

LITHUANIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government addressed Holocaust legacy issues through a number of initiatives, including public commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Jewish Ghetto and restitution or compensation of seized property to the Jewish community.

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

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom through outreach activities, public speaking engagements, and support for civil society efforts to encourage tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates that the population is 3.5 million (July 2013 estimate). The 2011 census reports 77.3 percent is Roman Catholic and 6.1 percent do not identify with any religious group. Religious groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Russian Orthodox, Old Believers, Lutherans, Reformed Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics, and the Karaites. The Karaites traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region. The Jewish population is mainly concentrated in the larger cities. The majority of Muslims, mainly of Tatar origin and long-established in Lithuania, live in Vilnius and Kaunas. Recent converts and migrants and temporary workers from the Middle East and Africa also belong to this religious group.

Less than 0.5 percent of the population belongs to religious groups the government designates as “nontraditional.” The most numerous are Jehovah’s Witnesses, Full Gospel Word of Faith Movement, Pentecostals/Charismatics, Old Baltic faith communities, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, members of the New Apostolic Church, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution provides that a person's freedom to profess and spread religious beliefs may be limited only when necessary to protect health, safety, public order, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

The criminal code contains three provisions to protect religious freedom. It prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for up to two years in prison for violations. The code penalizes interference with religious ceremonies of "traditional" religious groups by imprisonment or community service, and penalizes inciting religious hatred by imprisonment of up to three years.

It is unlawful to make use of the religious teachings of churches and other religious groups, their religious activities, and their houses of prayer for purposes that contradict the constitution or the law. The government may temporarily restrict freedom of expression of religious belief during a period of martial law or a state of emergency, although it has never invoked this right.

Several government agencies handle religious issues. A department in the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) adjudicates registration requests by religious groups, and the prime minister's staff includes an adviser for religious issues. The prime minister also has several unpaid advisors on such matters as Jewish community and Holocaust issues. The Office of the Equal Opportunities (OEO) Ombudsperson adjudicates complaints of discrimination based on religion directed toward state institutions, educational institutions, employers, and product and service sellers and producers.

The parliamentary ombudsperson examines whether state authorities properly perform their duty to serve the population. The law on the parliament ombudsperson specifically notes religious beliefs as within the purview of the office. The OEO and parliamentary ombudspersons may investigate complaints, recommend changes to parliamentary committees and ministries regarding legislation, and recommend cases to the prosecutor general's office for pretrial investigation.

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While there is some overlap between the OEO and parliamentary ombudspersons, the OEO ombudsperson has greater authority to hear complaints about individual acts of religious discrimination.

The Journalist Ethics Inspectorate investigates complaints under a law that bars publishing material that “instigates war, national, racial, religious, social, and gender hatred.” The inspectorate may levy administrative fines on newspapers under administrative law or refer cases for criminal prosecution.

There is no state religion. The law divides registered religious groups into state-recognized traditional religious groups, other state-recognized religious groups, and all other registered communities and associations.

By law the government recognizes as “traditional” those religious groups able to trace their presence in the country back at least 300 years. The law lists nine “traditional” religious groups: Latin Rite Catholics (Roman Catholics), Greek Rite Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans, Evangelical Reformed Churchgoers, Orthodox Christians (Moscow Patriarchate), Old Believers, Jews, “Sunni Muslims”, and Karaites.

Traditional religious groups may perform marriages that are state-recognized, establish joint private/public schools, provide religious instruction in public schools, and receive annual government subsidies from the government’s budget. Their highest ranking leaders are eligible to apply for diplomatic passports, their clergy and theological students are exempt from military service, and they may provide military chaplains. The law does not require traditional religious groups to register their bylaws. Traditional religious groups are not required to pay social and health insurance taxes for clergy and members of monastic orders who work at monasteries. The state provides minimal social security and health care insurance contributions to religious leaders and members of monastic orders of the traditional and other state-recognized religious groups. Other religious groups by law must pay for these benefits on behalf of their leaders.

