

LITHUANIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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 “traditional” religious groups and more limited benefits to four “recognized” religious groups. Religious groups must register with the government to gain legal status. Parliament had not yet considered the recognition application by the indigenous religious group Romuva, following a favorable recommendation by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and again did not vote on the recognition application of the United Methodist Church, pending since 2001. The government allocated funds to begin the conversion of a Soviet-era sports palace built atop a Jewish cemetery into a conference center. The Lithuanian Jewish Community (LJC) supported the project, but its Vilnius branch and other Jewish groups issued a statement against it and two other projects on former Jewish cemetery sites. Parliament removed the ombudsman for academic ethics amid allegations of anti-Semitism. The government again paid 3.62 million euros (\$4.15 million) to the Foundation for the Disposal of Good Will Compensation for the Immovable Property of Jewish Religious Communities (Good Will Foundation) as compensation for nationalized Jewish communal property and 1.2 million euros (\$1.38 million) to traditional religious groups. Senior government officials participated and spoke at Holocaust remembrance events.

Some participants at a nationalist march of 1,000 persons in March wore fascist symbols and carried banners of Lithuanian partisans who critics said were Nazi collaborators. Some participants at another nationalist march of 300 persons in February carried a banner with a picture of a World War II (WWII)-era anti-Semite, Kazys Skirpa. Anonymous anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim internet postings in response to articles about Jewish or Muslim issues were common; media portals generally removed them.

U.S. embassy officials and the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues) met with government officials, including a vice chancellor, vice ministers at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, members of parliament (MPs), and the head of the LJC to discuss ways to combat intolerance and anti-Semitism and to encourage resolution of remaining issues of compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi and Soviet eras. Embassy officials discussed Jewish heritage preservation with local government officials. In September the Ambassador spoke

on the importance of religious tolerance in remarks at the Symposium for Diplomats Who Saved Jewish Lives.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.8 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, of the 90 percent of the population that responded to the question about religious affiliation, 86 percent is Roman Catholic, and 7 percent does not identify with any religious group. Religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Russian Orthodox, Old Believers, Lutherans, Reformed Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics, and Karaites. In the 2011 census, approximately 5,100 persons identified as followers of Romuva, a religion practiced in the country since before Christianity. According to the 2011 census, the Jewish population is predominately concentrated in larger cities and is estimated at 3,050. The population of Karaites, who traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region, is estimated at 250. The Sunni Muslim population numbers approximately 2,800, the majority of whom are Tatars, a community living primarily in Vilnius and Kaunas. The Muslim community also includes recent converts, migrants, refugees, and temporary workers from the Middle East and Africa, most of whom are Sunni.

According to the 2011 census, less than 1 percent of the population belongs to other religious groups. Among these, the most numerous are 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.

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, although it has never invoked this right.

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 they have support in society and 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.

The law defines religious groups as (1) religious communities, (2) religious associations, which comprise at least two religious communities under common leadership, and (3) religious centers, which are higher governing bodies of religious associations.

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, Russian 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 been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years.

Parliament votes whether to grant this status upon recommendation from the MOJ. The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Pentecostal Evangelical Belief Christian Union, and the New Apostolic Church of Lithuania are the only state-recognized nontraditional religious groups.

Recognition entitles nontraditional religious groups to perform marriages and provide religious instruction in public schools. Unlike traditional groups, however, they are not eligible for annual subsidies from the state budget. The law provides recognized nontraditional religious groups with legal entity status, but they do not qualify for certain social security and healthcare contributions by the state.

The MOJ handles official registration of religious communities, associations, and centers. Groups wishing to register must submit an application and supporting documentation to the MOJ, including their 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 euros (\$37).

Traditional communities also have a simpler registration procedure, needing 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 Center of Registers, there are 1,115 traditional and 194 nontraditional religious communities, associations, and centers officially registered in the register of legal entities.

