

LATVIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides every person the right to “freedom of thought, conscience and religion” and specifies the separation of church and state. By law eight Christian religious groups receive rights and privileges that other groups do not. The government took steps to minimize societal manifestations of anti-Semitic sentiment and pursued cases of hate speech and vandalism. The Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities continued to seek restitution of religious properties confiscated during World War II.

Reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice primarily centered on acts of anti-Semitism. Theaters across the country staged performances of a musical about the life of Herberts Cukurs, a pioneering aviator who later became a member of the Waffen SS during the Holocaust, events accompanied by non-violent protests and criticism from the foreign minister.

The U.S. embassy engaged government officials on the importance of responding to concerns about religious intolerance and discussed with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and representatives of religious groups the role religious groups can play in promoting tolerance. The embassy sponsored a Holocaust education program for high school students.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 2.2 million (July 2014 estimate). There are over 30 religious groups present in the country and the Ministry of Justice reports the largest are Roman Catholics (22.7 percent), Lutherans (19.6 percent), and Orthodox Christians (15.3 percent). Smaller Christian groups include Baptists, Pentecostals, and other evangelical Protestant groups. The Central Statistical Bureau estimates that approximately 5,400 persons self-identify as Jews, while the Council of Jewish Communities estimates the Jewish population at between 6,200 and 11,000. In its annual report to the Ministry of Justice, the Islamic Cultural Center, an umbrella organization for Muslim religious communities, states there are an estimated 10,000 Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds living throughout the country. Other religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Methodists, Hare Krishnas, and Buddhists.

LATVIA

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states everyone has the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” and “the church shall be separate from the state.” The law gives eight religious groups - Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews - some rights and privileges not given to other religious groups, including the right to teach religion courses in public schools and the right to officiate at marriages without obtaining a civil marriage license from the Ministry of Justice. These eight groups are also the only religious groups represented on the government’s Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body established by law and chaired by the prime minister that meets irregularly to comment on and provide recommendations on religious issues. These recommendations do not carry the force of law.

Religion-specific laws define relations between the state and each of these eight groups. The rights and activities of other religious groups are covered by the law on religious organizations.

Although the government does not require religious groups to register, the law accords registered religious groups a number of rights and privileges, including legal entity status for owning property and conducting financial transactions, and providing tax benefits for donors. Registration allows religious groups to perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons and military units, and also to hold services in public places such as parks or public squares with the agreement of the local government. Unregistered groups do not possess legal entity status, may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons and military units, and may not hold worship services in public places. The law prescribes various fines if an unregistered group carries out any of these activities.

The law stipulates that in order to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members over the age of 18 recorded in the population register. Individuals with temporary residency status, such as asylum seekers and foreign diplomatic staff, may count as members for the purpose of registration only during the authorized period of their residency permits. The justice ministry determines whether to register a religious group as a congregation. The ministry may deny an application if registration would threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, or public safety, welfare, or morals.

LATVIA

Ten or more congregations of the same faith or denomination, each with permanent registration status, may form a religious association (or a church). Groups with religious association status, or status as a private society or foundation, may establish recognized places of worship, theological schools, or monasteries. The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association in a single faith or denomination. For example, the law prevents any church other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word “orthodox” in its name.

The law distinguishes between religious congregations registered for at least 10 years and those registered for fewer than 10 years, which are subject to annual reregistration requirements. Marriage ceremonies performed by clergy of religious groups registered for less than 10 years, and also by religious associations registered for more than 10 years but not represented in the Ecclesiastical Council must be supplemented by a civil marriage license.

According to the law, registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the Ministry of Justice by March 1 regarding their activities, in accordance with the procedures specified by the cabinet.

The law criminalizes the incitement of hatred on the basis of religious affiliation, although there is no legal definition of a hate crime.

The law does not provide a mechanism for the restitution of communal and religious properties confiscated or nationalized during World War II.

The government provides funding for optional religion classes taught by the eight authorized religious groups as long as the Center for Educational Content in the Ministry of Education has approved the curriculum content. Students at state-supported national minority schools may attend classes on a voluntary basis on the religion “characteristic of the national minority.” Other religious groups without their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Depending on the grade level, courses in public schools range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved instructors, to non-denominational Christian teachings, to overviews of major world religions. Parents can also register their children for voluntary, non-religious ethics classes.

LATVIA

The ombudsman's office is an independent human rights institution established by law to help resolve matters that include religion-based discrimination.

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 law stipulates that foreign missionaries may hold meetings and proselytize only if invited by domestic religious groups to conduct such activities.

