

MOLDOVA 2018 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 and electoral politics. Several legal cases involving minority religions continued to be unresolved. Throughout the year, President Igor Dodon expressed his support for Orthodox Christianity and particularly the MOC. In May the Jewish community submitted a request to renew a building permit with the Chisinau mayor’s office to renovate property on which a historical Jewish synagogue stands, following a favorable Supreme Court of Justice decision in 2017 and the 2016 endorsement by parliament of the Wiesel Commission’s *Report on the Holocaust*. The government also adopted a 2017-19 action plan based on the commission’s recommendations. In October it adopted a decision to establish a National Holocaust Museum in Chisinau, renovate the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau, one of the largest in Europe, and approve a high school curriculum on historic lessons of the Holocaust, to be introduced in the 2019 school year. There was progress on other commitments taken under the action plan, such as holding special sessions of parliament and government to commemorate Holocaust victims and developing content on the Holocaust for history textbooks. In July the Supreme Court of Justice upheld a decision recognizing the validity of a building permit for a Kingdom Hall in Ceadir-Lunga. After more than two years of opposition from local authorities, Jehovah’s Witnesses were able to proceed with the building’s construction. A number of religious entities benefited from a 2017 law allowing individuals to direct 2 percent of their income tax to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or religious organizations. The Islamic League of Moldova (Islamic League) reported an increase in actions taken against girls in public schools for wearing the hijab. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research (Ministry of Education) did not take action following complaints submitted by the parents and advised them to take the case to the Anti-Discrimination Council.

In the separatist Transnistria region, NGOs continued to report the de facto authorities discriminated against, restricted the activities of, and monitored activities of, minority religious groups. Jehovah’s Witnesses’ attempts to reregister their charters in Transnistria were unsuccessful. The Muslim community

said it continued to refrain from overt religious activities because of past intimidation by the de facto authorities. The imam who led Friday prayers fled the region after the local Committee for State Security put him on their “wanted” list. Three Jehovah’s Witnesses’ complaints of discriminatory acts in Tiraspol to the UN Human Rights Committee involving the de facto authorities and the Russian Federation remained pending at year’s end.

Representatives of the Pentecostal Church said that on February 20, unknown individuals entered a Pentecostal church’s premises in Pirlita Village in Falesti District and beat and threatened the guard with retaliation if he attempted to thwart their actions. The individuals set several new doors in the church on fire. This was the second attempt since 2010 to set the church on fire. There were also arson attacks and other forms of destruction against churches in the Falesti District during the year. The Jewish community reported an increase in hate speech during the year, particularly in online forums. A Chisinau-based representative of the World Jewish Congress reported the presence of anti-Semitic comments and hate speech on social media sites such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, and in the comments section of local news websites. The Jewish community reported one act of vandalism in which unknown individuals drew swastikas in a Jewish cemetery in Balti.

The chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad and embassy officials held discussions in August with the government on the treatment and maintenance of Jewish heritage sites and the opening of a Jewish heritage museum in Chisinau. The embassy also sponsored several events that focused on religious freedom and tolerance. On June 1, the embassy hosted an iftar with leaders and representatives of the Muslim community and diplomatic representatives. The community discussed its concerns over rising societal intolerance toward Muslims in media, politics, education, and employment. The Ambassador and embassy officials called for enhancing interfaith tolerance and dialogue. Embassy officials discussed respect for the rights of religious minorities and combating religious intolerance with representatives of religious groups. In December the Ambassador hosted an event with leaders of minority religious groups to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between religious communities in the country. The Ambassador also met with the heads of the MOC, Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC), and Roman Catholic Church in the country to discuss the prospects of creating an official platform for cooperation among various faiths.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 3.44 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2014 census, the predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, with 90 percent of the population belonging to one of two Orthodox Christian groups. Of Orthodox adherents, approximately 90 percent belong to the MOC, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the remaining 10 percent belong to the BOC, which falls under the Romanian Orthodox Church. Nearly 7 percent of the population did not identify a religious affiliation. The largest non-Orthodox religious groups, accounting for 15,000 to 30,000 adherents each, are Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Muslims, Jews, and atheists.

Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Molokans, Messianic Jews, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Evangelical Christian Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), other Christians, Falun Gong, and 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.

The law allows individuals to redirect 2 percent of their income tax to NGOs or religious groups. Religious groups wanting to benefit from the provisions must register with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and use the amounts received only for social, moral, cultural, and/or charitable activities. The law exempts religious organizations from registration fees and from paying tax on the income received as donations under the 2 percent law.

