

## LATVIA

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The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religious groups, and suspicions remained toward religious groups considered to be nontraditional.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 25,000 square miles and a population of 2.2 million. The largest religious groups and their percentages of the population include Roman Catholic (22.7 percent), Lutheran (19.7 percent), and Orthodox Christian (16.8 percent). Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and evangelical Protestant groups. According to official sources, 9,736 persons identified themselves as ethnically Jewish.

As of January, 1,135 congregations were registered with the government. These included Lutheran congregations (297), Catholic (250), Orthodox Christian (119), Baptist (92), Old Believer Orthodox (68), Seventh-day Adventist (51), evangelical Christians (40), Muslim (15), Jehovah's Witnesses (14), Methodist (13), Jewish (12), Hare Krishna (11), Buddhist (3), and 150 other congregations.

Interest in religion increased markedly following the restoration of independence; however, many adherents do not regularly practice their faith. Religious groups provided the following estimates of membership in congregations to the Justice Ministry: Catholics (500,000), Lutherans (433,000), Orthodox Christians (370,000), Baptists (6,874), Seventh-day Adventists (3,977), Old Believer Orthodox (2,500), Methodists (685), Mormons (609), the Dievturi (567), Jews (413), Muslims (267), Jehovah's Witnesses (156), Hare Krishnas (133), and

Buddhists (110). Orthodox Christians, many of whom are Russian-speaking, noncitizen permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. There is no state religion; however, the government distinguishes between traditional--Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Old Believers, Baptist, Methodist, Adventist, and Jewish--and new religious groups. In practice this has resulted in additional bureaucratic regulations and requirements for new religious groups that are not applicable to traditional ones.

The Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches have their own seminaries. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

The Ecclesiastical Council comments on religious issues for the government. The council is an advisory body chaired by the prime minister. It includes representatives from major religious groups: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, Baptist, Adventist, Old Believers, Methodist, and Jewish. The council did not meet during the reporting period. Only traditional organizations are represented on the council, limiting the input of other religious organizations into government decisions on religious matters.

The Consultative Council of Religious Affairs was established by the Ministry of Justice in 2009. It includes 14 representatives, mostly from traditional Christian churches, but also from the Jewish community, the indigenous Dievturi group, and the government's Enterprise Registry. The council meets quarterly to discuss practical matters affecting religious groups. During the reporting period, the council met to discuss the tax payments by pastors.

By law "traditional" religious groups enjoy certain rights and privileges that "nontraditional" groups do not. Religion-specific laws define relations between the state and each of the traditional religious groups.

Although the government does not require the registration of religious groups, the Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges if they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or for financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rules for holding public gatherings.

According to the law, any 20 citizens or other persons over the age of 18 who have been recorded in the population register may apply to register a religious group. Persons with temporary residency status, such as asylum seekers and foreign diplomatic staff, may register religious groups only during the authorized period of their residency permit. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination, with permanent registration status, may form a religious association. Congregations that do not belong to a registered religious association must reregister each year for 10 years. Only groups with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. The decision to register a group is made by the Ministry of Justice with technical review by the Enterprise Registry.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas. For several years the Orthodox Church has been seeking official recognition for Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas as observed according to the Orthodox Church's calendar, but the government had not adopted this proposal by the end of the reporting period.

### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association (church) in a single confession. In particular the law prevents any church other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word "Orthodox" in its name.

On July 14, the Justice Ministry denied the Scientologists' reapplication, ruling that the registration of Scientology as a religious organization would have a negative

impact on society; the registration was originally denied in 2009. The registrants appealed this decision to the State Notary. A decision on the appeal was pending at the end of the reporting period.

Visa regulations require foreign religious workers to present letters of invitation and either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology. The process remained cumbersome, although the government was generally cooperative in helping to resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionaries.

The law stipulates that foreign missionaries may hold meetings and proselytize only if invited by domestic religious organizations to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations criticized this provision.