For nontraditional 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 permits construction of facilities necessary for religious activities. All registered groups are eligible for public funds from municipalities for cultural and social projects.

In December 2017, parliament amended the law to exempt all clergy from registered groups from compulsory military service. Previously, only clergy (and theological students) from traditional religious groups were exempt from military service. In the event of a conflict, clergy would be called to serve as chaplains in the military.

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

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 what the commission perceives to be "principles that stress respect for human freedom of expression and freedom of religion."

The Journalist Ethics Inspectorate, an independent, government-sponsored organization whose head is appointed by parliament, investigates complaints involving the violation of regulatory laws governing the provision of information to the public, including 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 newspapers or refer cases to the Office of the General Prosecutor.

The Soviet Union nationalized all religious buildings, some of which it redistributed, while others continued to serve religious communities. For properties belonging to the national government, registered groups could apply to the appropriate ministry for the restitution of, or compensation for, religious property they owned before June 19, 1948. For former religious properties belonging to municipalities, registered groups applied for restitution or compensation to the appropriate municipality. Religious communities could also register a claim for property not officially registered under their name but which they used during the Soviet period. If the ministry or municipality determines the claim is legitimate, it drafts a resolution officially returning the property to its original owner. The deadline for registered religious groups to submit a claim for religious property restitution was 1997. The government continues to review cases filed by the 1997 deadline but is not accepting any new claims. Religious groups may appeal the decisions of the ministry or municipality in court. Unregistered religious groups could not apply for restitution.

A compensation fund for Jewish-owned communal property nationalized under totalitarian regimes is designed to support Jewish educational, religious, scientific, cultural, and healthcare projects with public benefits. Pursuant to the law, the government is committed to disbursing 37 million euros (\$42.43 million) over the course of the decade ending March 1, 2023. Funds go to the Good Will Foundation, a public institution governed by national and international Jewish leaders.

The country has no law for the restitution of heirless private property.

The government allocates funds to traditional religious communities for refurbishing houses of prayer, restoring old cemeteries, and preserving cultural heritage sites. Each traditional religion group receives 3,075 euros (\$3,500) every year as a base fund plus a variable component that depends on the number of believers of each community.

The constitution and other law permits and funds religious instruction in public schools for traditional and other state-recognized religious groups. Most religious instructors are regular state-employed teachers, but some are priests, seminarians, or monks. Parents must choose either religious instruction or secular ethics classes for their children, but may not opt out of both offerings. Schools decide which of the traditional religious groups will be represented in their curricula on the basis of requests from parents of children up to age 14, after which students present the requests themselves.

There are 30 private schools established by religious communities, 26 Catholic and four Jewish; 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 and Science through a voucher system based on the number of pupils. Each private school receives 1,099 euros (\$1,300) per student. Beginning with the 2017-18 school year, national minority schools, which include schools established by the Jewish community, receive 20 percent more – 1,318.80 euros (\$1,500) – per student than other private schools. The per-student stipend covers only the program costs of school operation. Private school operators generally bear responsibility for covering capital outlays; however, per an agreement the government signed with the Holy See, the Ministry of Education and Science 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 (OEO) ombudsperson investigates complaints of discrimination, including those based on religion, directed against state institutions, educational institutions, employers, and product and service sellers and producers. Parliament appoints the ombudsperson for a period 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. The office also makes proposals to state and municipal institutions and government agencies concerning the improvement of legal acts and priorities of the implementation of equal rights policy. The OEO ombudsperson does not levy monetary penalties.

The parliamentary ombudsperson often works with the OEO ombudsperson but is a separate entity. The parliamentary ombudsperson examines the conduct of state authorities in serving the population. The law governing the parliamentary ombudsperson specifically includes religious discrimination within its purview. The OEO and 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 criminal code prohibits public display of Soviet and Nazi symbols or national anthems. Violators are subject to fines of 144-289 euros (\$170-\$330).

