

LATVIA

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, primarily in the form of anti-Semitism in some sectors of society.

During the year, the U.S. embassy worked to support religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with government officials, nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of various religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

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 the 2011 census, 6,416 persons, or 0.3 percent of the population, identified themselves as ethnically Jewish.

As of the end of the year, 1,149 congregations were registered with the government. These included Lutheran congregations (295), Catholic (250), Orthodox Christian (122), Baptist (94), Old Believer Orthodox (69), Seventh-day Adventist (51), evangelical Christian (39), Muslim (17), Jehovah's Witnesses (15), Methodist (13), Jewish (12), Hare Krishna (11), Buddhist (4), and 157 other congregations.

Interest in religion increased markedly following the restoration of independence; however, many adherents do not regularly practice their religion. 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

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. There is no state religion. The law, however, gives eight religious groups--Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Old Believers, Baptist, Methodist, Adventist, and Jewish--certain rights and privileges that other religious groups do not have. For example, these groups are exempt from registration requirements. Only members of these eight groups serve on the government's Ecclesiastical Council. Other distinctions relate to the teaching of religion courses in public schools. Religion-specific laws define relations between the state and each of these eight groups. Other religious groups are covered by a general Law on Religious Organizations.

The law distinguishes between religious groups that have been registered for at least 10 years and those that have not; organizations in the latter group are subject to annual registration requirements. In practice this has resulted in additional bureaucratic requirements for religious groups recently established in the country that are not applicable to longer-established groups.

The Ecclesiastical Council is an advisory body chaired by the prime minister which comments on and issues recommendations regarding religious issues. Although its recommendations do not carry the force of law, the prime minister's participation on the council means that its recommendations are often given government attention. In December the council proposed that optional religious education in public schools be extended beyond the third grade, the year it currently ends, and tasked the education ministry with submitting a position on the proposal. Only eight religious organizations are represented on the council, limiting the input of other religious organizations into government decisions on religious matters.

The Ministry of Justice established the Consultative Council of Religious Affairs in 2009 as an informal body of experts on religious issues. It is an advisory body that the government can consult, but its recommendations do not carry the force of law. It includes 14 representatives drawn from traditional Christian churches, the Jewish community, the indigenous Dievturi group, and the government's enterprise registry. Since its organization the consultative council has been relatively inactive. It did not meet during the year.

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 Justice Ministry may deny the application on grounds that registration of the group as a religious organization would threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, public safety, welfare, or morals.

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.

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. Some religious groups criticized this provision.

The law stipulates that only representatives of certain Christian churches (Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, Old Believer, Baptist, Methodist, and Adventist) and Jewish groups may teach religion in public schools to 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. The Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches have their own seminaries. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

The criminal law separately criminalizes incitement to hatred on the basis of religious affiliation.

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 year.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Restitution of individual 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 community's outstanding claims and consider solutions. The task force did not release its report by the end of the year, and members of local and international Jewish communities continued to urge the government to resolve this issue.

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

The Prison Administration allowed prisoners and detainees to observe religious practices with some limitations, including security-related restrictions on religious articles kept in cells and dormitory rooms. In March, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of a challenge against these restrictions by a group of prisoners, noting inconsistency among facilities in the application of these restrictions. The court ordered the government to revise these restrictions to reflect clear criteria related to safety and to ensure consistent application. At the end of the year, the Ministry of Justice continued to work on revising these restrictions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or 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.

Jewish cemetery desecration and monument vandalism continued to be a problem. On June 28, a Jewish cemetery in Valdemarpils was desecrated with swastikas. On May 17 in Riga's Second Forest Cemetery, the grave of Zanis Lipke (a protector of Latvian Jews in World War II) was vandalized. The foreign minister publicly condemned the act.

In January police arrested three persons for vandalizing 89 headstones in the New Jewish Cemetery of Riga on December 7, 2010. The perpetrators, teenage members of the Russian-speaking community, pled guilty to possession of neo-Nazi materials. The three arrestees admitted their guilt, and their cases were pending as of the end of the year.

On May 8, two persons from the Russian-speaking community painted Nazi symbols and anti-Semitic statements in the Latvian language on a memorial to Jewish Holocaust victims. Police promptly arrested the perpetrators. The perpetrators confessed, claiming they intended to cast suspicion on Latvian nationalist parties. On September 7, the defendants pled guilty, and a court sentenced them to 50 hours of community service.

Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some segments of society, manifested in occasional public comments and the 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 rather than the Holocaust or some citizens' role in it.

On December 13, the hosts of an independent radio program called "Age of the Native Land," broadcast on the University of Latvia's radio station, used offensive terms for Jews, questioned generally accepted statistics of Jews killed in the country during the Holocaust, argued that Jews were the instigators of Soviet deportations of Latvians to Siberia during the 1941 Soviet occupation, and criticized the level of attention given to the Holocaust, in their view, at the expense of attention to the suffering of other groups.

Veterans of the Latvian Legion, a Waffen-SS combat unit during World War II, held a parade in Riga in recognition of "Legionnaires' Day." Counter-demonstrators protested the Waffen-SS commemoration, chanting "no to fascism" and "stop the legionnaires."

On a television talk program on the same day as the controversial March 16 event commemorating Latvian veterans of German Waffen SS units, Uldis Freimanis, a neo-Nazi, made anti-Semitic comments advocating violence against Jews. The local Jewish community filed a criminal complaint, alleging a violation of the law against inciting racial or ethnic hatred and violence, and the security police opened an investigation. On August 1, the security police closed the criminal investigation, stating that "the facts of the case did not constitute a criminal offense." The Anti-Defamation League also lodged a complaint with the government over the incident.

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. In general, the Muslim population, which mainly came from Central Asia during Soviet times, was well integrated into society. However, some in society expressed distrust of newer Muslim immigrants, perceived to be on the rise.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

During the year, 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 groups, including missionaries. The embassy included religious leaders in discussions on human rights and civil society. The embassy supported the Jewish community in its ongoing efforts to secure restitution of communal property.