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USDOS – US Department of State (Author)

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Lithuania

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom of religious practice, and state recognition of religious organizations, provided they do not contradict the constitution or the law. The government extends special benefits to nine recognized “traditional” religious groups and more limited benefits to four recognized “nontraditional” religious groups.

The government continued to express support for Russian Orthodox Church members and clergy who opposed Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The government continued to uphold its ban on Moscow Patriarch Kirill entering the country. The Seimas (parliament) again did not support the neopagan Romuva community’s application for state-recognized status. Jehovah’s Witnesses continued their appeal, following rejection by the Seimas, for state-recognized status. A case also remained pending before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) brought by a Jehovah’s Witnesses member after the government did not exempt him from military service or offer an alternative. Government leaders strongly denounced the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel, which the Seimas termed “brutal and unprovoked.” Seimas member Remigijus Zemaitytis posted antisemitic remarks on social media during the year, including after October 7, which were widely condemned by public officials. The prosecutor’s office in Vilnius commenced an investigation into potential criminal liability, and the Seimas began proceedings for possible expulsion, both of which were pending at year’s end.

There were incidents of Holocaust memorial sites being defaced with swastikas and the “V” and “Z” symbols of Russia’s military and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul reinstated the

status of seven Orthodox clerics previously defrocked by the Moscow-affiliated diocese. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives stated that community members often chose not to report religiously motivated crimes to authorities.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers met regularly with a wide range of government officials to promote religious freedom, including combating antisemitism. They also discussed improving societal integration of religious minorities, including Muslim migrants. The Ambassador discussed religious freedom issues with multiple religious leaders and community members. The Ambassador met with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Istanbul to discuss support for Orthodox believers and clergy in the country expelled from the Church due to their opposition to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Ambassador and embassy officers delivered remarks at multiple Holocaust memorial events and urged the government's continued efforts to remove monuments and plaques that honor figures who collaborated with the Nazi regime. In April, the chair of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad met with government officials to discuss Holocaust legacy issues, Jewish heritage sites, and preservation of historic churches. The embassy used social media to promote respect for religious freedom throughout the year.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.7 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2021 census, 77 percent identify as Roman Catholic, and 17 percent identify with other religious groups, including Orthodox, Old Believers, Evangelical Lutherans, Evangelical Reformed, Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics, Karaites, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Full Gospel Word of Faith Movement, Pentecostals/Charismatics, Old Baltic faith communities, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, and members of the New Apostolic Church and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (The Church of Jesus Christ). The number of Orthodox Christians increased in recent years, due in part to an influx of refugees fleeing Ukraine after the 2022 Russian invasion. According to the census, 6 percent do not identify with any religious group.

According to the 2021 census, 3,917 persons identify as followers of Romuva, a neopagan religion practiced in the Baltic region since before the introduction of Christianity. The Jewish population is concentrated in larger cities and numbers 2,256 individuals. Of those, 196 are Karaite, who traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region. The Sunni Muslim population numbers 2,165, the majority of whom are Lipka Tatars, a community living primarily in Vilnius and Kaunas. The Muslim community also includes recent converts, migrants, refugees,

international students, and temporary workers from the Middle East and Africa, most of whom are Sunni.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution stipulates there is no state religion and provides for the right of individuals to choose freely any religion or belief, to profess their religion and perform religious practices, individually or with others, in private or in public, and to practice and teach their beliefs. It states no one may compel another person (or be compelled) to choose or profess any religion or belief. The constitution allows limits on the freedom to profess and spread religious beliefs when necessary to protect health, safety, public order, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. It restricts freedom of expression if it incites religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. It stipulates religious belief may not serve as justification for failing to comply with laws.

Under the constitution, the government may temporarily restrict freedom of expression of religious belief during a period of martial law or a state of emergency.

The constitution acknowledges the freedom of parents or guardians to oversee the religious and moral education of their children without interference and stipulates public education shall be secular, although schools may provide religious instruction at the request of parents.