Other state-recognized religious groups include those granted this status by parliament in accordance with the law’s stipulation that they have been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years, they have societal support from at least 15 adult Lithuanian citizens, and their instruction and rites are not contrary to laws and morality. Upon receiving an application requesting this status, the MOJ must review the documentation within six months and make a recommendation to parliament.

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The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are the only state-recognized nontraditional religious groups. Recognition entitles them to perform marriages and exempts them from paying social security and healthcare taxes for clergy. Unlike traditional groups, however, they are not eligible for annual subsidies from the state budget, and their clergy and theological students are not exempt from military service.

While only traditional religious groups are entitled to receive annual state subsidies, nontraditional groups are eligible for support from public funds for cultural and social projects. Registered nontraditional religious groups have legal entity status, but do not receive tax exemptions, and do not qualify for certain social security and health care contributions, social benefits. Municipalities or other government entities may, however, provide funding for cultural and social projects for other religious groups. The law allows all registered religious groups to own property for prayer houses, homes, and other uses and permits construction of facilities necessary for their activities.

The MOJ handles official registration of religious communities and associations. While registration of traditional religious communities and associations only involves establishment of their ties to their traditional religious group, nontraditional groups must submit an application providing a statement describing their religious teachings and a founding statement signed by no fewer than 15 adult citizen members. The MOJ has six months to review the application. The MOJ's Division of Legal Persons and Religious Affairs processes initial registration applications. Upon approval of its application, a religious community is registered as a legal entity with the State Enterprise Center of Registers. Traditional religious communities and associations are registered free of charge, while nontraditional communities pay a fee of 107 Lithuanian litas (LTL) (\$43). As of November 1, there were 1,093 traditional and 185 nontraditional religious associations, centers, and communities officially registered with the Register of Legal Entities.

Official registration is a prerequisite for opening a bank account, owning property, and acting in a legal or official capacity as a community. Unregistered communities have no legal status or state privileges; however, the constitution allows them to worship and seek new members.

The constitution establishes public educational institutions as secular. The law permits and funds religious instruction in public schools for traditional and other state-recognized religious groups. Parents may choose either religious instruction

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or secular ethics classes for their children. Schools decide which of the traditional religious groups will be represented in their curricula on the basis of requests from parents for children up to age 14, after which students present the requests themselves.

The number of wholly private religious schools is relatively small. There are 30 schools with ties to Catholic or Jewish groups, although students of different religious groups often attend these schools. All accredited private schools (religious and nonreligious) receive funding from the Ministry of Education and Science through a voucher system based on the number of pupils. This system covers only the program costs of school operation. Founders generally bear responsibility for covering capital outlays; however, the Ministry of Education and Science funds capital costs of traditional religious private schools where there is an international agreement to do so. To date, the Roman Catholic Church is the only religious group with such an international agreement. Under this accord, the government funds both the capital and operating costs of private Roman Catholic schools.

The interministerial Commission to Coordinate Activities of Governmental Institutions that Deal with Issues of Religious, Esoteric, and Spiritual Groups, established following parliamentary calls for increased control of “sects,” coordinates investigations of religious groups if there is a concern a group’s actions may be inconsistent with the principles of a democratic society, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. The MOJ appoints the chairperson of the commission, which includes representatives of the ministries of justice, interior, education, health, foreign affairs, culture, Vytautas Magnus University, the prosecutor general’s office, and the state security department. The commission decides which problems to examine based on concerns expressed in general public discussions, concerns raised by government or parliamentary officials, or on its own initiative. The commission, which to date has not found that any group is a “sect,” reports annually to the parliament and government.

A religious group may apply to reclaim property nationalized during the Soviet occupation via a mechanism adopted by the government in May 2012. Under this system, a religious group submits an application to the MOJ with a claim to a property it had owned before June 19, 1948. The ministry then investigates the claim, and if the ministry finds it legitimate, drafts a resolution returning that property to its rightful owner.

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A compensation fund for Jewish-owned property, nationalized under totalitarian regimes, is designed to support Jewish education and religious, scientific, cultural, healthcare, and other projects with public benefits. Pursuant to a law adopted in April 2012, the government will disburse LTL 128 million (\$51 million) over the course of a decade to the Foundation for the Disposal of Good Will Compensation for the Immovable Property of Jewish Religious Communities.

