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2019 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. By law, eight “traditional” religious groups (seven Christian groups and Jews) receive rights and privileges other groups do not. In addition, six new religious groups registered during the year. Draft legislation to provide restitution to Jewish Holocaust victims in accordance with the 2009 Terezin Declaration was withdrawn after a procedural defeat in parliament in June. On March 16, approximately 250 persons, including 10-15 veterans of the Nazi Waffen-SS and four members of the National Alliance (NA) party, participated in the annual march for Latvian Legionnaires who fought as conscripts of the Waffen-SS against the Soviet Union in World War II (WWII). An estimated 1,100 people were in the total crowd of supporters, protesters, media, observers and passersby, according to police, one third less than recent years. In its *Freedom of the World 2019* report, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House said support for the event continued to decline. Various groups, including the Latvian Anti-Nazi Committee, again condemned the march.

A European Commission (EC) survey published in September showed that 12 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in the country, while 67 percent said it was rare. A Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism published in January showed that 14 percent of respondents believed anti-Semitism was a problem in the country, and 7 percent believed it had increased over the previous five years. Jewish and Muslim groups again cited instances of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate speech on the internet.

The U.S. embassy repeatedly engaged with government officials, including representatives from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Office of the Ombudsman, and parliamentarians on the importance of religious tolerance, restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community by passing a restitution bill satisfying Latvia’s commitments under the Terezin Declaration, and Holocaust education. Embassy officials also engaged with the NGOs MARTA and Safe House, as well as representatives of various religious groups, including the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Latvian Orthodox Christian churches, the Jewish community, and

the Islamic community, on the role they could play in promoting religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. The embassy funded a cultural project highlighting the experiences of a Latvian Jew during the Holocaust.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities published by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), based on 2018 data (the most recent available), the largest religious groups are Lutheran (36 percent), Roman Catholic (17 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christian (9 percent), the latter predominantly native Russian speakers. Thirty-five percent of the population is unaffiliated with any religious group. The Latvian Orthodox Church is a self-governing Eastern Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Central Statistical Bureau reports there are 4,567 persons who identify as Jewish, and the Council of Jewish Communities believes there are between 6,000 and 8,000 persons with Jewish heritage. The Muslim community reports approximately 1,000 Muslims, while the MOJ's report of religious organizations lists 134 Muslim community members in 15 congregations. There is a small Ahmadi Muslim community. Other religious groups, which 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 “the church shall be separate from the 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. 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 euros (\$45-\$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 age 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 – totaling 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. For example, the law prevents any association other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word “orthodox” in its name. Other Orthodox groups, such as Old Believers, are registered as separate religious associations.

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 criminalizes hate speech and the incitement of hatred on the basis of religious affiliation but requires legal proof, determined at trial, of substantial harm for conviction. Penalties range from community service to up to 10 years of imprisonment. Committing a crime for religious reasons may also be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The government funds required religion and ethics classes in public schools in first through third grade. The school must receive the approval of the parents of at least 10 students in order to hold religion classes in any of the eight traditional groups; if such approval is not obtained or if they prefer not to enroll in religion classes, students take courses on general ethics. The Center for Educational Content at the Ministry of Education must review the content of the classes to verify they do 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.

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 European Union (EU) or Schengen countries do not require visas.

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

Government Practices

The MOJ approved the applications of six religious groups that applied to register for the first time: the Orthodox Congregation of St. Nicholas the Miracle-worker in Rezekne, the Hindu Bhakti Marga Latvian Congregation, the Latvian Orthodox Autonomous Church, the Orthodox Church of Riga Apostles St. Peter and Paul, the Orthodox Church of St. Alexander Nevsky in Daugavpils, and the Riga International Baptist Church “Grace” of the Latvian Baptist Insurance Union.

In June the parliament debated a Holocaust-era property restitution bill that would have established an approximately 40 million euro fund (\$44.9 million, funded over 10 years) for the Jewish community in accordance with the 2009 Terezin Declaration. The bill also called for measures to provide assistance, redress, and remembrance for victims of Nazi persecution. The bill was withdrawn after a procedural defeat. According to news reports and the head of the Development/FOR parliamentary faction Daniels Pavluts, a combination of political infighting, a difficult fiscal environment, the historical complexity of the original thefts, and inertia from previous restitution attempts prevented the bill's passage. Misunderstandings about details of the bill – which provided fiscal transparency and government control, had protections to prevent the funds benefiting only a few individuals, and supported projects and events linked to common Latvian-Jewish historical and cultural heritage – added to the difficulty. Conferees at the Terezin Declaration Conference in December said local Jewish community leaders, and the legislation's sponsors in parliament, planned to reintroduce Holocaust property restitution legislation in 2020 following a public education and advocacy campaign.

According to a 2018 (the latest available) report on Latvia by the NGO National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry (NCSEJ), the government made progress in recognizing Jewish issues and commemorating the Holocaust, adding that problems remained with regard to property restitution and vandalism of Jewish sites.

Authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities according to the annual report of the security police. Muslim community members, including community leader Zufars Zainullins, said in December they did not feel pressured or singled out due to their faith.

The new prayer center of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Latvia (ICCL) remained closed since 2016 due to what the Riga City Construction Board said was a failure to meet city fire and safety requirements in the center's old building. Muslim leader Zainullins said lack of ICCL leadership also slowed the project, rather than government pressure. Muslim students at universities continue to have access to campus religious facilities such as prayer rooms and Riga Stradins University's Muslim student society (Ibn Sina).

