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2015 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 that other groups do not. Religious groups registered for less than 10 years must reregister every year, a requirement they described as onerous. The leader of the Islamic community said police monitored its members’ activity. There were approximately 270 Jewish communal property restitution claims against the government outstanding; a government proposal to return five communal properties remained pending in parliament at the end of the year. Government leaders spoke out against religious intolerance at two Holocaust memorial ceremonies.

An annual march commemorating Latvians who fought with the Nazi Waffen SS against the Soviet Red Army took place without incident. A Jewish school received a threatening letter written in Arabic, and Jewish community leaders stated there were instances of anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet, although none were reported to police. There was one incident of vandalism against the Islamic Cultural Center, which represents the Muslim community, in Riga.

The U.S. embassy engaged government officials on the importance of responding to concerns about religious intolerance and restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community. It also discussed with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives of religious groups the role they can play in promoting religious tolerance. The embassy continued to sponsor a Holocaust education program for high school students.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (July 2015 estimate). There are over 30 religious groups present in the country, and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) reports the largest are Lutherans (37 percent), Roman Catholics (21 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christians (19 percent). The Office of Migration and Citizenship estimates approximately 8,800 persons identify as Jews, while the Council of Jewish Communities estimates the Jewish population at between 10,000 and 12,000. There are no reliable figures on the total number of Muslims in the country. Some unverified estimates by the Islamic community put the total number of Muslims in

the country at approximately 10,000. The MOJ and the Islamic community estimate there are 800-1,000 Muslims who regularly attend services or participate in community events. Other religious groups (which together constitute less than 5 percent of the population) include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, evangelicals, Methodists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

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 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 the 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 and tax deductions for donors. Registration also allows religious groups to perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units and 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 without requiring them to register. These groups are only required to submit annual reports on their activities to the MOJ. Unregistered groups do not possess legal status, may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units, or hold worship services in any place other than the group’s own property without special permission. The law stipulates a fine 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 over the age of 18. 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 their statutes, stipulating their aims and tasks; a list of all group members (full name, identification card code, and signature); minutes of the meeting founding the group; confirmation that members voted on and approved the statutes; a list of members (full name, identification card code, and title) of the revision committee, which is responsible for preparing financial reports on the group and ensuring it

adheres to its statutes; and the names of the persons who will represent the religious organization. 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, or public safety, welfare, or morals.

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 or monasteries. The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association of a single faith or denomination. For example, the law prevents any association other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word “orthodox” in its name; independent Orthodox faiths, such as Old Believers, are registered as separate religious associations.

The law requires religious congregations, but not religious associations, registered for fewer than 10 years to reregister every year. Reregistration requires an MOJ evaluation of the group’s activities in the previous year and submission of the same documentation as first-time registrants.

According to the law, all registered religious organizations are required to submit by March 1 an annual report to the MOJ regarding their activities and goals. They must additionally provide other data, including congregation size, the number of clergy, the number of weddings, baptisms, 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. The commission of a crime with a religious basis can be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The government provides funding for optional religion classes in public schools taught by the eight “traditional” religious groups. Denominations must receive the approval of the parents of at least 10 students in order to hold these classes. The Center for Educational Content in the Ministry of Education must review curriculum content of the classes to verify they do not violate freedom of conscience. First- to third-grade public school students must take either a religious or ethics class; for older students, these classes are elective. Schools are permitted to teach more in-depth classes on religion with education ministry authorization. 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. Religious courses in public schools range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved instructors (usually at the lower grades), to nondenominational Christian teachings or overviews of major world religions by certified teachers suggested by a religious group and approved by the education ministry (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.

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. The law stipulates foreign missionaries may

hold meetings and proselytize only if invited by registered domestic religious groups to conduct such activities.

Government Practices

Eight religious groups applied to register for the first time during the year; the government approved seven of the applications, and the eighth remained pending at year's end.

Representatives from religious groups registered for fewer than 10 years said the necessity to reregister annually imposed an onerous burden and did not take into account that some groups had been present in the country in an unregistered status for many years. The MOJ typically renewed registrations.

In September municipal police halted a Muslim prayer ceremony in a yard next to the Islamic Cultural Center in Riga. Police deemed the ceremony an unsanctioned public event, though the owner of the private yard had provided permission for prayers to take place there. The municipal court levied a fine against the Islamic Cultural Center for failing to notify the authorities. The center appealed the judgment to the Riga Administrative Court; the appeal remained pending at year's end.

