

MOLDOVA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects the right of individuals to practice their religion and states religious groups are autonomous and independent from the state. The law, however, recognizes the “exceptional importance” of Orthodox Christianity. Minority religious groups and others reported the government continued to provide preferential treatment to the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) and that the MOC exerted strong influence over government policies. A court released two leaders of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church) from house arrest after they were arrested in 2015 on human trafficking charges, which human rights groups said were unfounded. An appeal to the Supreme Court to review a court decision allowing the dissolution of two Falun Gong organizations due their use of the swastika symbol was rejected on December 21. Earlier, the court maintained a ruling which introduced the Falun symbol into the register of materials with extremist character. The two associations remained dissolved at year’s end. Minority religious groups stated that local public administrations in rural areas commonly discriminated against them. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported poor police response to acts, including physical aggression, against them. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Baptists reported continuing difficulty in obtaining buildings in which to worship despite court orders. The Jewish community reported a failure of authorities to react to an increased number of anti-Semitic incidents. Parliament endorsed an Elie Wiesel Commission report on the Holocaust in a political statement condemning the Nazi persecution and extermination of Jews in the territory of the country during World War II (WW II) and attempts to deny or ignore the Holocaust.

In the separatist Transnistria region, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported the de facto authorities continued to discriminate against, and restrict the activities of, minority religious groups and to monitor their activities. The de facto authorities barred Jehovah’s Witnesses from displaying religious literature, and the Muslim community said it continued to refrain from overt religious activities because of past intimidation by the de facto authorities. Three Jehovah’s Witnesses in Tiraspol filed complaints to the United Nations Human Rights Committee against the country of Moldova and the Russian Federation.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 20 assaults, threats, and verbal attacks against their members. In July two men threatened two Jehovah’s Witnesses and struck one on the head. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported incidents of verbal abuse, property

destruction, and discrimination, sometimes led by MOC priests. The MOC announced the creation of a special unit to enhance “its fight against unrecognized denominations and cults in the country.” The MOC said the new unit would “fight neo-Protestant” communities, such as Baptists and Pentecostals, which had recruited converts. The Islamic League, which encompasses a majority of the Muslim community in the country as the only registered Muslim umbrella organization, reported an improvement in societal attitudes but cited negative media coverage of Islam. The Jewish community reported an increase in acts of vandalism during the year.

U.S. embassy officials discussed respect for the rights of religious minorities and combating religious intolerance with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Anti-Discrimination Council. The embassy sponsored several projects that focused on religious freedom and tolerance and preserved or restored religious heritage sites. The Ambassador and embassy officials met with leaders of religious groups, and called for enhancing interfaith tolerance and dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 3.5 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the most recent International Republican Institute survey conducted in September, the predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, with 94 percent of the population belonging to one of the two Orthodox groups: approximately 85 percent to the MOC, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church; and 9 percent to the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC), under the Romanian Orthodox Church. The same survey shows that 5 percent of the population identifies as atheist and 1 percent belongs to other, non-Orthodox religious groups. According to a 2013 survey conducted by the local NGO Human Rights Information Center (CIDO), the largest non-Orthodox religious groups, accounting for 15,000 to 30,000 adherents each, are Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, Jews, evangelical Christians, and Muslims.

Smaller religious groups include Bahais, Molokans, Messianic Jews, Lutherans, Presbyterians, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), members of the Unification Church, other Christians, and followers of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

In the separatist Transnistria region, an estimated 80 percent of the population belongs to the MOC. Other religious groups in the region include Catholics,

followers of Old Rite Orthodoxy, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and charismatic Christians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates equal treatment for all citizens regardless of religion and guarantees freedom of conscience, manifested in “a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect,” and of religious worship. It states religious groups may organize and operate according to their own statutes, independent from the state. The constitution prohibits all actions instigating religious hatred and “any manifestation of discord” between religious groups. The constitution stipulates the state shall support religious worship, including facilitating religious assistance in the army, hospitals, penitentiaries, nursing homes, and orphanages.

