



Centrul de Informare în  
domeniul Drepturilor Omului  
Информационный Центр  
по Правам Человека



Consiliul Național  
al Tineretului din Moldova

## REPORT SUMMARY

### on the Snapshot Study of the Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion (Fundamental Religious Freedoms and Rights) in the Republic of Moldova

#### Methodology

The primary information for the study has been collected through over 20 interviews with the leaders of most numerous religious groups present in Moldova, and visits to 8 rural localities with known diversity or conflicts in terms of various religious groups.

The main scope of the performed study is the research of the situation with fundamental religious rights and freedoms in the Republic of Moldova in general lines, and identification of the the major trends, tendencies, issues and problems in this field. The study was not designed and does not provide a representative statistics on religious groups, their followers and adepts, or absolute numbers on religious rights and freedoms violations. The study was not intended and did not cover the normative analysis of the existing national legislation, case law, and did not analyze all the available secondary sources. At the same time the findings of the study are valid for identification of issues, problems and gaps in the area of fundamental religious rights and freedoms in the Republic of Moldova, and for design of appropriate policy and legal responses and measures.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY of FINDINGS

#### General findings

The performed study and the present Report reconfirm and substantiate with additional data the findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and in the US Department of State International Religious Freedom Reports with regard to the Republic of Moldova. The below findings along many lines reiterate the previous findings of the above two reports, at the same time widening and deepening their scope.

**1)** The situation with fundamental religious rights and freedoms improved since 2009, but in many respects is still far from being in compliance with the international and national human rights standards. There are still clear patterns and numerous cases of discrimination on the grounds of religious affiliation present in Moldova. These cases of discrimination could be found in almost all relevant areas: registration of denominations, construction of religious buildings, interferences into religious activities, access to schools and other educational institutions, discrimination in education, health care and employment, coverage in media and in public discourses, etc.

**2)** The Moldovan Orthodox Church exercises an extremely high and visible domination over elaboration and adoption of public policies in the area of religious rights and freedoms, other important public policies (in the area of equality and non-discrimination, health care, family issues, etc), and interferes into exercise of these religious rights and freedoms by other religious groups, which is incompatible with the principles of rule of law and separation of state and church.

**3)** Overall the Moldovan government does not take decisive steps to distance the Moldovan Orthodox Church from interferences into politics. The apparent reason for that is the desire to strengthen political and electoral support for the government through the Moldovan Orthodox Church network of parishes and believers. The price for this

Page 1



*The study and the report are made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Department of State. The contents are the responsibility of the abovementioned authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of State or the United States Government.*



Centrul de Informare în  
domeniul Drepturilor Omului  
Информационный Центр  
по Правам Человека



Consiliul Național  
al Tineretului din Moldova

“cooperation” is Orthodox indoctrination of the public policy making, often in contradiction with the fundamental human rights standards, and discrimination of other religious groups and violation of their fundamental religious rights and freedoms. In some areas the Moldovan Orthodox Church aims at replacement of the rule of law with the rule of the Bible.

4) Violation of fundamental religious freedoms and rights is more frequent and gross in rural areas outside Chisinau. This tendency is due to much lower level of education among public local officials, Orthodox priests and general population. Cases of violations are multiple, and vary from verbal insults to damaging of properties of minority religious groups, and physical aggression towards the non-Orthodox ministers or believers. No remedy or accountability for the acts of violation is virtually available at the local level.

5) The number and extent of discrimination of “traditional” religious denominations (Catholics, Judaists, Orthodox Old Believers, and Armenian Gregorian Church) is significantly lower, than the number and extent of discrimination of “non-traditional” [for Moldova] religious denominations. A special case is the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which although very “traditional” had been, and in some aspects still is a target of discrimination. This situation is due to the “competition”, which this church creates for the dominating Moldovan Orthodox Church. The Moldovan authorities, particularly at the local level, implicitly uphold this “scale of discrimination”.

