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[Countries & Regions](#) | [International Topics & Issues](#) | [History, Education & Culture](#)
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Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion except in cases where religious activities contradict the Constitution and the law, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. There is no state religion; however, some religious groups enjoy government benefits not available to others. Nontraditional religious groups face some restrictions.

There are generally amicable relations among the various religious communities, although members of religious minorities occasionally are subject to acts of intolerance. A certain level of anti-Semitic sentiment persists in the country.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 25,174 square miles and its population is approximately 3.5 million.

There are no official data on the number of adherents of various faiths. Unofficial estimates indicate that approximately 70 percent of the inhabitants consider themselves to be Roman Catholic (some 673 communities in 2000). The second largest religious group is the Orthodox Church (180,000 members and 43 communities), concentrated in the east, along the border with Belarus. The "Old Believers" number 50,000 and have 27 communities. Some 30,000 Lutherans (54 communities) are concentrated to the southwest. The Evangelical Reformed community has some 11,000 members in 12 communities. The 5 Sunni Muslim and 6 Jewish communities number about 5,000 members each, while the Greek Catholic community has about 900 members. Around 18 percent of the inhabitants do not identify with any religious denomination.

The Chabad Lubavich, an Orthodox Jewish group, operates a school (kindergarten through twelfth grade), a social center, and a kosher kitchen in the capital of Vilnius.

Karaites, while not unique to the country, exist in few other locations in the world. They are considered by some to be a branch of Judaism; their religion is based exclusively on the Old Testament. Two houses of worship in Vilnius and Trakai serve the Karaite religious community of approximately 250 members. The Karaites have been in the country since 1397. Considered as well to constitute a distinct ethnic group--Karaites speak a Turkic-based language and use the Hebrew alphabet--their community president is also their only religious leader.

According to the Ministry of Justice, a total of 923 traditional and 176 nontraditional religious associations and communities are registered.

According to data provided by religious groups, some 0.5 percent of the population belong to what the Government refers to as "nontraditional" religious communities. The most numerous are the Full Gospel Movement, Pentecostals/Charismatics, New Apostolic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists.

Foreign missionary groups, including Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses, operate in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in

practice.

The Constitution provides that that a person's freedom to profess and propagate his or her religion or faith "may be subject only to those limitations prescribed by law and only when such restrictions are necessary to protect the safety of society, public order, a person's health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." The religious teachings of churches and other religious organizations, their religious activities, and their houses of prayer may not be used for purposes that contradict the Constitution and the law. The freedom of expression of religious conviction also may be restricted temporarily during a period of martial law or a state of emergency. None of the limitations specified in the Constitution has been invoked.

There is no state religion. However, some religious groups enjoy government benefits not available to others.

The 1995 Law on Religious Communities and Associations grants property rights for prayer houses, homes, and other buildings to religious communities, associations, and centers, and permits construction that is necessary for their activities. The law specifies nine religious communities that have been declared "traditional" and therefore are eligible for governmental assistance. They are Latin Rite Catholics, Greek Rite Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans, members of the Evangelical Reformed Church, Orthodox Christians (Moscow Patriarchate), Old Believers, Jews, Sunni Muslims, and Karaites. These traditional associations and communities receive annual financial support from the State. Other religious communities are not eligible for financial assistance from the Government, but there are no restrictions on their activities or property rights.

In 1999 the Seimas (Parliament) amended the Law on Religious Communities and Associations to provide funding from the national budget for the educational institutions of religious organizations designated as traditional. The governmental Department of European Law has warned publicly that this amendment discriminates in favor of these communities; the law is expected to take effect in September 2001.

There is no separate government agency dealing with religious groups, only a small department in the Ministry of Justice that handles requests of religious groups for registration.

Traditional religious associations and communities are not required to register their bylaws with the Ministry of Justice in order to receive legal status. However, nontraditional religious communities must present an application, a founding statement signed by no less than 15 members, and a description of their religious teachings and their aims. The Ministry must review the documents within 6 months.

The Constitution divides religious communities into state recognized traditional groups and others. However, in practice a four-tier system exists: Traditional, state recognized, registered, and unregistered communities. The Law on Religious Communities and Associations stipulates that nontraditional religious communities may be granted state recognition if they are "backed by society" and have been registered in the country for at least 25 years. Both traditional and state recognized communities can receive state subsidies; they do not have to pay social and health insurance for clergy and other employees; their clergy and theological students are exempt from military service; and they are not subject to VAT tax on such services as electricity, telephone, and heat. However, only traditional

communities have the right to teach religion in state schools and buy land to build churches (other communities can rent it). Religious communities registered by the Ministry of Justice constitute the third status group; they do not receive subsidies, tax exemptions, social benefits, or military exemptions enjoyed by traditional and state recognized communities but can act as legal entities and thus rent land for religious buildings. There are also unregistered communities. They have no juridical status or state privileges, but there are no reports that any such groups were prevented from worshiping or seeking members.

