



[Print Friendly Version]

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

[Home](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [Archive](#) | [Search](#)
[About the State Department](#) | [Press & Public Affairs](#) | [Travel & Living Abroad](#)
[Countries & Regions](#) | [International Topics & Issues](#) | [History, Education & Culture](#)
[Business Center](#) | [Other Services](#) | [Employment](#)

Latvia

International Religious Freedom Report
 Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
 October 2001


The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, bureaucratic problems persist for some minority religions.

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, lingering suspicions remain towards newer nontraditional faiths.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 25,000 square miles and its population is estimated at 2.4 million. The three largest faiths are Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Orthodox Christianity. No precise denomination membership statistics are available. Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and various evangelical Protestant groups. The once large Jewish community was virtually destroyed in the Holocaust during the 1941-44 German occupation and now totals only 6,000 persons.

As of February 2000, the Justice Ministry had registered over 1,000 congregations. This total includes: Lutheran (302), Roman Catholic (243), Orthodox (112), Baptist (85), Old Believer Orthodox (65), Seventh-Day Adventist (44), Jehovah's Witnesses (11), Methodists (10), Jewish (7), Buddhist (3), Muslim (6), Hare Krishnas (8), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) (1), and over 100 others.

Interest in religion has increased markedly since independence. However, a large percentage of these adherents do not practice their faith regularly. Churches have provided the following estimates of church membership to the Justice Ministry: Lutherans (350,000), Roman Catholic (500,000), Orthodox (250,000), Baptist (6,000), Old Believer Orthodox (70,000), Seventh-Day Adventist (4,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (2,000), Methodists (500), Jewish (6,000), Buddhist (100), Muslim (300), Hare Krishnas (500), and Mormons (2,000). There are significant numbers of atheists, perhaps a majority of the population. Orthodox Christians, many of them Russian-speaking, noncitizen, permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

The Latvian Lutheran Church established its own clergy education center, the Luther Academy in Riga, in 1998. The Roman Catholic Church also has its own seminary. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

Section II. The Status of Religious Freedom
Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

However, bureaucratic problems persist for some minority religions. There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions.

Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rules for public gatherings.

According to the Law on Religious Organizations, any 10 citizens or permanent residents over the age of 18 may apply to register a church. Asylum seekers, foreign embassy staff, and those in the country temporarily in a special status cannot register a religious organization. Congregations functioning in the country for the first time that do not belong to a church association already registered must reregister each year for 10 years. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination and with permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only churches with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. A decision to register a church is made by the Minister of Justice. According to Ministry of Justice officials, most registration applications are approved eventually once proper documents are submitted; however, the law does not permit the simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession, and the Government occasionally denies applications on this basis. The Board for Religious Affairs registered a Christian Science Congregation in the period covered by this report. Previously this registration had been prevented as a result of opposition from the Doctors' Association.

Property restitution has been completed substantially. The status of the remaining properties is unclear and is the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes.

Citizens' passports indicate the ethnicity of the bearer. Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than as Latvian, Russian, etc.

December 25 is celebrated as Christmas and is a recognized national holiday. Good Friday and Easter Monday are also national holidays.

There is a New Religions Consultative Council whose membership consists of doctors, academics, and the independent human rights ombudsman. The Council, which meets on an "ad hoc" basis, can research and write opinions on specific issues, but has no decision-making authority. There also is a Traditional Religion Council, which meets monthly. This body reportedly aims at facilitating greater ecumenical communication, discussing matters of common concern and improving dialog between the traditional faiths and the State.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Problems arise and registration is denied because the Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession, and the Government occasionally denies groups registration. Because of this provision, the Government does not register any splinter groups, including an independent Jewish congregation, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, and a separate Old Believers group.

Visa regulations effective since July 1999 require religious workers to present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a Latvian bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process still is cumbersome. Nonetheless, the Government cooperated to resolve several difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers. Difficulties in this area diminished and Citizenship and Migration Department officials have worked to ease the situation.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries, including from the United States, are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations have criticized this provision.

The Law on Religious Organizations stipulates that religion may be taught to students in public schools on a voluntary basis only by representatives of Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, Baptist, and Jewish religions. The State provides funds for this education. Students at state supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations may provide religious education in private schools only.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities are generally amicable. Ecumenism still is a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude towards the concept. Although government officials are encouraging a broader understanding of and acceptance of newer religions, suspicions remain towards newer nontraditional faiths.

In April 1999, a bomb exploded at a Jewish Holocaust memorial just outside the city. Police have not identified those responsible for this incident.

The Latvian Historical Commission, under the sponsorship of President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, has continued to promote Holocaust awareness throughout all elements of society. This included an international academic conference on the Holocaust in Latvia. Other efforts include the funding of research into Jewish life, curriculum development seminars for educators, teaching materials for high schools, and the translation into Latvian of the highly regarded book for young adults, "Tell Ye Your Children." In addition, President Vike-Freiberga has continued to speak openly of the need to discuss frankly the country's history in relation to the Holocaust. This includes a firm government commitment to bring to justice those citizens accused of complicity in crimes against humanity. This commitment was demonstrated in the case of Konrads Kalejs, whose extradition from Australia is being sought in connection with his indictment for war crimes dating from his membership in the pro-Nazi Arajs Commando during World War II.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy worked to support the principle of religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with appropriate government bodies, non governmental organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries. The Embassy has been involved closely in the process of Jewish property restitution.

The Embassy actively supports the Latvian Historical Commission. It has funded the travel of Latvian scholars to the United States for education in ethnic and religious tolerance and of U.S. experts to Latvia for Historical Commission activities. The Embassy also sponsored a series of academic exchanges and lectures on Holocaust issues, including one by the Historian of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Embassy officials meet regularly with visiting missionary groups from the U.S. Embassy officials discussed problems that members of certain minority religions experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits.

[End]

Released on October 26, 2001

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

This site is managed by the Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

