

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

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LITHUANIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the Government respects this right in practice. There is no state religion.

The Law on Religious Communities was passed in 1995. It grants religious communities, associations, and centers property rights to prayer houses, homes, and other buildings and permits construction necessary for their activities. Article 5 of this law mentions nine religious communities that have been declared "traditional" by the law and therefore are eligible for governmental assistance: Latin Rite Catholics; Greek Rite Catholics; Evangelical Lutherans; Evangelical Reformers; Orthodox; Old Believers; Jews; Sunni Muslims; and Karaites. Other religious communities are not eligible for financial assistance from the Government, but there are no restrictions on their activities or property rights.

Relations between the Government and the officially-registered Jewish community are good. In May 1999, the Minister of Justice finally registered the Hasidic Chabad Lubavich community as a traditional religious organization. The Ministry of Justice had argued that the Chabad Lubavich was not a part of Lithuania's historical, spiritual, or social heritage and therefore could not be registered as traditional (Article 5 of the Law on Religious Communities and Associations). The Ministry had also stated that the Chabad Lubavich did not have a continuity of traditions and was a separate branch of Judaism than that followed by the traditional Lithuanian Jewish religious community. Furthermore, it noted that the Hasidic movement only began in Lithuania in the 18th century and had been suspended twice. The Chabad Lubavich community successfully countered that the suspension of its activity during the war years and subsequently was imposed by Nazi and Soviet occupiers. The community also protested the disassociation of the Hasidic movement from Judaism. The Chabad Lubavich continued to press for recognition as a traditional religion and obtained registration in May 1999. The inability to register did not have a direct impact on Chabad Lubavich activities; the Chabad Lubavich operates a school (kindergarten through 12th grade), a social center, and a kosher kitchen.

Karaites, while not unique to Lithuania, exist in few other locations in the world. They are considered by some to be a sect of Judaism; their religion is based exclusively on the Old Testament. Two houses of worship (known singularly as "kenesa"), in Vilnius and Trakai, serve the Karaite religious community of approximately 250 members. The Karaites have been in the country since 1397. Considered as well to constitute a distinct ethnic group--Karaites speak a Turkic-based language and use the Hebrew alphabet--their community president is also their only religious leader.

The Catholic Church is predominant. Although official statistics do not exist, it is believed that over 90 percent of citizens consider themselves to be Catholic, about 5 percent consider themselves to be Orthodox, and the remainder follow other beliefs listed above. In general, Orthodox are concentrated in the east along the border with Belarus. Lutherans are more concentrated to the southwest, towards Russia's Kaliningrad region and Lithuania's Baltic Sea coast. Other faiths are distributed more evenly throughout the country.

Foreign missionary groups, including Baptists, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses, operate in the country, and their activities are not restricted.

According to the Constitution, state and local teaching and education establishments are secular. At the request of parents, schools can offer classes in religious instructions. In practice, parents can choose classes in religious instruction or classes in ethics for nonreligious education.

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

There are generally amicable relations between the various religious communities, although members of religious minorities occasionally are subject to acts of intolerance, such as insults.

Ten percent of the population before World War II were Jewish. Over 200,000 Jews (about 95 percent of that population) were killed in the Holocaust. The country still is reconciling itself with its past and working to understand it better. President Valdas Adamkus established a historical commission in August 1998 to investigate both the crimes of the Holocaust and the subsequent Soviet occupation. However, a certain level of anti-Semitic sentiment persists in the country.

In 1998 Jewish community leaders expressed their concern regarding desecration at the cemetery in Kaunas and at a monument marking a former cemetery site in Vilnius. Although authorities responded promptly in both cases, no witnesses were found and no charges were brought.

On January 23, 1998, Lithuanian Fascist Youth activist Vidmantas Gulbinas was sentenced in the port city of Klaipeda to 3 years of incarceration at a hard labor facility for "malignant hooliganism" in connection with, among other charges, desecration of Jewish cemetery in 1995. This was the first such conviction since Lithuanian independence was restored in 1990.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy maintains a close and regular dialog on religious issues with senior officials in the Government, Members of Parliament, and presidential advisors, as well as contact with religious leaders.

The Embassy had been involved for several years in support of the Hasidic Chabad Lubavich community's efforts to be registered as a traditional religious organization. In part as a result of the Embassy's involvement, the Minister of Justice registered the Chabad Lubavich community as a traditional religious organization in May 1999. It was evident that the Chabad Lubavich community, which had documented its presence in the country since the 18th century and had proved its ownership of a synagogue (destroyed during World War II), merited such status.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy's democracy commission funded a number of projects with the goal of promoting greater religious tolerance, particularly those related to building broader understanding of the Holocaust. These projects include publications detailing the stories of citizens who helped to rescue Jews and seminars discussing the role of significant Jews in Lithuanian history.

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