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

Government Practices

On May 25, the MOJ submitted to parliament an application from the Romuva for state-recognized religious association status. Minister of Justice Eimutis Misiunas supported the proposal, stating the Romuva's commitment to reviving national culture was important for the country's national identity and that Romuva was the country's fastest growing religious community. The parliamentary committee on human rights was reviewing the proposal at year's end. An application for

religious association status by the United Methodist Church of Lithuania, which the MOJ submitted to parliament, with a favorable recommendation, in 2001 remained pending. According to the MOJ, it was incumbent on the United Methodist Church to advocate for its application in parliament, but the group had not done so.

In April Minister of Economy Virginijus Sinkevicius introduced in parliament an amendment that would ban the sale of material that “distorts historical facts” about the nation, which was met by criticism from many quarters. Parliament’s legal department concluded it failed to ensure human rights. The LJC said it “raise[d] well-founded concerns and recall[ed] the dark times of government censorship... and ha[d] given rise to anger, with foundation, in the international Jewish community.” Lithuanian and international media also reacted negatively, with some viewing the proposed amendment as a response to the publication in 2016 of a controversial book by Lithuanian writer Ruta Vanagaite and a representative of the Simon Wiesenthal Center citing participation by Lithuanians in the Holocaust. The proposal never reached a final vote in parliament, and Sinkevicius withdrew it in May.

In October media reported that the Ministry of Finance had proposed allocating 28.3 million euros (\$32.45 million) for the reconstruction of the Vilnius Sports Palace, which the Soviets built on the Snipiskes cemetery, Vilnius’s oldest Jewish cemetery, in 1971. The plans were to convert the buildings into a conference center, with design work scheduled to begin in 2019, construction in 2020, and an opening by 2021. In November the government approved the budget allocation. On August 29, the Vilnius Jewish Community, one of 33 regional branches of the LJC, and other local Jewish groups issued a statement protesting the Sports Palace renovation, as well as other renovation projects of Soviet buildings located on the site of former Jewish cemeteries in Kaunas and Siauliai. The proposed renovations at the latter two sites remained pending. The national LJC supported the Vilnius Sports Palace project. The government stated it would undertake the project in accordance with the August 26, 2009 agreement between the LJC, the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, and the Lithuanian Department of Cultural Heritage, and would protect the area of the cemetery at the Sports Palace and its buffer zone, as well as other related areas. The LJC and Vilnius municipality said that, in recognition of the sensitivity of the issue, they had installed vehicle barriers and 10 information plaques around the Sports Palace, noting it had once been a Jewish cemetery and that all of the human remains had been removed. Initially, Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis said he backed a proposal to convert part of the new complex into a Jewish museum or cultural

center; the government was still considering other proposals aimed at commemorating the legacy of the Snipiskes Jewish cemetery at year's end.

The government again disbursed 3.62 million euros (\$4.15 million) to the Good Will Foundation, in accordance with its agreement with that institution.

The government provided 1.2 million euros (\$1.38 million) to traditional religious groups to reconstruct religious buildings and to support other religious community activities. Of this total, it granted one million euros (\$1.15 million) to the Roman Catholic Church (some of which was to assist with preparations for the visit of Pope Francis in September) and 61,100 euros (\$70,100) to the Russian Orthodox community. The remaining 139,000 euros (\$159,000) was divided among the Old Believer, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Sunni Muslim, Karaite and other Jewish, and Greek Catholic communities.

On March 15, parliament removed Vigilius Sadauskas from the government-appointed position of ombudsman for academic ethics and procedures amid allegations of anti-Semitism. Sadauskas, affiliated with Gedimino Technical University, had offered a reward to students who submitted a research thesis about Jewish crimes in the 20th century.