In September parliament rejected a proposal to ban clothing covering the face. The president supported the ban, citing security concerns, and tasked the government with addressing this and other issues associated with the arrival of Muslim refugees.

According to the Council of Jewish Communities, an umbrella organization representing the majority of Jews, there were approximately 270 unresolved claims of Jewish communal property confiscated by the state. The government met with Jewish community leaders and introduced a proposal to restitute five communal properties. The proposal remained pending parliamentary approval at year's end. In the 1990s, the country addressed outstanding claims on properties, including private Jewish properties, confiscated during the Holocaust and Soviet era. There was no systematic effort to restitute Jewish communal properties, however, because there was no formal organization to submit requests on behalf of the community. The Council of Jewish Communities was not established until 2003, after the window for filing restitution claims had closed. The Jewish community and the government continued discussions on the unresolved claims.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of outstanding property restitution claims by other religious groups.

Government officials, including then-president Andris Berzins, Jewish community representatives, and others attended the annual July 4 Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga. Berzins condemned the burning of the Riga Choral Synagogue during the Nazi occupation and said it was the responsibility of all to ensure history did not repeat itself. On November 29, President Raimonds Vejonis, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, the speaker of the parliament, and foreign diplomats spoke at the annual Holocaust commemoration at Rumbula forest, the site of the destruction of the country's Jewish community in 1941. Vejonis highlighted the need to acknowledge the role of local collaborators and to take steps to restitute Jewish community properties.

Muslim leaders said privately that police often monitored the Muslim community's activities.

In May the Security Police released an annual threat assessment in which it again cited concerns about the potential radicalization of the country's Muslims as a result of ties between the Islamic Cultural Center and organizations in Persian Gulf countries. As in previous years, the report, which covered the year 2014, stated the threat of terrorism within the country remained low.

In October the chief of the Security Police commented to the press that every year increasingly more radical Muslims came to its attention and expressed concerns about their contacts with other Muslims. He stated the inflow of new refugees, of which a large number would be Muslim, would entail risks, and that it could not be ruled out that some of the refugees could be linked to terrorism.

In June the minister of justice met with leaders of the eight "traditional" religious groups to discuss the issue of refugees, many of whom were expected to be Muslim and to begin arriving in 2016, and to request their assistance in integration efforts. Members of the Muslim community did not attend this meeting. In August leaders of the main religious groups stated they were ready to assist in receiving and integrating refugees.

The Ecclesiastical Council, composed of members of the eight "traditional" religious groups, met once to discuss government financing for church reconstruction in the 2016 budget. Authorities and religious groups agreed to cooperate to expand religious public television programming in 2016.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On March 16, an annual march took place commemorating Latvians who fought in German Nazi Waffen SS units against the Soviet Red Army in World War II. The unofficial march was attended by about 1,500 far-right activists and veterans and their families. Observers stated that, despite the presence of demonstrators and counterdemonstrators, the procession was peaceful and no Nazi or anti-Semitic signs or symbols were present. Prior to the march, the prime minister called on the population to avoid provocations.

In December a Jewish school in Riga received a threatening letter in Arabic with a picture of a masked individual holding a knife. Police continued to investigate the incident at year's end.

Other than the threat against the Jewish school, the MOJ stated it did not receive any requests to investigate anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim incidents during the year. Jewish community leaders stated there were instances of anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet, though none were reported to police.

In September unidentified individuals painted in English the slogan "Your Allah, your problem, go home!" on a wall of the Islamic Cultural Center in Riga. Representatives of the center stated the incident was indicative of an increasing level of "Islamophobia," and called upon the media to be more mindful of how they presented information about Islam. Police were still investigating the case at the end of the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged in regular discussions with government officials, primarily at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education, on the importance of religious tolerance and Holocaust education.

The Ambassador met with the leaders of the Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Latvian Orthodox Churches to advocate religious tolerance and the acceptance of primarily Muslim refugees and migrants into society. The embassy met with leaders of prominent NGOs, including the Latvian Centre for Human Rights, Safe House, and Mozaika, to discuss the role they could play in advancing religious tolerance. The embassy continued to support the Jewish community in its ongoing efforts to secure the restitution of communal property by engaging with government officials and members of parliament. The embassy also funded a Holocaust education program for high school students involving their participation in the filming of a documentary about the Holocaust in the country, which reenacted the forced march from the Riga ghetto to the mass killing at Rumbula forest.