In March parliament amended legislation to transfer the power to register and monitor noncommercial organizations from the MOJ to the Public Services Agency (PSA). The new law provides for a registration process in which a religious group must present to the PSA a declaration including its exact name, fundamental principles of belief, organizational structure, and 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 PSA is required by law to register a religious group within 15 days if the registration request is made according to law, a change from the previous 30-day deadline. The applicant may request an extension if the government determines the documentation submitted is insufficient. Under the new provisions, the MOJ retains the right to request a suspension of 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 PSA makes all registration entries into the State Registry of Legal Entities.

The law does not require registration, but only registered religious groups possess status as legal entities, allowing them to build houses of worship, 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 PSA 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.

Through an agreement with the MOJ, MOC chaplains have free access to detention facilities for religious assistance without prior approval of the prison administration. In addition, the MOC has a separate agreement with the Ministry of Defense, which allows 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.

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.

The constitution provides for freedom of religious education and stipulates the state educational system should be secular. 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 one through nine. 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 before they may 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 may 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 may also suggest pertinent legislative amendments or participate in working groups authoring legislative initiatives.

According to the law, male citizens ages 18 to 27 have the right to choose civilian over military service if the latter runs 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, health care, 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 32,500 lei (\$1,900) or between 100 and 150 hours of community service, and those punished are still obliged to enroll in civilian 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 temporary residency permits and may reside and work in 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 and the Bureau for Migration and Asylum. 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.

Transnistrian “law” prohibits proselytizing in private homes and limits distribution of religious literature to houses of worship and special premises designated by the “authorities.” Transnistrian “law” requires the reregistration of religious groups to operate legally in the region. The region’s registration body 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 ages 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 that have previously registered separately as legal entities. In that case, their application must additionally 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. Such grounds include: disturbing public order or violating public security; conducting extremist activities; coercing persons into breaking up their families; infringing on citizens' identity, rights, and freedoms; violating citizens' morality and well-being, using 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 refusal to fulfill 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 such 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.

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

Government Practices

Throughout the year, President Dodon expressed his support for Orthodox Christianity and particularly the MOC. President Dodon took part in a number of publicized church celebrations and events promoting “traditional family values” together with the MOC head. During a meeting with the MOC head in October, President Dodon declared the MOC would keep its unity with the Russian Orthodox Church forever. In October, following the Russian Orthodox Church’s break from the Constantinople Patriarchate, Dodon expressed concern over the fate of the Orthodox Church, adding that Moldova would remain in the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Under previous agreement between the Ministry of Education and the MOC, the government transferred control of most churches and monasteries confiscated during the Soviet era to the MOC. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the remaining churches and monasteries not under the control of the MOC. Local authorities working through the Ministry of Culture may arrange with local parishes to return or lease those churches or monasteries to religious groups. Other religious groups, including the Lutheran and Jewish communities, reported they had not benefitted from a similar agreement with the government to reclaim religious property confiscated during the Soviet era. In previous years, the Jewish community’s attempts to restitute property were unsuccessful, and its requests for the government to adopt a law enabling it to restitute historically Jewish properties and sites remained unheeded.

The PSA registered 19 religious entities during the year, consisting of new religious subgroups that are part of existing religious denominations, including the Baptist Church, MOC, BOC, Evangelical Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Union of Pentecostal Churches, Orthodox Slavonic Church, and Orthodox Metropolis of Chisinau and all Moldova. The PSA did not reject any registration applications.

During the year, 83 religious groups received funds from income tax payments directed toward religious groups.

The Falun Gong association's two complaints to the European Court of Human Rights, which were filed in 2015, remained pending at year's end. The association exhausted all national court avenues regarding charges against it of violating the law on extremist activity by the Falun Gong's symbol's incorporation of five swastikas based on Buddhist and Chinese tradition, remained pending at year's end. A case also remained pending in the courts on the liquidation of the organization.

Minority religious groups, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, reported local authorities remained reluctant to allocate land to them to construct houses of worship. They also reported Orthodox priests often pressured local mayors or councilors to discriminate against Jehovah's Witnesses by refusing to execute court orders allowing use of facilities by Jehovah's Witnesses for worship.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders reported fewer restrictions from local authorities and an overall improvement in the registration process for acquiring properties to build houses of worship. Several cases related to obtaining zoning permits were ongoing, however. For example, in Olanesti Village Jehovah's Witnesses could not use their Kingdom Hall, renovated in 2016, because the local authorities refused to provide a zoning permit. The case remained pending at year's end. Jehovah's Witnesses leaders said police failed to prosecute individuals who threatened or verbally abused members of Jehovah's Witnesses in rural localities.

