



Litauen (89)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:
Lithuania**

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000

24

22/11-00

LITHUANIA

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice.

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

There are generally amicable relations among the various religious communities, although members of religious minorities occasionally are subject to acts of intolerance. A certain level of anti-Semitic sentiment persists in the country. Nontraditional religious groups face some restrictions. In mid-1999 some U.S. missionary groups had problems with new government procedures for temporary residence permits.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy intervened to assist in the resolution of the residency permit problems of U.S. missionaries.

Section I. 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. There is no state religion.

The Law on Religious Communities and Associations 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. These traditional associations and communities receive annual financial support from the State. Other religious communities are not eligible for financial assistance from the Government, but there are no restrictions on their activities or property rights.

In May 1999, the Seimas (Parliament) amended the Law on Religious Communities and Associations. The amendment provides funding from

the national budget for educational institutions of traditional religious organizations. The Government Department of European Law has warned publicly that this amendment discriminates in favor of traditional religious communities versus nontraditional; the law is expected to come in to effect in 2001.

Relations between the Government and the officially registered Jewish community are good. In May 1999, the Minister of Justice recognized the Hasidic Chabad Lubavich community as a traditional religious organization. The Ministry of Justice previously had argued that the Chabad Lubavich was not a part of the country's historical, spiritual, or social heritage and therefore could not be registered as traditional. The lack of recognition did not have a direct impact on Chabad Lubavich activities but was a sore point in relations with the Government and with other religious groups.

Traditional religious associations and communities are not required to register their bylaws with the Ministry in order to receive legal status. However, nontraditional religious communities have to present an application, a founding statement signed by no less than 15 members, and a description of religious teaching and its aims. The Ministry has to review the documents within 6 months.

Since these laws were enacted, the Ministry of Justice turned down two applications, those of the Osho Ojas Meditation Center and the Lithuanian Pagans Community.

Based on the Law on Procedures for the Restoration of the Rights of Religious Communities to Existing Real Property, all religious communities had enjoyed equal opportunity in regaining control over former property used for conducting religious services. However, although the law provides for the restitution of private property to citizens, the deadline for filing claims has passed. A number of successful claims have been made, and others still are pending. Lack of funds for compensation and protracted bureaucratic obstacles are the primary problems preventing the return of private property. The Government has taken no action on the problem of (community) property without heirs and has no plans to do so.

Religious Demography

The Catholic Church is predominant. In general, the 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.

The Chabad Lubavich operates a school (kindergarten through 12th grade), a social center, and a kosher kitchen in the capital of Vilnius.

Karaites, while not unique to Lithuania, exist in few other locations in the world. They are considered by some to be a branch 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.

In total there were 921 traditional and 165 nontraditional religious associations and communities registered in the country according to the Ministry of Justice.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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. However, several U.S. religious missionary groups complained in mid-1999 to the U.S. Embassy over a change in temporary residency requirements. These groups were having problems with the Government's new procedures (enacted by law in 1999) requiring residency permits for religious workers.

On April 14, 2000, the Government decided to establish an intergovernmental commission to investigate whether the activities of religious, esoteric, or spiritual groups comply with the law. It includes representatives of the Ministries of Justice, Interior, Education, Health, Foreign Affairs, the General Prosecutor's Office, and State Security. The Minister of Justice appoints the chairman of the commission. The commission was established as a response to parliamentarians' calls for increased control of "sects" following negative coverage of some religious groups in the media. The Government defended the move, stating that it had established the commission on the recommendations (No. 1412 and No. 1178) of the Council of Europe.

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

The Law on Religious Communities and Associations provides that only religious instruction of traditional and other state-recognized religious communities may be taught in state educational institutions. However, nontraditional religious communities have the right to establish and have general education schools of their own.

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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 among 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. Two annual conferences were held and one commission report has been filed on the prewar period after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pacts. Other grants have been issued for research on the war and post-war periods. 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.

In 1999 there was increased concern by the country's Jewish communities with regard to anti-Semitic comments made by some politicians. In April 2000, a politician known for making anti-Semitic and derogatory comments towards Jews and foreigners was elected mayor of the country's second largest city, Kaunas.

In April 2000, the Lithuanian Catholic Church apologized for indifference and crimes committed by the Lithuanian people during the Holocaust. The statement included the first recognition by the Lithuanian Church that some Lithuanians participated in the killing and mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust.

A number of ecumenical organizations operate in the country.

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 continual contact with religious leaders. Religious groups use the Embassy as a vehicle to voice their complaints and the Embassy encourages religious leaders to keep the Embassy informed of their views on the status of religious freedom and any complaints.

The Embassy maintains regular contact with U.S. missionary groups. In

late 1999, the Embassy intervened to assist in the resolution of their complaints regarding residency permit procedures.

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.

[end of document]

[Europe and the New Independent States Index](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [International Religious Freedom](#) | [Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) |

