

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Estonia

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ESTONIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

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

The 1993 Law on Churches and Religious Organizations requires all religious organizations to have at least 12 members and to be registered with the Interior Ministry and the Board of Religion. Leaders of religious organizations must be citizens with at least 5 years' residence in Estonia. A new law on churches and congregations, introduced early in 1999, has been tabled in light of the recent parliamentary elections. The proposed legislation reflects a general reform trend in Estonian law to simplify and clarify existing procedures. Parliamentary working groups are expected to begin meeting in July 1999 to rework the legislation, which is expected to be enacted in 2000. Although some U.S. missionaries had expressed concerns that a previous version of the legislation gave preferential treatment to the larger, established religious communities in the country, an examination of the new proposed legislation reveals it does not provide preferential treatment to any church or group of churches.

The majority of citizens are nominally Lutheran, and there is a large Orthodox community. A broad range of other creeds and beliefs make up a small but growing segment of the religious community. However, 40 years of communism diminished the role of religion in Estonian society. Many new neighborhoods built since the war do not have religious centers, and many of the surviving churches require extensive renovations. Church attendance, which had seen a surge coinciding with the independence movement in the early 1990's, now has plunged. Anecdotal evidence, garnered from local churches, indicates a 65 percent decrease in registered confirmations, for example.

In 1998 there were an estimated 165 congregations of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and over 80 Orthodox congregations, with 39 belonging to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (E-AOC), 30 to the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia, and 11 to the Union of Estonian Old Believer congregations. Lutherans and Orthodox believers account for the majority of believers. Nonetheless, there are smaller communities of Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic and other Christian denominations. There is an active, if small, Jewish community. There are also communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and many other denominations and faiths. However, each of these minority faiths has less than 6,000 adherents. The 2000 census will, for the first time, attempt to account for all religious groups, as well as atheists.

Many groups have sent foreign missionaries into Estonia; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) being the largest. During the period covered by this report, the Church overcame numerous bureaucratic and technical obstacles and obtained residence permits for its missionaries.

Persons of varying ethnic backgrounds profess Orthodoxy, including communities of Russian Old Believers who found refuge in Estonia in the 17th century. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAO), independent since 1919, subordinate to Constantinople since 1923, and exiled under the Soviet occupation, reregistered under its 1935 statute in August 1993. Since then, a group of ethnic Russian and Estonian parishes preferring to remain under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church structure imposed during the Soviet occupation has insisted that it should have claim to the EAO name but has been unable to register under the same name. Representatives of the Moscow and Constantinople Patriarchates reached an agreement in May 1999 that the Moscow Patriarchate would register under a new name. The new name is expected to be submitted in July 1999. Much of the controversy between the EAO and the Orthodox Church has centered on property issues. In June 1999 the State and the Moscow Patriarchate reached a tentative agreement on the use of the Nevski Cathedral and Kuremae monastery. The Moscow Patriarchate agreed to allow the monastery to be registered as state property, after which the State would either donate or rent the property back to the Moscow Patriarchate. Throughout the dispute, free worship has occurred in practice. The dispute over whether the Orthodox Church should be subject to Moscow or Constantinople had taken on political overtones, as sensitivities remain from the 40-year Soviet occupation.

There is a process whereby religious and lay property is restored to its pre-Soviet occupation owners. In some cases properties are claimed by more than one group, complicating restitution efforts. The procedure for reclaiming property is generally considered fair but often is slow and bureaucratic.

A program of basic ecumenical religious instruction is available to public schools. However, public school participation presently exists in only 55 schools, with approximately 2,600 students participating. Those students in the 55 schools offering this ecumenical instruction who do not wish to participate have the option to take alternative courses. Private schools are allowed to provide religious instruction as well.

Government officials have voiced concerns about extremist religious groups establishing themselves in Estonia. The Director of the Religious Affairs Department under the Ministry of Interior Affairs expressed his concern about Satanists planning to register their sect with the Government in accordance with the Law on Churches and Religious Organizations.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion 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 II. Societal Attitudes