Former president Raimonds Vejonis and other senior government officials, including Speaker of the Parliament Inara Murniece, Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins, and Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, attended or spoke at Holocaust memorial events, including International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Latvian Holocaust Memorial Day, and the Rumbula Forest Massacre Memorial. In July, at a commemoration of the 1941 burning of the Great Choral Synagogue with victims inside, Murniece stated, “The victims of the Holocaust should be kept in eternal commemoration by teaching about what happened to the young generation.” She added that “Latvia, as a democratic, legal, socially responsible, and national state, is based on human dignity and freedom, recognizes and protects fundamental human rights, and respects minorities.” In his speech at the same event, former president Vejonis stated, “Much has been done to heal the wartime wounds, but there also remain those (Holocaust survivors) whose healing will take time and mutual understanding.”

In September, as part of a speech commemorating a WWII battle against the Soviet army, Defense Minister Artis Pabriks praised the Latvian side, which at the time was under Nazi operational control. When the Simon Wiesenthal Center later protested those comments, the defense ministry edited the headline of the issued press release but kept the content unchanged. In November Pabriks spoke at the Rumbula Forest Holocaust memorial event, where he condemned the actions of Latvian citizens who participated in crimes committed by Nazi Germany against the Jewish people. He apologized to the Jews that Latvia had failed to protect them at the time, because Latvia had been occupied.

In June the government granted refugee status to a woman who said she had fled Russia after she and her family had been persecuted for being Jehovah's Witnesses.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On March 16, the annual march commemorating Latvian Legionnaires who fought in the grenadier divisions of the Waffen SS against the Soviet Red Army in WWII took place in Riga. As in recent years, an estimated 250 persons participated in the event, with police estimating the total crowd of supporters, protesters, media, observers and passersby numbering approximately 1,000, one third less than recent years. Ten to fifteen SS veterans and four members of parliament from the NA party participated. International media reported a large police presence and a small number of counterprotesters at the event. The organizers, the Daugava Hawks group, called the day a “commemoration of Latvian soldiers who were involved in World War II battles between superpowers and fought for their country” rather than as a glorification of Nazism. In a statement issued the same day, the MFA noted “March 16 is not an official remembrance day,” but an event organized by individuals “on their own private initiative to pay respects to fallen soldiers.” The statement added that “senior officials and members of the government do not participate” in this commemoration. Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins publicly discouraged cabinet officials from participating. As in previous years, the march drew strong condemnations from various groups, including the Latvian Anti-Nazi Committee. The Latvian Russian Union's Miroslavs Mitrofanovs said the march was where “people gather together to glorify neo-fascist ideology”.

On November 30, approximately 500 persons 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 in 1941. A separate Rumbula Forest memorial service was well attended, including by members of the NA party.

In November and December, media reported multiple instances of NA Secretary-General Raivis Zeltits supporting extremist organizations. While initial reports outlined texts and meetings with a supremacist website and 2015 meetings with the founder of a British neo-Nazi organization “National Action,” subsequent articles illustrated ongoing ties with and support to the Ukrainian ultranationalist Azov movement. Zeltits said he accepted that his views were ultranationalist but refuted claims of any racist or anti-

Semitic beliefs. An NA representative stated Zeltits’ actions did not reflect NA’s ideology. Subsequent social media posts by prominent NA members, however, defended engagement with Azov.

In May the European Commission (EC) carried out a study in each EU-member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 12 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Latvia, while 67 percent said it was rare; 70 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 85 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, 79 percent with an atheist, 78 percent with a Jew, 70 percent with a Buddhist, and 63 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their adult child were in a “love relationship” with a member of a different religious group, 85 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 73 percent if atheist, 66 percent if Jewish, 53 percent if Buddhist, and 42 percent if Muslim.

In January the EC published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU-member state. According to the survey, 14 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was a problem in Latvia, and 7 percent believed it had increased over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 18 percent; on the internet, 19 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 13 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 11 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 20 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 10 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 11 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 11 percent; and anti-Semitism in media, 10 percent.

Neither survey categorized results by religious groups to assess if Jews and Muslims perceived these issues differently from the Christian majority.

Riga Jewish Community Executive Director Gita Umanovska said anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet was mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments in news articles, although none were reported to police. For example, one online commenter wrote, “We need to clean up our public administration from Jews,” Another wrote, “As if we would need to choose the poorest (the worst) people, we would need to choose Jews” (directed at newly elected President Egils Levits, of Jewish heritage). Another poster wrote: “The Jew is one of the greatest evils in any case.”

As in previous years, Muslim community leader Zainullins said Muslims generally did not feel suppressed or discriminated against; however, some anti-Muslim hate speech appeared on social media and the internet, mostly in individual posts and comments in news articles. For example, one site had the comment, “We must get them out of our politics and definitely keep them out of our country as much as possible. We TOTALLY need to shut down all mosques. The devil resides in them.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged in regular discussions with government officials, including at the MFA, MOJ, Office of the Ombudsman, and with members of parliament, on the importance of restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community, religious tolerance, and Holocaust education. Embassy officials also met with Foreign Minister Rinkevics, other MFA officials, and members of all the political parties represented in parliament specifically to encourage passage of the restitution bill, an important step to meet the country’s obligation under the Terezin Declaration.

Embassy staff met with leaders of the Lutheran Church, Roman Catholic Church, Latvian Orthodox Christian Church, Jewish community, and the Muslim community to discuss their concerns about religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. They also met with the NGO MARTA, which worked with immigrant women, including those who might be at risk of victimization as a result of their religious beliefs. Embassy staff also engaged representatives of the NGO Safe House, which assists with transition support and education for immigrants and refugees, many of whom are of minority faiths.

The embassy funded a project with the Zanis Lipke Memorial Museum to support an upcoming exhibit by a Latvian-born Jewish American artist, focusing on his experience surviving the Holocaust in Latvia and later his life in a Latvian enclave of New York City.

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