The constitution grants recognition to traditional religious groups and provides for recognition of other religious groups if their teachings and practices do not conflict with law or public morals. It states the status of religious groups shall be established by agreement or law and recognized religious groups shall be free to carry out their activities as long as they are not in conflict with the constitution or laws.

Recognition entitles nontraditional religious groups to perform marriages recognized by the state in the same manner as marriages officiated by traditional religious groups and to provide religious instruction in public schools. Recognition also grants nontraditional religious groups eligibility for annual subsidies from the state budget and for certain social security and healthcare contributions by the state, as well as the right to broadcast religious services on national radio.

Effective May 1, an amendment to the Law on Religious Communities and Societies requires that the Seimas determine whether to grant state recognition to a religious group within three months of receiving a positive recommendation from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). A religious

community has the right to present its opinion on the recommendation to the Seimas. If the Seimas refuses to grant state recognition to a nontraditional religious community, it must draft a resolution stating the grounds, including the reasons why the religious community is believed to have insufficient support in society and why its teachings or practices are contrary to law and/or morality. If the Seimas does not grant state recognition, a religious community may reapply after two years.

The law requires police to take preemptive measures against illegal activities, giving special attention to maintaining order on specific historical dates and certain religious or cultural holidays.

The law defines religious groups as in one of three categories – religious communities, religious associations (which comprise at least two religious communities under common leadership), and religious centers (which are higher governing bodies of religious associations).

Religious groups may apply to the government for state registration, state recognition, or both. The MOJ handles official registration of religious communities, associations, and centers. Groups wishing to register must submit an application and supporting documentation to the ministry, including bylaws describing their religious teachings and governance, minutes of the founding meeting, and a list of the founders, at least 15 of whom must be citizens. Upon approval of its application, a religious community, association, or center may register as a legal entity with the State Enterprise Center of Registers. Registration is voluntary for religious communities, associations, and centers affiliated with traditional religious groups and mandatory for nontraditional communities wishing to receive legal status.

Registration of traditional religious communities, associations, and centers is free of charge, while nontraditional communities pay a fee of €32 (\$35). Traditional communities also have a simpler registration procedure and need to submit only an application, decisions of their governing body on the appointment of their leader, and their headquarters address. The MOJ may refuse to register a religious group if full data are not included in the application, the activities of the group violate human rights or public order, or a group with the same name has already registered. According to the MOJ, there are 1,129 traditional and 198 nontraditional religious communities, associations, and centers that are officially registered entities.

The law recognizes as traditional those religious groups able to trace back their presence in the country at least 300 years. The law lists nine traditional religious groups: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, and Karaite Jewish. Traditional religious groups may perform marriages that are state recognized, establish joint private/public schools,

provide religious instruction in public schools, and receive annual government subsidies. Their highest-ranking leaders are eligible to apply for diplomatic passports, and they may provide chaplains for the military, social care institutions, hospitals, and prisons. The state provides social security and healthcare insurance contributions for clergy, religious workers, and members of monastic orders of the traditional religious groups. Traditional religious groups are also not required to pay social and health-insurance taxes for clergy and most other religious workers and members of monastic orders.

Other religious groups and associations may apply to the MOJ for state recognition if they have legal entity status, meaning they have been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years. The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Pentecostal Evangelical Belief Christian Union, and New Apostolic Church of Lithuania are the only state-recognized nontraditional religious groups registered in this manner.

For all religious groups, official registration is a prerequisite for opening a bank account, owning property, and acting in a legal or official capacity as a community. The law allows all registered religious groups to own property for use as prayer houses, homes, and other functions, and it permits construction of facilities necessary for religious activities. All registered groups are eligible for public funds from municipalities for cultural and social projects.

There is compulsory military conscription for males between ages 19 and 26 and up to age 38 for those with higher education. Military service is for nine months. Clergy from registered groups are among those exempt from compulsory military service. In the event of a military conflict, clergy would be called to serve as chaplains. The law recognizes the right to conscientious objection to military service and provides for alternative service under military direction either in civilian institutions or, if the military deems it necessary, in a national defense institution.

Unregistered religious communities have no legal status, but the constitution allows them to conduct worship services and seek new members.

A specific governmental commission, the Interministerial Commission to Coordinate Activities of Governmental Institutions that Deal with Issues of Religious, Esoteric, and Spiritual Groups, coordinates investigations of religious groups if there is a concern a group's actions may be inconsistent with "principles that stress respect for human freedom of expression and freedom of religion."

The Journalist Ethics Inspectorate, a government-sponsored organization whose head is appointed by the Seimas, investigates complaints involving

the violation of regulatory laws governing the provision of information to the public, including by print media and the internet. These laws include prohibition of the publication of material that fuels religious hatred. The inspectorate may levy administrative fines on media organizations or refer cases to the Office of the General Prosecutor.

A series of laws governs restitution and compensation of seized religious property. Under these laws, registered religious communities had until 1997 to apply to the appropriate ministry or municipality for restitution or compensation of religious property that they owned before June 19, 1948, the date on which the former Soviet Union nationalized all religious buildings. The government reviews cases from registered religious groups filed by the 1997 deadline but does not accept new claims. Religious groups may appeal ministry-level or municipality decisions in court. Unregistered religious groups may not apply for restitution.

In some cases, religious groups continued to use nationalized buildings after June 19, 1948. Religious groups had until the 2014 deadline to register with the MOJ previously nationalized religious property that was not officially registered under their name but which they owned before 1948 and continued to use during the Soviet period. The government completed its review process in 2014.

For Jewish-owned communal property nationalized under totalitarian regimes, a law was passed in 2011 establishing the Good Will Foundation (GWF), a public institution governed by national and international Jewish leaders, to administer compensation funds to support Jewish educational, religious, scientific, cultural, and healthcare projects. Under the law, the government committed to disbursing €37 million (\$40.8 million at that time) over the decade that ended March 1, 2023.

For individuals, the country's private property restitution laws provided a mechanism through which the country's citizens who had received citizenship before the December 31, 2001 restitution application deadline and resided in the country had the right to submit a claim for private property restitution. Those laws initially excluded individuals who either lacked citizenship or regained it after 2001.

An amendment to the Holocaust compensation law enacted in 2022 authorized €37 million (\$40.8 million) for private claimants excluded under previous laws and for heirless Jewish property seized during the Nazi era. Under an application process managed by the GWF, €5 to €10 million (\$5.5 million to \$11 million) of this total will be distributed as symbolic compensation in equal amounts to eligible individuals or their heirs. The application window closed on December 31, and the law provides that final determinations will be made by the end of 2024 and paid not later than July 1, 2025. The GWF will use the remainder of the total, representing compensation for heirless Jewish property as

referenced in the 2009 Terezin Declaration, for continued support of Jewish community projects.

The government uses the term "confession" to refer to one or more traditional religious communities grouped under a single faith. The government allocates funds to each of nine confessions for refurbishing houses of prayer, restoring old cemeteries, and preserving cultural heritage sites. Each of the nine confessions receives €3,075 (\$3,400) annually as a base fund, plus an additional amount apportioned according to the number of adherents in each community.

The constitution and other laws permit and fund religious instruction in public schools for traditional and state-recognized religious groups. Most religious instructors are regular, state-employed teachers, but some are priests, seminarians, or members of religious orders. Parents must choose either religious instruction or secular ethics classes for their children. Schools decide which of the traditional or state-recognized nontraditional religious groups will be represented in their curricula based on requests from parents of children up to age 14, after which students present the requests themselves.