The Ministry of Defense (MOD) provides places of worship for members of the military. Fifteen Roman Catholic chaplains offer religious services. There are no chaplains from other religious groups. The chaplaincy is authorized to ask the MOD to support religious services for other religious groups based on need or requests from service members.

Religious slaughter, as required by Muslim and Jewish dietary laws, is permitted under certain conditions.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Government Practices

Three applications for status as a state-recognized religious association continued to await parliamentary approval, specifically the New Apostolic Church (pending since 2003), the Pentecostals Evangelical Belief Christian Union (since 2002), and the United Methodist Church of Lithuania (since 2001).

The authorities continued to investigate the Soviet-era persecution of the writers, publishers, and distributors of an underground publication called *Chronicles of the Catholic Church of Lithuania*. From 1972 to 1989, this publication carried news about the persecution of and discrimination against Catholics, and sought to inform the international community about the plight of Catholics and the church. The investigation sought to determine whether Communist-era authorities committed crimes against humanity, which were not subject to a statute of limitations. The investigation continued at year's end.

In March the chairman of the Lithuanian Conference of Bishops stated, in response to a proposal from the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania party for compulsory religion classes in primary and elementary schools, that the Roman Catholic Church did not support mandatory religion classes in all schools. While the

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chairman confirmed the need for mandatory religion classes in Catholic schools, he stated he did not want society to think the Roman Catholic Church was forcing religion on all schools.

On October 15, the parliament passed a draft amendment to prevent the outlawing of kosher slaughter. The amendment was submitted to enable the export of meat to Muslim countries and Israel. Two more parliamentary votes and a presidential signature are needed to approve the law. The Conference of European Rabbis welcomed the draft resolution.

The government provided a total of LTL 1.68 million (\$669,856) to traditional religious groups to reconstruct religious buildings seized during the Nazi or Soviet eras and to support other religious community activities. The Roman Catholic Church received LTL 1.49 million (\$594,099) of that amount. The Archdiocese of the Lithuanian Orthodox community received LTL 89,100 (\$35,526), the Lithuanian Church of Old Believers LTL 22,200 (\$8,852), the Vilnius Old Believers LTL 2,500 (\$997), the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church LTL 21,600 (\$8,612), the Synod of the Evangelic Reformed Church of Lithuania LTL 5,700 (\$2,273), the Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania Unitas Lithuaniae Synod LTL 8,500 (\$3,389), the spiritual center of Lithuanian Muslims LTL 11,700 (\$4,665), the Jewish religious community LTL 7,800 (\$3,110), the religious community of Kaunas Jews LTL 2,000 (\$797), the religious community of Vilnius Jews Chassidie Chabad Lubavitch LTL 1,000 (\$399), the St Joseph Basilian Vilnius Monastery LTL 10,500 (\$4,187), and the Lithuanian Karaite religious community LTL 10,200 LTL (\$4,067).

In December 2012, the government transferred the initial LTL 3,000,000 (\$1,200,000) to the compensation fund for Jewish-owned property. To date, the foundation has received some 1,200 applications from survivors throughout the world. Seven hundred survivors from Lithuania have already received LTL 1,600 (\$638) each.

In commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto, parliament proclaimed 2013 the Year of the Vilnius Ghetto. The government organized 38 events to commemorate the Jewish Ghetto and hosted the Fourth World Litvak Congress. Senior government officials attended the events, including President Dalia Grybauskaitė, Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius, and then-Speaker of Parliament Vydas Gedvilas.

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In January government and city officials marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day by participating in a series of events. Government and city officials emphasized the importance of remembering and honoring victims of the Holocaust. The prime minister noted the Holocaust was a tragedy not only for Jewish people but for all of mankind. The vice foreign minister participated in the unveiling of the Lithuanian translation of *Paneriai Diary*. Originally written in Polish, *Paneriai Diary* tells the story of the mass killings of Jews in Paneriai during the Nazi occupation.

