

Estonia (70)



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

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ESTONIA

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.

Both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among religions in society contribute to the free practice of religion. To date the single controversy is the internal division in the Orthodox faith. The Interior Ministry, which provides support to registered faiths through its Religious Affairs Department, has been seeking a solution to this ongoing debate.

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. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The 1993 Law on Churches and Religious Organizations requires all religious organizations to have at least 12 members and to be registered with the Interior Ministry and the Board of Religion. Leaders of religious organizations must be citizens with at least 5 years' residence in Estonia. A new draft law on churches and congregations was introduced early in 1999, but the bill has yet to pass a first reading in the new Parliament elected in March 1999. Readings are expected to occur in fall 2000, with enactment expected in January 2001. The proposed legislation reflects a general reform trend in the law to simplify and clarify existing procedures. The draft law places responsibility for registry of religious organizations on the courts rather than the Interior Ministry. Upon passage of this law, all registries in the country would then fall under the auspices of the courts. Although some U.S. missionaries had expressed concerns in 1999 that a previous version of the legislation gave preferential treatment to the larger, established religious communities in the country, examination of the proposed legislation indicates that it does not provide preferential treatment to any church or group of churches.

Many groups have sent foreign missionaries into Estonia; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) being the largest. During the period covered by this report, no church or missionary group reported problems in obtaining the necessary residence permits.

A program of basic ecumenical religious instruction is available to public schools. However, public school participation presently exists in only 55 schools, with approximately 2,600 students participating. Those students in the 55 schools offering this ecumenical instruction who do not wish to participate have the option to take alternative courses. Private schools are allowed to provide religious instruction as well.

There is a process whereby religious and lay property is restored to its pre-Soviet occupation owners. In some cases properties are claimed by more than one group, complicating restitution efforts. The procedure for reclaiming property is generally considered fair but often is slow and bureaucratic.

Religious Demography

The majority of citizens are nominally Lutheran, and there is a large Orthodox community. A broad range of other creeds and beliefs make up a small but growing segment of the religious community. However, 40 years of communism diminished the role of religion in society. Many new neighborhoods built since the war do not have religious centers, and many of the surviving churches require extensive renovations. Church attendance, which had seen a surge coinciding with the independence movement in the early 1990s, now has plunged. Anecdotal evidence, garnered from local churches, indicates a 65 percent decrease in registered confirmations, for example.

In 1998 there were an estimated 165 congregations of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and over 80 Orthodox congregations, with 39 belonging to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC), 30 to the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia, and 11 to the Union of Estonian Old Believer congregations. Lutherans and Orthodox believers account for the majority of believers. Nonetheless, there are smaller communities of Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and other Christian denominations. There is an active, if small, Jewish community. There are also communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and many other denominations and faiths. However, each of these minority faiths has less than 6,000 adherents. The 2000 census, once completed and published, would, for the first time, attempt to account for all religious groups, as well as atheists.

Persons of varying ethnic backgrounds profess Orthodoxy, including communities of Russian Old Believers who found refuge in Estonia in the 17th century. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC), independent since 1919, subordinate to Constantinople since 1923, and exiled under the Soviet occupation, reregistered under its 1935 statute in August 1993. Since then, a group of ethnic Russian and Estonian parishes preferring to remain under the authority of the Russian

Orthodox Church structure imposed during the Soviet occupation has insisted that it should have claim to the EAOC name but has been unable to register under the same name. Representatives of the Moscow and Constantinople Patriarchates remain in contention on this issue. Interior Ministry attempts to broker an agreement have not been successful, and the Orthodox Church wing affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate in Estonia remains unregistered with the State. The unregistered status of the Church makes negotiation and settlement of the issue problematic. However, throughout the dispute, free worship has occurred in practice. This dispute over whether the Orthodox Church should be subject to Moscow or Constantinople has taken on political overtones, as sensitivities remain from the 40-year Soviet occupation.

The country's small Jewish community was decimated during the Nazi occupation. It now numbers over 3,000 members and in January 2000 was granted land by the Government on which to build a synagogue. The community has recovered the Jewish school building and leaders say that property restitution is not an issue, as most pre-war religious buildings were rented, not owned.

Government officials have voiced concerns about extremist religious groups establishing themselves in Estonia. The Director of the Religious Affairs Department under the Ministry of Interior Affairs expressed his concern about Satanists planning to register their sect with the Government in accordance with the Law on Churches and Religious Organizations.

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

Relations between the various religious communities are generally amicable. Although the majority of citizens are nominally Lutheran, ecumenical services during national days, Christian holidays, or at public events are common. Tensions between the ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian populations occasionally do spill over into religious matters. Most of the country's Russian-speaking people profess Orthodoxy, while the Estonian majority is predominantly Lutheran.

Citizens are generally tolerant of new religions and foreign missionaries but are wary of those they regard as cults. Although such groups seem to cause some discomfort among citizens, there have been no problems noted. Government officials regard developments such as the Satanist group's recent announcement of its intention to register with the Religious Affairs Department as an indication of the group's intention to

abide with the laws and government guidelines. There is a deep-seated tradition of tolerance of other denominations and religions.

In 1998 there was an incident in which youths vandalized a Jewish cemetery. The police investigated and arrested the perpetrators. The Rabbi of Estonia attributed the incident to drunken hooliganism. During the period covered by this report, two instances of theft involving 40 religious icons occurred. There were no reports of vandalism. In the former case, the Interior Ministry provided funding to equip the parishes affected with alarm systems.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with a wide range of figures in Estonian religious circles. Embassy officials monitored the dispute over property issues involving the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church and met with representatives of both sides.

Embassy officials regularly visit religious sites in Tallinn and elsewhere in the country and are monitoring the reformulation in parliamentary committee of the new Law on Churches and Congregations.

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