The law states every person has the right to belong or not belong to a religion, to have or not have individual beliefs, to change religion or beliefs, and to practice religion or beliefs independently or as a group, in public or in private, through teaching, religious practices, or rituals. According to the law, religious freedom may be restricted only if necessary to ensure public order and security, to protect public health and morality, or to protect a person's rights and freedoms. The law also prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation.

The law stipulates that the state recognize the “exceptional importance and fundamental role” of Orthodox Christianity, particularly that of the MOC, in the life, history, and culture of the country.

The law allows religious groups to establish associations and foundations. It permits local religious groups to change their denominational affiliation or dissolve themselves. The law exempts registered religious groups from paying real estate and land taxes.

In July parliament adopted amendments to the law which allow individuals, but not companies or other legal entities, to redirect 2 percent of their income tax to NGOs or religious organizations. Religious groups wanting to benefit from the new provisions must register with the Ministry of Justice, and only use the amounts received for social, moral, cultural and/or charity activities. The law exempts religious organizations from paying tax on the income received as donation under the 2 percent law and from registration fees.

The law provides for a registration process in which a religious group must present to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) a declaration including its exact name, fundamental principles of belief, organizational structure, scope of activities, financing sources, and rights and obligations of membership. The law also requires a group to show it has at least 100 founding members. A religious group must present proof of having access to premises where it can conduct its religious activities, but the law does not specify that the group must own this property. The MOJ is required by law to register a religious group within 30 days if the registration request is made according to law. The applicant may request this term be extended if the government determines the documentation submitted is insufficient. At the request of the MOJ, a court may suspend the registered status of a religious group if it “carries out activities that harm the constitution or laws,” or “affects state security, public order, [or] the life and security of the people.” The law also provides for suspension or revocation of a religious group’s registration in case of violation of international agreements or for political activity.

The law does not require registration, but only registered religious groups possess status as legal entities allowing them to build churches, own land in cemeteries or other property, publish or import religious literature, open bank accounts, or employ staff. Registration also exempts them from land taxes and property taxes. Individual churches or branches of registered religious groups are not required to register with the MOJ as long as they do not carry out legal transactions and do not receive donations as local legal entities. The parent organization must exercise authority in those areas for unregistered local branches.

The law allows all religious groups to hold services at state facilities, including prisons, orphanages, hospitals, schools, and military and police institutions, at the request of individuals in such institutions, provided they obtain the approval of the institution’s administration.

The law bans religious entities from engaging in political activity and prohibits “abusive proselytism,” defined as the action of changing religious beliefs through coercion.

Although the law provides for restitution of property confiscated during the successive fascist and Soviet regimes to politically repressed or exiled persons, the provision does not apply to property confiscated from religious groups. Under previous agreements, the government transferred control of most confiscated churches and monasteries to the MOC or the BOC. The Ministry of Culture is responsible for the remaining churches and monasteries not under the control of

the MOC or BOC. Local authorities working through the Ministry of Culture may arrange with local parishes to return or lease those churches or monasteries to religious groups.

The constitution provides for freedom of religious education and stipulates the state educational system “shall be of a lay nature.” According to the law, religion classes in state educational institutions are optional. Students submit a written request to the school’s administration to enroll in a religion class. Religion classes are offered in grades 1-9. No alternative classes are offered for those who choose not to enroll in religion classes. The religion curriculum offers two types of courses: one for Orthodox denominations and Roman Catholics, and the second for evangelical Christians and Seventh-day Adventists. The religious curriculum for Orthodox and Catholic groups derives from instructional manuals developed by the Ministry of Education with input from the MOC and includes teaching guidelines developed with the support of the BOC. Teachers and Orthodox priests teach these optional courses, which focus on Orthodox Christianity. Teachers and representatives of the Evangelical Christian Church teach the second course, which is based on translated religious manuals and literature from Romania, the United States, and Germany. Both courses teach religious doctrine as well as moral and spiritual values.

