



2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - Estonia

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy maintained a dialogue with the government and religious groups on religious freedom issues, including Holocaust education and anti-Semitism. The ambassador and other U.S. government officials frequently participated in local events involving religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to current government statistics, the population is 1.3 million. Approximately 14 percent of the population is Evangelical Lutheran and 15 percent belongs to one of the two Orthodox Churches: the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAO). Other Christian groups, including Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Roman Catholics, and Pentecostals, constitute 1.4 percent of the population. Members of the Russian Old Believers live primarily along the west bank of Lake Peipsi in the east. There are also small Jewish and Muslim communities. Thirty-four percent of the population is unaffiliated; 32 percent, unspecified or other; and 6 percent do not identify with any religion. Most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population are Orthodox and reside mainly in the capital or the northeastern part of the country.

According to the government, there are more than 500 registered religious associations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

Two laws regulate the activities of religious associations. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are registered with city courts. Church congregations or unions of congregations are required to have a management board. Citizens and legal residents may be members of the board. In order to register formally, the management board of a religious association must submit an application signed by all its members. A congregation must have at least 12 adult members. The minutes of the constitutive meeting, a copy of statutes, and a notarized copy of signatures of the board members serve as supporting documents for the registration application. The government treats registered churches and religious organizations as non-profit entities which receive a tax benefit.

The law requires the commanding officer of each military unit to provide defense force members the opportunity to practice their religion. Prison directors must also provide the opportunity for inmates to practice their religious beliefs.

Basic instruction on religious themes is available in public schools. A school must offer religious studies at the primary or secondary level if at least 12 students request it. Comparative religious studies are available in public and private schools on an elective basis.

The country is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Pentecost, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

In August a local media company used images of the gate to the Auschwitz concentration camp in an Internet advertisement, but subsequently removed it following public controversy. In September a local weekly newspaper published a mock advertisement on its comics page promoting diet pills that pictured Holocaust victims. On September 20, Foreign Minister Urmas Paet publically condemned the two advertisements, saying they demonstrated a lack of respect for Holocaust victims and were out of touch with the country's values. He stated, "trying to make a joke out of [the Holocaust] is absolutely unacceptable and inappropriate ... so many people have been hurt and insulted as a result of this and as an Estonian, I am very embarrassed."

The government observed January 27 as the annual Holocaust and Other Crimes against Humanity Victims' Memorial Day, and schools in the country participated in commemorative activities. The Jewish community organized a special commemoration that included the diplomatic corps. Minister of Education and Research Jaak Aavisoo laid a wreath at a memorial monument dedicated to victims of the Holocaust at the Tallinn Jewish cemetery, while government officials, including the

foreign minister, participated in other events during the year related to Holocaust remembrance, including commemorations of French victims of the Holocaust who had been transported to Estonia.

In January, 80 elementary school history teachers from across the country participated in a Holocaust-themed conference in the capital sponsored by the Estonian Atlantic Treaty Association and the Estonian Human Rights Institute with support from the Ministry of Education. The conference aimed to introduce teachers to best classroom practices for Holocaust commemoration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On July 28, a ceremony was held outside the northeast village of Sinimae to honor veterans of the 20th Estonian Waffen SS Grenadier Division and commemorate the World War II battle of the Tannenberg line. No national government officials participated in the ceremony, but military chaplains laid wreaths at monuments for soldiers from both sides who died in battles nearby. A woman was photographed at the event wearing swastika jewelry, and some Waffen SS unit symbols and insignia were displayed. The minister of foreign affairs and minister of defense stated the event was not a celebration of Nazism. Both stressed that anti-Semitic values have no place in the country's society.

In December the parliament held its first ecumenical prayer breakfast with representatives from a wide range of religious faiths.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Officials of the U.S. embassy met with the Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, nongovernmental organizations, and a wide range of religious leaders. Embassy officers continued to engage with government officials and members of civil society and religious groups to promote dialogue and education on the Holocaust and on issues affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. government, in cooperation with the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine, funded two teachers' participation in a summer teacher training program in the United States to foster Holocaust education. These teachers incorporated the training into their classrooms in addition to the standard Holocaust education materials.