

2023 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. It allows restrictions on the expression of religious beliefs to protect public safety, welfare, morals, the democratic structure of the state, and the rights of others. By law, eight “traditional” religious groups (seven Christian groups and Jews) receive rights and privileges other groups do not.

In April, the government passed a compulsory conscription law allowing civilian alternatives to military service to those who cannot perform regular military duties because of religious, ideological, or other reasons. The law stipulates the service must be performed in one of the institutions within the Ministry of Defense system.

During the year, the Enterprise Registry, which registers religious organizations, terminated the activities of seven religious organizations for failure to submit required reports on their activities. The Enterprise Registry approved the registration of four new religious groups.

As of year’s end, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church had not responded to the Latvian Orthodox Church’s (LOC) 2022 request for autocephaly. In August, while filming a LOC service for broadcast and discovering a priest praying for Patriarch Kirill, the editorial board of state-owned Latvian Television (LTV) decided not to broadcast the service and suspended future broadcasts of LOC services through the end of the year. The editorial board determined the priest’s actions were a contravention of assurances from the Ecumenical Media Council Foundation (EMCF) that LOC services recorded for broadcast would not include intercessions for Patriarch Kirill.

The Prosecutor General’s Office investigated alleged human rights abuses by Jehovah’s Witnesses and said the group’s activities could be terminated should they “threaten the democratic state order, state security, public security or order, as well as the health and morals of other persons.” In an unrelated development, Jehovah’s Witnesses said they had concerns regarding the compulsory conscription law passed in April because it requires that alternative civilian service be performed under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense.

During a May interview with the *Jerusalem Post* while in Israel, Riga City Council Deputy Chair Linda Ozola said there was no antisemitism in the country. She discussed a plan for a Holocaust museum in Riga that would not only focus on the past but also look to the future and what Jews can contribute to the country. On July 4, then president Egils Levits and other senior government officials attended the public Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga. Riga Mayor Martins Stakis posted to Twitter “On July 4, Latvia mourns the victims of the Holocaust. 70,000 Latvian Jews were killed during the Holocaust. We lost an entire culture.” Some hate speech characterized as racist or anti-Muslim continued to appear on social media and the internet during the year. After the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, Jewish leaders said they did not experience antisemitic hate speech. There were, however, reports of antisemitic texts and threats directed at international Israeli and Jewish students from fellow international Muslim students at Riga Stradins University after the Hamas attack.

U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged with senior government officials and parliamentarians on the importance of religious tolerance. In September, a senior official from the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country and met with officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Justice to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. He also met with representatives from religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Jewish

community, to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. Throughout the year, embassy officials engaged religious representatives to discuss religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.8 million (midyear 2023). According to the *Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities* published by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), based on 2022 data, the largest religious groups by population share are Lutherans (38 percent), Roman Catholics (18 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christians (14 percent), the latter being predominantly native Russian speakers. Twenty-nine percent of the population is not affiliated with any religious group. The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs reports there are 7,383 persons who identify as Jewish. The Muslim community reports there are approximately 1,000 Muslims resident in the country, while the MOJ's report of religious organizations lists 224 active members in 10 Muslim congregations. Separately, there is a small Ahmadiyya Muslim community. Other religious groups that together constitute 17 percent of the population include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, evangelical Christians, Methodists, Calvinists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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 provides for the separation of church and state. It allows restrictions on the expression of religious beliefs 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 organizations are also the only religious groups represented on the government’s 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 the eight groups. The rights and activities of other religious groups are covered by the Law on Religious Organizations.

The law states that the activities of a religious organization may be terminated by a court ruling if the group acts in conflict with the constitution and other regulatory laws. Activities may also be terminated if a religious organization calls on others to disobey the law or if its activities endanger the democratic state system, public peace and order, or the health and morals of others. The Law on Religious Organizations, amended in 2022, provides that the Enterprise Register of the Republic of Latvia may terminate the activities of a religious organization if it cannot be reached at its legal address, does not submit the report on its activities as required by law, or fails to ensure the right of representation for the management bodies of the organization.

According to a law passed in 2022, the LOC – a self-governing Eastern Orthodox Church – is de jure independent from any church outside the country.

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 to 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, which it treats as already registered.