6) The public statistical basis is very poor in terms of reflecting the religious diversity in Moldova. The 2004 national census states that around 93,34% of Moldovan population (3 158 thousands persons) are Christian Orthodox, circa 3,06% (103 thousands persons) are adepts of other religious denominations, and the remainder of 3,6% (121 thousands persons) are atheists or undeclared. These figures do not reconcile fully with the data received during the study. Based on the interviews conducted with the leaders of religious groups present in Moldova, it comes out that the total number of active non-Orthodox believers is around 150 thousands, which accounts for at least 5% of Moldovan population present in the country. The most numerous non-Orthodox denominations, accounting for 15-30 thousand each, are the Catholic Church, the Pentecostals, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah Witnesses, the Evangelists and Baptists, and the Judaists. These figures again do not match well the data of the 2004 census with regard to the individual number of Catholics, Pentecostals, Jehovah Witnesses, and Judaists.

Observation of Sunday religious services at the Orthodox churches in rural areas of Moldova shows that the average Sunday church attendance among Orthodox believers in rural areas is about 1,5-2% of the total locality population, on big religious holidays (except for Christmas and Easter) – 5% (for a village of around 3000 inhabitants, on average 50-60 village inhabitants, mainly aged women, attend regular Sunday services, and on average 150 village inhabitants attend “special” Sunday services).

7) In Moldova there are extremely weak legal mechanisms for protection of fundamental religious rights and freedoms. The study showed an overwhelming impunity for the violations of these rights and freedoms both, in Chisinau and outside Chisinau. An exceptionally low number of violators, including those who commit attacks or promote hate speech on religious grounds, are brought to justice, and even when brought, many of them are sanctioned inadequately. The ombudsman office is weak in relation to protection of fundamental religious rights and freedoms, and there are no other public authorities with strong stance and position with regard to protection of these rights and freedoms.

The implemented study demonstrated the need for further in-depth research and study of the situation with the right to freedom of conscience, thought and religion in Moldova, particularly in such areas as religious properties, religion in schools, religious rights and freedoms in rural areas, and in Transnistria.





Centrul de Informare în  
domeniul Drepturilor Omului  
Информационный Центр  
по Правам Человека



Consiliul Național  
al Tineretului din Moldova

### **Registration of religious denominations**

Situation with registration of religious groups improved since 2009, however in this area there is still a number of issues: cases of the Islamic group of Talgat Masaev and Falun Dafa. The core issue is the vulnerability of the registration body to the political factor (internal and external).

In addition, there are problems of bureaucratic nature: lengthy registration procedures, requests for additional information and documentation (not provided by the law).

### **Religious buildings**

Approximately half of the interviewed religious groups reported major issues in construction of religious buildings. There are reported cases of denial in allocation of land plots for construction of religious buildings (Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans), and cases of denial in issuance of construction authorizations (Bessarabian Orthodox Church, Jehovah Witnesses, Pentecostals).

### **Public spaces for religious activities**

There were registered major cases of violation of the freedom of assembly of the non-Orthodox groups in 2009 (cases of denial of the Adventist event at the Great National Assembly Square, and Menorah vandalization near the Steven the Great Monument in Chisinau), but also recently in 2010 and 2011 (Jehovah Witnesses – the Green Theatre, Falun Dafa – Chisinau Arboretum, Baha’i – various events in public spaces).

Chisinau municipal authorities continue to often treat some religious groups discriminatorily and from the position of superiority.

### **Funeral ceremonies and cemeteries**

In rural areas there are reported numerous cases of obstructing non-Orthodox funeral processions by the local Orthodox priests or the locals instigated by the Orthodox priest.

In addition there are frequent situations when the public cemeteries are de facto controlled and managed by the local Orthodox priests, who decide on allocation of burial plots, „allow” or „disallow” burial of some non-Orthodox deceased.

For example, in Micleuseni (Nisporeni district), according to Pentecostal congregation, the local cemetery is virtually „privatized” by the local Orthodox priest. 2 years ago a deceased Christian Evangelical woman could not be buried because the local Orthodox priest together with the followers physically obstructed the procession to enter the cemetery, and the procession had to proceed around the cemetery on a very bad road 1 kilometer extra under very cold weather. The woman was ultimately buried at the most remote cemetery area, booked for suicides.

Seventh Day Adventists report that in Buteni village in 2011 a funeral procession was obstructed by a local Orthodox priest who used a gun to stop the procession.

### **Third-party interferences into religious activities**

At least 5 religious groups are continuously being a target of interferences in their religious activities. These groups are: Jehovah Witnesses, Pentecostals, Islamic League, Christ’s Church, and Falun Dafa.





