

USDOS – US Department of State

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Latvia

Executive Summary

The constitution provides every person the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and it specifies the separation of church and state. By law, eight “traditional” religious groups (seven Christian groups and Jews) receive rights and privileges other groups do not. On November 10, the Prosecutor General’s office filed an injunction to terminate the activities of the New Generation Organization, an evangelical Christian church, after it said representatives and members of two congregations were determined to have repeatedly disregarded COVID-19 restrictions limiting the number of persons at public gatherings. The government approved the applications of 10 new religious groups during the year. In June, a social media post by Law and Order Party leader Aldis Gobzems equating COVID-19 restrictions to the Holocaust was condemned across the political spectrum. Gobzems was consequently barred from participation in one Saeima (parliament) meeting, and the Saeima ethics committee initiated an ethics violation case against him. In September, the first of three readings took place in the Saeima of a draft restitution bill that would satisfy the country’s commitments under the 2009 Terezin Declaration and provide 40 million euros (\$45.35 million) to the Jewish community for heirless and communal properties seized by the Nazis and Soviets during World War II. According to the annual report of the security police, authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities but made no interventions during the year. President Egils Levits and other senior government officials attended several Holocaust memorial events throughout the year.

Jewish and Muslim groups cited instances of antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate speech in news articles and on social media. In September, the Brussels-based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European antisemitism survey, which found that 6 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Latvia said they had negative feelings towards Jews. On November 30, approximately 300 persons lit thousands of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga in remembrance of Jews massacred by the Nazis in Rumbula Forest in 1941.

In September, the Secretary of State posted on Twitter a message reiterating the importance of resolving the country’s obligations under the Terezin Declaration. U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged with senior government officials and parliamentarians on the importance of religious tolerance and providing restitution and compensation for expropriated property to the Jewish community. Embassy officials also engaged with representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities as well as NGOs MARTA Center and Safe House to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (midyear 2021). According to the Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities published by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), based on 2019 data, the largest religious groups are Lutheran (37 percent), Roman Catholic (18 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christian (13 percent), the latter being predominantly native Russian speakers. Thirty-one percent of the population is unaffiliated with any religious group. The Latvian Orthodox Church is a self-governing Eastern Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Central Statistical Bureau reports there are 4,372 persons who identify as Jewish, and the Council of Jewish Communities believes there are approximately 10,000 persons with Jewish heritage. The Muslim community reports approximately 1,000 Muslims resident in the country, while the MOJ’s report of religious organizations lists 176 active members in eight Muslim congregations. Separately, there is a small Ahmadi Muslim community. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, evangelical Christians, Methodists, Calvinists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution states that everyone has the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and provides, “The church shall be separate from the state.” It allows restrictions on the expression of religious beliefs 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’s 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 a 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, eligibility to apply for funds for religious building restoration, and tax deductions for donors. Registration also allows religious groups to perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units and to 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, which it treats as already registered.

Unregistered groups do not possess legal status and may not own property in the name of the group, although individual members may hold property. Unregistered groups may not conduct financial transactions or receive tax-free donations. They may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, or military units and generally may not hold worship services in public places without special permission. The law stipulates fines ranging from 40 to 200 euros (\$45 to \$230) if an unregistered group carries out any of these activities.

By law, to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members aged 18 or older. 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 charters explaining their objectives and activities; a list of all group members (full name, identification number, and signature); the names of the persons who will represent the religious organization; minutes of the meeting founding the group; confirmation that members voted on and approved the statutes; and a list of members of the audit committee (full name, identification number, and title). The audit committee is responsible for preparing financial reports on the group and ensuring it adheres to its statutes. 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, public safety, welfare, or morals. Groups denied registration may appeal the decision in court.

Ten or more congregations with a total of 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 and monasteries. The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association of a single faith or denomination or of more than one religious group with the same or similar name.

According to the law, all traditional and registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the MOJ by March 1 regarding their activities and goals. They must also provide other data, including congregation size, number of clergy, number of weddings, other ceremonies performed, and details of group governance and financial status.

