



2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Latvia

Executive Summary

The constitution provides every person the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and specifies the separation of church and state. By law, eight “traditional” religious groups receive rights and privileges that other groups do not. Religious groups registered for fewer than 10 years must reregister every year. The government restituted five World War II (WW II)-era Jewish communal properties. The leader of the Islamic community attributed a delay in the opening of a new prayer center to discrimination by the Riga City Council Construction Board and said police continued to monitor its members’ activity. A senior lawmaker employed anti-Semitic stereotypes in an interview with a local radio station. President Raimonds Vejonis spoke out against anti-Semitism and xenophobia at a Holocaust memorial ceremony.

An annual march commemorating Latvians who fought in the Grenadier Divisions of the Waffen SS against the Soviet Red Army took place without incident in March. There was a small counter-protest to the march organized by local, Kremlin-backed Russian activists and a German anti-fascist group. Jewish community leaders stated there were instances of anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet but reported none to police. The Muslim community cited instances of hate speech on the internet.

The U.S. embassy engaged government officials on the importance of restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community, religious tolerance, and Holocaust education. It also discussed with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives of religious groups the role they could play in promoting religious tolerance. The embassy funded a history teacher’s trip to the U.S. for a training program to foster Holocaust education and continued to sponsor a Holocaust education program for high school students.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the largest denominations are Lutheran (37 percent), who live throughout the country, Roman Catholic (21 percent), who live predominantly in the east, and Latvian Orthodox Christians (19 percent), who are predominantly native Russian speakers. The Latvian Orthodox Church is a self-governing Eastern Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Office of Migration and Citizenship estimates approximately 8,600 persons identify as Jews, while the Council of Jewish Communities believes there are as many as 11,000 people with Jewish heritage. The Islamic community reports approximately 1,000 practicing

Muslims, while the MOJ Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities lists 337 members. Other religious groups, which together constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, evangelical Christians, Methodists, Calvinists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states everyone has the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” and “the church shall be separate from the state.” It allows restrictions on the expression of religious beliefs in order to protect public safety, welfare, morals, the democratic structure of the state, and others’ rights. The law gives eight “traditional” religious groups – Lutherans, Catholics, Latvian Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews – some rights and privileges not given to other religious groups, including the right to teach religion courses in public schools and the right to officiate at marriages without obtaining a civil marriage license from the MOJ. These eight groups are also the only religious groups represented on the government Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body established by law and chaired by the prime minister that meets on an ad hoc basis to comment and provide recommendations on religious issues. These recommendations do not carry the force of law.

Separate laws define relations between the state and each of these eight groups. The rights and activities of other religious groups are covered by the law on religious organizations.

Although the government does not require religious groups to register, the law accords registered religious groups a number of rights and privileges, including legal status to own property and conduct financial transactions, eligibility to apply for funds for religious building restoration, and tax deductions for donors. Registration also allows religious groups to perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units and hold services in public places such as parks or public squares with the agreement of the local government. The law accords the same rights and privileges to the eight “traditional” religious groups without requiring them to register. These groups are only required to submit annual reports on their activities to the MOJ. Unregistered groups do not possess legal status and may not own property, conduct financial transactions, or receive tax-free donations. They may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units, and generally may not hold worship services in public places without special permission. The law stipulates fines if an unregistered group carries out any of these activities.

The law stipulates that, in order to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members over the age of 18. Individuals with temporary residency status, such as asylum seekers and foreign diplomatic staff, may count as members for the purpose of registration only during the authorized period of their residency permits. To apply, religious groups must submit statutes stipulating their aims and tasks; a list of all group members (full name, identification number, and signature); minutes of the meeting founding the group; confirmation that members voted on and approved the statutes; a list of members of the audit committee (full name, identification number, and title), which is responsible for preparing financial reports on the group and ensuring it adheres

to its statutes; and the names of the persons who will represent the religious organization. The MOJ determines whether to register a religious group as a congregation. The ministry may deny an application if it deems registration would threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, or public safety, welfare, or morals. Groups denied registration may appeal the decision in court.