Unregistered groups do not possess legal status and may not own property in the name of the group, although individual members may hold property that the group uses for religious purposes. Unregistered groups may not conduct financial transactions or receive tax-free donations. They also may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, or military installations and generally may not hold worship services in public places without special permission. The law stipulates fines ranging from €40 to €200 (\$44 to \$220) if an unregistered group carries out any of these activities.

By law, to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members who are 18 or older. 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 charters explaining their objectives and activities; a list of all group members (full name, identification number, and signature); the names of the persons who will represent the religious organization; minutes of the meeting founding the group; confirmation that members voted on and approved the statutes; and a list of members of the audit committee (full name, identification number, and title). The audit committee is responsible for preparing financial reports on the group and ensuring it adheres to its statutes. The Enterprise Register determines whether to register a religious group as a congregation, in consultation with the Ministry of Justice. The Enterprise Register 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.

Ten or more congregations with a total of 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 and 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.

According to the law, all traditional and registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the MOJ by March 1 regarding their activities and goals. They must also 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 incitement of hatred based on religious affiliation but requires legal proof, determined at trial, of substantial harm for conviction. Penalties range from community service or fines to up to three years imprisonment. Committing a crime for religious reasons may also be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The new Compulsory Conscription Law permits individuals, based on beliefs, conscience or religious convictions, to perform alternative civilian service to military service. Alternative civilian service must be performed in an institution subordinate to the Ministry of Defense.

The government funds religion and ethics classes in public schools in the first through third grades. A school must receive the approval of the parents of at least 10 students to hold religion classes covering any of the eight traditional groups' faiths. If the school cannot secure the approval of 10 students' parents for a specific religion class, or if a student prefers not to enroll in religion classes at all, the student takes courses on general ethics. The Center for Educational Content at the

Ministry of Education must review the content of the classes to verify the content does not violate freedom of conscience. Starting in fourth grade, religious subjects are incorporated into elective ethics and social science classes. If there is 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 nontraditional 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 who are proposed by a religious group and approved by the Ministry of Education, usually at higher grades. Education guidelines require inclusion of Holocaust education in Latvian history and world history classes, which are mandatory for all students in public schools.

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 may issue recommendations to specific authorities. Parliament appoints the ombudsman.

The law stipulates foreign missionaries may be issued residency permits, hold meetings, and proselytize only if a registered domestic religious group invites them 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. Religious workers from the EU or the 27 Schengen Area countries do not require visas.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

During the year, the Enterprise Register terminated the activity of seven religious organizations – three Lutheran, two evangelical, one Pentecostal, and one Muslim – for failure to submit required reports on their activities after multiple requests. The organizations had the right to appeal the decision, but none had done so by the end of the year.

During the year, the Enterprise Register approved the registration application of four religious groups, a Pentecostal congregation, an evangelical Christian congregation, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the friars of the Discalced Carmelites (under the Catholic Church).

By the end of the year, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church had not responded to the LOC’s request for autocephaly, which the LOC submitted in 2022. Representatives of the LOC said that the decision had to be made by the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, who meet once every four years. Its last meeting took place in July 2022.

In August, while recording an Orthodox service, LTV observed a priest praying for Patriarch Kirill. The LTV Editorial Board announced it would not broadcast the service, since intercession for Patriarch Kirill, who supported Russia’s war in Ukraine, went against LTV’s editorial position. In addition, the law prohibits glorification and support of Russia’s war in Ukraine. LTV broadcasts the services of the major Christian denominations (Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox, and Baptist) every Sunday in accordance with an agreement between LTV and EMCF. The agreement stipulates that the EMCF is responsible for the content’s compliance with the Latvian law. In a meeting with the EMCF after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, LTV received assurance from the EMCF that the services of the LOC recorded for broadcast would not include intercessions for Patriarch Kirill. LTV suspended further broadcasts of Orthodox services through the end of the year.

Following media reports in 2021 and 2022, including from the news portals Kas Jauns and TVNET, alleging human right abuses within Jehovah’s Witnesses communities, the Prosecutor General’s Office investigated the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2022. In April, the Prosecutor General’s

Office notified Jehovah's Witnesses that their activities could be terminated on the basis of a future court ruling should their activities "threaten the democratic state order, state security, public security or order, as well as health and morals of other persons." In June, the Administrative Court overruled Jehovah's Witnesses' appeal in this case. In December 2022, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a lawsuit against Kas Jauns for slander, and in December the Riga City Court overruled their case. In July, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a court case against TVNET news portal for slander. The case was pending at the end of the year.