The law states that the activities of a religious organization may be terminated on the basis of a court ruling if it is in conflict with the constitution and other regulatory laws. Activities may also be terminated if a religious organization calls on others to disobey the law or if its activities endanger the democratic state system, public peace and order, or the health and morals of others.

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 for conviction. Penalties range from community service or fines to up to three years of imprisonment. Committing a crime for religious reasons may also be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The government funds required religion and ethics classes in public schools in first through third grade. A school must receive the approval of the parents of at least 10 students to hold religion classes in any of the eight traditional groups; if such approval is not obtained or if they prefer not to enroll in religion classes, students take courses on general ethics. The Center for Educational Content at the Ministry of Education must review the content of the classes to verify it does not violate freedom of conscience. Starting in fourth grade, religious subjects are incorporated into elective ethics and social science classes. If there is demand, schools are permitted to teach classes on the history of religion. Students at state-supported national minority schools may attend classes on a voluntary basis on the religion "characteristic of the national minority." Other nontraditional religious groups without their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Religion courses in public schools range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved government-certified instructors, usually at the lower grades, to nondenominational Christian teachings or overviews of major world religions by certified teachers who are proposed by a religious group and approved by the Ministry of Education, usually at higher grades. Education guidelines require inclusion of Holocaust education in Latvian history and world history classes, which are mandatory for all students in public schools.

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 may issue recommendations to specific authorities. Parliament appoints the ombudsman.

The law stipulates foreign missionaries may be issued a residency permit, hold meetings, and proselytize only if a registered domestic religious group invites them to conduct such activities. 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. Religious workers from European Union or Schengen countries do not require visas.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

During the year, two congregations belonging to the New Generation religious organization of the Evangelical Christian Church received warnings from police and faced court proceedings for violating public health laws. On November 10, the Prosecutor General's office filed an injunction to terminate the activities of the New Generation Organization after representatives and members were determined to have committed more than six violations of public health laws. Despite previous warnings, authorities stated that the New Generation Organization's representatives and members continued to disregard public health restrictions prohibiting public gatherings. On October 27, police found approximately 50 persons participating in an event, and on October 31, during a national lockdown, approximately 150.

During the year, the MOJ approved the applications of 10 religious groups that applied to register for the first time: the Autonomous Church SIKHISM; the Riga English Church of Jehovah's Witnesses; "Spirit Assembly International Ministries," the Riga Evangelical Christian Church; "Light of Zion," the Evangelical Christian Church New Generation congregation; "REBIRTH," the Latvian Evangelical Christian Church; "Source of Faith," the Valmiera Pentecostal Church; "KACIR," the Limbazi Pentecostal Church; "KACIR," the Riga Pentecostal Church; "Glory of God," the Riga Pentecostal Church; and "Hope," the Tukums Evangelical Pentecostal Church.

In June, Saeima deputy and leader of the recently formed Law and Order Party Aldis Gobzems posted to social media a photograph in which he wore a yellow Star of David. The image was widely understood as Gobzems' drawing a parallel between the backlash he received for his stance against COVID-19 restrictions and the persecution of the Jews under the Nazi regime. His post was widely condemned across the political spectrum. The Saeima Mandate, Ethics, and Submissions Committee subsequently filed a breach of ethics complaint against Gobzems, and he was barred from participating in a later Saeima meeting.

Authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities, according to the annual report of the security police, but they made no interventions during the year.

According to a 2020 report by the NGO National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry (NCSEJ), the most recent available, the country made progress in assessing its role in the Holocaust, and senior government officials expressed their solidarity with the country's Jewish victims and with Israel. NCSEJ, however, expressed continued concern over what it described as the country's ultra-nationalist movement.

In September, the first of three readings took place in the Saeima of a draft restitution bill that would satisfy the country's commitments under the 2009 Terezin Declaration and provide 40 million euros (\$45.35 million) to the Jewish community for communal and heirless properties confiscated during World War II.

Public funding continued to support Holocaust education in schools.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, events commemorating the Holocaust were smaller than in previous years. President Egils Levits and other senior government officials, including Speaker of Parliament Ināra Murniece, Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, Defense Minister Artis Pabriks, and Interior Minister Marija Golubeva attended Holocaust memorial events, including International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Latvian Holocaust Memorial Day. Officials held a socially distanced public event on July 4 to commemorate the 1941 burning of the Great Choral Synagogue with victims inside.

