and maintenance of church property.

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.

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Of the 31 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.

#### 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.

In May 2010 President Klaus and Prague Archbishop Duka, the Catholic Church primate in the country, agreed to end court disputes concerning the ownership of the St. Vitus Cathedral. According to the agreement, the Catholic Church will administer the cathedral as the metropolitan church, and the state will secure necessary material assistance. The agreement requires the Catholic Church to withdraw the lawsuit it filed with the Constitutional Court in May 2009. The agreement also provides for creation of a seven-member council to supervise the care of the church. The members include four key constitutional officials--the president, speakers of both chambers, and prime minister--as well as the archbishop of Prague, provost of the Metropolitan Chapter, and lord mayor of Prague.

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. Parliament failed to approve a government bill on church restitution proposed in April 2008 before the May 2010 parliamentary elections. Therefore, the process would have to start anew after the formation of a new government.

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. 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 June 2000, parliament enacted legislation that authorized the government to transfer approximately 200 additional properties to the Jewish community. Two lawsuits pending in Brno at the end of the reporting period concerned properties in the possession of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

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 Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, which received \$15 million (300 million Czech koruna) 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 2008, for example, the fund contributed \$300,000 (six

million Czech koruna) to 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 2009 the ministry provided \$185,000 (3.7 million Czech koruna). 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.

#### 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 in 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-Semitism 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 2009 the government recorded 48 criminal offenses with anti-Semitic motives. The Federation of Jewish Communities reported 28 anti-Semitic incidents.

Police closed the investigation of the January 2009 damage to the Monument to Holocaust Victims in Teplice for lack of evidence. However, quarterly meetings of Teplice municipal officials, local police, and representatives of the local Jewish community were introduced to monitor and evaluate the situation.

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.

The Brno Muslim community's plan to build a second mosque in the city led to protests, including a small demonstration by the National Party in August 2009. The local leadership of the centrist Christian Democratic Party also opposed the plan.

A loose network operated between neo-Nazis not in prison and neo-Nazi prisoners sentenced for racially motivated crimes. Those outside of 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. However, two small fringe parties (the National Party and the Workers' Party), neither of which had representation in parliament, issued extremist statements. In March 2009 the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed the government's petition for the ban of the Workers' Party. Following violent attacks against ethnic minorities by far right extremists, in September 2009 the government filed a more detailed petition for the ban, and in February 2010 the Supreme Administrative Court banned the party.

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. Police intervened in several incidents where hate speech was used. The number of neo-Nazi concerts dropped from 34 in 2008 to 18 in 2009 because of police intervention. The arrests of a number of key neo-Nazis in the second half of 2009 forced the local organizers of neo-Nazi concerts to organize them outside the country, mostly in the border regions of Slovakia and Poland.

In May 2010 the government approved a strategy to fight extremism that stresses 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 matters focused largely on encouraging the government and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims and registration of religious organizations.

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 several meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Culture, Catholic Church, and Federation of Jewish Communities on restitution matters. Embassy officials also 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. 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. After the June 2009 Holocaust Era Assets Conference in Prague, U.S. State Department and embassy officials participated in follow-up negotiations on principles for restitution of real estate seized during the Holocaust era. Following extended negotiations, the Czech Republic was one of 43 countries that adopted the Guidelines and Best Practices for Holocaust-era Property Restitution in Prague in June 2010.

The embassy and other State Department officials worked closely with the Prague-based European Shoah Legacy Institute, an organization established after the June 2009 conference, to monitor progress in fields specified in the Terezin Declaration (welfare of Holocaust survivors, real estate, looted art, Judaica, and Holocaust education and remembrance) and to create a Web platform for gathering and sharing information on Holocaust-related matters.

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