In July the Supreme Court of Justice upheld a decision recognizing the validity of a building permit for a Kingdom Hall in Ceadir-Lunga. After more than two years of opposition from local authorities, Jehovah's Witnesses were able to proceed with the building's construction.

On January 5, police in Ciorescu summoned two Jehovah's Witnesses, alleging they had violated a law passed in 2017 by the village council banning religious preaching and distribution of religious literature in the village, which the council termed "propaganda." Police issued fines worth 600 lei (\$35) each. The two members submitted an appeal to the Chisinau court, which annulled the fines on March 28. The Ciorescu police department appealed this decision, which the Court of Appeals rejected on May 22.

In May the Jewish Community of Moldova (JCM) submitted a request to the Chisinau mayor's office to renew a building permit to renovate a historical Jewish synagogue and yeshiva. The request followed a successful resolution of a long-standing court dispute with the Public Property Agency, which argued the JCM had taken too long to renovate the property and denied the permit. In September 2017, the Supreme Court ruled against the agency and awarded the property to the JCM. At year's end, the JCM reported it had received the building permit but had not yet started reconstruction efforts on the synagogue property. The JCM had purchased the site in 2010.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches reported that the process of importing social and humanitarian assistance had improved. During the year, however, the Union reported that it remained unable to obtain a building certificate for a building in Copceac Village it bought in 2006 and used for religious services. In August the Union challenged the local authorities' refusal to issue the building certificate in court.

In October the government adopted a decision to build a Jewish museum in Chisinau. According to the decision, the museum would provide education on the Holocaust, combat anti-Semitism, and promote culture, tolerance, and peace. The new museum will host a Jewish library and an educational center. Prime Minister Pavel Filip also announced in October the government would renovate the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau, one of the largest in Europe, with more than 40,000 graves. The government also pledged to build a Yad Vashem-style Jewish historical and cultural center that would include a number of historical sites of importance to the Jewish community in the country. These actions constituted partial implementation of the government's 2017-19 action plan responding to recommendations of the Elie Wiesel Commission's 2016 *Report on the Holocaust*.

The Jewish community reported progress in fulfilling the action plan and an enhanced openness by the authorities at the national level to address Jewish community concerns. This included the government partnership with the Jewish community to design and build a Jewish heritage museum in Chisinau, government renovation of Chisinau's 30-acre Jewish cemetery, building a Jewish historical and cultural center, and approving a high school curriculum on historic lessons of the Holocaust to be introduced the following school year.

Through an earlier agreement with the Ministry of Labor, Social Protection, and Family, the MOC continued to develop a network of social assistance sites, including opening day-care centers and temporary shelters within churches and

monasteries. The MOC also has agreements with other state institutions such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and National Penitentiary Association to provide spiritual guidance and services to police officers, state workers, and prison inmates. Representatives of the BOC contended their attempts to obtain similar agreements with state institutions were unsuccessful.

According to minority religious groups and civil society leaders, authorities continued to exhibit preferential treatment toward the MOC, compared to other religious groups. The government invited MOC priests to officiate at state-sponsored events, national holidays, and blessing ceremonies at schools. During the year, President Dodon praised the role of the MOC in the lives of citizens and attended multiple MOC-led religious events. The MOC, however, reported problems receiving building and other types of permits from the Chisinau mayor's office. Ahead of a planned visit by Russian Patriarch Kirill to the country in October, the Chisinau mayor's office denied the MOC's request for a permit to place billboards in the city to promote his visit.

An outbreak of measles during the year sparked social debate about the legal requirement for immunization. According to the Ministry of Education, of the 5,664 children who were not enrolled in schools at the beginning of the academic year, 800 were denied admission because their parents refused immunization for religious reasons.

The Islamic League stated that the principal and teaching staff at Mihai Berezovschi Public High School in Chisinau subjected three young Muslim girls who wore the hijab to constant pressure and intimidation, causing the parents to transfer the girls to schools outside the country. The principal reportedly tried to persuade the girls to give up their belief in Islam and banned the girls from attending school wearing a hijab, warning their dress did not comply with school norms. The principal also reportedly expressed "fear for herself and the other 2,000 students at the school." The Ministry of Education did not take action following complaints submitted by the parents and advised them to take the case to the Anti-Discrimination Council.

