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Estonia

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 17,666 square miles and a population of 1.36 million (65 percent ethnic Estonian and 35 percent Russian-speaking). The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) is the largest denomination, with 165 congregations and approximately 180,000 members. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC) has 59 congregations with approximately 20,000 members and the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), has 30 congregations with approximately 150,000 - 200,000 members. There are smaller communities of Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Methodists, and other denominations. There is a small Jewish community with 2,500 members. In December 2000, the country's only synagogue was opened in the Jewish school facility. There are also communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and many other denominations and faiths; however, each of these minority faiths has fewer than 6,000 adherents.

Fifty years of Soviet occupation diminished the role of religion in society. Many neighborhoods built since World War II do not have religious centers, and many of the surviving churches require extensive renovations. A few new churches have been built and inaugurated in recent years, including a Methodist church in Tallinn and an Orthodox church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, in Narva. Church attendance, which had seen a surge coinciding with the independence movement in the early 1990s, now has decreased significantly. Anecdotal evidence from local Lutheran churches indicates a 76 percent decrease in registered confirmations between 1990 and 2000.

Many groups have sent foreign missionaries into the country in recent years; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) has the largest number of missionaries.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this

right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution states that there is no state church, thus establishing the separation of church and state. However, this has not been interpreted strictly in administrative practice. For example, the Churches and Congregations Act decrees that the commanding officer of each military unit shall ensure conscripts the opportunity to practice their religion; however, the coordination of chaplains' services to the prisons is delegated to one of the Lutheran diaconal centers. In response to an order by the Prime Minister, the center carries out this responsibility in a way that does not discriminate against non-Lutherans.

There also are other laws and regulations that directly or indirectly regulate individual and collective freedom of religion. The 1993 law on churches and religious organizations requires that all religious organizations have at least 12 members and register with the Religious Affairs Department under the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MIA). Leaders of religious organizations must be citizens with at least 5 years residence in the country. The minutes of the constitutive meeting, a copy of statutes, and a notarized copy of three founders' signatures serve as supporting documents to the registration application.

Former President Lennart Meri refused to promulgate a revised law from June 2001 on churches and congregations that contained a provision barring the registry of any church or union of congregations whose permanent or temporary administrative or economic management is performed by a leader or institution situated outside Estonia, declaring, in part, that it constituted an intrusion into the sphere of autonomy of religious institutions. In February 2002, Parliament adopted unanimously a revised Law on Churches and Religious Organizations with amendments, which removed the earlier disputed provision. On February 27, 2002, President Arnold Ruutel promulgated the law. It took effect on July 1, 2002.

On April 17, 2002, the MIA registered the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), and ended a series of disputes over the registration of the name the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. In 1993 the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC)—independent since 1919, subordinate to Constantinople since 1923, and exiled under the Soviet occupation—re-registered under its 1935 statute. A group of ethnic Russian and Estonian parishes that preferred to remain under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church structure imposed during the Soviet occupation attempted, unsuccessfully, to claim the EAOC name. In May 2001, the MIA had declined to approve an application by representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate, explaining that it could not formally register this church under its desired name as it would be confused too easily with the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church.

A program of basic Christian ecumenical religious instruction is available in public schools. In primary school parents decide whether their children will participate in these religious studies; at the secondary level, pupils decide if they will attend these classes. Comparative religious studies are available in public and private schools on an elective basis. There are no official statistics on how many students participate in these classes. There are two private church schools that have a religious-based curriculum, both in Tartu.

The property restitution process largely has been completed. The specific details of EOCMP registration have significant implications for which branch of the Orthodox Church may receive legal title to church property. By the end of the reporting period, most church properties, including those being used by the EOCMP, have been under the legal control of the EAOC. Once the EOCMP registered and acquired the legal capacity of a juridical person, it then obtained the right to initiate court proceedings to gain de jure control over the properties that it has used on a de facto basis with the permission of the EAOC. On October 4, 2002, the Government and the two churches concluded a protocol of intentions according to which the EAOC would transfer a part of its property presently used by the EOCMP to the state. The state in turn will lease it to the EOCMP for 50 years. Aleksander Nevski Cathedral is owned by the city of Tallinn and rented out to its Russian Orthodox congregation on a several decade lease basis. According to local Jewish leaders, property restitution is not an issue for the community, as most prewar religious buildings were rented, not owned.

Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas day, Pentecost, and Boxing Day are national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 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. Although the majority of citizens are nominally Lutheran, ecumenical services during national days, Christian holidays, or at public events are common. Tension between ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian populations, which have been on the decline in recent years, generally does not extend to religious matters.

Most of the religious adherents among the country's Russian-speaking population are Orthodox, while the Estonian majority is predominantly Lutheran. There is a deep-seated tradition of tolerance of other denominations and religions. Although citizens are generally tolerant of new religions and foreign missionaries, some groups that are regarded widely as "cults" cause apprehension.

Two churches were vandalized during the period covered by this report. Earlier thefts of church property prompted the Estonian Council of Churches and the Board of Antiquities to initiate a database of items under protection. The database, which is comprised of digital photos and detailed descriptions, will be shared with law enforcement agencies as needed.

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. Officials of the U.S. Embassy met regularly during the period covered by this report with appropriate government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and a wide range of figures in religious circles.

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