The law mandates immunization of all children and before they can enroll in kindergarten. It does not provide an exception for religious reasons.

The Anti-Discrimination Council, established by law, is an independent institution charged with reviewing complaints of discrimination, including discrimination of a religious character or based on religious affiliation. Parliament chooses members through a competitive process, appointing them to five-year terms. The council does not have sanctioning powers; however, it can determine if an act of discrimination took place, offer advice on how to remedy the situation, and send requests to prosecutors to initiate criminal proceedings. It can also suggest pertinent legislative amendments or participate in working groups authoring legislative initiatives.

According to the law, citizens aged 18 to 27 have the right to choose civilian over military service if the latter is counter to their religious beliefs. The standard duration of both alternative civilian and military service is 12 months; university graduates may choose six months of civilian service or three months of military training. Those who choose civilian service may complete it at public institutions or enterprises specializing in such areas as social assistance, healthcare, industrial

engineering, urban planning, roads and road construction, environmental protection, agriculture or agricultural processing, town management, and fire rescue. There are no blanket exemptions for religious groups from the civilian service alternative, but higher-ranking clergy, monks, and theology students are exempted from alternative service. Refusal to enroll in civilian service is punishable by a fine up to 15,000 lei (\$754) or between 100 and 150 hours of community service.

The law defines as “extremist” and makes illegal any document or information justifying war crimes or the complete or partial annihilation of a religious or other kind of societal group, as well as any document calling for or supporting activities in pursuit of those goals.

Foreign missionaries may submit work contracts or volunteer agreements to apply for a temporary residency permit, and may reside and work in a paid status or as unpaid volunteers. Only missionaries working with registered religious groups may apply for temporary residency permits. Foreign religious workers with these permits must register with the National Agency for the Occupation of the Workforce, the Bureau for Migration and Asylum, and the Ministry of Information Technology and Communications. They must present documents confirming the official status of the registered religious group for which they will work, papers confirming their temporary residence, and proof of valid local health insurance. Other foreign missionaries belonging to registered religious groups may remain for 90 days on a tourist visa.

In separatist Transnistria, Transnistrian “law” affirms the special role of the Orthodox Church in the region’s culture and spirituality. The de facto law “recognizes respect” for Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religious groups historically present in the region. All religious groups, whether registered or not, officially have freedom to worship, but the law permits restrictions on the right to freedom of conscience and religion “if necessary to protect the constitutional order, morality, health, citizens’ rights and interests, or state defense and security.” Foreign citizens also have the freedom to worship. The prosecutor’s office oversees implementation of the law on religious freedom.

The law provides for the registration of religious groups, but registration is not legally required. The region’s self-professed Ministry of Justice registers religious groups and monitors their adherence to the goals and activities set forth in their statutes. Registration provides a number of advantages to religious groups,

including the ability to own and build places of worship, open religious schools, and publish literature.

To register, a local religious group must present proof of activity in the region for at least 10 years; a list comprising at least 10 members aged 18 years or older with permanent residence in one of the seven administrative-territorial units in the region and Transnistrian “citizenship;” a list of founders and governing members and their personal details; the group’s charter, statutes, and minutes of its constituent assembly; basic religious doctrine; contact details of its governing body; and a receipt indicating payment of the registration fee. Local religious groups may also register as part of a centralized religious organization, which must consist of at least three local religious groups, which have previously registered separately as legal entities. In that case, their application must include a copy of the registration papers of the centralized organizations. The central religious organizations must inform the registration authority on a yearly basis about intentions to extend their activities.

The de facto authorities must decide to register a religious group within 30 days of the application. If they decide to conduct a religious assessment, which is a law enforcement investigation of the group’s background and activities, registration may be postponed for up to six months or denied if the investigating authorities determine the group poses a threat to the security or morality of the region, or if foreign religious groups are involved in its activities.

