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2018 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 receive rights and privileges other groups do not. Three new religious groups registered during the year. Pursuant to a Supreme Court ruling in April, religious groups registered in the country for less than 10 years no longer had to reregister every year. The government again did not take any steps to restitute property to victims of Nazi persecution in accordance with the 2009 Terezin Declaration. Several senior politicians, including the president and prime minister, spoke against anti-Semitism during the year or participated in Holocaust memorial ceremonies.

On March 16, approximately 250 persons, including 10-15 veterans of the Nazi Waffen SS, five members of the All for Latvia Party, and a member of the National Alliance coalition, participated in the annual march for Latvian Legionnaires who fought alongside the Waffen SS against the Soviet Union in World War II (WWII). Attendance was similar to recent years. NGO Freedom House said support for the event continued to decline. Police said they detained two persons protesting the march. Various groups, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Latvian Anti-Nazi Committee, and politicians from the Latvian Russian Union, again condemned the march. Jewish and Muslim groups again cited instances of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate speech on the internet.

The U.S. embassy engaged with government officials, including representatives from the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Office of the Ombudsman, Department of Religious Affairs, and parliamentarians on the importance of restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community, religious tolerance, and Holocaust education. It also engaged with nongovernmental organization (NGO) MARTA and representatives of various religious groups, including Baptists, the Jewish community, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Muslims, on the role they could play in promoting religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. The embassy funded three projects designed to address Holocaust issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities published by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), based on 2017 data, the largest religious groups are Lutheran (36 percent), Roman Catholic (19 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christian (19 percent), the latter of which are predominantly native Russian speakers; 24 percent are 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 reported there are 4,721 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 198 Muslim community members in 15 congregations. 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 in order 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 one 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, 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 if an unregistered group carries out any of these activities.

The law stipulates that, in order to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members aged 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 statutes stipulating their aims and tasks; 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.

In April the Constitutional Court ruled that the law requiring religious groups to reregister every year if they had been registered in the country for fewer than 10 years was unconstitutional.

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 can 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 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 three religious groups that applied to register for the first time: evangelical Christian Church Kingdom of God, spiritual center Rebirth, and evangelical Christian Church Grace of Christ.

Pursuant to the Constitutional Court’s ruling, effective in April, religious groups registered in the country for fewer than 10 years no longer had to register every year. In December parliament amended the law on religious organizations to bring it into compliance with the Constitutional Court’s ruling.

The government again did not take any steps to restitute property in accordance with the 2009 Terezin Declaration, which called for measures to provide assistance, redress, and remembrance for victims of Nazi persecution. There continued to be differing views among the government and Jewish community groups about the number of

properties that remained to be restituted. Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics told media in May restitution of Jewish property remained on the agenda and would be addressed in the next parliament, elected in October.

According to a report on the country issued in 2018 by the NGO National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry (NCSEJ), the government had made significant 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 activities according to the annual report of the security police. In November Islamic Cultural Centre in Latvia (ICCL) leader Janis Hamza Lucins stated privately he had had no negative interaction with the security police during the year and was unaware of any actual or threatened violence against the Muslim community by government actors or private individuals during the same period. In October Muslim community leader Zufars Zainullins said privately he did not view government monitoring of Muslims to be discriminatory or a violation of their rights.

The new prayer center of the ICCL remained unopened. ICCL leader Lucins stated the ICCL was not currently focused on opening the new prayer center and had no timeline for opening the facility. Lucins and Muslim community leader Zainullins said the ICCL's unopened status did not involve anti-Muslim animus on the part of the government.

President Raimonds Vejonis and other senior government officials, including Speaker of the Parliament Inara Murniece, Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis, 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 burning in 1941 of the Great Choral Synagogue together with those inside, Murniece said, “Thousands of lives were wiped out ... it was hell on earth,” adding that local henchmen were also involved in the mass executions that took place in the country during WWII. In his speech at the same event, President Vejonis said Jews were an integral part of the country and that “intolerance to those who are different find[s] a fertile soil in society and public space. Those who remember the horrible events of the past are today's hope.”

On the July 4 Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust, officials unveiled a memorial in Riga dedicated to Hungarian Jewish women who were deported to labor and concentration camps in Latvia during the 1944 Nazi occupation, where they perished or were killed.

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 Latvians who fought in the grenadier divisions of the Waffen SS against the Soviet Red Army in WWII took place in Riga. Approximately 250 persons, including 10-15 SS veterans and five members of parliament from the All for Latvia Party, participated. Numbers were similar to recent years. Protesters against the march also attended. The organizers, the Daugava Hawks group, characterized the annual march as a commemoration of national identity and remembrance of those who fought for independence rather than as a glorification of Nazism. According to the NCSEJ's report on the country, the march featured Nazi propaganda. Police reported they detained two persons protesting the march, one on a charge of public drunkenness, the other for displaying a poster picturing concentration camp prisoners before a Nazi firing squad, shouting and acting aggressively, and resisting police orders. Police released them on the same day after they paid a fine.