Relations between the Government and the officially registered Jewish community are good. In May 1999, the Minister of Justice recognized the Hasidic Chabad Lubavich community as a traditional religious organization. The Ministry of Justice previously had argued that the community was not a part of the country's historical, spiritual, or social heritage and therefore could not be registered as traditional.

In July 2000, the Government and the Holy See agreed to establish a military Ordinariat to provide religious support to Catholic members of the military service in the form of military chaplains. The Ministry of Defense provides material support for the Ordinariat and its places of worship. Other traditional churches and religious groups can also provide religious support to the military services. Alternative military service is available, but there is no option for alternative nonmilitary service, as demanded by members of Jehovah's Witnesses.

In August 2000, three agreements between the Government and the Holy See took effect: "On Cooperation in the Sphere of Education and Culture," "On Spiritual Guidance of Catholics Serving in the Military," and "On Legal Aspects of Relations Between the Catholic Church and the State." The last of these agreements established Assumption Day (August 15) as a national holiday, in addition to the previously established holidays of St. Mary's celebration (January 1), Easter Monday, All Saint's Day (November 1), Christmas, and Boxing Day (December 26). The list of holidays can be changed by agreement of both sides. There is no direct evidence that these agreements adversely affect religious freedom for the adherents of other religions.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Nontraditional religious communities must submit an application and supporting documents to the Ministry of Justice in order to receive legal status. Since 1995 the Ministry of Justice has turned down two applications, those of the Osho Ojas Meditation Center and the Lithuanian Pagans Community. Both were rejected because the authorities concluded that these groups were nonreligious. They were advised to register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) instead.

While the operations of foreign missionary groups within the country are not restricted, nontraditional foreign religious workers must obtain work permits, and they face difficult bureaucratic requirements in obtaining residence permits from officials who regard them as representatives of "cults" and "sects." Several foreign missionary groups complained in mid-1999 over a change in temporary residency requirements. These groups encountered problems with the Government's new procedures (enacted by law in 1999) requiring residency permits for religious workers. Most of these problems had been resolved by mid-2001.

According to the Constitution, state and local teaching and education establishments are secular. The Law on Religious Communities and Associations provides that only religious instruction of traditional and other state-recognized religious communities may be taught in state educational institutions. At the request of parents from these communities, schools can offer classes in religious instruction. In practice, parents can choose classes in religious instruction or classes in ethics for nonreligious education. However, nontraditional religious communities have the right to establish schools of their own.

The 1995 Law on Procedures for the Restoration of the Rights of Religious Communities to Existing Real Property granted all religious communities equal opportunity in regaining control over former property used for conducting religious services. However, the Catholic community has been more successful in regaining its property than many other religious communities. Some religious property, including 26 synagogues, was returned to the Jewish community, mostly from 1993 to 1996.

The deadline for filing claims has passed. A number of claims have been successfully resolved, and others still are pending. Lack of funds for compensation and protracted bureaucratic obstacles are the primary problems preventing the return of private property. The Government has taken no action on the problem of restoring property of religious institutions that no longer exist and has no plans to do so.

On April 18, 2001, the Vilnius First District Court ruled that the Vilnius City Council had violated the previous owners' and tenants' rights when returning 4 buildings to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1992 and 1993. The Court abrogated the decision of the Vilnius Council on Property Restitution. The Church appealed, asserting that it had owned the properties before they were nationalized in 1945 and that restitution had been carried out according to the law.

In April 2000, the Government established a commission to coordinate the activities of governmental institutions in order to investigate whether the activities of religious, esoteric, or spiritual groups comply with the law. It includes representatives of the Ministries of Justice, Interior, Education, Health, Foreign Affairs, the General Prosecutor's office, and the State Security Department. The Minister of Justice appoints the chairman of the commission. The commission was established following some parliamentarians' calls for increased control of "sects," following negative coverage of some religious groups in the media. The commission takes as its guidance domestic laws and the recommendations (No. 1412 and No. 1178) of the Council of Europe, which seek to ensure that activities of religious groups are in line with the principles of a democratic society, human rights and fundamental freedoms. As of mid-2001, the commission had taken no action and made no statements affecting specific religious groups.