Foreign religious groups may not register or undertake religious activities. Foreigners may only worship individually; they may not be founders or members of religious groups.

Religious groups disband on their own decision or upon a “court’s” decision. The “prosecutor’s office” or the region’s de facto executive, city, or district authorities can request the courts to disband or suspend a religious group on multiple grounds, including disturbing public order or violating public security; conducting extremist activities; coercing people into breaking up their families; infringing on citizens’ identity, rights, and freedoms; violating citizens’ morality, well-being, including the use of psychotropic substances, drugs, hypnosis, or perverse activities during religious activities; encouraging suicide or the refusal of medical treatment for religious reasons; obstructing compulsory education; using coercion for alienation of property to the benefit of the religious community; and encouraging the refusal to fulfil civic duties.

The law allows the use of private homes and apartments to hold religious services. It does not, however, allow religious groups to use homes and apartments as their officially registered addresses. The law also allows registered religious groups to hold religious services and rituals in public places such as hospitals, clinics, orphanages, geriatric homes, and prisons.

The authorities screen and may ban the import and export of religious printed materials, audio and video recordings, and other religious items.

According to the law, citizens have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter contradicts an individual's religion and beliefs. Alternative civilian service may be performed only at organizations under the Transnistrian authority or "other military forces," and at institutions subordinate to the "executive bodies of the state or local administration."

The de facto authorities do not allow religious groups to participate in elections or other political party activities or to support NGOs involved in elections.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On February 3, a court denied a prosecution appeal and upheld a decision to release into house arrest two leaders of the Unification Church in the country: Mihai Calestru and Oleg Savencov. On March 25, authorities released the two leaders from house arrest. Authorities had arrested them in 2015 on human trafficking charges, alleging they had recruited, transported, and harbored persons for labor exploitation. They also charged the Church was founded as an organized criminal group. In August a different prosecutor assumed responsibility for the case, which remained pending at year's end. Human rights NGOs, including Human Rights without Frontiers and the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe, said the charges against the two men were unfounded.

On December 21, the Supreme Court of Justice rejected the appeal filed by the country's two Falun Gong organizations, Falun Gong Moldova and Falun Dafa. The two organizations filed the appeal in 2015 after the Supreme Court of Justice upheld a lower court decision that they should be dissolved because the Falun symbol, which incorporates five swastikas based on Buddhist and Chinese tradition, violated the law against extremist activity. The December 21 decision

followed a December 7 Supreme Court of Justice ruling maintaining a court of appeals decision which had declared the Falun symbol extremist and ordered its inclusion into the register of symbols with extremist character. The two associations remained dissolved and exhausted all legal avenues at the national level. The Falun associations filed two complaints to the European Court of Human Rights in 2015 and these were pending at the year's end.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders reported police failed to prosecute individuals who physically assaulted, threatened, or verbally abused their members in rural localities. They reported police were often summoned to sites where violence occurred, but did not take any action or took only minimal action to stop the violence. In most cases, police said they found no basis to charge the perpetrators or downgraded the offenses and only issued administrative fines. For example, on March 5, the mayor and local councilor in Napadova village banned members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community from holding religious services. The mayor and the councilor also threatened Witnesses with physical violence if they did not leave the village. In response to a complaint, police stated they found no evidence of a crime regarding the mayor's and local councilor's actions. On May 22, the same local councilor with 10 others stopped four Jehovah's Witnesses from manifesting their religious beliefs and threatened them with physical violence. The Witnesses filed a complaint with police that day. In response to the complaint, police stated the local councilor had not broken any laws. Jehovah's Witnesses did not provide specific examples of incidents involving physical assault.

The MOJ registered 27 religious entities during the year, consisting of one new Orthodox denomination and 26 religious groups as component parts of existing religious denominations, including the Baptist Church, the Old Rite Church, the MOC, the BOC, the Evangelical Church, and the Union of Pentecostal Churches. It did not reject any registration applications.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported improved access to government permits to hold religious activities in detention facilities. According to community leaders, the Department of Penitentiary Institutions discontinued the practice of imposing additional bureaucratic impediments that had hindered the group's access to prison inmates in the past and issued Jehovah's Witnesses permits granting them unhindered access to detention facilities valid for six months.

