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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Latvia

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, primarily demonstrations of anti-Semitism.

The U.S. embassy engaged in regular exchanges on religious freedom with government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and representatives of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (July 2013 estimate). Of over 30 religious groups, the Ministry of Justice reports the largest are Roman Catholics (22.7 percent), Lutherans (19.6 percent), and Orthodox Christians (15.3 percent). Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and other evangelical Protestant groups. The Central Statistical Bureau estimates that approximately 5,900 persons self-identify as Jews, while the Council of Jewish Communities estimates the Jewish population at between 6,200 and 11,000. In its annual report to the Ministry of Justice, the Latvian Islamic Cultural Center notes it has 340 members and an estimated 10,000 Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds live throughout the country. Other small religious groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Hare Krishnas, and Buddhists.

Many Orthodox Christians are Russian-speaking noncitizens who live mainly in major cities. Many Catholics live in the eastern part of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. There is no state religion, but the law gives eight religious groups some rights and privileges not given to other religious groups. Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews are the only religious groups represented on the government's Ecclesiastical Council. Other distinctions relate to the teaching of religion courses in public schools and the right to officiate at marriages without obtaining a civil marriage license from the Ministry of Justice. Religion-specific laws define relations between the state and each of these eight groups. Other religious groups are covered by a general law dealing with religious organizations.

The prime minister chairs the Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body that meets irregularly to comment on and issue recommendations on religious issues. The council's recommendations do not carry the force of law, but they typically warrant government attention because of the prime minister's participation.

Although the government does not require religious groups to register, the law accords registered religious groups a number of rights and privileges, including legal entity status for owning property and conducting financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration allows religious groups to hold services in public places such as parks or public squares. Non-registered groups may not hold worship services in public places.

The law distinguishes between religious groups registered for at least 10 years and those registered for fewer than 10 years, which are subject to annual registration requirements.

By law any 20 citizens or other persons over the age of 18, who have been recorded in the population register, may apply to register as a religious group. Those with temporary residency status, such as asylum seekers and foreign diplomatic staff, may apply to register religious groups only during the authorized period of their residency permits. Ten or more congregations of the same faith or denomination, each with permanent registration status, may form a religious association.

Congregations not belonging to a registered religious association must re-register each year for 10 years. Groups with religious association status, or status as a private society or foundation, may establish recognized places of worship, theological schools, or monasteries. The justice ministry determines whether to register a religious group. The ministry may deny an application if registration would threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, public safety, welfare, or morals.

The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association in a single faith or denomination. For example, the law prevents any church other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word “orthodox” in its name.

The law does not provide a mechanism for the restitution of communal and religious properties confiscated or nationalized during World War II, although some individual properties have been returned to religious organizations in the past via the passage of special legislation.

Visa regulations require foreign religious workers to present letters of invitation and either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor’s degree in theology.

The law stipulates that foreign missionaries may hold meetings and proselytize only if invited by domestic religious groups to conduct such activities.

The law stipulates that representatives of certain Christian churches (Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, Old Believer, Baptist, Methodist, and Adventist) and Jewish groups may teach religion in public schools to students, in first to third grades, who elect to take such classes. The government provides funding for these classes. Students at state-supported national minority schools may attend classes on a voluntary basis on the religion “characteristic of the national minority.” Other religious groups without their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Depending on the grade level, courses in public schools range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved instructors, to non-denominational Christian teachings, to overviews of major world religions. Parents can also register their children for voluntary, non-religious ethics classes.

The law criminalizes incitement to hatred on the basis of religious affiliation, although there is no legal definition of a hate crime.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Government Practices

The legal necessity for groups registered for fewer than 10 years to re-register annually imposed additional bureaucratic requirements on recently established religious groups. Representatives from these religious groups complained such requirements were onerous and ignored the long history of their presence in Latvia. Marriage ceremonies performed by clergy of these religious groups, and religious associations registered for more than 10 years but not represented in the eight-member Ecclesiastical Council, must be supplemented by a civil marriage license.

During the year the Ministry of Education rejected a 2011 proposal from the Ecclesiastical Council to extend optional religious education in public schools beyond the third grade.

The process of obtaining visas for foreign religious workers remained cumbersome. The government, however, helped to resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionaries. Some religious groups criticized the legal requirement for foreign missionaries to have an invitation from a domestic religious group in order to hold meetings and proselytize.

Some religious groups, including the Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities, continued to seek restitution of communal and religious properties confiscated or nationalized during World War II.

The government and the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities did not reach a consensus on a legislative solution for the restitution of communal properties, nor on the number of properties eligible for restitution. These properties included cemeteries, former synagogues, schools, hospitals, and community centers.