According to the National Association of Catholic Schools, there are 27 private Catholic schools as well as Catholic technological and preschool educational institutions. There is one Jewish school. Students of different religious groups may attend these schools. All accredited private schools (religious and nonreligious) receive funding from municipalities and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport through a voucher system based on the number of students. Each private school receives €1,099 (\$1,200) per student. National minority schools, which include a Jewish school, receive 20 percent more than other private schools – a total of €1,318.80 (\$1,500) per student. This funding supports additional language study, as minority communities often do not speak Lithuanian as their first language. The per-student stipend covers only the program costs of school operation. Private school operators generally bear responsibility for covering capital outlays; however, according to an agreement the government signed with the Holy See, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport funds both the capital and operating costs of private Catholic schools.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of hatred and discrimination based on religion and stipulates fines or up to two years in prison for violations. The code penalizes interference with religious ceremonies of recognized religious groups, with community service, fines, or detention for up to 90 days. The law does not address interference with or incitement of hatred against unrecognized religious groups.

The Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson (OEO) investigates complaints of discrimination, including those based on religion, directed

against state institutions, educational institutions, employers, and product and service sellers and producers. The Seimas appoints the ombudsperson for a term of five years. The office conducts independent investigations, publishes surveys and independent reports on discrimination, and provides conclusions and recommendations on any discrimination-related issues. Its recommendations are not mandatory, but the OEO may appeal to the courts in cases of noncompliance. The office also submits proposals to state and municipal institutions and government agencies for legislative improvements and priorities for the implementation of equal rights policies. The ombudsperson does not levy monetary penalties but may recommend cases to the Prosecutor General's Office for pretrial investigation.

The parliamentary ombudsperson oversees a separate entity that examines the conduct of state authorities in serving the population. The parliamentary ombudsperson may investigate complaints, recommend changes in the law or draft legislation to parliamentary committees and ministries, and recommend cases to the Prosecutor General's Office for pretrial investigation.

The law prohibits public display of pro-Russian war symbols and messages, such as the St. George's ribbon, and the Nazi-related and pro-Russian war letters "V" and "Z." The law forbids use of the Nazi swastika and other Nazi symbols. Violators are subject to fines of €300-700 (\$330-\$800).

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

The law does not allow alternative civilian service that is not under the control or supervision of the military. A 2020 case involving a Jehovah's Witnesses member "Rutkauskas v. Lithuania," remained pending before the ECHR. The applicant stated the government violated the European Convention on Human Rights because it did not exempt him from military service or provide alternative service in the civilian sector.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

In November 2022, the MOJ recommended the Seimas reject the 2017 application by Jehovah's Witnesses for state-recognized religious association status. According to Jehovah Witnesses representatives, the MOJ concluded the religious group's teachings against military service and on blood transfusions fell short of the country's constitutional standard of public morals. In December 2022, Jehovah's Witnesses filed an appeal with the Administrative Court of Vilnius. After rejection of the appeal, Jehovah's

Witnesses appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court, where the case remained pending at year's end.

An application for religious association status by the United Methodist Church of Lithuania, which the MOJ submitted to the Seimas with a favorable recommendation in 2001, remained pending.

On September 19, the Seimas rejected for the third time the application for state recognition of the Romuva, a religious association whose members practice an ancient Baltic pagan faith. The Seimas previously refused recognition in 2022 and 2019. The Romuva prevailed in their case before the ECHR (nonbinding on the country) in 2018. The Seimas, however, again refused state recognition, stating the group fosters ethnic culture but should not be viewed as a religion. In response, the Romuva requested the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to implement "enhanced supervision" of the ECHR decision, which is used for cases requiring urgent individual measures or revealing important structural problems. Deliberations continued at year's end.

Under a law effective in May requiring removal of symbols of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, local governments submitted a required list of such symbols present in their municipalities to the state-funded Genocide and Resistance research Center of Lithuania. A nine-member commission comprising members from a range of government institutions was reviewing the lists, which at year's end comprised almost 100 objects. The review resulted in an order to remove a monument to Nazi collaborator Juozas Krikstaponis in Ukmerge by November. On August 18, the commission had proposed altering the Krikstaponis memorial stone rather than removing it entirely. The name of Krikstaponis would be removed and replaced with a memorial to "deceased partisans of Vytis District." The Jewish Community of Lithuania (JCL) objected to this proposal, stating that this language still tacitly included Krikstaponis. The center's decision requiring full removal by November 18 was appealed in a court action brought by the Union of Freedom Fighters of Lithuania, the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees, and others. The appeal remained pending as of year's end. In the past, the municipal government faced both domestic and international calls to remove the monument voluntarily.