NGOs and advocacy groups continued to note the government had no laws or mechanisms in place to address Holocaust-era claims of communal property restitution and reported the government had made no progress on resolution of these claims, including for foreign citizens.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Reports of discriminatory treatment of minority religious groups in Transnistria continued. According to such groups, local security forces in Transnistria continued monitoring their activities.

Jehovah's Witnesses said the Transnistrian de facto authorities continued to refuse to reregister two local Jehovah's Witnesses groups, in Tiraspol and Rybnitsa. Local authorities refused several times to accept the required documents. On April 12, the de facto ministry of justice filed a claim with the Rybnitsa city court to prohibit the reregistration of a local Jehovah's Witnesses group. The case was pending in court at year's end. On August 14, Jehovah's Witnesses in Rybnitsa resubmitted papers for reregistration, which were ultimately denied.

The Muslim community continued to run a cultural and educational center in Transnistria, but the Islamic League again stated it chose not to register it as an official religious entity. The Muslim community continued to avoid undertaking any overt religious activity because of previous intimidation attempts by the region's authorities. According to the Islamic League, during the year, the local security services declared the imam that led Friday prayers to be wanted for questioning by "authorities" in Transnistria, and he later fled the region.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jehovah's Witnesses reported some incidents of societal abuse, consisting mainly of verbal intimidation and property destruction.

Pentecostal representatives reported that on the evening of February 20, unknown individuals who posed as representatives of a company delivering construction materials entered the Pentecostal church premises in Pirlita Village in the district of Falesti. The individuals reportedly beat the guard and threatened him with retaliation if he attempted to thwart their actions. The perpetrators set several new doors of the church on fire. The individuals tried to forcibly enter the entrance to the attic to set it on fire as well but were not successful. Following the incident, the guard extinguished the fire and called the police. This was the second attempt since 2010 to set the same church on fire. Churches throughout several locations in Falesti were repeatedly the target of attacks, including arson and other forms of destruction.

According to the Islamic League, societal attitudes toward Muslims worsened compared with previous years, and local media continued to exhibit a critical

attitude and bias against Islam. During the Chisinau mayoral election in June, a fake news story attempted to stir negative public opinion on Islam by claiming that one of the candidates intended to build mosques and a neighborhood for Arabs in Chisinau. The Islamic League reported Muslims, particularly Muslim women, faced discrimination when seeking employment. Employers were often reluctant to employ Muslim women choosing to cover their hair by wearing a hijab. Negative attitudes and bias against women wearing a hijab continued on public transportation, including drivers reportedly failing to stop to pick up women wearing a hijab and disapproving looks from other passengers.

Property disputes between the MOC and BOC Churches continued during the year.

Leaders of the Jewish community reported one case of vandalism during the year. Unknown individuals drew swastikas in a cemetery in Balti.

Anti-Semitic discourse and attitudes, particularly by politicians and public figures, increased during the year. In July the mayor of Orhei, an Israel-born Moldovan of Jewish descent, posted a video on social media criticizing his political opponents. This video triggered a wave of reactions and criticism from politicians, commentators, and media. According to the Jewish community, some of the comments were anti-Semitic in nature.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In August the chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad and embassy representatives met with the foreign minister, speaker of parliament, and minister of education, culture, and research, as well as Jewish community leaders, to discuss the treatment and maintenance of Jewish heritage sites and the opening of a Jewish heritage museum in Chisinau. Embassy officials met with leaders and representatives of the MOC, BOC, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim groups, Baptist Church, and Pentecostal Church to discuss societal attitudes and government actions or inaction with regard to religious groups. Embassy representatives also continued to meet regularly with leaders of the Jewish community to discuss respect for their rights and the challenges faced by the community.

On January 28, the embassy attended the unveiling of a new monument in Tiraspol dedicated to victims of the Holocaust who were killed in Transnistria. Subsequently, embassy representatives participated in a roundtable discussion on lessons learned from the Holocaust at the State University of Tiraspol with the

dean, the de facto minister of education, and several of the region's government representatives. The conference discussed ways to introduce Holocaust education into academic curriculums and broadly educate the public on the events of the Holocaust that took place in Moldova.

On June 1, the embassy hosted an iftar with leaders and representatives of the Muslim community and diplomatic representatives. The community discussed its concerns over rising societal intolerance toward Muslims in media, politics, education, and employment.

In December the Ambassador hosted a lunch with leaders of minority religious groups to discuss issues important to these groups and facilitate a better dialogue and cooperation between religious communities in the country. The Ambassador also had separate meetings with the heads of the MOC, BOC, and Roman Catholic Church to discuss prospects of setting up an official platform for cooperation between various faiths.