

CZECH REPUBLIC 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, a supplementary document to the constitution, guarantees the freedom of religious conviction and states every individual has the right to change religion, to abstain from religious belief, and to freely practice religion. During the year the national government registered two religious groups, the Oasis Church and Josef Zezulka's Society, and denied the applications of three others. Courts and the public defender of rights (ombudsman) rejected as discriminatory local ordinances that would ban Muslim women from wearing headscarves. The government continued to address restitution cases, providing property restitution or financial compensation to religious groups, but some cases remained unresolved. The president and other politicians, at both the national and local level, continued to make intolerant remarks about Muslims. Some government figures made anti-Semitic statements, but others held rallies against anti-Semitism.

Right-wing groups held rallies and published internet blogs that included anti-Semitic statements, Holocaust denial, Nazi propaganda, and anti-Muslim sentiments. There were incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism as well as the desecration of a mosque.

U.S. embassy officials met with the Ministry of Culture (MOC) and Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant leaders to support the resolution of religious property restitution claims. The embassy continued to emphasize the importance of restitution or fair and adequate compensation for property taken from Holocaust victims, the Jewish community, and churches. Embassy officials responded to specific requests for assistance from U.S. citizen Holocaust victims and their families seeking compensation. Embassy officials and the Department of State Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues participated in meetings of the European Shoah Legacy Institute (ESLI) to discuss the organization's progress on goals laid out by the Terezin Declaration. The Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss interfaith cooperation. The embassy also supported programs to promote tolerance of religious minorities, including a study on how Islam is portrayed in schools.

Section I. Religious Demography

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The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.6 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 11 percent of the total population is Catholic, 7 percent lists no specific religion, and 3 percent adheres to a variety of religious beliefs, including Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. The census data also showed 35 percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. Another 44 percent did not respond to the census question on religious beliefs. There are approximately 3,500 persons officially registered as members of the Jewish community, although academics estimate there are approximately 10,000 Jews, and the Federation of Jewish Communities estimates there are 15,000 to 20,000. Leaders of the Muslim community estimate there are 10,000 Muslims, most of whom are immigrants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution does not explicitly address religious freedom, but does protect the “rights and freedoms of man and citizen.” The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, a supplementary constitutional document, guarantees the freedom of religious conviction and states every individual has the right to change religion or faith; to abstain from religious belief; and to freely practice religion, alone or in community, in private or public, “through worship, teaching, practice, or observance.” It provides for the independence of religious societies from the state, and stipulates conscientious objectors cannot be compelled to perform military service. It states religious freedom may be limited by law in the event of threats to “public safety and order, health and morals, or the rights and freedoms of others.”

The law states the Department of Churches in the MOC is responsible for religious affairs. While religious groups are not required by law to register with the government and are free to perform religious activities without registering, they have the option to register with the MOC. The law establishes a two-tiered system of registration for religious groups. To qualify for the first (lower) tier, a religious group must have at least 300 adult members permanently residing in the country, a founding document that lists the basic tenets of the faith, and a clearly defined structure of fiduciary responsibilities. First-tier registration confers limited tax benefits; establishes annual reporting requirements on activities, balance sheets, and use of funds; and requires a 10-year waiting period before a group may apply for full, second-tier registration. For second-tier registration, a group must have

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been registered with the Department of Churches for 10 years and published annual reports throughout the time of its registration, have membership equal to at least 0.1 percent of the population, or approximately 10,600 persons, and provide this number of signatures as proof.

Second-tier registration entitles religious groups to government subsidies. In addition, only clergy of registered second-tier religious groups may perform officially recognized marriage ceremonies and serve as chaplains in the military and at prisons. Prisoners who belong to registered religious groups may receive visits from their own clergy. Religious groups registered prior to 2002 are exempt from the requirements for second-tier registration, such as the minimum number of members, and automatically received second-tier status.

There are 37 state-recognized religious groups; 16 groups are first-tier and 21 are second-tier.

Unregistered religious groups are free to assemble and worship, but may not legally own community property. The law provides the option of forming civic associations to manage their property until they can meet the registration qualifications.

A law on church restitution passed in 2012 authorizes the government to return land still in the government's possession, the total of which is estimated to be worth approximately 75 billion koruna (\$3.4 billion). It also sets aside 59 billion koruna (\$2.6 billion) for financial restitution for lands that cannot be returned, to be paid over 30 years to 16 second-tier religious groups that received state subsidies prior to the enactment of the law, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Federation of Jewish Communities, and the Hussite Church. Churches filed 7,445 claims for property during the one-year application period concluding at the end of 2013, which are currently being processed. The law allocates slightly more than 79 percent of the financial compensation to the Catholic Church, and contains provisions for phasing out direct state support to religious groups over a 17-year period.