Local media reported that the security services monitored the activities of the NGO "Collegiate Association for the Research of the Principle," Jehovah's Witnesses, and a visiting member of the Russian Vissarion Church. In June 2000, the Ministry of Justice warned the "Collegiate Association for the Research of the Principle" to discontinue its religious activities (they were proselytizing on behalf of the Unification Church, an activity that was not described in their own statutes, and thus violated the Law on Public Organizations.)

The nontraditional Word of Faith Church (a charismatic Protestant Church) has expressed concern that Vilnius county and district authorities refuse to register a private school established by the Church. The problem emerged when the school, which operates under a license issued by the Education and Science Ministry, relocated in 1999 from Vilnius city to Vilnius county. The Vilnius county authorities claimed that they were asked to "freeze" the registration of the school by the special services, which investigated activities of the Word of Faith Church. The problem remained unresolved as of mid-2001.

There was one unconfirmed complaint about a civil servant being denied promotion to a higher position on the grounds of religious affiliation.

There were no reports of religious prisoners of detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 13, 2000, after reviewing an appeal by several members of Parliament, the Constitutional Court confirmed the principle of separation between church and state in the sphere of education. The Court ruled that in state educational institutions, classes or groups may not be coestablished with state-recognized traditional religious associations. The Court also ruled that if educational establishments are sponsored jointly by a state institution and a religious group, the group cannot set any religious test for employment of staff not connected with religious instruction. Finally, the Court ruled that the heads of state educational establishments could not be appointed and dismissed by government institutions on the recommendation of a religious association. The Catholic Church criticized the Court's ruling.

In March 2001, the Government abolished the position of advisor for religious affairs, established in 1993. The former advisor admitted in a public interview that the Catholic Lithuanian Bishops' Conference had proposed his candidacy. This decision contributed to a more evenhanded approach to religious matters.

In the period from January 2000 to April 2001, the Ministry of Justice registered 13 nontraditional religious groups and granted 41 traditional religious communities legal person status. The Parliament's Human Rights Committee recommended that the Parliament extend state recognition to the Baptist community. Legally, the status of "state recognized" religious community is higher than that of a "registered" community but lower than that of the "traditional" community.

In December 2000, the Ministry of Justice and the Government's inter-agency commission organized an International Conference on Law and Religion in Lithuania, sponsored by a foreign NGO and foreign academic institutions. The conference was seen by the participants as a contribution to interfaith dialog.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There are generally amicable relations among the various religious communities, although members of religious minorities occasionally are subjected to acts of intolerance, such as insults.

An estimated 10 percent of the population before World War II were Jewish. Over 200,000 Jews (about 95 percent of that population) were killed in the Holocaust. The country still is reconciling itself with its past and working to understand it better. President Valdas Adamkus established a historical commission in August 1998 to investigate both the crimes of the Holocaust and the subsequent Soviet occupation. The commission has held three annual conferences and several seminars and has filed three reports; many more reports were pending as of June 30, 2001. A government-sponsored international forum on Holocaust-era looted cultural assets took place in October 2000. Alleged war criminal Aleksandras Lileikis, the former head of the security police of the Vilnius district under Nazi control, died on September 27, 2000, at age 93, without facing trial. On February 14, 2001, the Vilnius District Court's College for Criminal Cases found Kazys Gimzauskas, Lileikis' deputy, guilty of genocide committed in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation. The court closed the case, but did not sentence Gimzauskas, who was judged to be mentally ill.

Beginning in 1999 the country's Jewish communities expressed increased concern by over anti-Semitic remarks made by some politicians. Such anti-Semitic comments continued during the period covered by this report; however, the political leadership and the national press condemned the anti-Semitic statements of fringe political groups. In October 2000, a politician known for making anti-Semitic and derogatory comments towards Jews and foreigners was elected to the Parliament. He had won election in 1999 as mayor of the country's second largest city, Kaunas.

In April 2000, the country's Catholic Church issued an apology for indifference and crimes committed by Lithuanians during the Holocaust. The statement included the first recognition by the Church that some Lithuanians participated in the killing and mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust.

A number of ecumenical organizations operate in the country. An NGO, Research and Information Center for New Religions was established in Vilnius in May 2001 to provide objective information about new religions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy maintains a close and regular dialog on religious issues with senior officials in the Government, Members of Parliament, and presidential advisors, as well as continual contact with religious leaders. Religious groups use the Embassy as a vehicle to voice their complaints and the Embassy encourages religious leaders to keep the Embassy informed of their views on the status of religious freedom and any complaints.

The Embassy maintains regular contact with U.S. missionary groups.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy's democracy commission funded a number of projects with the goal of promoting greater religious tolerance, particularly those related to building broader understanding of the Holocaust.

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