10 or more congregations – totaling at least 200 members – of the same faith or denomination, each with permanent registration status, may form a religious association or church. Groups with religious association status, or status as a private society or foundation, may establish theological schools or monasteries. The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association of a single faith or denomination, or of more than one religious group with the same or similar name. For example, the law prevents any association other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word “orthodox” in its name. Independent Orthodox groups, such as Old Believers, are registered as separate religious associations.

The law requires religious groups registered for fewer than 10 years to reregister every year. Reregistration requires an MOJ evaluation of the group’s activities in the previous year and submission of the same documentation as first-time registrants.

According to the law, all registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the MOJ by March 1 regarding their activities and goals. They must additionally provide other data, including congregation size, the number of clergy, the number of weddings and other ceremonies performed, and details of group governance and financial status.

The law criminalizes hate speech and the incitement of hatred on the basis of religious affiliation, but requires legal proof, determined at trial, of substantial harm. Penalties range from community service to up to 10 years of imprisonment. Committing a crime for religious reasons may also be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The government provides funding for religion and ethics classes in public schools. The school must receive the approval of the parents of at least 10 students in order to hold religion classes; if such approval is not obtained, students take courses on general ethics. The Center for Educational Content at the Ministry of Education must review the content of the classes to verify they do not violate freedom of conscience. First- to third-grade public school students must take either a class on religious beliefs or an ethics class; for older students, religious subjects are incorporated into elective ethics and social science classes. If there is a demand, schools are permitted to teach classes on the history of religion. Students at state-supported national minority schools may attend classes on a voluntary basis on the religion “characteristic of the national minority.” Other religious groups without their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Religion courses in public schools range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved government-certified instructors (usually at the lower grades), to nondenominational Christian teachings or overviews of major world religions by certified teachers suggested by a religious group and approved by the Ministry of Education (usually at higher grades).

The law establishes an independent ombudsman’s office for human rights. Its mandate includes helping to resolve cases of religious discrimination through collaboration with authorities. While it does not have enforcement powers, it can issue recommendations to specific authorities.

The law permits halal and kosher slaughter.

The law stipulates foreign missionaries may be issued a residency permit, hold meetings, and proselytize only if invited by registered a domestic religious group to conduct such activities. Visa regulations require foreign religious workers to present letters of invitation, typically from a religious organization, and either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Eight religious groups applied to register for the first time during the year and the government approved all eight applications. In October the Riga District Administrative Court ruled against an appeal by The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (Pastafarians) of the government's 2015 denial of its registration application. The court ruled that the Church's teachings and ideas were based on disdain and ridicule of other religious beliefs, which could be perceived as offensive. The MOJ approved all registration renewals.

On February 25, parliament voted to return to the Jewish community five communal properties confiscated during WW II. The Council of Jewish Communities, an umbrella organization representing the majority of Jews, established a foundation to receive the properties and determine how to use the properties for the benefit of community members. The Council stated it regarded this legislation as a first step toward addressing the restitution of remaining Jewish communal property and cited approximately 270 unresolved claims for communal property confiscated during the Soviet era. Government ministries stated the number was significantly lower. Members of parliament (MPs) who worked on the bills to return the five Jewish properties told the media additional restitution legislation was unlikely during the current session of parliament. The Jewish community and the government continued discussions to negotiate a resolution of unresolved claims. These claims remained unresolved because there had been no formal body to file Jewish communal claims until the establishment of the Council of Jewish Communities in 2003, after the window for filing restitution claims had closed. There were no reports of outstanding property restitution claims by other religious groups.

Beginning in February the Riga City Construction Board delayed the opening of a new prayer center for the Islamic Cultural Centre in Latvia (ICCL) due to what it said was a failure to meet fire and safety requirements. The leader of the ICCL stated the delays were unwarranted and constituted discrimination. The prayer center had not yet opened at year's end.

The leader of the ICCL, Janis Hamza Lucins, said police continued to monitor its members' activities, but he did not view this as discrimination or a violation of their rights. According to the Security Police report for 2015, a threat assessment published in May, police continued to monitor the ICCL after its former leader traveled to Syria or Iraq to join ISIS in 2015.

The 2015 Security Police Report continued to cite concerns about the potential radicalization of the country's Muslims as a result of ties between the ICCL and organizations in Persian Gulf countries. As in previous years, the report stated the threat of terrorism within the country remained low but cited a slight increase in the number of people who left the country to fight for ISIS.

