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Estonia

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, 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, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 17,666 square miles and a population of 1.36 million (65 percent ethnic Estonian and 35 percent Russian-speaking). The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) was the largest denomination, with 165 congregations and approximately 180,000 members. The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC) had 59 congregations with approximately 20,000 members and the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), had 30 congregations with approximately 150,000 members. There were smaller communities of Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Methodists, and other denominations. There was a small Jewish community with 2,500 members, with one synagogue in operation. There were also communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and many other denominations and faiths; however, each of these minority faiths had fewer than 6,000 adherents. According to population census in 2000, approximately 70,000 persons considered themselves atheists.

Fifty years of Soviet occupation diminished the role of religion in society. Many neighborhoods built since World War II do not have religious centers, and many of the surviving churches require extensive renovations. A few new churches have been built and inaugurated in recent years, including a Methodist church in Tallinn and an Orthodox church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, in Narva. Church attendance, which had seen a surge coinciding with the independence movement in the early 1990s, now has decreased significantly. Anecdotal evidence from local Lutheran churches indicates a 76 percent decrease in registered confirmations between 1990 and 2000.

Many groups have sent foreign missionaries into the country in recent years; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) had the largest number of missionaries.

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 Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution states that there is no state church. The Churches and Congregations Act decrees that the commanding officer of

each military unit shall ensure conscripts the opportunity to practice their religion. Military chaplain services extend to service members of all faiths. The coordination of chaplains' services to the prisons is delegated to one of the Lutheran diaconal centers, and the center carries out this responsibility in a way that does not discriminate against non-Lutherans.

There are other laws and regulations that directly or indirectly regulate individual and collective freedom of religion. The 1993 law on churches and religious organizations requires that all religious organizations have at least 12 members and register with the Religious Affairs Department under the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MIA). Leaders of religious organizations must be citizens with at least 5 years' residence in the country. The minutes of the constitutive assembly, a copy of statutes, and a notarized copy of three founders' signatures serve as supporting documents to the registration application.

The Estonian Orthodox Church is registered as subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), which ended a series of disputes over the registration of the name "the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church." In 1993, the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC)—independent since 1919, subordinate to Constantinople since 1923, and exiled under the Soviet occupation—re-registered under its 1935 statute. A group of ethnic Russian and Estonian parishes that preferred to remain under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church structure imposed during the Soviet occupation attempted, unsuccessfully, to claim the EAOC name.

A program of basic Christian ecumenical religious instruction was available in public schools. In primary school, parents decided whether their children would participate in these religious studies; at the secondary level, pupils decided if they would attend these classes. Comparative religious studies were available in public and private schools on an elective basis. There were no official statistics on how many students participated in these classes. There were two private church schools in Tartu that had a religious-based curriculum.

The property restitution process largely has been completed. The specific details of EOCMP registration have significant implications for which branch of the Orthodox Church may receive legal title to church property. By the end of the period covered by this report, most church properties, including those being used by the EOCMP, were under the legal control of the EAOC. Once the EOCMP registered and acquired the legal status of a "juridical person," it then obtained the right to initiate court proceedings to gain de jure control over the properties that it had been using on a de facto basis with the permission of the EAOC. In 2002, the Government and the two churches concluded a protocol of intentions according to which the EAOC would transfer a part of its property presently used by the EOCMP to the State. The State in turn will lease it to the EOCMP for 50 years. The Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Alexy II, visited the country in September 2003 to mark the registration of the EOCMP. Despite continued political progress, differences over the disposition of Orthodox Church property continued between the EAOC and the EOCMP. The Government approved the transfer of three properties to the EOCMP in 2003, including properties in Haapsalu, Tartu and Tapa. Aleksander Nevski Cathedral is owned by the city of Tallinn and rented out to its Russian Orthodox congregation on a several decade lease basis.

According to local Jewish leaders, property restitution was not an issue for the community, as most prewar religious buildings were rented, not owned.

Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas day, Pentecost are national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or 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 refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities is generally amicable. Although the majority of citizens were nominally Lutheran, ecumenical services during national days, Christian holidays, or at public events was common.

Most of the religious adherents among the country's Russian-speaking population were Orthodox, while the Estonian majority is predominantly Lutheran. There is a deep-seated tradition of tolerance of other denominations and religions.

President Ruutel awarded the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church Alexy II with the highest Estonian civilian order, the Terra Mariana Cross, 1st Class. Alexy II recognized Ruutel for his outstanding contribution to the strengthening of the unity of Orthodox nations.

Two churches and three graveyards were vandalized during the period covered by this report. In July 2003, candlesticks were stolen from a Narva church, and a stained glass window was broken in a Viljandi church. In November 2003, a tombstone and part of a fence were broken in a Rakvere cemetery. In April, eight graves were vandalized in Tartu Raadi cemetery. Authorities initiated misdemeanor proceedings in the cases.

Earlier thefts of church property prompted the Estonian Council of Churches and the Board of Antiquities to initiate a database of items under protection. The database, which is comprised of digital photos and detailed descriptions, is shared with law enforcement agencies as needed.

In June 2003, three skinheads were sentenced to conditional imprisonment for activities that publicly incited hatred on the basis of national origin and race. They were convicted for having drawn swastikas and written inscriptions insulting to Jewish persons on buildings in the northeastern Estonian town of Sillamae.

There are two pending investigations related to the posting of anti-Semitic remarks on the Internet.

In 1998, President Meri established the International Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, headed by Finnish diplomat Max Jakobson. In 2001, the Commission produced a nine-page document about the Holocaust in Estonia. A fuller report has been in progress for several years, and the Commission is continuing its work.

Other steps taken by the Government to promote tolerance include introduction of an annual Holocaust Remembrance Day, first commemorated on January 27, 2003. The Government has stated that it will focus on educating teachers and lecturers by compiling a best practices handbook, as well as organizing forums and seminars.

The Government has stated that it plans to begin sensitivity training for law enforcement officials so that they can more effectively act against manifestations of intolerance, xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism.

Estonia is an observer to the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education. In that capacity, it is working with Sweden to encourage nongovernmental organization (NGO) Holocaust education efforts. A seminar for Estonian school teachers, developed by an Estonian NGO in cooperation with Sweden's Living History Forum (to be co-financed by the Estonian Ministry of Education), has been proposed for August 2004.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall policy to promote human rights. Officials of the U.S. Embassy met regularly during the

period covered by this report with appropriate government agencies, NGOs, and a wide range of figures in religious circles. In 2002 and 2003, U.S. Embassy officials engaged the Government and nongovernmental actors to promote dialogue and education on Holocaust issues in the country.

In September 2003, the U.S. Delegation of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research visited the country. It met with high-level officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Science, an Executive Secretary of Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, as well as representatives of NGOs, such as Friends of Israel and Jaan Tonisson Institute. It identified opportunities to strengthen the Task Force's activity.

During the period covered by this report the U.S. government also funded the following projects: Publication of the following books: "Who are the Jews and What is the Holocaust?"; "Tell Your Children" about Holocaust history; and Virtual Exhibition in the Harju County Museum - History of Jews and Holocaust.

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