

MOLDOVA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects the right of individuals to practice their religion and states religious groups are independent from the state and free to organize and operate according to their own statutes. The law cites the “exceptional importance” of Orthodox Christianity. In May, President Maia Sandu signed into law amendments to the criminal and misdemeanor codes on discrimination and incitement to discrimination or hate-based violence. The amendments define “genocide propaganda and crimes against humanity” and introduce the new term of “incitement to discrimination” into the law.

A court challenge by the Jewish Community of Moldova (JCM) to a 2021 decision of the Public Services Agency (PSA) to reject the JCM’s application to register a synagogue in Orhei city remained pending. Leaders of the Islamic League stated that the Chisinau municipal authorities’ refusal to allot a plot of land for the Muslim community at the state-run cemetery in Chisinau was in violation of the law. The Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) criticized a national broadcaster for its decision not to broadcast in full the traditional religious service celebrating Chisinau City Day, a decision the broadcaster indicated was a response to the church’s refusal to blame Russia for the war in Ukraine. The MOC rejected a call from the Liberal Party of Moldova to sever ties with the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow and unite with the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC). On several occasions, authorities asked Falun Dafa and Falun Gong followers demonstrating in front of the Chinese embassy to remove banners. Religious minorities continued to report no progress in obtaining government restitution or compensation for property confiscated prior to the country’s independence in 1991. A legal dispute between the MOC and the BOC concerning which group should control more than 800 monasteries and churches was pending in court and was postponed multiple times on various grounds during the year. Religious groups reported effective cooperation with government authorities in providing

humanitarian relief for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion. Some MOC leaders criticized the war and called on its priests and congregants to pray “for peace and wisdom for political leaders.”

Jehovah’s Witnesses stated their situation in the separatist Transnistria region continued to worsen. They remained unable to reregister as a religious organization with de facto authorities, which they said criminalized their religious activity and left them vulnerable to discrimination. They also reported warnings that the de facto authorities would introduce a total ban on their activities. The Muslim community did not make renewed attempts to secure a site for a mosque in Transnistria after receiving a permit for one in 2019, citing lack of funds for the mosque construction and a desire not to create tensions with the de facto authorities.

There were instances of online hate speech against the JCM and one case of vandalism of its properties. The JCM reported antisemitic rhetoric on the internet. As in past years, the BOC continued to report MOC harassment of priests and communities in several villages. The MOC continued to say that MOC-BOC conflicts were at the local level and were caused in some cases by individual priests’ reluctance to abide by MOC disciplinary sanctions. Numerous property disputes from prior years between the MOC and BOC remained unresolved in the courts.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials met with leaders and representatives of religious groups to discuss the status of religious freedom and to highlight religious freedom as a U.S. government policy priority. They also continued their engagement with authorities to promote passage of a property restitution law for all religious groups and worked with government officials to remove antisemitic graffiti from locations in Chisinau. The Ambassador reiterated the importance of creating a Museum of Jewish History per the government’s 2018 commitment. Embassy officers also raised issues of religious freedom for religious minorities in the Transnistria region with de facto authorities there. In January, the Chargé d’Affaires joined the President, the Prime Minister, and the

Jewish community at an event commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day, held at the Memorial to the Victims of Fascism in Chisinau and wrote a statement for the JCM's newspaper, *Our Voice*. In September, the Ambassador marked the completion of a restoration project at the Assumption of the Virgin Mary Orthodox Church in Causeni funded by a \$1 million grant from the embassy. Embassy officers joined other diplomatic missions at the book presentation for *One-way Suitcase*, which is based on actual stories of refugees from Ukraine who were supported by a local synagogue as a sign of solidarity between the Jewish community and refugees fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 3.3 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2014 census, the most recent available and which does not include Transnistria, the predominant religion is Orthodox Christianity, with 90 percent of the population belonging to one of two Orthodox Christian Churches. Most Orthodox adherents (approximately 90 percent) belong to the MOC, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church; the remaining 10 percent belong to the BOC, which falls under the Romanian Orthodox Church. Nearly 7 percent of the population does 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. Estimates of the Jewish population vary widely, ranging from 1,600 to 30,000 persons. According to the JCM, there are approximately 20,000 Jews. The Islamic League estimates there are between 15,000 and 17,000 Muslims. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Muslims, and atheists.

Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Molokans, Messianic Jews, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), the Salvation Army, the Evangelical Christian Church, the 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, de facto authorities estimate 80 percent of the population belongs to the MOC. Other religious groups in the region include Catholics, followers of Old Rite Russian 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 the state shall recognize and guarantee all citizens the right to preserve, develop, and express their religious identity. It provides for 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 stipulates religious groups are independent from the state and free to organize and operate according to their own statutes. The constitution prohibits all religious groups, in their mutual relationships, from using, expressing, or inciting hatred or enmity. The constitution stipulates the state shall support religious worship, including facilitating religious assistance in the army, hospitals, prisons, 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 when 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 recognizes the “exceptional importance and fundamental role” of Orthodox Christianity, and particularly the MOC, in the life, history, and culture of the country.

The law does not require religious groups to register, and members of unregistered groups may worship freely. Religious groups that seek to register with the government must do so with the PSA. Only religious groups registered with the PSA possess status as legal entities, which allows them to build houses of worship, own land for cemeteries or other property, publish or import religious literature, open bank accounts, or employ staff. Registration also exempts registered religious groups from land taxes and property taxes and allows them to establish associations and foundations. The law permits local registered religious groups to change their denominational affiliation or dissolve themselves.

The law allows individuals to redirect 2 percent of their income tax to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or religious groups. Religious groups wanting to benefit from the provision must be officially registered with the PSA and active for a minimum of one year before applying for the income tax benefit; use the funds received only for social, moral, cultural, and/or charitable activities and certain administrative costs; and present reports on the use of the funds. The law exempts religious organizations from registration fees and from paying tax on the income received as donations under the 2 percent law.

Under the law, a religious group wishing to register must present to the PSA 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 it has access to premises where it can conduct religious activities, but it does not need to own this property. The PSA is required by law to register a religious group within 15 days if the registration request meets all legal requirements. The applicant may request an extension if the government determines the documentation submitted is insufficient.

Under the law, the Ministry of Justice has 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 “affect 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 prohibits religious entities from engaging in political activity or “abusive proselytism,” defined as the action of changing religious beliefs through coercion.

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 may submit a written request to a school’s administration to enroll in a religion class. Religion classes are offered in grades one through nine. The religious curriculum offers two types of courses: one for Orthodox denominations and Catholics, and the other 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 advice from the MOC, and includes teaching guidelines developed with the support of the BOC. Regular teachers and MOC and BOC priests teach these optional courses, which focus on Orthodox Christianity. Regular teachers and representatives of the Evangelical Christian Church teach the second course, which is based on religious manuals and literature from Romania, the United States, and Germany.

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

The Antidiscrimination 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 council 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 a remedy, and request prosecutors to initiate criminal proceedings. It may also suggest pertinent legislative amendments or participate in working groups authoring legislative initiatives.

By law, male citizens between the ages of 18 and 27 have the right to choose alternative civilian service over military service if the latter runs counter to their religious beliefs. Those who choose civilian service may complete it at public institutions or enterprises specializing in areas such as social assistance, healthcare, industrial engineering, urban planning, road construction, environmental protection, agriculture or agricultural processing, town management, and fire rescue. There are no blanket exemptions for religious groups from alternative civilian service, but higher-ranking clergy, monks, and theology students are exempted from such service. Refusal to enroll in civilian service is punishable by a fine up to 32,500 lei (\$1,700) or between 100 and 150 hours of community service, and those punished are still obliged to enroll in civilian service.

The law mandates restoration of rights and compensation for material damages for victims of the totalitarian regimes that controlled Moldovan territory between 1917 and 1991 and for citizens who were subject to reprisals based on political, national, religious, or social grounds. The law specifically refers to private property restoration for victims of the Soviet era but makes no mention of Holocaust-era property confiscations. The law does not apply to communal property confiscated from religious groups.

According to the law, Holocaust denial and insulting the memory of the Holocaust are criminal offenses, with penalties ranging from six months' to five years' imprisonment and fines ranging from 25,000 to 50,000 lei (\$1,300-\$2,600). The offenses include the production, sale, distribution, or public use of fascist, racist, or xenophobic symbols or ideology, unless used for art, science, or education. The law prohibits the promotion of xenophobia, racism, fascism, and hatred and violence on ethnic, racial, or religious grounds.

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 societal group, as well as any document calling for or supporting activities in pursuit of those goals.

In May, President Sandu signed into law amendments to the criminal and misdemeanor codes regarding discrimination and incitement to discrimination or hate-based violence. The new amendments allow for enhanced sentences for crimes motivated by stereotypes or prejudice based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, social background, citizenship, sex, gender, language, religion or religious beliefs, political views, gender identity, sexual orientation, health, age, disability, or civil status. It also defines “genocide propaganda and crimes against humanity” and introduces a new term of “incitement to discrimination.”