In October Riga District Court found a man guilty of hate speech against Muslims and sentenced him to 140 hours of community service. In 2015, the defendant posted a comment to an online news article about a Muslim Latvian woman who wore a niqab, stating “I would burn people like this who spit on their nationality like witches during the inquisition.”

Speaking to a Russian language radio station, a senior lawmaker from the governing political coalition stated Jews “mostly of a very smart ethnicity with lawyers [among them]” were skillful in operating “on the edge” of the law to avoid being charged with violating the criminal code related to challenging the country’s independence. The lawmaker apologized for the remarks and a subsequent parliamentary ethics committee investigation found he had not breached the code of ethics.

The Ecclesiastical Council, composed of members of the eight “traditional” religious groups, met once to discuss government financing for reconstruction of historical buildings and the establishment of a university faculty of Catholic theology in the 2017 budget.

Government officials, including President Vejonis, Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis, and Parliamentary Speaker Inara Murniece, Jewish community representatives, and others attended the annual July 4 Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga, held at the former location of the Choral Synagogue, to mark the 75th anniversary of its destruction by the Nazis, who burned it down with approximately 20 people trapped inside in 1941. In his speech, President Vejonis reminded the public that the Holocaust was a tragedy for both Jews and Latvians, and called for the eradication of anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

President Vejonis and other senior government officials regularly met with Jewish groups to discuss Holocaust issues, property restitution, and cooperation efforts between the government and the Jewish community.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On March 16, an annual march took place commemorating Latvians who fought in the Grenadier Divisions of the Waffen SS against the Soviet Red Army in World War II. Approximately 800 people, including veterans and their families, several MPs, and members of the All for Latvia Party, attended the march. In addition, approximately a dozen activists, whom organizers considered to be ultranationalist and had requested not to participate in the event, laid flowers at the Freedom Monument at the end of the ceremony. Observers stated that, despite the presence of these activists and a small counterprotest (approximately 30 counterdemonstrators) organized by local Kremlin-backed Russian activists and a German anti-fascist group, according to security police, the procession was peaceful. The Cabinet of Ministers agreed that none of its members would participate in the event. Organizers characterized the annual march as a commemoration of Latvian national identity and remembrance of those who fought for independence, rather than as a glorification of Nazism. Efraim Zuroff, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s office in Jerusalem,

commented after observing the march that people who fought for Nazi Germany should not be honored, citing the role of the Waffen SS in some of the worst atrocities of the Nazi regime.

The ombudsman and the MOJ stated they did not receive any requests to investigate anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim incidents during the year. Jewish community leaders stated there were instances of anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet, mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments on news articles, although none were reported to police.

The Muslim community reported incidents of hate speech on the internet, mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments on news articles. In September ICCL head Lucins said “Islamophobia” existed, but it stemmed primarily from a more general anti-immigrant sentiment, and that the community, which consisted primarily of Latvian converts to Islam, did not encounter problems with discrimination.

According to a 2014 survey from the Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre SKDS, 53 percent of Latvians held negative attitudes towards members of the Muslim community.

A representative of the ICCL told journalists that a “sense of alienation” could be a reason some Latvian Muslims had left for Syria to join ISIS. According to the security police, fewer than 10 Latvians had traveled to Syria to join ISIS. Worshippers at the Riga Mosque told the media that radicalization was strongly discouraged.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers engaged in regular discussions with government officials, primarily at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education, and with members of parliament, on the importance of restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community, religious tolerance, and Holocaust education.

The embassy met with leaders of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, the Jewish community, the Mormon community, and NGOs, including the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Safe House, to discuss the role they could play in advancing religious tolerance.

The embassy funded a history teacher’s trip to the United States for a teacher training program to foster Holocaust education. The embassy also funded a Holocaust education program, the traveling exhibition “No Child’s Play,” and the Zanis Lipke Museum’s exhibition on a Latvian family that saved Jews from the Nazis during World War II. In January to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the embassy screened the award-winning Holocaust remembrance documentary *Paper Clips* in three different cities across the country, and engaged with high school students on the country’s own Holocaust history.