In March a researcher for U.S.-based NGO Freedom House said far-right participation in the march had fallen year on year and that “Such movements tend to become the butt of online jokes rather than a meaningful force on the Latvian political scene.” Minister of Interior Rihards Kozlovskis stated confrontations between parties holding opposing opinions at the rally had decreased over the years, and that the 2018 march passed without incident. As in previous years, the march drew strong condemnations from various groups, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Latvian Anti-Nazi Committee, and politicians from political party the Latvian Russian Union.

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. Organizer Lila Tomsone initiated the annual commemoration in 2016.

In December the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights released its second survey of Jewish experiences and perceptions of anti-Semitism. In Latvia 200 respondents completed the survey; however, because the agency encountered difficulties in reaching respondents through online methods, which it attributed to the country's small and elderly Jewish population, it conducted the survey through face-to-face interviews. The agency concluded the different recruitment and data collection methods affected the data quality and cited its findings for the country in an appendix rather than with the main survey results. According to these findings, 3 percent of respondents said they had experienced anti-Semitic harassment over the previous 12 months, and 8 percent said a family member or close friend had experienced verbal insults or harassment because of being Jewish over the same period. Three percent had felt discriminated against because of their religion or belief. Twelve percent of respondents considered anti-Semitism to be a problem in the country; 77 percent considered the level of anti-Semitism had stayed the same over the previous five years.

Riga Jewish Community Executive Director Gita Umanovska said that anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet was mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments on news articles, although none were reported to police. For example, one online commenter wrote, “Hitler was too humane.” Another wrote, “It is a damned nation that causes riots... and destroys nations from within that God himself cursed when he made them walk 40 years through the desert. They don't deserve anything!” Another poster

wrote: “in the Jewish Torah it says that other people are goy ... [Jews] can kill them and humiliate them, and even destroy entire nations. It is not surprising that Adolf (half-Jewish) started to beat his own, so that they do not go too far.”

According to Muslim community leader Zainullins, anti-Muslim hate speech on the internet also consisted mostly of posts on social media and comments on news articles. For example, one site carried the message, “You [Muslims] have no place in Europe with your savage beliefs”. Another message read, “Muslims have their own territory, Christians have their own ... Maybe you do not have to offer your territory to a potential enemy so that no [expletive] could happen!” Several comments suggested the pilgrimage to Mecca would be a perfect opportunity for a bombing, such as: “All of them could go straight to their hotly-loved Allah in one big crowd. There are so many Muslims in one place. Really no one has thought of it.”

In September the Riga City Vidzeme District Court ordered the government to pay 2,000 euros (\$2,300) in damages to Leonards Inkins for prosecuting him on charges of anti-Semitism because of an article Inkins wrote in 2012 defending a broadcast by Radio Naba. On that broadcast, a person said he had witnessed “Jews with guns” in charge. In 2017, the Supreme Court upheld lower court verdicts acquitting Inkins of anti-Semitism.

During a visit to the country in September, Pope Francis prayed along with members of the Lutheran, Russian Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian faiths at the Lutheran cathedral in Riga. Pope Francis praised the people’s solidarity in the face of ethnic and religious differences. He laid flowers at the Freedom Monument honoring soldiers killed in the War of Independence before celebrating a Mass for 40,000 persons at the Basilica of Aglona, a Catholic pilgrimage site. During the Mass in Aglona, the pope called for “the spirit of universal fraternity.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged in regular discussions with government officials, including at the MFA, MOJ, Office of the Ombudsman, Department of Religious Affairs, and with members of parliament, on the importance of restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community, religious tolerance, and Holocaust education. U.S. embassy officials also met with Foreign Minister Rinkevics and other MFA officials specifically on the issue of why the country had not yet met its obligation under the Terezin Declaration.

Embassy staff met with leaders of the Jewish community, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, and the Muslim community to discuss their concerns with religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. They also met with NGO MARTA, which worked with immigrant women, including those that might be victimized as a result of their religious beliefs.

The embassy funded a Holocaust education program for teachers with workshops designed to help the teachers discuss critical topics, including religious tolerance and the history of the Nazi occupation of the country, as well as the Holocaust itself. The

program also included designing teaching materials to assist educational instructors to tackle issues of historical remembrance of the Holocaust in Europe. The materials provided lesson plan examples and historical sources to support teachers. The program built on a previous embassy-supported program that sponsored five teachers for a teacher-training program in the United States on Holocaust education.

The embassy also provided funding for a series of workshops and speakers on the theme “Holocaust Education: Three Generations Later” during International Holocaust Remembrance Day. With the embassy’s support, the organizers live streamed the event on the internet, making it possible for people throughout the country and around the world to view the event.

The embassy funded a project with the Zanis Lipke Memorial Museum called the “Ghetto Drawings” that created an album of sketches by artist Alexandra Belcova capturing life in the Riga Ghetto and depicting the Holocaust in the country. More than 8,000 visitors viewed the exhibition, including students from regional schools and universities, such as Riga Stradins University, Riga Technical University, and the University of Latvia.

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