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 Employment 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. Foreign missionaries belonging to registered religious groups who do not wish to apply for temporary residency may remain in the country for 90 days on a tourist visa.

The law states that “acts of vandalism and desecration of tombs, monuments, or places revered by persons belonging to various religious groups” are subject to penalties of up to two years’ imprisonment or 180 to 240 hours of community service, and a maximum fine of 47,500 lei (\$2,500).

In separatist Transnistria, Transnistrian “law” affirms the special role of the Orthodox Church in the region’s culture and spirituality. The “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.”

Transnistrian “law” prohibits proselytizing in private homes and limits distribution of religious literature to houses of worship and special premises designated by the authorities. It also bans the involvement of children under 18 in religious organizations and mandatory religious classes against their will or without prior consent from their parents or legal guardians. It requires the reregistration of religious groups to operate legally in the region and stipulates groups that failed to reregister by the end of 2010 are “subject to liquidation.” The region’s registration “authority” registers religious groups and monitors their adherence to the goals and activities set forth in their statutes. Registration provides several advantages to religious groups, including the ability to own and build places of worship, open religious schools, conduct religious services in penitentiary institutions, and publish literature.

To register as a religious organization in Transnistria, a local religious group must present the following: proof of activity in the region for at least 10 years; a list of at least 10 members who are 18 or older who have Transnistrian “citizenship” and permanent residence in one of the seven administrative-territorial units in the region; a list of founders and governing members and their personal details; the charter, statutes, and minutes of its constituent assembly; the organization’s basic religious doctrine; contact details of its governing body; the origin of financial resources for the organization’s activity and other assets; 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 organization. Centralized religious organizations must inform the registration “authority” on a yearly basis about intentions to extend their activities to cover additional local groups.

Transnistrian “authorities” must decide to register a religious group within 30 days of the application. If those “authorities” decide to conduct a “religious assessment” – a law enforcement investigation of the group’s background and activities – registration may be postponed for up to six months or denied if 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.

Under the “law,” foreign religious groups may not register or undertake religious activities. Foreign citizens have the freedom to worship, including with registered religious groups, but they may not be founders or members of religious groups.

Religious groups disband on their own decision or upon a Transnistrian “court” decision. The “prosecutor’s office” or de facto executive, city, or district authorities may request the “courts” disband or suspend a religious group on multiple grounds. Such grounds include the following: disturbing public order or violating public security; conducting activities deemed to be extremist; 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.

Transnistrian “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.

Transnistrian “authorities” screen and may ban the import or 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. De facto authorities prioritize alternative civilian service in armed forces units, so they may assign conscientious objectors to perform their civilian service in military units. Another alternative is service at institutions subordinate to the “executive bodies of the state or local administration.”

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

The “law” required religious organizations that were active in the Transnistria region before November 14, 2016, to register again with de facto authorities by the end of 2021. Another provision specifies which entities are responsible for different aspects of monitoring religious organizations: the region’s “prosecution office” monitors the observance of the “law” on freedom of worship and religious organizations, the registering “authority” makes sure that religious groups observe their statutes, while local “authorities” monitor observance of notification requirements about the initiation or continuation of a religious group’s activities.

The “law” allows missionary and preaching activities through the media, the internet, or other legal means. Religious organizations or their representatives may practice such activities in religious buildings, places of pilgrimage, cemeteries, educational institutions historically used for religious teaching, and in other public places in line with the “law on public assembly.” Religious organizations may hold services with their members in private homes, but proselytizing is banned in private homes. Foreign or stateless citizens legally

residing in Transnistria may engage in such activities only if the religious organization involved is registered in the relevant territorial unit. The “law” bans missionary and preaching activities that violate public order or security, promote extremism, harm the traditional family, or harm citizens’ health or morality.

Moldova is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

During the year, the PSA registered all 21 religious entities that applied. These were new religious subgroups belonging to existing religious denominations, including the Baptist Church, MOC, BOC, and Union of Pentecostal Churches.

The Falun Association reported some remaining impediments to freedom of assembly following the 2021 removal by the Ministry of Justice of the Falun symbol, which contains one large and four small swastikas, from its register of extremist materials. The 2021 Ministry of Justice decision followed a 2020 ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice that reversed the government’s earlier decision to dissolve the Falun Gong and Falun Dafa Associations and their reregistration with the PSA. The two associations had used the swastika symbol based on Buddhist and Chinese tradition. On several occasions, the police documented the Falun followers protesting in front of the embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Chisinau and asked them to remove their banners. On October 15, which coincided with City Day festivities, officials from the Chisinau mayor’s office asked Falun members to remove their banners, stating municipal authorities did not receive a prior notification, although such notification is not required for groups with fewer than 50 participants. Falun members complied but continued their practice of public exercise and meditation.