For property restitution, religious groups must file restitution claims with the current owner or owning agency of the property in question. If the owner does not return the property requested to the claimant, the claimant may then take the case to court.

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The law permits second-tier registered religious groups to apply through the MOC to teach religion in state schools; currently, 11 of the 21 second-tier groups have applied and received permission. Although the law makes religious instruction in public schools optional, school directors must introduce religious education choices if seven or more students of the same religious group in a class request such instruction.

The penal code contains provisions regarding hate crimes. It outlaws genocide, and Holocaust denial, and provides for prison sentences of six months to three years for public denial, questioning, approval of, or attempts to justify the genocide committed by the Nazis. The law also outlaws the incitement of hatred based on religion and provides for prison sentences of up to three years. The law designates January 27 as Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Missionaries must obtain long-term residence and work permits to remain in the country more 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.

Government Practices

The government granted first-tier registration to two religious groups and rejected three, while a number remained pending. Efforts at the local level to ban Muslim women from wearing headscarves were termed discriminatory by government officials and, in at least one case, abandoned. The president and other political figures made anti-Islamic statements. Some government figures made anti-Semitic statements, but others held rallies against anti-Semitism.

The government rejected the applications filed in 2013 by the Hussite Church of Jan Zizka of Trocnov and the Christian Church of Free Friars for first-tier registration because the groups did not submit all required documents for registration. The government also rejected the 2013 application of the Ukrainian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church on grounds the church professed intolerance against other Ukrainian Orthodox denominations. The Czech Orthodox Church (Ceska Ortodoxni Cirkev) withdrew its application. The Order of the Guardians of the Crown and Sword of the Iron and Golden King appealed the rejection of its

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application earlier in the year that was based on its failure to provide the signatures of the minimum 300 adherents. The appeal was pending at year's end.

The MOC registered the Oasis Church in October and Josef Zezulka's Society in December. Applications by the Czech Orthodox Church (Ceska Pravoslavna Cirkev) and the Church of All Saints were pending at year's end.

A group called "NO to Islam in the Czech Republic" submitted a petition of 25,000 signatures to the parliament asking the government not to grant the Muslim community second-tier registration, for which the community had not applied.

The government continued to provide subsidies to religious groups with second-tier registration and to sponsor religiously oriented cultural activities, including the Night of Churches, Hussite Festival, and a celebration of 600 years of Jewish presence in Teplice.

Four second-tier religious groups – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Christian Congregations, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the New Apostolic Church – declined to receive state financial support as a matter of principle and an expression of independence.

Religious groups received approximately 3.5 billion koruna (\$157 million) from the government. The government paid approximately 1.4 billion koruna (\$63 million) as a contribution to 17 second-tier religious groups and 2.1 billion koruna (\$94 million) as part of compensation for communal property in state hands that would not be returned to churches. While accepting the state contribution, the Baptist Union opted not to accept the compensation. The MOC provided 3 million koruna (\$134,000) in grants for religiously oriented cultural activities in response to applications from a variety of religious groups.

Several government institutions attempted to ban Muslim women and girls from covering their hair while at school or work. The city of Teplice considered an ordinance banning Muslim women from covering their faces, but dropped the idea after checking with the Ministry of Interior (MOI). The MOI stated such an ordinance violated the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

The High School for Nursing, in Prague, prohibited women from wearing headscarves in class. Following the prohibition, at least two female students left

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the school. One, a Somali woman, submitted a complaint to the Ministry of Education's Ombudsman of Education, who in August described the ban as discriminatory. The minister for education agreed, but also said he did not believe that any changes to school codes were required. In October President Milos Zeman announced his own opposition to Muslim women wearing headscarves in hospitals and schools, calling the practice of wearing hijab a "slippery slope" towards wearing a burqa.

The government continued to address outstanding religious communal property restitution cases. These included Jewish claims dating to the period of the Nazi occupation during World War II, and claims of the Roman Catholic authorities and other religious groups concerning property seized during the communist era. Although the government had returned most Catholic churches, parishes, and monasteries in the 1990s, most land and forests previously owned by the Catholic Church remained in state possession as laid out in restitution legislation.

In accordance with restitution legislation, the Brno Jewish community resubmitted a claim for a property possessed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The ministry stated it did not believe the community had owned the title to the property, and rejected the claim. The government had previously returned nearly all of the state-owned property claimed by the Federation of Jewish Communities.

