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[Countries & Regions](#) | [International Topics & Issues](#) | [History, Education & Culture](#)
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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 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 land area of 28,266 square miles and a population of 1.4 million inhabitants (65 percent ethnic Estonian, 35 percent Russian speaking). The majority of citizens are nominally Lutheran, and there is a large Christian 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 society. Many new neighborhoods built since World War II 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 1990s, now has decreased significantly. Anecdotal evidence from local Lutheran churches, indicates a 76 percent decrease in registered confirmations in that faith between 1990 and 2000.

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church is the largest denomination, with 165 congregations and approximately 177,230 members as of May 15, 2001. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church has 59 congregations and the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, has 27 congregations. Persons of varying ethnic backgrounds profess Orthodoxy. Lutherans and Orthodox Christians account for the majority of believers. There are smaller communities of Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Estonian Old Believers, and other Christian denominations. There is a small Jewish community. 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.

The country's small Jewish community was decimated during the Nazi occupation. It now numbers 2,500 members. In December 2000, the country's only synagogue was opened in the Jewish school facility.

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

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom*Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels generally protects 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, in response to an order by the Prime Minister, the coordination of

chaplains' services to the prisons is delegated to one of the Lutheran diaconal centers. However, 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 all religious organizations to have at least 12 members and to 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 for the registration application. On June 13, 2001, Parliament adopted a revised law 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. Both the Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, and the Estonian Council of Churches expressed concern that such wording could prevent the registry of churches and congregations that traditionally had been active in the country. On June 29, President Lennaert Meri refused to promulgate the law, declaring, in part, that it constituted an intrusion into the sphere of autonomy of religious institutions.

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

A program of basic Christian ecumenical religious instruction is available to public schools. Religious studies in public and private schools are an elective subject both for pupils and for teachers. In the primary classes parents decide about whether their children will participate in religious studies; at the gymnasium level pupils decide this independently. However, public school participation presently exists in only 41 schools, with approximately 1,820 students participating. Additionally, there are two small private church schools that have a religion-based curriculum.

The property restitution process largely has been completed except for those properties disputed by the two main branches of the Christian Orthodox faith. In a few local cases, church properties have been claimed by more than one Christian group, complicating and slowing restitution efforts. The most notable of these involves two competing hierarchies of the Christian Orthodox faith. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC), 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 that prefer to remain under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church structure imposed during the Soviet occupation has insisted, unsuccessfully, that it should have claim to the EAOC name. In January 2001, representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate submitted an official church registration application under the name of the "Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate" to the MIA. On May 21, 2001, the MIA declined to approve the application, 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. The unregistered status of the church makes negotiations on and the settlement of the issue of the ownership of the Aleksander Nevski Cathedral, a prominent and valuable Tallinn landmark, problematic. The Cathedral currently is owned by the city of Tallinn and rented out to its Russian Orthodox congregation on a several decade lease basis. This dispute over whether the Orthodox Church should be subject to Moscow or Constantinople has taken on political overtones, as sensitivities remain from the 40-year Soviet occupation. According to local Jewish leaders, property restitution is not an issue for the community, as most prewar religious buildings were rented, not owned.

As of June 30, the Satanists, who earlier announced that they would seek to register with the Religious Affairs Department, have not applied for registration. MIA officials initially reacted with concern to the prospect of a registration application from this group. However, they more recently have viewed it as an indication of the group's intention to abide with the laws and government guidelines.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The Churches and Congregations Act decrees that the commanding officer of each military unit shall ensure conscripts the opportunity to practice their religion. However, it is not clear whether or how this freedom is implemented in practice. The military chaplaincy is delegated by an order of the Prime Minister to an organization operated by the Lutheran Church.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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. Although the majority of citizens are nominally Lutheran, ecumenical services during national days, Christian holidays, or at public events are common. Tension between the ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian populations generally does not extend to religious matters; however, the hierarchical dispute and legal conflict over church property does result in some resentment on the part of Christian Orthodox believers belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate (see Section II).

Although persons of varying ethnic backgrounds profess Christian Orthodoxy, 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.

On November 1, 2000 (All Soul's Day), over 100 grave sites were destroyed in a cemetery in Tartu. Police attribute the crime to Satanists.

While no churches were victimized in 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 on items under protection. The database, which is comprised of digital photos and detailed descriptions, is expected to be shared with law enforcement agencies as needed.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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. Embassy officials met with representatives of both sides in the dispute between the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church.

[End]

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