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**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Latvia**

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LATVIA

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There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Relations between the various religious communities are generally amicable.

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. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, bureaucratic problems for minority religions persist. There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions. Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rules for public gatherings.

According to the Law on Religious Organizations, any 10 citizens or permanent residents over the age of 18 may apply to register a church. Asylum seekers, foreign embassy staff, and those in the country temporarily in a special status cannot register a religious organization. Congregations functioning in the country for the first time that do not belong to a church association already registered must reregister each year for 10 years. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination and with permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only churches with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. A decision to register a church is made by the Minister of Justice.

According to Ministry of Justice officials, most registration applications

are approved eventually once proper documents are submitted. Problems arise and registration is denied because the Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious union (church) in a single confession. Because of this provision, the Government can not register any splinter groups, including an independent Jewish congregation, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, and a separate Old Believers group. The Christian Scientists have been refused registration due to opposition from the Doctors Association.

Shortly after the renewal of independence in 1991, the Vatican, with the support of the Latvian Catholic community, requested negotiations for a reestablishment of the 1922 Concordat, which had existed between Latvia and the Vatican during Latvia's period of independence between World War I and World War II. In 1996, the Prime Minister established a working group to negotiate a new agreement. This agreement reportedly would grant the Roman Catholic Church privileged status. The negotiations have led to some concern among members of other religions. If approved, it is expected that adherents of other faiths would seek similar recognition and benefits for their own religious community.

Religious Demography

The three largest faiths are Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Orthodoxy. No precise denomination membership statistics are available. Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and various evangelical Protestant groups. The once large Jewish community was virtually destroyed in the Holocaust during the 1941-44 German occupation of Latvia and now totals only 6,000 persons.

As of February 2000, the Justice Ministry had registered over 1,000 congregations. This total includes: Lutheran (302), Roman Catholic (243), Orthodox (112), Baptist (85), Old Believer Orthodox (65), Seventh-Day Adventist (44), Jehovah's Witnesses (11), Methodists (10), Jewish (7), Buddhist (3), Muslim (6), Hare Krishnas (8), Mormons (1), and over 100 others.

Interest in religion has increased markedly since independence. However, a large percentage of these adherents do not practice their faith regularly. Churches have provided the following estimates of church membership to the Justice Ministry: Lutheran (400,000), Roman Catholic (500,000), Orthodox (190,000), Baptist (6,000), Old Believer Orthodox (70,000), Seventh-Day Adventist (4,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (2,000), Methodists (500), Jewish (6,000), Buddhist (100), Muslim (300), Hare Krishnas (500), and Mormons (200). There are significant numbers of atheists, perhaps a majority of the population. The Orthodox, many of them Russian-speaking, noncitizen permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

There is a New Religions Consultative Council whose membership consists of doctors, academics, and the independent human rights ombudsman. The council, which meets on an "ad hoc" basis, can

research and write opinions on specific issues, but has no decision-making authority. There also is a Traditional Religion Council, which meets monthly. This body reportedly aims at facilitating greater ecumenical communication, discussing matters of common concern and improving dialog between the traditional faiths and the State.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Latvian visa regulations effective since July 1999 require religious workers to present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a Latvian bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process still is cumbersome. Nonetheless, the Government cooperated to resolve several difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers. Difficulties in this area diminished and Citizenship and Migration Department officials have worked to ease the situation.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries, including from the United States, are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations have criticized this provision.

The Law on Religious Organizations stipulates that religion may be taught to students in public schools on a voluntary basis only by representatives of Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, Baptist, and Jewish religions. The State provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations may provide religious education in private schools only.

The Latvian Lutheran Church established its own clergy education center, the Luther Academy in Riga, in 1998. The Roman Catholic Church also has its own seminary but wants to establish its own separate faculty of theology at the University of Latvia or, alternatively, join forces with a Catholic university elsewhere in Europe that would issue degrees. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is now nondenominational.

Citizen's passports currently indicate the ethnicity of the bearer. Jews are considered an ethnic group and are listed as such rather than Latvian, Russian, etc. This practice may be phased out shortly.

Jewish community leaders have regained a number of major properties around the country, and they report that the legal framework for restitution of religious property is adequate. While restitution of a few Jewish properties proceeds, the process is slow, complex, and often delayed by legal wrangling and bureaucratic obstacles.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens There were no reports of the forced religious conversion 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.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities are generally amicable. Ecumenism still is a new concept in the country and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude towards the concept. Although government officials are encouraging a broader understanding of and acceptance of newer religions, lingering suspicions remain towards newer nontraditional faiths.

There was no progress reported in apprehending the perpetrators of the 1995 bombing of the central synagogue in Riga, or the second bombing in 1998 of the same synagogue. In June 1998, two youths were arrested for painting anti-Semitic slogans on a wall opposite the synagogue. The Riga center district police opened an investigation for hooliganism. The case was sent forward to the Prosecutor's office for indictment but was returned for additional investigation. The youths were released shortly after being apprehended.

There were scattered incidents in Liepaja and other places during 1998 in which Jewish monuments were defaced. In April 1999, a bomb exploded at a Jewish Holocaust memorial just outside the city. Police have not yet identified the culprits responsible for these incidents.

The Latvian Historical Commission, under the auspices of former President Guntis Ulmanis and current President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, held two international meetings, in July 1999 and in March 2000, attended by scholars from a broad range of countries, including the United States and Israel. Under the direction of its executive director, the Historical Commission also sponsored international conferences on topics such as "Jews in a Changing World" in October 1999, held consultations in the United States with Jewish-American organizations, and launched major Holocaust education projects, including a workshop with the teachers of the Latvian history association, and sponsored Latvian teachers' travels to the Yad Vashem (a Holocaust memorial) in Israel for education courses. Two well-known books on the Holocaust, William Styron's "Sophie's Choice" and Simon Wiesenthal's "Sunflower" were published in Latvian. President Vike-Freiberga in April 2000 dedicated a plaque to the family of Zanis Lipke, a blue-collar worker who saved the lives of more than 50 Jews during the Holocaust. She has supported firmly government efforts to bring war criminals, including those who participated in Nazi war crimes, to justice. In addition the University of Latvia Judaic Studies center was renovated and expanded. In July 2000, President Vike Freiberga presented the country's highest "Three Star" award to four citizens whose actions during World War II are credited with saving the lives of more than 400 Latvian Jews.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy worked to support the principle of religious freedom by engaging actively in the Jewish property restitution process. The Embassy maintains regular contact with the Jewish community on this matter. The Embassy also takes an active role in supporting the work of the Historical Commission and assisted with funding of the translation of "Sophie's Choice".

Embassy officials meet regularly with visiting missionary groups from the U.S. Embassy officials discussed problems that members of certain minority religions experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits.

Two representatives from the Ministry of Justice participated in a summer 1999 U.S. Government-funded international visitor travel/study program in the United States focused on freedom of religion and religious tolerance issues.

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[Europe and the New Independent States Index](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [International Religious Freedom](#) | [Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) |