Under a cooperation agreement between the MOJ and the MOC, MOC chaplains had free access to detention facilities for religious assistance without prior approval of the prison administration. A separate cooperation agreement between the MOC

and the Ministry of Defense allowed MOC priests to preach to army units, bless military personnel prior to their deployment in peacekeeping missions, and distribute religious literature to libraries within the army. Through an earlier agreement with the Ministry of Labor, Social Protection, and Family, the MOC continued to develop a network of social assistance, including opening day care centers and temporary shelters within churches and monasteries.

In March the MOC signed a new memorandum of cooperation with the Ministry of Labor, Social Protection, and Family to boost joint efforts to support families and children in the country. Under the agreement, the MOC and state committed to promote and implement policies that would protect disadvantaged families, the elderly, orphans, and persons with disabilities. The government would not reimburse the MOC for the cost of these services.

The authorities also continued to grant greater freedom to the MOC to import religious materials and privileges pertaining to the restitution of church property compared to other religious groups. The government also continued to grant privileges, such as invitations to officiate at state-sponsored events, national holidays, and blessing ceremonies at schools, to MOC clergy it did not grant to other religious groups. Local NGOs, including CIDO and the Human Rights Resource Center (CREDO), as well as other minority religious groups criticized the law for failing to provide equal rights to all religious groups, and the government's policy of granting a leading role to the Orthodox Church.

Despite the law banning political activity by religious groups, the MOC head Vladimir made statements during the presidential election campaign in October encouraging citizens to vote for a candidate who pledged to support Orthodox values. According to local NGO Promo-Lex, electoral campaigning in MOC churches was common, particularly in rural areas.

According to representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal Church, and Baptist Church, local authorities remained reluctant to allot land to minority religious groups in local cemeteries, which were often under the administration of Orthodox churches.

Minority religious groups, including Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Muslims, reported local authorities were also often reluctant to allocate land for the construction of houses of worship.

Jehovah's Witnesses stated in many instances local mayors or councilors were pressured by Orthodox priests to discriminate against Jehovah's Witnesses, and local public officials and priests serving as local councilors refused to execute existing court orders allowing use of facilities by Jehovah's Witnesses for worship.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported the mayor and local councilors in Olanesti village refused to issue a permit in March allowing the community to use its completed kingdom hall, even though it had completed all bureaucratic formalities and provided all necessary documentation. In one of the responses to Jehovah's Witnesses summons to review its decision, the local administration said it based its decision on the vote of 1,629 residents who endorsed an earlier ruling of the council to reject the Jehovah's Witnesses request.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches reported numerous cases of opposition from local public administrations in rural localities to church activities. Local mayors refused to change building permits to allow for a church, despite final court rulings. In one case, after five years of litigation with the local administration in Falesti, the Supreme Court issued a final ruling ordering the local mayor to change the designation of the building from a private home to a church. Local administration officials, however, refused to follow the court ruling.

On December 13, the Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the Jewish community by dismissing the claim lodged by the Agency of Public Property and upholding the first instance court decision which rejected the Agency of Public Property's claim on a synagogue and yeshiva. In 2010 the Jewish community had purchased the Rabbi Tsirilson Synagogue and Magen David Yeshiva ruins, later claimed by the Agency of Public Property.

Human rights NGOs, including CIDO, CREDO, and Promo-Lex, continued to criticize the Ministry of Education for allowing the optional religion course for Orthodox Christians and Catholics to cover only Orthodox Christian doctrine, to the exclusion of other religious teachings. The same NGOs stated there was a high level of Christian Orthodox influence in schools, through such means as the classes on Orthodox Christian faith; mandatory extracurricular religious activities for students, including attending Mass or ceremonies, for example at the start of the school year, officiated by Orthodox priests; the presence of religious symbols, such as crosses or icons, in school; and messages from teachers.