The law stipulates that only representatives of traditional Christian churches (i.e., Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, Old Believer, Baptist, Methodist, and Adventist) and Jewish groups may teach religion in public schools to public school students who volunteer to take the classes. The government provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on a voluntary basis on the religion "characteristic of the national minority." Other denominations and religious groups that do not have their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Depending on the grade level, courses can range from sectarian instruction with Church-approved instructors to nondenominational Christian teachings to overviews of major world religions. Parents can register their children for nonreligious ethics classes instead of Christian-based courses.

Restitution of property confiscated or nationalized during the World War II period and thereafter was substantially completed under an expired denationalization law. However, some religious groups--including the Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities--continued to claim additional communal and heirless properties. The status of many of these remaining properties was the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes concerning ambiguous ownership, competing claims, and the destruction of the Jewish communities to whom properties belonged before World War II.

The Jewish community has identified a number of properties for restitution. In 2008, the government established a task force to study the Jewish community's outstanding claims and consider solutions. The task force did not release its report

by the end of the reporting period, and members of local and international Jewish communities continued to urge the government to pursue a resolution to this issue.

Discussions continued during the reporting period between the government and the Lutheran Church over the restitution of St. Peter's Church in Riga. Although this one issue remained outstanding, the Lutheran Church was generally satisfied with the government's property restitution record.

During the reporting period, prisoners brought a case before the Constitutional Court alleging that Prisons Administration rules on items that can be kept in cells unlawfully infringes on their right to practice religion. The Justice Ministry, which supervises the Prisons Administration, said it consulted with an informal panel of religious leaders about the rules and that sufficient religious liberty is allowed. A decision was expected in early 2011.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Although law enforcement institutions do not collect or publish data specifically on hate crimes, as there is no definition of hate crimes in laws, they report on violations of the law against the incitement of ethnic, racial, or religious hatred. There is also a separate law against incitement of hatred against religious groups. The Security Police initiated five criminal cases based on incitement of interethnic hatred, based on comments made over the Internet.

On December 7, 89 headstones in the New Jewish Cemetery of Riga were vandalized, painted with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans in the Russian language. Government officials, including the president, prime minister, foreign minister, and the mayor of Riga, quickly and forcefully condemned the acts. The police launched an investigation and said they would charge the perpetrators with grave desecration and inciting ethnic hatred, crimes carrying up to 10-year prison terms. The City of Riga rapidly repaired the damage with city funds, and the mayor pledged to increase police patrols in areas around the cemetery to prevent further incidents.

On December 13, marks of white paint were found on a monument to Zanis Lipke, a Latvian who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. Riga city authorities removed the paint on the day it was discovered, and police opened a criminal investigation. The president and foreign minister quickly and strongly condemned the act.

Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some segments of society, manifested in occasional public comments and the above-referenced vandalism of Jewish sites. In addition books and other publications addressing the World War II period generally dwelt on the effects of the Soviet and Nazi occupations on the country and on ethnic Latvians, sometimes at the expense of comment on the Holocaust or some citizens' role in it. However, previously reported public resistance to Holocaust and related memorials seemed to have lessened. During the reporting period, a Jewish history museum and a Jewish school were opened with no adverse public comment. Jewish community representatives also commented publicly on favorable cooperation with a municipal government on the restoration of a former synagogue and establishment of a Holocaust memorial.

In August Catholic Cardinal Janis Pujats called for mandatory Biblical education in all schools. This appeal reignited the debate within society about the intersection of education and religion. The political party For a Good Latvia, prior to parliamentary elections in October, strongly backed Pujats' proposal and submitted a draft legislative proposal to this effect. "For a Good Latvia" was relatively unsuccessful in the elections, winning only eight seats in the 100-seat parliament. Both the prime minister and the Catholic archbishop of Riga stated that religious education should be voluntary.

Leaders of religious groups reported that ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, both among Christian faiths and between Christians and other religious groups, was still developing. In general interfaith relations between major Christian churches and the Jewish community were positive. Some religious groups were perceived as "reserved" toward the concept of interfaith dialogue. Some Christian leaders expressed distrust of Muslim groups in the country, which were perceived to be on the rise.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

During the reporting period, the U.S. embassy worked to support religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with the president, the prime minister, appropriate government bodies, human rights nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries.