

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Latvia

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LATVIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, bureaucratic problems for minority religions persist. The country does not have an official state religion. The Education Law considers six faiths (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) "traditional religions." However, in general the traditional religions appear to have a close relationship with the Government and are wary of newer, nontraditional, foreign-based religions.

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.

The three largest faiths are Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Orthodoxy. No precise denomination membership statistics are available. 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 of Latvia and now numbers only 6,000.

By April 1999, the Justice Ministry had registered over 1,000 congregations. This total includes: Lutheran (301), Roman Catholic (241), Orthodox (110), Baptist (81), Old Believer Orthodox (65), Pentecostal (53), Seventh-Day Adventist (44), new religious movements (52), Methodists (10), Jewish (6), Buddhist (3), Muslim (6), Armenian Apostolic (1), Krishna (5), and Independent (25). In August 1998, a nominally Lutheran English-speaking parish in Riga formally rejoined the Anglican Church. In a welcome reversal of a 1996 denial, six Jehovah's Witnesses congregations have been registered.

Other minority religious groups that have been registered and openly practice include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), whose previous lack of official registration had created difficulties in obtaining visas and residence status, and various evangelical Protestants, such as the Pentecostal Good News Church.

Interest in religion has increased markedly since independence. However, a large percentage of these adherents do not regularly practice their faith. It is reliably, if informally, estimated that only 2 percent of the population regularly attend church services, and that regular worshipers are predominantly

women. There are significant numbers of atheists, perhaps a majority of the population. The Orthodox, many of them Russian-speaking, non-citizen permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in eastern Latvia.

Registration somewhat eased difficulties which minority religions have experienced obtaining Latvian visas and residence status. However, problems in this critical area caused by hostile bureaucrats in the Ministry of Interior's Citizenship and Migration Department have persisted. For example, in March 1999, a Deputy Director of the Citizenship and Migration Department, apparently acting on his own initiative, formally requested criminologists and psychologists to evaluate whether the Mormons, the Oklahoma based Good News Church, and the California-based Grace Mission Church posed a threat to social order. However, in June 1999, the Government's Citizenship and Migration Department agreed to issue religious worker visas to Mormon missionaries and several American evangelical pastors. Nonetheless, the visa application is still cumbersome. The negative attitude of certain Citizenship and Migration Department officials towards minority religions was criticized by the country's human rights ombudsman, as well as by Ministry of Justice officials.

According to the Ministry of Justice's Department of Religious Affairs, in 1998 and the first half of 1999 some 40 churches were denied registration, 30 of which subsequently were registered. Many registration denials are reportedly technical in nature, as the 1995 Law on Religions does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession. Churches still awaiting registration include the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, the Church of Christ Scientist, and the Rock of Salvation Church.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries, including from the United States, are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only religious organizations in Latvia may invite them to carry out such activities. Foreign religious denominations have criticized this provision.

Only traditional religions can provide religious instruction, which is taught on a voluntary basis in public schools, and establish religious instruction institutions of higher education such as seminaries.

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 but wants to establish its own separate faculty of theology at the University of Latvia or, alternatively, join forces with a Catholic university elsewhere in Europe that would issue degrees. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is now nondenominational.

There are ongoing, confidential negotiations between the Government and the Vatican concerning a new Concordat, since the original 1922 Concordat is no longer in force. The new Concordat reportedly would grant the Roman Catholic Church a privileged status. If approved, it is expected that other traditional faiths would seek similar recognition and benefits. According to local press reports, possible benefits might include some government financing for religious instruction in public schools, and the establishment of a Catholic theological faculty at the University of Latvia. The negotiations have led to some concern on the part of minority religions.

In January 1998, a new religion consultative council was established. The council's membership consists of doctors, academics, and the independent human rights ombudsman. The council, which meets

monthly, can research and write opinions on specific issues but has no decision-making authority. There is also a traditional religion council which meets monthly. This body reportedly aims at facilitating greater ecumenical communication, discussing matters of common concern and improving dialog between the traditional faiths and the State.

In March 1999, the Ministry of Justice's Religious Affairs Department sponsored a conference in Riga on religious pluralism in northern Europe and associated emerging issues. Specific sessions were devoted to religious pluralism, church registration, state subsidies, tax-exempt status, the return of confiscated property, treatment of religious minorities, religion and education, and conscientious objector issues. The event, which was cosponsored by the International Academy for Freedom of Religion and Belief and the International Commission on Freedom of Conscience, drew participants from the United States, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Estonia.

In October 1998, Parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Education, one of which stipulated that religious education may be provided to students in public schools on a voluntary basis only by representatives of evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Old Believer, Jewish, Baptist, and Orthodox religious organizations. 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.

In 1996 the Parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Religious Organizations. One of the amendments reduced the number of persons necessary to seek registration as a religious organization from a minimum of 25 to 10 persons residing permanently in the country. In June 1998, the Parliament further amended this legislation to allow any citizens and permanent residents included in the Inhabitant's Register to register a religion. Asylum seekers, foreign embassy staff, and those in country temporarily in special status cannot register a religious organization.

The country lacks legislation to permit conscientious objectors (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses) to perform alternative service, such as civil defense disaster assistance in place of obligatory military service.

Official travel documents currently indicate the ethnicity of the bearer. Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than Latvian, Russian, etc. This practice may be phased out shortly.

Jewish community leaders have regained a number of major properties around the country and they report that the legal framework for restitution of religious property is adequate. While restitution of Jewish property still is proceeding, the process is slow, complex, and often delayed by legal wrangling and bureaucratic obstacles.

There was a slight improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom in mid-1999, with the agreement of the Citizenship and Migration Department to issue religious worker visas to several foreign missionaries and pastors; nonetheless bureaucratic difficulties remain.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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. Ecumenicalism is still a new concept in the country and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude towards the concept. Although government officials are encouraging a broader understanding of and acceptance of newer religions, lingering suspicions remain towards newer nontraditional faiths.

There was no progress reported in apprehending the perpetrators of the 1995 bombing of a Riga synagogue. In April 1998, another bomb exploded at the central synagogue in Riga, causing considerable property damage. President Guntis Ulmanis, the Prime Minister, and others criticized the bombing and enlisted the assistance of foreign experts in launching an investigation. The Government also fired the State Police Chief and disciplined other ranking police and Ministry of Interior officers for failing to protect the synagogue. In June 1998, two youths were arrested for painting anti-Semitic slogans on a wall opposite the synagogue. The Riga Center District Police opened an investigation for hooliganism. The case was sent forward to the Prosecutor's office for indictment but was returned for additional investigation. The youths were released shortly after being apprehended.

There were also scattered incidents in Liepaja and other places during 1998 in which Jewish monuments were defaced. In April 1999, a bomb exploded at a Jewish Holocaust memorial just outside the city, causing significant damage. Leading politicians again criticized the bombing. Police have not yet determined the culprits responsible for the above acts.

In 1998 a member of the country's largest nationalist party, For Fatherland and Freedom, republished a Nazi era, anti-Semitic book, "The Horrible Year." (The book also appeared for sale in the party's bookstores in Riga, although party leaders claim that they had not authorized its sale there.) The Government criticized the contents of the book and its reissuance and called on the State Prosecutor's office to investigate whether the book's publication violated the law. It subsequently was determined that technically it did not. Nevertheless, the leadership of For Fatherland and Freedom expelled the publisher of the book from the party.

President Ulmanis consulted with members of the Jewish Survivors of Latvia organization and well-known Latvian historians on establishing a special commission to evaluate the Holocaust and other events of 20th century Latvian history. The University of Latvia established a Judaic studies center in the summer of 1998. The Mayor of Riga commemorated the deeds of Zanis Lipke, a blue-collar worker who saved the lives of more than 50 Jews during the occupation of Riga, by renaming a street in the former ghetto in his honor. After prolonged negotiations, the German Government in August 1998 agreed to provide \$1.2 million (2 million Deutschmarks) to create a medical center for the victims of the Nazi occupation.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy worked to support the principle of religious freedom by engaging actively in the Jewish property restitution process. The Embassy maintains regular contact with the Israeli Embassy on this matter.

Consistent and public embassy support for religious freedom over the past several years helped bring about the 1998 registration of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Embassy officials discussed persistent problems that members of certain minority religions (e.g., Mormon missionaries and the Good News Church pastor) have experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits. Embassy officials raised their concern on this subject with other key officials, including the Foreign, Interior, and Justice Ministers, the Religious Affairs Department Director, and the Director of the Citizenship and Migration Department. As a result of the Embassy's intervention, leaders of the Mormon mission ultimately had their visas renewed.

Embassy officials also met with representatives from the International Academy for Freedom of Religion and Belief and other visiting American academics, the general Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses, a Ministry of Education advisor on religious education, the Mormon Baltic/Belarus regional mission director, the secretary of the Latvian Baptist Union, the director of the Talsi Christian school, representatives from Youth with a Mission, and a U.S. prison ministry group. The Ambassador and Embassy officers participated at various times in these activities.

Two representatives from the Ministry of Justice participated in a summer 1999 U.S. Government-funded international visitor travel/study program in the United States focused on freedom of religion and religious tolerance issues.

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