The Seventh-day Adventists Reform Movement reported problems enrolling children in kindergartens as a result of their refusal to have children immunized. In

an appeal sent to the Ministry of Health in September, the minister of education stated that the refusal of mandatory immunization of children for religious reasons should not be an impediment for their enrollment in schools. According to the Ministry of Education, a health certificate should be sufficient to allow enrollment. The ministry created a working group tasked with ensuring access to educational facilities to children whose parents refused them immunization for religious or philosophical reasons.

Representatives of the Union of Pentecostal Churches reported continuous problems with the customs office over imports of humanitarian assistance. According to church leaders, imperfect legislation and artificial barriers imposed by customs officers seriously affected the community's ability to import and distribute humanitarian assistance. Multiple requests sent to the prime minister to resolve this issue remained unanswered. Other importers reportedly faced similar problems.

The Jewish Community of Moldova reported state authorities failed to react to an increase in anti-Semitic acts, including vandalism and hate speech but did not provide specific examples. According to community leaders, police were reluctant to take action or allowed the perpetrators to escape prosecution. The community also stated certain political leaders glorified representatives of the Romanian WW II-era fascist regime through sponsoring or attending the inauguration of monuments erected in the memory of Iron Guard representatives or promoting anti-Semitic authors.

On July 22, parliament endorsed the Elie Wiesel Commission's 2004 Report on the Holocaust through a political statement. The statement condemned the extermination and persecution of Jews by the Nazis and their Romanian collaborators in the country's territory during WW II. It also condemned attempts to deny or ignore the Holocaust and paid homage to its victims and survivors.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Human rights experts, including representatives from Promo-Lex, continued to report minority religious groups in Transnistria not favored by the Russian Orthodox Church, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Pentecostals, were treated unequally as compared to the more "traditional" religious groups. Minority religious groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to refrain from requesting registration or from engaging in any other activities due to the history of local authorities refusing to register these groups and

preventing them from displaying or distributing religious literature. According to minority religious groups, local security forces continued monitoring their activities.

On June 30, three Jehovah's Witnesses in Tiraspol filed complaints against Moldova (which had sovereignty, but not control, over Transnistria) and the Russian Federation to the United Nations Human Rights Committee for refusing to reregister the religious group.

On May 17, the "Supreme Court of Transnistria" refused to hear the appeal from a Jehovah's Witness who was issued a citation for violating the administrative code for using a religious literature display cart in Bender in October 2015. On May 11, police issued a written warning to two Jehovah's Witnesses for using a religious literature display cart in Bender. The warning stated that displaying religious literature in public was prohibited.

The Muslim community continued to run a cultural and an educational center in Transnistria but did not attempt to register as a religious community. The Muslim community said it avoided undertaking any overt religious activity because of previous attempts by the region's authorities to intimidate it.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

As of November, Jehovah's Witnesses had reported 20 incidents of societal abuse, two of which involved physical assaults, against their members. Incidents consisted mainly of assaults, threats, verbal intimidation, and actions impeding religious activities

On July 30, two men stopped two Witnesses who were reciting Bible verses in the village of Carabetovca, threatened them, and struck one on the head. The victims filed a complaint with the police.

Jehovah's Witnesses stated that, in a number of villages, local Orthodox priests instigated hatred against Jehovah's Witnesses and obstructed efforts by the Witnesses to either build new houses of worship or change the designation of premises they purchased. They reported Orthodox priests assaulted or threatened to assault Jehovah's Witnesses in Balti, Carabetovca, and Napadova villages. On July 10, an Orthodox priest threw a stone at a Jehovah's Witness. The victim filed a complaint with the police, which found the priest's actions amounted to hooliganism and fined him.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported in Olanesti village local residents led by the Orthodox priest obstructed the community on multiple occasions from holding its religious activities. Groups of 10 to 30 village residents bearing Orthodox flags and ritual objects assembled in front of the kingdom hall. They blocked the entrance to the premises and impeded the community's religious activities for the entire day on at least 18 occasions between March and June. In other cases, the groups installed iron chain padlocks or wire on the gate. The groups carried banners reading "The village without Jehovah's Witnesses" and "Out of the village. We do not want you here." Jehovah's Witnesses also reported seeing local public administration representatives among the protestors. The Witnesses said they alerted police, but they rarely took action. According to the Witnesses, the prosecutor's office rejected all requests for criminal investigations.