On August 21, the commission postponed a decision on the removal of commemorative plaque to accused Nazi collaborator Jonas Noreika in Siauliai District. The chair requested that the Genocide and Resistance Research Center submit an updated report regarding Noreika.

In May, media reported that a memorial plaque honoring Noreika was removed from the library of the National Academy of Sciences in Vilnius. Media reported library officials stating that its removal was due to renovations, and that the library returned the plaque to its owners, the

nationalist organization Pro Patria, for storage. It remained undetermined at year's end whether the library would restore the plaque to the library upon completion of renovations.

On April 5, Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte established an international working group tasked with submitting proposals for the Snipiskes Jewish cemetery as a designated memorial site within the current Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace complex. The group's mandate included maintaining the functional purpose of the building and also preserving and protecting the cemetery. The task force had not announced proposals at year's end. In a press release on June 1, the Prime Minister stated that "we need to return appropriate dignity to the old Jewish cemetery site." She noted the centuries-long contribution of the country's Jewish community to the creation and nurturing of a common, independent nation.

The government disbursed €3.62 million (\$4 million) to the GWF under a 2012 agreement with GWF and as required by the 2011 Good Will Compensation law. The GWF distributed the funds "for projects that contribute to building a strong and active Jewish community."

The government provided €1.69 million (\$1.8 million) to traditional religious groups to reconstruct religious buildings and support other religious community activities. Apportionments were based on the number of adherents as published by the Department of Statistics. Of this total, it granted €1.55 million (\$1.7 million) to the Roman Catholic Church and €81,300 (\$89,900) to the Russian Orthodox community. The remaining €58,700 (\$64,900) was divided among the Old Believer, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Sunni Muslim, Jewish, Karaite Jewish, and Greek Catholic communities.

The Vilnius mosque continued to experience severe overcrowding, particularly during prayers on Friday and on holidays. In order to construct a larger mosque and community center, the Vilnius Muslim community secured a 99-year lease for land in the Naujininkai area outside the city center. At year's end, the city had not issued necessary permits for building to commence, citing pending expert studies regarding a cemetery on the land, and managing the status of the land as a protected cultural heritage site. Muslim community leaders said the municipality was unresponsive to their concerns and proposals to accommodate the heritage area. They stated the municipality did not reply to their request to review and amend the heritage designation to limit construction to that part of the parcel that did not fall under legal protection.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

Government officials continued to express support for those priests and members in the Lithuanian Orthodox Church who disassociated from the Moscow Patriarchate over its public support for Russia's full-scale invasion

of Ukraine. During Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew's March visit to Vilnius, he and Prime Minister Simonyte signed a mutual agreement to strengthen cooperation and "to facilitate the exercise of the freedom of conscience and religion for the Orthodox believers in Lithuania." The government continued to uphold its ban on Moscow Patriarch Kirill entering the country due to his support for Russia's invasion.

MP Remigijus Zemaitaitis posted several antisemitic remarks on social media expressing anger regarding Prime Minister Simonyte's June visit to Israel and accusing Jews of deporting and killing Lithuanians in 1941, during the Soviet occupation. Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, Zemaitaitis made additional antisemitic comments on social media. The Vilnius District Prosecutor's Office started an investigation into whether his comments constituted promotion of hate and incitement to hatred against a group of people on the basis of their nationality. The investigation was continuing at year's end.

Government leaders across the political spectrum, including President Nauseda, Speaker Cmilyte-Nielsen, Prime Minister Simonyte, and Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, condemned Zemaitaitis's remarks. Faina Kukliansky, chairwoman of the JCL, called for a government response. On November 21, the Seimas started expulsion proceedings against Zemaitaitis and brought the case to the Constitutional Court to determine whether he violated the constitution and breached his parliamentary oath. The review process continued at year's end.