Government Practices

Representatives from religious groups registered for fewer than 10 years said the necessity to reregister annually imposed additional bureaucratic requirements on recently-established religious groups. Representatives from these religious groups complained that such requirements were onerous and ignored the fact that some groups had been present in the country in an unregistered status for many years.

The Ecclesiastical Council met three times during the year to discuss insufficient government financing for church schools, cooperation between religious and government institutions, and the revision of the reporting standards for religious organizations.

On March 11, the Cabinet of Ministers issued a statement encouraging the population not to participate in the annual, unofficial march honoring the fallen members of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen SS who fought against the Soviet Red Army in World War II. In addition, the prime minister issued a statement that "Latvia has consistently condemned crimes against humanity committed by totalitarian regimes, condemns the Holocaust, and honors the memory of the victims of totalitarian regimes." The march took place March 16, without any appearance of Nazi or anti-Semitic signs or symbols. After the minister of environment and regional development said he intended to participate in the march, he was forced to resign by the prime minister for disobeying her instruction not to participate.

In February the prosecutor general's office forwarded a case to the Riga Regional Court about online hate speech against Jews. The accused individual had published hateful comments toward Jews in an article about Israeli politics. The

LATVIA

prosecutor recommended a suspended sentence of one year's imprisonment. The case remained under investigation at year's end.

Following the intervention of the ombudsman's office, a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was allowed to postpone a test at the Academy of Music for religious reasons after the academy had initially refused him permission to do so.

Following the expiration of prior legislation, under which many religious organizations had been able to regain properties confiscated or nationalized during World War II, special legislation returned some communal properties to religious organizations. A number of religious groups, however, including the Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities, continued to seek restitution of communal and religious properties.

The government and the Council of Jewish Communities, which is a unifying body for the 13 Jewish communities throughout the country, did not reach a consensus on a legislative solution for the restitution of communal properties or on the number of properties eligible for restitution. These properties included cemeteries, former synagogues, schools, hospitals, and community centers.

The government continued discussions with the Lutheran Church over the restitution of St. Peter's Church in Riga, but no resolution was reached.

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.

Prison chaplains reported good relations with the prison administration and the Ministry of Justice. In March the Catholic archbishop met with the justice minister to discuss the need to increase government financing for religious education and augment the number of chaplains in prisons.

In May the Security Police, the state's security institution under the Ministry of the Interior, released an annual report on existing and potential threats to the country in which they stated that ties between the Islamic Cultural Center and organizations in Persian Gulf countries created a potential for the radicalization of the country's Muslims.

LATVIA

Due to lack of progress, the Security Police late in 2014 suspended the investigation of a 2013 incident where the monument to the former Latvian President Janis Cakste in Riga was vandalized with two swastikas and several other drawings. Municipal authorities had removed the graffiti immediately.

The government continued membership in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The police initiated 12 criminal cases alleging incitement of national, ethnic or racial hatred, including anti-Semitism. Complaints generally involved hate speech on the internet. A breakdown of how many incidents specifically related to religion was not available.

In May a sign reading “*Juden Frei*” (“free of Jews”) was hung outside a local nursery school in Riga. Authorities removed the sign and launched an investigation, which was closed later in May due to lack of evidence that a crime had actually been committed.

In October theaters in six cities across the country staged performances of a musical celebrating the life of Herberts Cukurs, a Latvian aviation pioneer who became a member of the Arajs Kommando, a Latvian auxiliary police unit under SS command during the German occupation. According to eyewitness accounts, Cukurs was responsible for the murder of Latvian Jews during the Holocaust. Several high-ranking government officials, including the foreign minister, condemned the musical. Several non-violent protests of up to 50 people took place prior to performances in Liepaja and Riga.

Jewish community representatives, government officials, and foreign diplomats attended the annual July 4 Holocaust commemoration ceremony in Riga.

Muslim leaders said Muslims, who were mostly ethnic Latvians or immigrants from Central Asia during the Soviet period, felt well-integrated into society.

Leaders of the Islamic Cultural Center reported that police monitored the activities of their community. According to an imam, some members from other countries complained that officials used warnings of visa revocation as a way to obtain information about the community.

LATVIA

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged in regular discussions with government officials about the importance of responding to concerns about religious intolerance. The embassy also met with human rights NGOs and religious leaders to discuss the role of religious groups in promoting tolerance and inclusiveness within society.

The embassy continued to support the Jewish community in its ongoing efforts to secure the restitution of communal property. Through a grant, the embassy also brought together 50 high school students from around the country as part of a Holocaust education and tolerance-building program. For an upcoming Public Broadcasting Service documentary, the students participated in a reenactment of the 1941 march to Rumbula during which 25,000 Jews were killed.