

ESTONIA

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. The government did, however, undertake positive engagement with the Council of Churches and other religious groups as part of its overall effort to strengthen civil society.

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

As part of its overall policy to promote human rights, the U.S. government maintained an open dialogue with the government and all religious groups in the country on religious freedom issues. Religious leaders were invited to participate in official events sponsored by the embassy, and U.S. government officials, including the ambassador, frequently participated in local religious and cultural events.

Section I. Religious Demography

Approximately 14 percent of the population is Evangelical Lutheran, and approximately 15 percent of the population belongs to one of the two Orthodox Churches in the country: the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC). Other Christian groups, including Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Roman Catholics, and Pentecostals, together constitute 1.4 percent of the population. The Russian Old Believers, who live primarily along the west bank of Lake Peipsi in the east, constitute another distinctive community. There are also small Jewish and Muslim communities. Thirty-two percent of the population is unspecified or other, approximately 34 percent is unaffiliated, and 6 percent does not identify with a religion. According to the government, as of September 2010, there were more than 500 religious associations registered in the country.

Most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population, who mainly reside in the capital or the northeastern part of the country, are Orthodox.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The Churches and Congregations Act and the Non-Profit Associations and Unions Act regulate the activities of religious associations. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are registered with city courts.

The law requires the commanding officer of each military unit to guarantee defense force members the opportunity to practice their religion. The act also decrees that prison directors must ensure inmates the opportunity to practice their religious beliefs.

A church, congregation, or associations of congregations are required to have a management board. Citizens and legal residents may be members of the board. In order to register formally with the city court, the management board of a religious association must submit an application signed by all its members. A congregation must have at least 12 adult members. The minutes of the constitutive meeting, a copy of statutes, and a notarized copy of signatures of the board members serve as supporting documents for the registration application.

Basic ecumenical religious instruction is available in public schools. A school must offer religious studies at the primary or secondary level if at least 15 students request it. Comparative religious studies are available in public and private schools on an elective basis.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Pentecost, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The property restitution process, by which the government transferred religious properties back to religious associations, has largely been completed. Ownership of a small number of properties is currently being decided through court proceedings.

The government took steps to promote anti-bias and tolerance education. The government observes January 27 as the annual Holocaust and Other Crimes against Humanity Victims' Memorial Day. The country is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

During the summer the Estonian History Museum mounted a temporary exhibit on notable former residents of Tallinn. Nazi politician and ideologue Alfred Rosenberg was included in the exhibit. The local Jewish community and a senior member of parliament complained about the exhibit, stating that it lacked information about Rosenberg's role in the Holocaust. Further, the information on Rosenberg was placed among several laudatory exhibits, which provided a misleading context. A local high school where Rosenberg studied also included him in a display of notable alumni. Following these complaints, the Ministry of Culture ordered the museum to remove the part of the exhibit related to Rosenberg.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were a few reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Although the largest religious group is Lutheran, ecumenical services on national holidays, including Christian holy days and at public events, were common. Society is largely tolerant of other religious groups.

On July 30 a memorial event was held in Sinimae to honor veterans who had been part of the 20th Estonian Waffen SS Grenadier Division. This event has been a source of controversy in the past due to the connection between non-Baltic Waffen SS units and Nazi war crimes. There were no reports of anti-Semitic statements or actions associated with the event.

Criminal proceedings came to a conclusion against two individuals charged in 2008 with damaging 45 grave markers, including crosses, gravestones, and plaques in the old Haapsalu cemetery that were under protection as historic memorials. On April 11 the Parnu County Court found them guilty and sentenced both to six months in prison with an 18-month probationary period. The court imposed civil remedies to cover the damages.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Officials of the U.S. embassy met with the Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, nongovernmental organizations, and a wide range of figures in religious circles. Embassy officials continued to engage government and nongovernmental actors to promote dialogue and education on Holocaust and other religious issues in the country.

The U.S. government, in cooperation with the U.S.-based Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Peace Studies and the Ministry of Education's Archimedes Foundation, funded two history teachers' participation in a summer training program on teaching about the holocaust from July 16 to 22.