In March, organizers cancelled a march commemorating the Latvian Legionnaires, who fought in the Waffen-SS in World War II, due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. On March 16, organizers laid a wreath at the Freedom Monument, the customary end of the march route. Six senior National Alliance party members – four of them parliamentarians – and dozens of supporters laid flowers there during the day. Press reported a small group of protesters also gathered. No Nazi emblems or symbols were evident among the participants. According to media and police reports, the event has received less and less attention each year and was generally viewed as a commemoration of national identity and remembrance of those who fought for independence rather than as a glorification of Nazism.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Riga Jewish Community executive director Gita Umanovska and Jews of Latvia Museum director Ilya Lensky said antisemitic hate speech that appeared during the year was mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments in news articles, although no one reported such incidents to the police. Sources stated the level of online antisemitic hate speech appeared similar to that of previous years, based on anecdotal assessments. In October, one online commenter wrote, "Not in vain, at all times and in all countries, Jews were beaten ... here. [Latvia] is a vivid example." In September, another online commenter wrote, "Jews have been [screwed] by state powers in all times."

In September, the Brussels-Based NGO Action and Protection League issued the results of its European anti-Semitism survey based on data from December 2019-January 2020. According to the survey, 6 percent of 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 in Latvia said they had negative feelings towards Jews. Ten percent said they would be "totally uncomfortable" or "uncomfortable" with having Jewish neighbors. The survey cited stereotypical statements about Jews and asked 1,000 respondents ages 18-75 the degree to which they agreed or disagreed. The proportion who responded "strongly agree" or "tend to agree" with the following statements were – "the interests of Jews in this country are very different from the interests of the rest of the population" (25 percent); "there is a secret Jewish network that influences political and economic affairs in the world" (27 percent); "Jews have too much influence in this country" (16 percent); "Jews will never be able to fully integrate into this society" (16 percent); "Jews are more inclined than most to use shady practices to achieve their goals" (33 percent); "many of the atrocities of the Holocaust were often exaggerated by the Jews later" (19 percent); "Jews are also to blame for the persecutions against them" (22 percent); "Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes" (34 percent).

Some hate speech characterized as racist or anti-Muslim appeared on social media and the internet during the year, mostly in individual posts and comments in news articles. For example, in September, one site had the comment, "Those blacks and Muslims are lazy, interested in benefits, forming gangs and doing drugs. It is their environment. They are shameless, lazy, they hate white people, they are racists."

On November 30, approximately 300 persons (about half the number in attendance pre-pandemic) lit thousands of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga in memory of the approximately 30,000 Jews killed in the Rumbula Forest by the Nazis in 1941. A separate Rumbula Forest memorial service on November 30 was well attended, including by President Levits, Prime Minister Kariņš, Foreign Minister Rinkevics, Defense Minister Artis Pabriks, members of the diplomatic corps, leaders in the Jewish community, and religious leaders.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In September, the Secretary of State posted to Twitter a message reiterating the importance of resolving the country's obligations under the 2009 Terezin Declaration.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged in regular discussions with senior government officials, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MOJ, the Office of the Ombudsman, and with members of parliament, on the importance of providing restitution for property expropriated by the Nazis and Soviets by passing a restitution bill satisfying the country's commitments under the Terezin Declaration. The Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues visited the country on October 11 and met with government officials, parliamentarians, and members of the Jewish community in support of a bill for Holocaust restitution.

Embassy staff met with representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. Staff also met with the MARTA Center, which works with immigrant women, including those who might be at risk of victimization as a result of their religious beliefs. Embassy staff also engaged representatives of Safe House, which assists with transition support and education for immigrants and refugees, many of whom are of minority faiths.

The embassy funded a project with the Zanis Lipke Memorial Museum to support an exhibit with paintings and diary fragments of a Latvian-born Jewish-American artist, focusing on his experience surviving the Holocaust in the country and his later life in a New York City Latvian enclave. The exhibit was open from February through the end of the year.

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