



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

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Latvia**International Religious Freedom Report 2004**

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

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religions.

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, lingering suspicions remain toward newer, nontraditional faiths.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 25,000 square miles, and its population is estimated at 2.3 million. The three largest faiths are Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Orthodox Christianity. Denominational membership statistics are self-reported estimates and are not completely reliable. Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and various evangelical Protestant groups. The once large Jewish community was virtually destroyed in the Holocaust during the 1941-44 German occupation and now totals only an estimated 6,000 persons.

As of April, the Justice Ministry had registered 1183 congregations. This total included: Lutheran (308), Roman Catholic (264), Orthodox (125), Baptist (96), Old Believer Orthodox (67), Seventh-day Adventist (50), members of Jehovah's Witnesses (13), Methodist (13), Jewish (13), Buddhist (5), Muslim (15), Hare Krishna (11), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (4), and more than 100 other congregations.

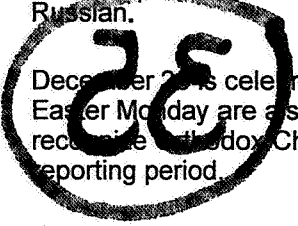
Interest in religion has increased markedly since independence. However, a large percentage of these adherents do not practice their faith regularly. In 2003, churches provided the following estimates of membership to the Justice Ministry: Lutherans (556,000), Roman Catholics (430,405), Orthodox (350,000), Baptists (6,530), Old Believer Orthodox (80,070), Seventh-day Adventists (3,956), Mormons (854), Jehovah's Witnesses (154), Methodists (1,012), Jews (685), Buddhists (100), Muslims (356), and Hare Krishnas (135). Although no reliable statistics exist, it is widely acknowledged that a significant portion of the population is atheist. Orthodox Christians, many Russian-speaking, non-citizen, permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom*Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, bureaucratic problems persist for some minority religions. There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions. In practice, this

has not resulted in government discrimination against any particular religion.

Citizens' passports indicate the ethnicity of the bearer only when requested by the bearer. However, ethnicity is not listed on the personal information page of the passport, but is instead stamped onto a blank visa page. Under this system, which is common throughout the region, Jewish persons are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than as Latvian or Russian.



December 25 is celebrated as Christmas and is a recognized national holiday. Good Friday and Easter Monday are also national holidays. The Orthodox Church wants the Government to recognize Orthodox Christmas, but the Government had not adopted this plan by the end of this reporting period.

The Latvian Lutheran Church established its own clergy education center, the Luther Academy in Riga, in 1998. The Roman Catholic Church also has its own seminary. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

There are three councils that comment on religious issues for the Government. The New Religions Consultative Council consists of doctors, academics, and an independent human rights ombudsman. It meets on an "ad hoc" basis and offers opinions on specific issues, but it does not have decision-making authority. The Traditional Religion Council aims at facilitating greater ecumenical communication, discussing matters of common concern and improving dialogue between the traditional faiths and the Government. In the past, the council has convened monthly, but it is now being replaced by a new organization called the Ecclesiastical Council. This new council was organized by the previous Prime Minister in 2002 and is chaired by either the sitting Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister. It includes representatives from the major churches: Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Orthodox, Jewish, Adventist, Methodist, and Old Believers.

Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rules for public gatherings.

According to the Law on Religious Organizations, any 20 citizens or persons over the age of 18 who have been registered in the Population Register may apply to register a church. Asylum seekers, foreign embassy staff, and those in the country temporarily in a special status may not register a religious organization. Congregations that do not belong to a registered church association must reregister each year for 10 years. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination and with permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only churches with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. A decision to register a church is made by the Minister of Justice. According to Ministry of Justice officials, most registration applications are approved eventually once proper documents are submitted; however, the law does not permit the simultaneous registration of more than one religious association (church) in a single confession, and the Government occasionally denies applications on this basis.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association (church) in a single confession, and therefore, the Government does not register any splinter groups. This has resulted in the denial of registration applications of several groups, including an independent Jewish congregation, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, and a separate Old Believers group.

In 2003, the Religious Affairs Administration proposed amendments to the Law on Religious Organizations that would abolish restrictions on single association registration. However, the Latvian Ecclesiastical Council, which has broad powers in these areas, declined to endorse the amendments on the grounds that they were drafted in haste and not well thought-out.

Visa regulations effective since 1999 require foreign religious workers to present either an

ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a Latvian bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process remains cumbersome. Although the Government generally was cooperative in helping resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers, problems still persisted.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations have criticized this provision.

The Law on Religious Organizations stipulates that only representatives of Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, Baptist, and Jewish religions may teach religion to students in public schools on a voluntary basis. The Government provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations may provide religious education in private schools only.

Property restitution has been substantially completed, although most religious communities, including the Lutheran, Orthodox, and Jewish communities, continued to wait for the return of some properties. The status of these remaining properties is unclear and is the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes. The Jewish Community has expressed concern about the terms under which some properties have been restored.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Ecumenism still is a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude toward the concept. Although government officials encourage a broader understanding and acceptance of newer religions, suspicions remain toward newer nontraditional faiths.

The Latvian Historical Commission, under the sponsorship of President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, has continued to promote Holocaust awareness throughout society. In 2003, a commission to honor Zanis Lipke, a Latvian who helped save dozens of Riga Jews during World War II, formed to develop a memorial.

Vandalism of Jewish cemeteries has occurred occasionally in the past. However, no conflicts or violent incidents of anti-Semitism occurred during the reporting period. The Government actively discourages anti-Semitism; nonetheless, cultural anti-Semitism—though hard to quantify—persists.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy worked to support the principle of religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with appropriate government bodies, including the Director of the Office of Religious Affairs, human rights nongovernmental

organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries. The Embassy's Consular Section also held regular discussions with local immigration authorities and section meetings with the Department of Religious Affairs.

The Embassy actively supports the Latvian Historical Commission. It has funded the travel of scholars to the United States for education in ethnic and religious tolerance and of U.S. experts to Latvia for Historical Commission activities. The Embassy sponsored a series of academic exchanges and lectures on Holocaust issues and is supporting the Zanis Lipke memorial project in an advisory capacity. In addition, the Embassy is working with the Government to develop a Holocaust education curriculum for all students in grades 9-12. The Embassy funds the training of teachers in curriculum develop, the production and publication of a Holocaust education curriculum, and the preparation of teachers to teach Holocaust history and awareness. The Embassy has also awarded a Democracy Commission Grant to the Jewish Museum in Riga, which has embarked on an effort to research and document mass graves.

Embassy officials maintain an open and productive dialogue with the Government's Director of the Office of Religious Affairs. Embassy officials also meet regularly with visiting missionary groups as well as representatives of different religious confessions, both Latvian and foreign. Problems that members of certain minority religions have experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits often are discussed.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)