The government continued discussions with the Lutheran Church over the restitution of St. Peter's Church in Riga. In September 2012, parliament had rejected a proposal by the opposition party Harmony Center aimed at consolidating the Riga City Council's ownership of the church. The parliament did not review the issue in 2013.

The prison administration allowed prisoners and detainees to observe religious practices with some limitations, including security-related restrictions on religious articles kept in cells and dormitory rooms. Latvian Islamic Cultural Center representatives reported limited access to religious books and halal food in prisons.

Prison chaplains reported good relations with the prison administration and the Ministry of Justice. In November the Catholic archbishop met with the minister of justice to discuss expanded cooperation and rehabilitation services for prison workers and inmates.

Some politicians sought official recognition of a Christmas holiday on January 7, when that holiday is celebrated according to the religious calendars of groups such as the Orthodox Church and Old Believers. In December the parliament voted against this proposal.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

A group of foreign missionaries reported two instances of violence against its members, including punches and kicks, by unknown perpetrators in public places during the year. The group did not ask local police to conduct an investigation in either case.

Muslim leaders said Muslims, who are mostly ethnic Latvians or immigrants to Latvia from Central Asia during the Soviet period, generally felt well integrated into society. Leaders of the Latvian

Islamic Cultural Center reported that police monitored the activities of their community. The Ministry of Justice noted that police received multiple complaints of perceived suspicious behavior from neighbors of the Latvian Islamic Cultural Center, and attributed some of the complaints to societal prejudices. Muslim leaders also complained police officers had refused on one occasion to remove their shoes before walking on prayer mats in the Latvian Islamic Cultural Center. Police expressed regret regarding the incident and cited official guidelines for police uniforms that prevented them from removing their shoes.

There were reports of anti-Semitic incidents, including several cases of anti-Semitic statements, particularly in social media fora. Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some segments of society. Vandals desecrated monuments and memorial plaques in Riga and Liepaja. Police investigated a June 2012 case, when vandals broke a stained-glass window at a chapel in the New Jewish Cemetery in Riga. Police were unable to identify the perpetrators and closed the investigation.

In November the monument to former Latvian President Janis Cakste in Riga was vandalized with two swastikas and several other drawings. Municipal authorities removed the graffiti immediately. Investigations of all of these incidents were ongoing at year's end.

On April 18, the independent Council on Electronic Mass Media initiated an administrative case against *Radio NABA* for broadcasting anti-Semitic statements and incitement to ethnic hatred. The case stems from a March 2012 broadcast during which hosts of the program *Radio NABA* and a Latvian veteran of the German Waffen SS during World War II made anti-Semitic comments. The radio program was canceled. Security police investigated the incident, but did not initiate a criminal case against those involved.

On July 4, Latvia's Holocaust Remembrance Day, nationalists organized an event in the town of Limbazi to commemorate the recapture of the town from Soviet occupation on that date. Due to the historical circumstances which followed the Red Army's exit from Limbazi – the ensuing German occupation led to the deaths of the town's approximately 100 Jewish residents – a number of groups criticized the event as anti-Semitic. Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics condemned the event as "unacceptable" and attended instead a commemorative event for Latvians who perished in the Holocaust. On March 16, an annual march took place honoring the fallen members of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen SS who fought against the Soviet Red Army in World War II. No Nazi or anti-Semitic signs or symbols were observed. The government did not participate in or support these events; freedom of expression and assembly are protected under Latvian law.

Jewish community representatives, government officials, and foreign diplomats attended the July 4 Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga. A group of neo-Nazis held a separate demonstration to protest the ceremony. Unlike the previous year, the Riga City Council required the counterdemonstration to conclude prior to the official commemoration ceremony.

The Ministry of the Interior reported that the security police recorded an increase in registered criminal offenses involving national, ethnic, or racial hatred, including anti-Semitism, from 12 to 18 from 2011 to 2012, the last full years for which data was available. These numbers cannot be broken down into those that specifically relate to religion. The European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) survey on anti-Semitism released in November, found 40 percent of 154 Latvian respondents (out of a "core Jewish population" of 6,200) had experienced or observed anti-

Semitic verbal or physical attacks; 39 percent believed anti-Semitism had gotten worse over the past five years; and 18 percent had considered emigrating because of anti-Semitism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged in regular discussions of issues affecting religious freedom with government officials, human rights NGOs, and representatives of religious groups, including missionaries. These issues included the role religious groups can play in bringing together ethnic Latvians and ethnic minority groups. The embassy included religious leaders in discussions on human rights and civil society. The embassy supported the Jewish community in its ongoing efforts to secure the restitution of communal property.

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