The Ministry of Education canceled its participation in a program to study how Islam was portrayed in schools following a campaign on social media by the "NO to Islam in the Czech Republic" group. Although the ministry removed its sponsorship from the project, it did not prevent individual schools from implementing the study's recommendations on best practices to teach Islam, and several schools did.

President Zeman, along with a small number of other politicians, made several public statements equating Islam with terrorism. His remarks at the Israeli National Day Celebration in May were reported in the press. President Zeman did not retract any of his statements or change his positions.

In March Minister of Justice Helena Valkova stated during an interview with news server Echo24, "not that much happened" during the Nazi occupation. Politicians from the TOP 09 party and the Civic Democratic Party said her statement was insensitive, offensive to all victims of the occupation, and a denial of the suffering

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by the Jewish community. Valkova apologized for her statement. Some government leaders said Echo 24 had taken her statement out of context.

The MOI continued to monitor the activities of right-wing groups espousing anti-Semitic views, shut down unauthorized rallies, and pursue Holocaust-denial investigations and prosecutions.

In April Deputy Chairman of the Senate Premysl Sobotka and Lord Mayor of Prague Tomas Hudecek sponsored and participated in an annual march against anti-Semitism. In September Sobotka, Deputy Chairwoman of the Senate Standing Committee on Media Daniela Filipiova, and Minister of Culture Daniel Herman organized a rally in the senate against anti-Semitism.

In July police charged two men over the publication of a book of selected speeches of Adolf Hitler. The men were acquitted in September when a court ruled they had not advocated anti-Semitic hate speech, only published the speeches.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and the ESLI, which is based in Prague.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The MOI recorded 15 criminal offenses with anti-Semitic motives during 2013, the last year for which data was available. Over the same period, the Federation of Jewish Communities reported 12 anti-Semitic incidents, including one physical attack, as well as damage to property; spray-painting of anti-Semitic remarks and Nazi symbols; threats via phone calls, emails, and messages; and harassment. An annual study by the Jewish community in Prague reported the number of cases of anti-Semitic postings on the internet increased from 82 in 2012 to 156 in 2013.

The MOI and Federation of Jewish Communities reported neo-Nazi groups continued to express anti-Semitic views, as did some nationalist groups and certain Islamic groups. Groups such as the National Resistance and the Autonomous Nationalists held public gatherings and published internet blogs that included anti-Semitic statements, Holocaust denial, the dissemination of Nazi propaganda, and anti-Muslim sentiments.

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A journalist running for European Parliament, Adam Bartos, included anti-Semitic advertisements in his campaign. One advertisement identified Orthodox Jews as a threat to Czech identity, and the public broadcaster refused to air it. It circulated instead on social media. Bartos also continued his anti-Semitic internet postings, including statements that the Holocaust as presented today is an example of conspiracy.

The private Endowment Fund for Holocaust Victims, which had received 300 million koruna (\$13.4 million) from the state in 2001, continued to use these funds to support the preservation of Jewish communal property, educational programs about the Holocaust, and community welfare. The fund contributed 4.3 million koruna (\$193,000) to 15 institutions providing health and social care to approximately 500 Holocaust survivors.

In March a poll conducted by the polling organization STEM of 1,000 people 15 and older found that 60 percent of respondents found Arabs/Muslims “unlikeable” or “very unlikeable.”

In September pig’s blood and graffiti were found on the wall of a mosque in the Prague district of Cerny Most. Media reported on the incident and the police started an investigation, but the Muslim community denied the incident had occurred. The police investigation of the case was suspended because the Muslim community did not file a claim for damages.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged the government on religious freedom issues and conducted outreach to the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities. The Ambassador met with an interfaith group of religious leaders to discuss how to support religious tolerance, including how to best combine their efforts to promote tolerance.

Embassy officials encouraged government officials and religious groups to resolve religious property restitution claims. The embassy continued to emphasize the importance of restitution or fair and adequate compensation when return was no longer possible in pending cases regarding property wrongfully taken from Holocaust victims, the Jewish community, and churches. Embassy staff participated in meetings on restitution matters with representatives from the MOC,

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the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and the Federation of Jewish Communities. Embassy officials responded to individual requests for assistance from U.S. citizen Holocaust victims seeking compensation for property seized in the past.

The Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the Prague-based ESLI and officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to monitor progress in fields specified in the Terezin Declaration. The declaration appealed to governments to address problems relating to the welfare of Holocaust survivors, confiscated real estate, looted art, Judaica, and Holocaust education and remembrance, and established the creation of ESLI. The Department of State continued to fund and support ESLI's activities.

The embassy supported programs to promote tolerance for religious minorities, in particular a study on how Islam is portrayed in Czech schools.