The OEO ombudsperson received five complaints of discrimination based on religion. Two concerned public schools holding graduation ceremonies at Catholic churches. Another concerned the content of the mission statement of a kindergarten operated by a religious community. A fourth involved the establishment of the position of police chaplain, a move that the petitioner stated favored Christianity. The OEO ombudsperson found these four complaints fell outside of the jurisdiction of the OEO office. The fifth complaint was from a prisoner who charged authorities did not allow him to participate in Christmas Mass. The ombudsperson ruled the incident did not constitute religious discrimination.

The government and civil society organizations continued to work together to promote Holocaust education and tolerance in schools. In July the Ministry of Culture sponsored a summer camp in Cekiskes to teach high school students about Jewish history and the preservation of Jewish culture. The program included tours, lectures, concerts, exhibitions, and conferences in Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, Kedainiai and other cities. On August 24, Prime Minister Skvernelis and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attended a ceremony at the Paneriai Memorial, which is located less than 11 miles from central Vilnius and marks the

site where the Gestapo, the SS security service, and the Vilnius Special Squad executed approximately 70,000 Jews between July 1941 and 1944. Prime Minister Skvernelis referred to the Holocaust as the “worst episode” in the country’s history and said the government was responsible for ensuring that this chapter not be hidden from the world. In September the nongovernmental organization Lithuanian Human Rights Center, in cooperation with local municipalities, installed eight new memorials known as “stumbling stones” to commemorate Holocaust victims in Alytus, Ukmerge, Plunge, and Kuliai.

On September 19, Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevicius called on authorities to remove a memorial plaque located on the side of the library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in central Vilnius honoring Jonas Noreika, a Lithuanian military officer known as Generolas Vetra (General Storm). Faina Kukliansky, head of the LJC, also called for the removal of the plaque. The appeals came after *The New York Times* published an article in early September citing a descendant of Vetra, who said Vetra had been complicit in the killing of Jews during the Holocaust. By year’s end, the library had not removed the plaque.

Government officials continued to participate in ceremonies to commemorate the Holocaust. On January 26, Minister of Foreign Affairs Linkevicius delivered a speech on International Holocaust Remembrance Day; he referred to the role of Lithuanian collaborators during the Holocaust as a “scar” on Lithuania’s history. On May 4, Prime Minister Skvernelis, Speaker of Parliament Viktoras Prancišius, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Linkevicius attended a groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of a new museum in Seduva commemorating the country’s extinct Jewish shtetl communities. Minister of Foreign Affairs Linkevicius, the President’s Advisor on Foreign Policy, the Israeli ambassador, and the LJC participated in the annual March of the Living on May 23, to memorialize the killing of 70,000 Jews in Ponary, on the outskirts of Vilnius, during the Nazi occupation.

On September 21, government and nongovernmental bodies organized events to mark the country’s 75th Holocaust Memorial Day. Minister of Foreign Affairs Linkevicius, Vice Chancellor Deividas Matulionis, Mayor of Vilnius Remigijus Simasius, MPs, Catholic Archbishop of Vilnius Gintaras Grusas, the LJC, and foreign dignitaries attended the unveiling of a memorial stone in Vilnius to honor the country’s Righteous Among the Nations – individuals recognized by Israel as risking their lives to help Jews during the Holocaust. In opening remarks, Minister of Foreign Affairs Linkevicius said, “Jews were killed by the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators. We can never forget this. But when there are tragic

events and trials, there are also people to whom truth and justice is more important than their own lives.” On September 22, President Dalia Grybauskaite stated, “In a country brutalized by both Nazi and Stalinist crimes, many people stood up to rescue Jews because they saw humanity as the ultimate good.”

On September 23, the anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto, Speaker of Parliament Pranciškis, Minister of Culture Lijana Ruokyte-Jonsson, Mayor of Vilnius Simasius, the LJC, and Litvak (Lithuanian Jewish) organizations from Israel and Poland attended a 75th Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony at the Paneriai Memorial. In his remarks, Speaker Pranciškis said, “Today we [Lithuanians] suffer repentance for the grievance caused to the Jewish nation.”

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Authorities did not maintain statistics on religiously motivated incidents.

On February 16, nationalists held a march in Vilnius to commemorate the anniversary of the restoration of the country’s independence. The march attracted approximately 300 participants, compared with 150 in the previous year; some of the participants held torches and carried national flags. The march included a banner with a picture of, and a quote by WWII-era anti-Semite Kazys Skirpa. Nationalists also organized a march in Vilnius on March 11, the country’s Independence Day, involving approximately 1,000 persons, compared with 500 in the previous year. According to local observers, some of the participants displayed fascist or neo-Nazi symbols such as a skull and crossbones flag, and carried a banner with the images of Lithuanian partisans who many believe were Nazi collaborators, such as Skirpa and Jonas Noreika.

A Lithuanian writer who cowrote a controversial 2016 book on Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust told an Israeli newspaper she had received threats to her safety, which she attributed in part to her book.

Anonymous anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim comments on the internet were common, for example on Lithuanian media portal Delfi. Examples of anti-Semitism in this forum included statements that Jews who collaborated with the KGB should be condemned by the LJC or statements justifying the Holocaust because “Jews collaborated with the Soviet Union and killed Lithuanian partisans.”

Most anti-Muslim examples included equating Muslims with terrorists. Main media portals generally removed such comments promptly after becoming aware of them.

On September 23, more than 50 people gathered for a ceremony at the site marking the former Vilnius ghetto to place stones made of lava and ash into a metal structure in the shape of the Star of David. During the ceremony Mayor Simasius said, “Our duty is to mark this day, to remember and say deep in our heart, ‘never again.’”

Also on September 23, Pope Francis visited the country and prayed at the site of the former Vilnius ghetto. At a Mass in Kaunas, he warned against any rebirth of “pernicious” anti-Semitism and honored Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy continued to maintain a regular dialogue with senior government officials on the importance of religious freedom. Embassy representatives met with a vice chancellor and officials at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, as well as MPs and continued to engage them on ways to promote tolerance and integration of religious minorities, including Muslim refugees, into society and combat anti-Semitism. Embassy representatives urged the government to address the remaining issues regarding compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi and Soviet eras. U.S. officials, including the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues in a visit in October, discussed Holocaust education, remembrance, and property restitution at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government offices and with MPs.

The Ambassador and embassy staff met regularly with the Jewish community to discuss issues of concern, including property restitution, preservation and restoration of heritage sites, combating intolerance, and Holocaust remembrance. On January 3, the Ambassador visited restored Jewish synagogues in Alanta and Pakruojis and met with the Jewish communities in Panevezys and Siauliai to discuss the country’s progress on Jewish heritage preservation, commemoration events, and religious life. On January 17, the Ambassador met with the American Jewish Committee to discuss its views on issues of concern to Jews in the country.

On May 4, the Ambassador attended a groundbreaking ceremony for a new museum in Seduva to commemorate the country’s extinct Jewish shtetl communities. She delivered remarks citing the government for acknowledging and

celebrating the life and contributions of Jews in the development of Lithuanian society, history, and culture and the government's actions to acknowledge and celebrate those contributions.

On July 12, the embassy collaborated with the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum to organize a public screening of the film *The Good Nazi*, the story of a German engineer who joined the Nazi Party in 1931 but later saved approximately 200 Jews in Vilnius. The screening was followed by a discussion with the executive producer about the role of individuals who helped save Jews during WWII.

In September the Ambassador delivered remarks at the Symposium for Diplomats Who Saved Jewish Lives, to honor the work of diplomats that helped saved Jews during WWII.

On September 23, the Ambassador presented a wreath on behalf of the diplomatic corps at the Paneriai memorial in honor of the 75th Holocaust Memorial Day. The Ambassador also participated in a ceremony at the site marking the former Vilnius Jewish ghetto to place stones made of lava and ash into a metal structure in the shape of the Star of David.