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2022 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. On March 24, parliament amended the Law on Religious Organizations to add additional conditions under which the government may terminate the activities of a religious group.

During the year, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) requested the termination of activities of 17 religious organizations for failure to submit required reports on their activities; one organization appealed. The MOJ approved the registration of one new religious group. On September 8, parliament passed a law stating the Latvian Orthodox Church (LOC) – a self-governing Eastern Orthodox Church – was de jure independent from any churches outside the country. In October, the LOC appealed to Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church to grant the LOC autocephaly. Media outlets reported Patriarch Kirill had not responded by year’s end. According to the annual report of the security police, authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities but made no interventions during the year. In March, the Prosecutor General’s Office initiated an investigation into the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses following local media reports alleging human rights abuses within the organization. An international human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) called the allegations “baseless.” In February, parliament passed and President Egils Levits signed into law a restitution bill providing €40 million (\$42.7 million) to the

Jewish community, to be allocated over the next 10 years to revitalize the community, provide social and material assistance to Holocaust survivors, and fund Jewish schools, building and memorial restoration, and other cultural projects. President Levits and other senior government officials attended several Holocaust memorial events throughout the year.

Jewish and Muslim groups continued to report instances of antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate speech in news articles and on social media. Jehovah's Witnesses said a teacher insulted the faith of a Jehovah's Witness child in school following media reports alleging members of the organization had committed human rights abuses. On November 30, several hundred people lit thousands of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga in remembrance of Jews massacred by the Nazis in Rumbula Forest in 1941.

U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged with senior government officials and parliamentarians on the importance of religious tolerance. Embassy officials and the U.S. Secretary of State praised the country's legislation resolving the issue of Holocaust-era restitution for the Jewish community. Embassy officials also engaged with representatives of all major religious organizations and with the Jewish and Muslim communities as well as the NGOs MARTA Center and Safe House to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.8 million (midyear 2022). According to the *Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities* published by the MOJ, based on 2021 data, the largest religious groups are Lutheran (37 percent), Roman Catholic (19 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christian (13 percent), the latter being predominantly native Russian speakers. Twenty-nine percent of the population is unaffiliated with any religious group. The Central Statistical Bureau reports there are approximately 4,000 persons who identify as Jewish, and the Council of Jewish Communities believes there are approximately 8,000 persons with Jewish heritage. The Muslim community reports approximately 1,000 Muslims resident in the country, while the MOJ's report of religious organizations lists 150 active members in eight Muslim congregations. Separately, there is a small Ahmadiyya Muslim community. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, evangelical Christians, Methodists, Calvinists, and 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 groups 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 these eight groups. The rights and activities of other religious groups are covered by a law on religious organizations.

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 may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, or military units and generally may not hold worship services in public places without special permission. The law stipulates fines ranging from €40 to €200 (\$43 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 MOJ determines whether to register a religious group as a congregation. The ministry may deny an application if it deems registration would threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, 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, number of clergy, number of weddings and other ceremonies performed, and details of group governance and financial status.

The law states that the activities of a religious organization may be terminated on the basis of 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. On March 24, parliament amended the Law on Religious Organizations to provide 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.

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 of imprisonment. Committing a crime for religious reasons may also be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The government funds religion and ethics classes in public schools in first through third grade. 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 it 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 a residency permit, 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 that do not require visas.

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

Government Practices

During the year, the Ministry of Justice requested the termination of activities of 17 religious organizations for failure to submit required reports on their activities after multiple requests. The organizations had the right to appeal the decision. One organization appealed the termination of its activities but had not received a decision by the end of the year.

On November 30, a court rejected the New Generation Organization of the Evangelical Christian Church's appeal seeking to lift a 2021 Prosecutor General's Office injunction against its activities and affirmed the termination of the organization's activities. The Prosecutor General's Office filed the injunction after it determined representatives and members of the organization had committed more than six violations of COVID-19-related public health laws restricting public gatherings.

During the year, the MOJ approved the registration application of one religious group – the Riga Pentecostal Church "True Word of God."

On September 8, parliament passed a law proposed by President Levits stating that the LOC, its dioceses, congregations, and institutions, were de jure independent from any churches outside the country and that the church was to inform the President's Chancellery of appointment or removal from office of the head of the church, metropolitans, archbishops, and bishops. Media outlets reported that President Levits said, "Termination of any connection with the patriarch of Moscow is an important issue for our Orthodox Christians, the entire Latvian society, and national security." The Russian news agency *Interfax* reported on September 6 that the Moscow Patriarchate "expressed outrage at the intention of Latvia's secular authorities to interfere in the affairs of the Latvian Orthodox Church." On October 20, Metropolitan of Riga and All Latvia Alexander Kudryashkov presided over a meeting at which leading LOC clergy and laity voted in favor of sending an appeal to Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church to grant the LOC autocephaly. Media outlets reported Kirill had not responded as of year's end. Orthodox media outlets reported that on December 14, President Levits participated in a meeting with heads of various religious groups titled "State-Church Relations in the Modern World," at which he reaffirmed "state support in strengthening the status of the autocephalous Church."