Centrul de Informare în  
domeniul Drepturilor Omului  
Информационный Центр  
по Правам Человека



Consiliul Național  
al Tineretului din Moldova

The interferences take the form of verbal insults, damage to the properties of religious groups and their adepts, obstructing of their religious activities, physical aggression and attacks.

In the majority of cases the perpetrators are not identified and are not brought to justice.

For instance, Pentecostals report that in 2010 in the village of Corestauti (Briceni district) a drunken Orthodox priest has beaten up a Pentecostal minister during an evangelical service. In 2008 in the village of Clocusna unknown individuals broke the windows at the Pentecostal Prayer House, in the village of Tohatin somebody set fire at the house of a Pentecostal adept, in the village of Mihaileni during the night unknown individuals opened gun fire onto the Pentecostal Prayer House, and then broke the door and the windows of the building. Neither police, nor the prosecutor's office investigated the case.

Jehovah Witnesses reported 33 cases of interference, infliction of damage and aggression in 2010, and 33 such cases in 2011, including cases of physical attacks and aggression, threats, damaged cars, premises and other properties.

Islamic League reported an unauthorized filming of group's prayers by police and check of ID data of prayer practitioners at the premises rented by the group in 2011 in Chisinau. In the same 2011 a Nistru-war veteran Valeriu Ciobanu at several occasions has made statements against Islam followers amounting to hate speech, and has publicly threatened Islam followers with physical aggression. None of the above cases has been adequately investigated, and none has been brought to justice.

Christ's Church reported a number of interferences of Orthodox priests into group's services in the villages of Sociteni and Biesti in 2010 and 2011. Uninvited, the Orthodox priests and a number of supporting locals broke into the group's premises during the religious service, insulted the group, threatened to interrupt the activity, called to hate. In addition cars of several group's followers were damaged in the same villages of Sociteni and Biesti in 2010 and 2011. In Orhei group's equipment has been stolen from the rented premises.

Falun Dafa reported that in May 2010 the management of the Moldovan Ministry of Culture and National Opera Theatre cancelled performance of the arts group Shen Yun Performing Arts from New York. The arts group's performance featured *inter alia* scenes about the modern-day persecution and murder of Falun Dafa followers. The breach of the contract by the National Opera Theatre and the barred performance caused very serious financial and material damage to the organizers of the performance, which to the date has not been compensated.

The head of the Moldovan Falun Dafa group was stopped at the Chisinau airport, not admitted to her scheduled flight, interrogated and searched by law enforcement agents, when she intended to fly to a Falun Dafa conference in New York. The head of Chisinau airport security declared that the lady would present "a threat to public health".

### **Discrimination on religious grounds: Education**

Seventh Day Adventists reported problems related to scheduling some exams in school for Saturday, which is a holy day for the Adventists. In addition Seventh Day Adventists (Reformist movement) reported problems in enrollment of their children into kindergarten and school, because of their refusal of vaccination.

Jehovah Witnesses reported that in primary school (I-IV forms) during the classes of Spiritual Education the educators often speak about the Orthodox symbols, which are not shared by JW's. The Elder of the Mereni JW congregation reported a case when the local school teacher insulted the children of one of the JW's followers. The members of the congregation had a discussion with the school administration, and the situation improved.





Centrul de Informare în  
domeniul Drepturilor Omului  
Информационный Центр  
по Правам Человека



Consiliul Național  
al Tineretului din Moldova

The pastor of the Colibasi Baptist group reported that there is a local school teacher, who is a Christian Orthodox, and she makes attempts to introduce during the classes elements of the Orthodox faith. The parents believe that she indirectly adversely influences the school marks of children, who are not Christian Orthodox.

Islamic group reported issues in schools with their daughters wearing hijab (veil): teachers and peers question this practice, and embarrass the girls.

### **Discrimination on religious grounds: Employment**

The head of the Falun Dafa group is a lawyer, who worked at the judge in a Moldova court. She was put under hard pressure by the colleagues from the Superior Council of the Magistrates (self-administration body of the judges) to leave the position. She was ultimately demitted from her position in 2008 for “violation of professional ethics” because of her belonging to the Falun Dafa group.

Talgat Masaev reported of woman being fired because of her wearing the hijab.

Jehovah Witnesses reported a case in Stefan Voda when a JW follower had difficulties in employment at a school because of the belonging to Jehovah Witnesses.