On April 11, the Cabinet of Ministers approved *The Plan for the Reduction of Racism and Antisemitism 2023* and endorsed the country's application of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. The national action plan includes measures for the prevention of racism and combatting antisemitism to be enshrined in legislation and pursued in practice. The plan was written in coordination with the Ministry of Culture and nongovernmental institutions and based on EU guidelines.

On April 18, then president Levits signed the compulsory military service law; it entered into force on April 19. Such service becomes mandatory for male citizens beginning on January 1, 2024. Jehovah's Witnesses expressed concerns regarding the law. They said even though the law allows individuals to replace military service with an alternative service due to their beliefs, conscience, or religious convictions, the service must be performed for 11 months in institutions subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said they were willing to serve in an alternative service (e.g., in hospitals or firefighting units) but refused to do so under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense. They planned to raise their concerns with the Ministry of Defense and said they expected the new law could affect a handful of their members.

Authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities, according to the annual report of the security police, but they made no interventions during the year. On August 14, criminal proceedings started against a Latvian citizen who converted to Islam and expressed support for a designated terrorist organization. The State Security Service found the individual systemically and purposefully disseminated content praising terrorism and calling for terrorism. The proceeding remained ongoing at year end.

Public funding continued to support Holocaust education in schools.

During a May interview with the *Jerusalem Post* while in Israel, Riga City Council deputy chair Linda Ozola said there was no antisemitism in the country. She discussed a plan for a Holocaust museum in Riga that would not only focus on the past but also look to the future and what Jews can contribute to the country.

On July 4, then president Levits, then Saeima (parliament) speaker Edvards Smiltens, several members of parliament, other government officials, and foreign diplomats attended the public Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga. Riga mayor Martins Stakis posted on Twitter, "On July 4, Latvia mourns the victims of the Holocaust. 70,000 Latvian Jews were killed during the Holocaust. We lost an entire culture." As in past years, officials also held a public event to commemorate the 1941 burning of the Great Choral Synagogue in Riga with victims inside. On November 30, Saeima Speaker Daiga Mierina and Minister of Defense Andris Spruds attended a Rumbula Forest memorial service in memory of approximately 30,000 Jews that the Nazis and Latvian collaborators killed in the forest in 1941.

The annual commemoration of Latvian Legionnaires who fought in German Waffen SS units against the Soviet army in World War II was held in Riga in March. Consistent with turnout in recent years, the event was sparsely attended, with an estimated 350 participants, including four members of parliament from the National Alliance party. Separately, some government officials attended a memorial event at the regimental cemetery in Lestene, as they had in previous years. No Nazi emblems or symbols were evident among the participants.

The country is a member of the IHRA.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Riga Jewish Community Executive Director Gita Umanovska, Jews of Latvia Museum Director Ilya Lensky, and Deputy Chair of the Jewish Council Dmitry Krupnikov said antisemitic hate speech was not an issue even after the October 7 Hamas attacks in Israel. They said Jewish persons in the country felt safe and supported by the public and the government. On October 14, approximately 400 individuals gathered at the Freedom Monument to light candles as part of the “Stand with Israel” campaign. There were, however, reports that international Israeli and Jewish students at Riga Stradins University received hate texts and threats from fellow international Muslim students.

Some hate speech characterized as racist or anti-Muslim appeared on social media and the internet during the year, mostly in individual posts and comments in news articles.

In October, representatives of Christian denominations (except for the Orthodox Church) met with Israeli Ambassador Sharon Rappaport-Palgi and Ukrainian Ambassador Anatolii Kutsevol to express their support for Israel and Ukraine.

On November 30, several hundred persons lit thousands of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga in memory of the approximately 30,000 Jews killed in the 1941 Rumbula Forest massacre.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged in regular discussions with senior government officials, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MOJ, the Office of the Ombudsman, and members of parliament, on the importance of religious freedom in the country. In September, a senior official from the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country. He discussed religious freedom issues with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and MOJ. He also met with representatives from major religious organizations, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Jewish community to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance in the country.

During the year, embassy officials met with representatives from all major religious organizations and the Jewish and Muslim communities to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. Embassy officials met with Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives to discuss their concerns about the prosecutor general’s warning to align their activities with the country’s laws and regulations.

In August and September, with the support of an embassy grant, a Jewish- American writer visited the country to work on her book about her family’s Holocaust experience and participated in public readings at the Zanis Lipke Memorial Museum.