During the year, the government paid monetary damages to the Falun associations in compliance with 2021 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling that determined the state violated the European Convention on Human Rights with respect to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and freedom

of association. The ECHR judgment resulted from the government's decision to dissolve the Falun Dafa Association and Falun Gong. The ECHR fines included €4,500 (\$4,800) in damages and €1,500 (\$1,600) in costs and expenses to the Falun Dafa association. Another case before the court, submitted by the Falun Dafa in 2020, alleged the state violated the group's right to peaceful assembly after the Chisinau mayor's office denied group members permission to hold a rally during the visit of a People's Republic of China delegation in 2017, remained pending at year's end.

The Islamic League complained that Chisinau municipal authorities twice rejected its requests for a plot of land for Islamic burials at the state-run cemetery in Chisinau, even though the law provides the right to burial space in public cemeteries for all registered religious groups. The mayoralty rejected both requests sent by the community in January and in March.

The Catholic Diocese of Chisinau's longstanding written complaints to the government that registration law provisions pertaining to the organization of religious groups were incompatible with Catholic canon law continued to remain unaddressed. According to Catholic Church representatives, canon law grants bishops the authority to organize new parishes and appoint priests, while Moldovan law requires that newly registered religious communities be created through the initiative of community members, with leadership chosen by the members.

In December, parliament amended the law regarding national identity documents to grant the BOC head the right to a diplomatic passport. The law provided equity with the MOC, whose head already has this entitlement.

Religious groups stated that the state of emergency imposed by the authorities immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February and extended through the year did not affect religious activities.

The government, as well as UN institutions operating in the country, worked with religious groups to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees fleeing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Religious groups, including charity arms of multinational churches, reported no government obstruction of their relief efforts.

A dispute between the BOC and the MOC concerning the government's registration of a village church in Dereneu, Calarasi Region, continued during the year. In 2020, BOC representatives accused the PSA of illegally registering the church under the MOC's authority. BOC officials said the church belonged to their denomination, although its status had been under dispute since 2017, when the parish and parishioners decided to switch legally and canonically from the MOC to the BOC. The BOC and MOC congregations both continued to use the Dereneu church; the local BOC priest was conducting church services in a chapel in the church courtyard, while the MOC priest held services in the disputed main church. The BOC's lawyer said a total of nine cases related to the BOC-MOC conflict in Dereneu were under review in courts at year's end. The BOC stated the local mayor fueled the conflict by using administrative resources and his position to interfere in the conflict on behalf of the MOC.

The JCM continued to state that the government did not properly maintain most Jewish cemeteries across the country or protect them from acts of vandalism. In December, the JCM requested a new investigation of government work conducted in 2018-19 that significantly damaged the large Jewish cemetery in Chisinau after the Prosecutor General's Office declined to open a case in 2020.

A project to open a Jewish museum, first announced by the government in 2018, remained on hold at year's end in the absence of a final decision on the museum's location or clarity on the use of funds earlier earmarked for the project. During the year, the Ministry of Culture appointed a museum director. The project would include the Jewish cemetery in Chisinau and a separate Yad Vashem-style Jewish historical and cultural center.

By year's end, the PSA had taken no further action on the registration of a synagogue in Orhei city following a complaint by the JCM to the PSA regarding the agency's "arbitrary actions." In 2021, the Orhei office of the PSA rejected the JCM's application for registration of the synagogue. A 2014 Orhei city council decision transferred the building to JCM ownership.

In June, officials unveiled a Holocaust memorial in Orhei honoring the memory of approximately 4,000 Jews from Orhei killed in 1941-45. JCM and Orhei city funded the construction of the memorial.

According to the religious communities concerned, the government again did not address longstanding efforts by the Jewish, Catholic, and Lutheran communities to regain title to properties confiscated during the Soviet era or to obtain similar properties. In contrast, the MOC continued to have use of, and exercise control over, most confiscated "historic" religious properties under a 2003 agreement with the Ministry of Culture, although the government retained title to the properties.