On April 27, the MOC head Vladimir held a speech in parliament on the eve of the Orthodox Easter holidays stating "Moldova is a Christian country, and it would be abasement for the 98 percent of the Christians to be equal to the other 2 percent."

In March the MOC announced it would enhance "its fight against unrecognized denominations and cults in the country." To do this, it said it had created a special unit called the Synod Sector for Missionary, Anti-Sectarian, and Anti-Schismatic Activity. The new structure promoted the Christian Orthodox faith on its website, distributed religious materials, and encouraged people to join the Orthodox Church. The MOC said the new unit would "fight neo-Protestant" communities which "were able to recruit innocent souls due to some social packages or second hand clothes." The unit met with Baptists and Pentecostals in several rural areas reportedly to convince them of the need to "return to the Christian Orthodox faith."

According to the Islamic League, the largest, and the only registered, Muslim umbrella organization in the country, societal attitudes toward Muslims improved compared to previous years, but local media continued to exhibit a critical attitude and bias against Islam, portraying it in a negative light in news articles and broadcasts. The Islamic League also said when reporting on terrorist attacks or threats, the media continued to cite the Islamic League, implicitly linking it to violence or threats. The media did not ask for statements from the Islamic League regarding reported events and did not refute previous reports related to Islam even when the Islamic League requested them to do so.

Leaders of the Jewish community reported four major acts of vandalism, an increase from the previous year. They reported at least two acts of vandalism of the synagogue in Orhei. Unknown individuals broke into the synagogue on the

nights of January 11 and February 23, threw Torah scrolls on the ground, ripped menorahs off the walls, and vandalized other religious objects. Leaders submitted a complaint to local police, which initiated an investigation. There were two instances of vandalism of Jewish cemeteries. In April unknown individuals damaged or destroyed 14 gravestones in a Jewish cemetery in Soroca. Prosecutors later identified the perpetrators but did not charge them because they were minors.

Representatives of the Union of Pentecostal Churches said media outlets reported for the first time about charity events and activities organized by its churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials discussed respect for the rights of religious minorities and combating religious intolerance with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Anti-Discrimination Council.

Embassy officials met with leaders and representatives of the MOC, BOC, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim groups, Baptist Church, Pentecostal Church, and Jewish community to discuss religious freedom, societal attitudes, and government actions or inaction with regard to religious groups. In a September meeting with the MOC head Vladimir, the Ambassador inquired about the level of cooperation between the majority and minority religious groups in the country, raised tolerance issues, and called for more interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador raised cooperation between Muslim communities, societal and media attitude towards Islam, and ways to overcome prejudice and stereotypes about minority religious groups in the country during a meeting in October with the leader of the Islamic League, Sergiu Sochirca.

Embassy representatives regularly met with leaders of the Jewish community to discuss respect for their rights and the challenges faced by the community, including the ongoing case of the Rabbi Tzirilson Synagogue and Magen David Yeshiva.

On January 27, the Ambassador announced the opening of a Holocaust photo exhibit sponsored by the embassy at the Free International University of Moldova. While on an embassy-sponsored visit to the country in February, a representative of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Ambassador toured the Jewish cemetery and other Jewish sites in Chisinau. During the visit, they spoke about religious tolerance and preservation of the Jewish faith and values. The

director also gave an interview to Radio Free Europe about the Holocaust in Moldova.