



[\[Print Friendly Version\]](#)

33

Latvia

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

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 denominational 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 an estimated 6,000 persons.

As of February, the Justice Ministry had registered 1098 congregations. This total included: Lutheran (307), Roman Catholic (252), Orthodox (117), Baptist (90), Old Believer Orthodox (67), Seventh-day Adventist (47), Jehovah's Witnesses (12), Methodist (12), Jewish (13), Buddhist (5), Muslim (5), Hare Krishna (10), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (3), and more than 100 other congregations. In 2003 the Government also registered the Christian Scientists as a recognized religious congregation.

Interest in religion has increased markedly since independence. However, a large percentage of these adherents do not practice their faith regularly. In 2002 Churches provided the following estimates of church membership to the Justice Ministry: Lutherans (400,000), Roman Catholics (500,000), Orthodox (300,000), Baptists (6,000), Old Believer Orthodox (70,000), Seventh-day Adventists (4,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (2,000), Methodists (500), Jews (6,000), Buddhists (100), Muslims (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, non-citizen, permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

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. 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 20 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 may not 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.

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. For example, Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than as Latvian or Russian.

December 25 is celebrated as Christmas and is a recognized national holiday. Good Friday and Easter Monday also are national holidays. The Orthodox Church wants the Government to recognize Orthodox Christmas, but the government had not adopted this plan by the end of the period covered by this report.

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.

There are three councils that comment on religious issues for the Government. The New Religions Consultative Council consists of doctors, academics, and the independent human rights ombudsman. It meets on an "ad hoc" basis and offers opinions on specific issues, but it does not have decision-making authority. The Traditional Religion Council aims at facilitating greater ecumenical communication, discussing matters of common concern and improving dialogue between the traditional faiths and the Government. In the past, it has convened monthly, but it is now being replaced by a new organization called the Ecclesiastical Council. This new council was organized by the previous Prime Minister in 2002 and is chaired by either the sitting Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister. It includes representatives from the major churches: Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Orthodox, Jewish, Adventist, Methodist, and Old Believers.

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 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. While the Government generally was

cooperative in assisting to resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers, problems still persist. An American religious worker is appealing the denial of a visa in 2002 to the European court of Human Rights. The Government has allowed the religious worker to remain in the country during the appeal.

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 Government 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. The Government was debating whether or not to mandate Christian religious instruction (parents would have the opportunity to opt for ethics class instead) in primary schools by the end of the period covered by this report.

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. Ecumenism still is a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude towards the concept. Although government officials encourage a broader understanding and acceptance of newer religions, suspicions remain towards newer nontraditional faiths.

The Latvian Historical Commission, under the sponsorship of President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, has continued to promote Holocaust awareness throughout all elements of society. In 2003 a commission to honor Zanis Lipke, a Latvian who helped save dozens of Riga Jews during World War II, formed to develop a memorial.

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, including the Director of the Office of Religious Affairs, human rights nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries. The Embassy's Consular Section also held regular discussions with local immigration authorities and section meetings with the Department of Religious Affairs.

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, and is supporting the Zanis Lipke memorial project and a mass graves research effort organized by the Jewish Museum in Riga.

Embassy officials maintain an open and productive dialog with the Government's Director of the Office of Religious Affairs. Embassy officials also meet regularly with visiting missionary groups as well as representatives of different religious confessions, both Latvian and foreign. Problems that members of certain minority religions have experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits often are discussed. Embassy contacts

believe that the denial of a visa to an American religious worker was not religiously motivated. The Government has allowed the religious worker to remain in the country during the appeal.

Released on December 18, 2003

[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.