On September 26, President Gitanas Nauseda awarded Life-saving Crosses to 38 individuals who saved Jews from Nazi genocide during World War II. At the ceremony he stated, "We have gathered here to honor 38 people – many of them, unfortunately, posthumously – who, despite the mortal danger to themselves and their families, rescued Lithuanian Jews during World War II. Marked by noble determination and sacrifice, each of their life stories is exceptional and unique."

On September 26, in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto, the Seimas adopted a resolution honoring the victims as well as the resistance. The resolution encouraged national institutions to pay tribute to participants of anti-Nazi resistance in ghettos and to recognize the contributions of the country's Jewish community to the restoration of the state in 1918-1920. The resolution further condemned racist or antisemitic statements by politicians and proposed that law enforcement institutions, in pursuing relevant criminal investigations of hate speech, be guided by the definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

On September 21, Seimas Speaker Viktorija Cmilyte-Nielsen recalled what she termed the "extraordinary history" of Jews in the country, which was built over almost seven centuries and whose tragic end was marked by

the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto. She said, "It was an ending without an end, as if making people wonder how it was possible for the efforts of almost 30 generations to be wiped out within just two years."

On September 21, several hundred persons marched from the Vilnius old town to the railway station from which trains transported individuals from the Vilnius Ghetto to Paneriai, a suburb of Vilnius where 50,000 to 70,000 Jews were killed during World War II.

Prime Minister Simonyte remarked during a commemoration event that the Paneriai site had witnessed the "horror of genocide," when the forces of hatred and intolerance "brutally took the lives of thousands of innocent Jews, Poles, Roma and people of other nationalities."

On September 19, President Nauseda unveiled a memorial plaque to Antanas Ulpis, a Lithuanian librarian and bibliographer, at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York. Ulpis was director of the Vilnius Book Chamber and part of the "Paper Brigade," whose participants risked their lives to save Jewish scrolls and publications by hiding them in St. George's Church. Nauseda said, "It is important to preserve the memory of the[se] deeds ... because thanks to them, thousands of Jewish books and documents were safeguarded during the Nazi and Soviet occupations."

On March 15, the country commemorated for the first time the Day of Rescuers of Lithuanian Jews. The names of 1,785 persons who saved Jewish lives were read aloud in Simonas Daukantas Courtyard at Vilnius University. Prime Minister Simonyte remarked, "Rescuers of Lithuanian Jews are a symbol of courage and sacrifice for us," and "I am glad that today we are all together celebrating a day of hope, whose heroes have once again confirmed that the light of hope shines brightest in the darkest darkness." On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, numerous officials and leaders issued statements of commemoration. President Nauseda posted on social media, "Today, we light candles in remembrance of the victims of the dark times in the history of humanity, the Holocaust. This horrific ideology resulted in the methodic extermination of European Jewry. We remember it and we will not let history ever repeat itself."

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

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Antisemitic and anti-Muslim comments on social media were common throughout the year. One post on the news website Diena read, "That invention, the Holocaust, is a Jewish usury business created on the corpses of its own country." Media site editors generally tracked and

removed such comments although without maintaining a log of those deleted.

In August, a local newspaper in Alytus reported that vandals painted swastikas on the benches and stones of a local park. Police opened an investigation, which continued at year's end.

In April and May, the Jewish community of Ukmerge reported Nazi-symbolic and pro-Russian war "Z" letters painted at the local Holocaust massacre site. A police investigation continued at year's end.

In February, a newspaper in Raseiniai District reported that a town elder stated in a meeting with voters, "Those who do not vote for me may be buried at a Jewish cemetery." JCL Chair Kukliansky called the statement antisemitic. The elder apologized to the JCL but did not resign his position.

Russian Orthodox officials in Moscow expelled numerous Lithuanian Russian Orthodox Church members and clergy after they opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Seven clerics who lost their positions successfully appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Istanbul, who reinstated their clerical status under his authority, enabling resumption of their pastoral work.