Both interviewed groups of the Seventh Day Adventists reported issues with work on Saturday, which is a holy day for the Adventists. The issues and problems because of that are reported as frequent.

The Russian Orthodox Church of the Old Rite reported that some of the male followers have problems at work because of the religious tradition to not shave the beard after they get to 40 years old. Some of them were asked to shave the beard off, which they didn't. None of these men was so far however fired because of that.

### **Discrimination on religious grounds: Other areas**

The Elder of the local Jehovah Witnesses congregation reported that in Mereni there are cases when the car and microbus drivers do not stop to pick up the local JW members, or when get them off the transport.

The Pastor of the Colibasi Baptist group of a problem related to the LPAs: the followers of the Baptist church are denied the provision of social assistance, even when they are eligible and entitled to receive it. The authorities justify this practice with the fact that the Baptists are hard-working people, and they can make it without the social assistance.

### **Mass media and public discourse on religious groups**

Mass media generally do not cover religious groups from Moldova in an objective, equidistant and unbiased manner.

The Moldovan Orthodox Church is the champion of media coverage in Moldova, this church being covered very frequently and overwhelmingly in a positive context.

Other “traditional”, “historical” or “conventional” religious groups, such as the Catholic Church, the Judaist denomination (Synagogue “Habad Liubavici”), the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Old Rite Orthodox Church, enjoy good and predominantly positive coverage in mass media.

Other religious groups either do not enjoy the sufficient attention of media, or such attention is mainly of negative nature. Many media outlets habitually and routinely use to call the “non-mainstream” religious groups as “sects” (with a clear negative or disrespectful emphasis or meaning).





Centrul de Informare în  
domeniul Drepturilor Omului  
Информационный Центр  
по Правам Человека



Consiliul Național  
al Tineretului din Moldova

Many religious groups mentioned low professionalism of Moldovan media in coverage of religion related issues, and high level of politicization of the religion related issues coverage.

## RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOLS

Access of the religious groups into schools is not done on a non-discriminatory and balanced manner.

The Moldovan Orthodox Church has a practically unlimited access to educational institutions, as well as to the contents of school disciplines delivered locally.

Other religious groups in some cases have access to educational institutions, but this access is often unstable, with many conditions and limitations.

The symbols of the Moldovan Orthodox Church (crucifixes, icons, etc) are omnipresent in the Moldovan educational institutions.

## Inter-confessional dialogue and cooperation

Religious groups present in Moldova do not cooperate strongly with each other. Cooperation is fragmentary, often is events-focused and driven, such as cooperation around opposition to Equality Law (Anti-Discrimination Law) or around the annual Family Day.

Cooperation among religious groups tends to be clustered: “traditional” religious groups cooperate more with other “traditional” groups, protestant groups with protestant groups, Islamic groups with Islamic groups, Tao group with other Oriental and meditation groups). A number of groups remain in self-conservation, without active efforts to reach out (Old Believers, Judaists, Krishna Society, JW, Seventh Day Adventists (R), etc).

At the central level, there are several religious groups, which make efforts to promote an inter-religious dialogue. These groups are the Unification Church and the Baha’i.

The Moldovan Government takes a weak position in promoting inter-religious dialogue. Reportedly it does not run systemic platforms to regularly communicate with religious groups present in Moldova, and/or to promote the idea of the inter-religious peace and dialogue.

## Appreciation of the Government’s activity: half / half

10 of the interviewed religious groups assess the role as good or very good (the Moldovan Orthodox Church, the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, Old Believers, Armenian Gregorian Church, Judaists, Catholics, Evangelists and Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Unification Church, Krishna Society).

10 of the interviewed religious groups assess the role as not so good or poor (Christ’s Church, Islamic League, JW, Islamic group of Talgat Masaev, Baha’i, Seventh Day Adventists (R), Methodists, Tao group, Lutherans, Falun Dafa).

One religious group (Pentecostals) mentioned that it very much depends on level and locality, and one group (Salvation Army) mentioned that it had no claims to the public authorities in the given context.

*This report has been prepared by the Human Rights Information Center (Centrul de Informare în domeniul Drepturilor Omului, CIDO) in partnership with the Nondiscrimination Coalition (Coaliția Nediscriminare, CND) and the National Youth Council of Moldova (Consiliul Național al Tineretului din Moldova, CNTM).*