On March 30, the Prosecutor General's Office released a press statement stating it had initiated an investigation into the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses following local media reports alleging human rights abuses within the organization. The press release came after local news outlet TVNET published a series of articles and, along with national television station LTV1, aired pieces that portrayed the group as "extremist" and reported on criminal accusations against Jehovah's Witnesses members and officials, including accusations of pedophilia, child abuse, domestic violence, misrepresentation, and concealing information about such crimes. In an April 1 statement, the NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) called the TVNET stories "baseless attacks" and said they were "reminiscent of the disinformation that Russia used to ban Jehovah's Witnesses and persecute them." HRWF noted Latvia was one of 12 countries that signed the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance's December 2021 joint statement "uphold[ing] the right of Jehovah's Witnesses to practice their religion and their beliefs and their

ability to adhere to being apolitical and pacifist without fear, harassment, discrimination, or persecution.”

Authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities, according to the annual report of the security police, but they made no interventions during the year.

In February, parliament passed and President Levits signed into law a restitution bill providing €40 million (\$42.7 million) to the Jewish community in lieu of restituting approximately 265 communal and heirless properties seized by the Nazis and Soviets in 1940-1945. By law, the funds must be allocated over the next 10 years to revitalize the country’s Jewish community, provide social and material assistance to residents who are Holocaust survivors, and fund Jewish schools, building and memorial restoration, and other cultural projects. Media outlets reported chairman of the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities Arkady Sukhareenko praised the government’s action, saying, “Finalizing this process demonstrates that even 77 years after the end of the Holocaust, it is never too late for justice.”

Public funding continued to support Holocaust education in schools.

President Levits and other senior government officials, including then Speaker of the Saeima (parliament) Inara Murniece, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, then Defense Minister Artis Pabriks, and Welfare Minister Gatis Eglitis, attended Holocaust memorial events, including International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27 and Latvian Holocaust Memorial Day on July 4. Also on July 4, Riga mayor Martins Stakis posted to Twitter, “The Holocaust is our common tragedy” and, as in year’s past, officials held a public event to commemorate the 1941 burning of the Great Choral Synagogue with victims inside.

The annual commemoration of Latvian Legionnaires who fought in German Waffen SS units against the Soviet army in World War II resumed after a two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An estimated 200 persons, including five members of parliament (MPs) from the National Alliance party, attended the march and flower-laying ceremony in central Riga on March 16. The number of attendees decreased from an estimated 250 people in 2019, the last time the event was held. Separately, the Speaker of Parliament, three Ministers, and several MPs attended a memorial event at the regimental cemetery in Lestene. No Nazi emblems or symbols were evident among the participants. According to media and police reports, the event has received less and less attention each year.

In parliamentary debate in February on the Holocaust-era restitution bill, National Alliance MP Aleksandrs Kirssteins cited the book, *Hitler’s Jewish Soldiers: The Untold Story of Nazi Racial Laws and Men of Jewish Descent in*

the German Military as an argument against providing restitution to the Jewish community in Latvia.

The country is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Riga Jewish Community Executive Director Gita Umanovska and Jews of Latvia Museum Director Ilya Lensky said antisemitic hate speech that appeared during the year was mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments in news articles. One victim of online hate speech reported the incident to police. Sources stated the level of online antisemitic hate speech appeared similar to that of previous years, based on anecdotal assessments. In February, one online commenter wrote, "Stalin's gulags were brought into life by Jews, 80 percent of USSR leaders were Jews who inflicted humiliation, the nation was robbed [in the post-Soviet era] by Jews in Banka Baltija, Parex [bank], Valsts krajbanka affairs ... and how did the Jews get that wealth? By working? No – by trickery and scheming."

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. For example, in December, one anonymous user, commenting on an online news article about an Iranian soccer player, said, "Islam is synonymous with totalitarianism. I don't like Islam because it is a depraved derivative of Judaism and Christianity."

Jehovah's Witnesses reported one instance of discrimination in which a teacher insulted a Jehovah's Witness child's faith at school, calling it a "cult." The incident followed TVNET and LTV1 reports on criminal accusations against Jehovah's Witnesses members and officials.

On November 30, several hundred people lit thousands of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga in memory of the approximately 30,000 Jews killed in the Rumbula Forest by the Nazis and Latvian collaborators in 1941. A separate Rumbula Forest memorial service on November 30 was well attended, including by Speaker of the Saeima Edvards Smiltens, then Defense Minister Pabriks, members of the diplomatic corps, leaders in the Jewish community, and religious leaders.

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 MPs, on the importance of providing restitution for property expropriated by the Nazis

and Soviets by passing a restitution bill satisfying the country's commitments under the Terezin Declaration. After the bill passed in February, Post engaged with the Council for the Jewish Community of Latvia, MPs, and other officials to learn about plans for utilizing the restitution funds.

On February 20, the U.S. Secretary of State posted on Twitter, "I commend Latvia's ongoing work to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and promote education about this dark period in history. The bill passed by Latvia's parliament shows true commitment to addressing Holocaust-era property theft."

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 press release and media allegations that portrayed the organization as "extremist." Staff also met with the MARTA Center, which works with immigrant women, including those who might be at risk of victimization as a result of their religious beliefs. Embassy officials also engaged representatives of Safe House, which assists with transition support and education for immigrants and refugees, some of whom are of minority faiths.

An embassy-funded exhibit at the Zanis Lipke Memorial Museum highlighting the life of a Latvian-born Jewish American artist and Holocaust survivor launched in February 2021 and ran through March. In March, a senior embassy official addressed a group of Holocaust scholars and educators as part of the project.

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