Jehovah's Witnesses representatives continued to state they often experienced hostility in society, but they typically did not report religiously motivated crimes to police for fear of not being taken seriously as well as the long and expensive legal proceeding it might entail.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy maintained regular dialogue with senior government officials on the importance of religious freedom. The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy representatives met with the Prime Minister, Speaker of the Seimas, Foreign Policy Advisor to the President, a vice chancellor, mayors, Ministers and Vice Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Culture, Justice, and Education, and Seimas members to promote religious freedom, acceptance and societal integration of religious minorities, including Muslim refugees, as well as to urge strong efforts to combat antisemitism.

On May 30, the embassy hosted a reception with religious leaders to coincide with the release of the U.S. International Religious Freedom Report during which embassy officials discussed U.S. efforts in promoting religious freedom globally. Guests included representatives from The Church of Jesus Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Reformed Church, the Muslim Tatar community, Jewish community, Romuva community, MOJ, Parliamentary ombudsperson, and academia.

In April, the chair of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad met with government officials to discuss Holocaust legacy issues and Jewish heritage sites, and to urge removal of remaining monuments to Nazi collaborators. She toured numerous Holocaust sites, Jewish cemeteries, and synagogues, and met with the country's Lutheran bishop. In public events, she emphasized the importance of religious freedom and acceptance of all religious groups in society.

Embassy officials met with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other government officials, and Seimas members and discussed Holocaust education and remembrance, and also urged removal of remaining symbols and monuments to Nazi collaborators. The embassy also used social media and press engagement to highlight themes and events related to Holocaust remembrance and combating antisemitism.

Embassy officials met with senior municipality officials to urge timely progress and a solution regarding construction of a new Vilnius mosque, which was on hold due to government cultural heritage designation of portions of the land intended for the mosque.

Embassy officials met with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in the country, and with some members who had been expelled due to their opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In March, the Ambassador met with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Istanbul during a visit to Vilnius to discuss religious freedom and the future establishment of a diocese (exarchate) of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Lithuania. Embassy officials also met with the general secretary of the Lithuanian [Catholic] Bishops' Conference, Lithuanian Muslim Tatar leaders, the Romuva high priestess, the Lutheran bishop, and Jehovah's Witnesses leaders to discuss their work and the conditions and challenges faced by these communities, and to emphasize U.S. commitment to supporting religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives met regularly with the Jewish community to discuss issues of concern, including preservation and restoration of heritage sites, combating intolerance, and Holocaust remembrance. The embassy expressed continued support for the activities of the Samuel Bak Museum and the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum and attended various Jewish cultural and Holocaust-related events during the year.

On March 31, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for leaders of various Lipka Tatar communities, which was also attended by members of the wider diplomatic community. The Ambassador remarked on the importance of religious freedom.

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, in connection with commemorative events, the embassy, together with other diplomatic

missions, issued a joint statement of remembrance that also highlighted the heroism of those who at great personal risk saved the lives of thousands of Jews. In related remarks, the Ambassador stated, “We owe it to the six million Jews, and millions of Roma, disabled persons, LGBTQI+ persons, Slavs, and many others, whose murders should never be forgotten, questioned, trivialized, or manipulated.”

On April 28, in remarks at the Paneriai Memorial, the Ambassador urged again the removal of all remaining memorials to Nazi collaborators in the Holocaust. On September 23, the National Memorial Day for the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews, the Chargé reinforced this call in speaking at the memorial event in Paneriai.

On August 23, the Chargé attended a ceremony in Balbieriskis to commemorate the location of a former synagogue, remarking that the site remains as a tribute to the history of its Jewish community. He noted, “Today we unveil a monument commemorating the former synagogue. It is a reminder to us, and to future generations, of what flowered here before, and of what was lost, and it reminds us of the horrors of the Holocaust and why ‘never again’ is such an important shared commitment.”

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