In March the Vilnius Municipality Council decided to name a section of a street near Vilnius Street after Ona Simaite, a former librarian of Vilnius University who helped Jewish students during the Nazi occupation. The City Council also named a nearby square The Square of the Righteous among Nations.

In April government officials participated in the March of the Living event. Marching from the Paneriai railway station to the Paneriai Memorial, participants retraced the steps the prisoners of the Vilnius Ghetto took as they entered the forest of Paneriai. The foreign minister recognized that Paneriai reminded Lithuanians of their painful history with the Holocaust.

In September the country marked the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto with a series of events, including the public reading of the names of Jewish victims who were killed in the Vilnius Ghetto, a Holocaust memorial ceremony at the Paneriai Memorial, and a presidential award ceremony to honor 47 rescuers of Jews with the Life Saving Cross. The President noted Litvaks had “always been and will be part of our common history.” She urged that the history of Lithuanian Jews and the Holocaust have their proper place in the Lithuanian collective memory and in school textbooks. Since 1994, the government has designated September 23 as National Memorial Day for the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews. The government continued efforts to transform the Paneriai Memorial Complex into an open-air museum memorializing the Holocaust and massacre of Jews.

After an eight-year hiatus, the full International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes met in Vilnius, October 12-14. The commission plans to meet annually.

In November the government, then holding the presidency of the Council of the EU, hosted an EU Fundamental Rights Agency conference on Combating Hate Crime in the EU. EU leaders, government officials, and members of civil society

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discussed crimes motivated by religious intolerance, including anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiments.

The government and civil society continued to work together to promote Holocaust education in schools.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Anti-Semitism was manifested especially on the internet, and there were acts of vandalism at the Jewish cemeteries in Vilnius and Panevezys.

In April swastikas and inscriptions of “Heil Hitler” and “Juden Raus” were found near the former Vilnius Ghetto and close to the Nazi forced labor camp HKP 562 (“Heereskraftfahrpark”) for military vehicle repair. The minister of foreign affairs condemned the anti-Semitic acts, stating Lithuania would not “tolerate incitement of national hatred in a democratic country where representatives of all nationalities are respected.” The police launched an investigation, but the perpetrators have not yet been identified.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy continued to maintain a regular dialogue on religious issues with parliamentarians, religious leaders, senior government officials, and interested nongovernmental organizations. The Ambassador and embassy staff met regularly with the Jewish community and other religious groups to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

Embassy officers continued to engage with the government to resolve the long-pending issue of compensation for Jewish communal property seized during the Nazi and Soviet eras.

On January 28, the Charge d’Affaires joined the Lithuanian vice minister of foreign affairs, the head of the Lithuania Jewish Community, and other foreign dignitaries to mark the UN-established International Holocaust Commemoration Day.

From February 20 to March 6, the embassy sponsored a book tour on Lithuania’s involvement in the Holocaust, reaching more than 550 students at schools, libraries, and cultural centers.

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On April 17, the Ambassador met with a delegation from the San Francisco Jewish Federation and staff members of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee for Lithuania and the Baltic region. They discussed the history and current state of Jewish-Lithuanian relations, and how to strengthen that relationship.

On July 10, the embassy sponsored an event to discuss the Holocaust in Lithuania and how to improve Holocaust education in Lithuanian schools.

From September 20 to 25, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues visited Vilnius. Along with embassy officials, the Special Envoy participated in events to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius Ghetto, including the fourth World Litvak Congress, and the Holocaust memorial ceremony in Paneriai.

In November the embassy participated in the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's conference in Vilnius on Combating Hate Crimes in the EU, which discussed anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiments.

Embassy officials met with religious leaders, including leaders of religious minorities. In embassy-hosted meetings, religious leaders discussed the limited (or lack of) funding they received from the government. Some also discussed their efforts to obtain governmental recognition as official "non-traditional" religious groups.

The embassy also met with the mufti of Lithuania, the Turkish imam of the mosque in Kaunas, Muslim immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, and an academic researcher on Islam in Lithuania. Embassy representatives discussed the situation of Muslims in Lithuania and the dynamics within the diverse Lithuanian Muslim community.