A court dispute between the BOC and MOC involving the ownership of a large number of monasteries and churches continued during the year. The Supreme Court of Justice sent the case for retrial in 2021 after the court overturned a 2020 ruling by the Chisinau Court of Appeals that annulled earlier agreements between the MOC and the Ministry of Culture transferring more than 800 monasteries and churches held as national heritage monuments from the state to the MOC for "indefinite use and protection." BOC lawyers stated that a number of these churches and monasteries legally belonged to the BOC; they said the ruling was unjustified and baseless. A further court hearing was scheduled for 2023.

The Union of Pentecostal Churches continued to state that it remained unable to obtain a zoning permit for a building in Copceac village it bought in 2006 and uses for religious services. The Pentecostal Church's 2020 appeal of a lower court ruling against it was still pending at year's end.

The MOC continued to maintain a network of social assistance sites, including day-care centers and temporary shelters within churches and monasteries, and to provide spiritual guidance and services to police officers, state workers, and prison inmates. Other registered religious groups had access to state facilities upon request.

The MOC did not officially condemn Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February, although its Primate, Metropolitan Vladimir, stated that he condemned the war. The MOC called on its priests and followers "to pray for peace and wisdom for the leaders." Some MOC priests publicly criticized Russia's invasion. In October, Metropolitan Vladimir received one of the Russian Orthodox Church's highest awards from Patriarch Kirill "as a sign of appreciation for his efforts to strengthen the Moldovan society around Orthodox values." Metropolitan Vladimir said he received the award on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

Responding to a call in November by the Liberal Party of Moldova to break with Moscow and unite with the BOC, a spokesman for the MOC Diocese of Chisinau stated, "The Orthodox Church of Moldova, in the voice of Metropolitan Vladimir, from the very beginning condemned the war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, calling it fratricide, which must be immediately stopped in the name of human values preached by the universal Orthodox teaching." The MOC spokesman, however, stated that the Liberal Party's stance was provocative, stemming either from ignorance or a desire to sow discord.

On October 15, Chisinau mayor Ion Ceban and MOC Metropolitan Vladimir criticized the national broadcaster Moldova 1 for not broadcasting in full the traditional religious service celebrating Chisinau City Day. In response, the television station's leadership said that it did broadcast the sermon, albeit from another MOC church, adding that "it reserves the right to restrict access to the station of Moldovan citizens, including highly ranked religious figures who support directly or indirectly the military aggression against Ukraine, as a result of which thousands of innocent people have died," referring to the MOC's connection to the Russian Orthodox Church.

According to the PSA, 156 religious groups (compared with 123 in 2021) received funds from income tax payments voluntarily directed to religious groups.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Jehovah's Witnesses reported a continued worsening of their situation in the Transnistria region, a separatist area internationally recognized as part of Moldova.

Transnistrian "authorities" continued to refuse to reregister two local Jehovah's Witnesses groups in Tiraspol and Ribnita. The Tiraspol community applied to reregister in 2020; the Ribnita community did so in 2019. A 2018 case filed by the "Ministry of Justice" in the Ribnita city "court" seeking the dissolution of the Jehovah's Witnesses group there remained pending at year's end. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the community was unable to freely practice its faith or to import or distribute its literature during the year. In their annual report, Jehovah's Witnesses stated in regard to the situation in Transnistria, "The de facto authorities refuse to grant legal status to congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses. This effectively criminalizes the Witnesses' peaceful religious activity and leaves them vulnerable to discrimination." The community also received unofficial warnings about planned "legislative amendments" seeking to outlaw Jehovah's Witnesses in the region, declare their publications and website extremist, and penalize community members. Their annual report stated that such a move "would effectively render the Witnesses' religious activities illegal."

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report problems with conscientious objection to military service, saying the "authorities" forced its members to undertake alternative civilian service within the Transnistrian "Ministry of Defense," which they stated, was also contrary to their beliefs. The Jehovah's Witnesses community reported that two 2019 cases filed in local "courts" by conscientious objectors against the Military Enrollment Committee remained unresolved. The

two individuals remained exempt from service while their cases were pending; as of year's end, the cases remained unresolved.

The Muslim community did not pursue plans to secure a location for a mosque and a Muslim educational and cultural center in Tiraspol, citing financial constraints and a desire not to create tension with the local "authorities." In 2019, de facto authorities in the city granted the community a building permit and offered a plot of public land to build the mosque but later withdrew the offer. According to the Islamic League leader, the community was able to meet freely and practice its faith in the region.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The JCM reported instances of antisemitic hate speech and instigation to discrimination and violence against the Jewish community, especially on the internet. Several online articles related to the Jewish community received discriminatory comments.

The MOC continued to say that MOC-BOC conflicts were at the local level and were caused in some cases by individual priests' reluctance to abide by church disciplinary sanctions. Sources stated, however, that MOC and local authorities' involvement in some cases indicated that these conflicts had wider resonance.

According to the BOC, during the year, MOC priests, local authorities, and MOC followers continued to harass and clash verbally with members and clergy of the church in Dereneu village, whose members in 2017 decided to switch from the MOC to the BOC but whose status remained in dispute.

In Razeni village, Ialoveni Region, a conflict between the MOC and BOC continued. After multiple confrontations, the BOC in October 2021 regained control over the local church, which had been subject of contention between the BOC and MOC following the death of the church's BOC priest in 2020. The BOC claimed property rights over the church in court.

According to the JCM, individuals and groups again made insulting and antisemitic statements in some news portals' online comments sections. The JCM said that the news portals did not take responsibility for editing individuals' comments on their websites and that there remained no legal avenue to complain about discriminatory language online.

During the year, the Jewish community reported unknown individuals drew swastikas on a monument in Edinet dedicated to victims of the Holocaust entitled, "Grieving Mother." In January, vandals defaced multiple public signs and business fronts in Chisinau with swastikas and Nazi phrases.

The JCM continued the reconstruction of the Rabbi Tsirelson Synagogue and Yeshiva in Chisinau during the year, with some adjustments to the original blueprint.

According to the JCM, the construction of the Alley of the Righteous Among the Nations near the Memorial to the Victims of Fascism in Chisinau experienced a delay due to the illegal construction of a car wash and store within the protected area of the monument. The JCM sued the company responsible for the illegal construction and won the case in a first instance court. The company challenged the decision at the court of appeals, and the case was pending a final ruling at the end of the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Ministry of Education and Research, Ministry of Culture, and Ministry of Justice, the Ambassador and other embassy officials highlighted religious freedom as a U.S. policy priority. Among issues raised were Holocaust remembrance, the protection and preservation of Jewish heritage sites, and the need to advance religious and communal property restitution, including a property restitution law covering all religious groups. The Ambassador noted the

government's 2018 commitment to create a Museum of Jewish History and the importance of fulfilling that commitment. The embassy worked with government officials to remove antisemitic graffiti from various locations in Chisinau.

Embassy officers also raised issues of religious freedom for religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, in the Transnistria region with de facto authorities there.

The Ambassador and embassy officials held meetings with leaders from the MOC, BOC, and the Roman Catholic Church, and with Jewish rabbis, as well as with representatives of minority Christian groups (including the Lutheran Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Armenian Orthodox Church) and Muslim, Jewish, and Falun Dafa groups, to encourage respect and tolerance for all religious groups, encourage interfaith cooperation, and highlight religious freedom as a U.S. government priority policy goal.

In January, as part of the annual Holocaust Remembrance Week, the Chargé d'Affaires joined the President, Prime Minister, and the Jewish community at a Holocaust Remembrance event held at the Memorial to the Victims of Fascism in Chisinau and wrote a statement for the JCM's newspaper *Our Voice* dedicated to International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In the statement, the Chargé said people must remember the Holocaust and recommit to the long-term fight against discrimination and hatred, noting, "We speak out publicly today because of and despite the urge to recoil in horror at the sheer scale of the crime against Roma, Catholics, political dissidents, LGBTQI+ populations, and most of all – Jews. But we cannot look away, and we cannot be silent. Instead, we must face this history, and ensure that 'never again' remains a solemn pledge by humanity, not merely a slogan."

In June, the Chargé attended the unveiling ceremony of the Monument in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust in Orhei, which honors the memory of 4,000 Jews from Orhei who lost their lives during the Holocaust.

In September, embassy officers joined other diplomatic missions at the *One-way Suitcase* book presentation (on the book based on true stories of refugees) as a sign of solidarity between the Jewish people and refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine.

In September, the Ambassador and Minister of Culture Sergiu Prodan marked the completion of a \$1 million restoration project funded by the embassy at the Assumption of the Virgin Mary Orthodox Church in Causeni, the only church in the country with interior walls covered in frescoes.

The Ambassador attended the unveiling ceremony of the Memorial to Victims of the Holocaust in Cosauti Forest that honors the memory of 6,000 Jews from Soroca District who lost their lives during the Holocaust. In a Facebook post, the embassy wrote, “The United States condemns these acts of hatred and stands in unshakable solidarity with the Jewish community.”