

LITHUANIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion as well as state recognition and free functioning of traditional churches and religious organizations, provided they do not contradict the constitution or the law. Three applications for status as a state-recognized religious association continued to await parliamentary approval. The parliament approved a law to permit kosher and halal ritual slaughter beginning in 2015. The Muslim community reported a case of police checking identity cards in advance of a religious event. The government addressed Holocaust legacy issues through a number of initiatives, including restitution or compensation for seized property to the Jewish community, and public commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Kaunas and Siauliai ghettos.

Anti-Semitic postings were made on the internet, and there were acts of vandalism at Jewish cemeteries in Vilnius and Kaunas.

The U.S. embassy continued engaging with government officials to combat anti-Semitism and resolve long-standing restitution issues for the Jewish community. Embassy officers met with religious leaders, parliamentarians, and nongovernmental organizations to discuss the limited funding religious groups received from the government and the efforts of some groups to obtain state recognition.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 3.5 million (July 2014 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 Karaites. Karaites traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region. The Jewish population is mainly concentrated in larger cities. The majority of Muslims, mainly of Tatar origin and long established in Lithuania, live in Vilnius and Kaunas. The Muslim community also consists of recent converts, migrants, and temporary workers from the Middle East and Africa.

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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, and members of the New Apostolic Church and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states 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 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.

There is no state religion. The law defines religious groups as religious communities; religious associations, which are comprised of at least two religious communities under common leadership; and religious centers, which are higher governing bodies of religious 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: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, 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. Their

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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 state provides minimal social security and healthcare insurance contributions to religious leaders and members of monastic orders of the traditional religious groups. Traditional religious groups are not required to pay social and health insurance taxes for clergy and members of monastic orders who work at monasteries.

Other (nontraditional) religious associations may be granted state recognition if they are “backed by society” and their instruction and rites are not contrary to the country’s laws and morality. Religious associations may apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for state recognition if they have been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years. It is necessary for parliament to grant this status upon recommendation from the MOJ. The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are the only state-recognized nontraditional religious groups.

Recognition entitles nontraditional religious groups to perform marriages and provide religious instruction in public schools. 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. Nontraditional groups are eligible for public funds from municipalities for cultural and social projects. The law provides recognized nontraditional religious groups with legal entity status, but they do not qualify for certain social security and health care contributions.

The MOJ handles official registration of religious communities and associations. Traditional religious communities and associations need only establish their ties to their recognized traditional groups. The law does not require traditional religious groups to register their bylaws.

Nontraditional groups must submit an application to the MOJ’s Department of Registers, providing a statement describing their religious teachings and a founding statement signed by no fewer than 15 adult citizen members. 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 litas (LTL) (\$38). As of November 1, there were 1,097 traditional and 186

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nontraditional religious associations, centers, and communities officially registered in 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. The law allows all registered religious groups to own property for use as prayer houses, homes, and other functions, and permits construction of facilities necessary for religious activities.

Unregistered communities have no legal status or state privileges; however, the constitution allows them to worship and seek new members.

The Interministerial Commission to Coordinate Activities of Governmental Institutions that Deal with Issues of Religious, Esoteric, and Spiritual Groups 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 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.

The law permits registered groups to apply to the MOJ for the restitution of religious property owned before June 19, 1948. In 2012, the government approved a process through which religious communities could register property nationalized but not confiscated by the Soviets. Following receipt of such claims, the ministry conducts an investigation. If the ministry determines the claim is legitimate, it drafts a resolution officially returning the property to its original owner.

A compensation fund for Jewish-owned property nationalized under totalitarian regimes is designed to support Jewish educational, religious, scientific, cultural, and healthcare projects with public benefits. Pursuant to the law, the government is committed to disburse LTL 128 million (\$45.1 million) over the course of the decade ending March 1, 2023 to the Foundation for the Disposal of Good Will Compensation for the Immovable Property of Jewish Religious Communities.

The constitution establishes public educational institutions as secular. The law permits and funds religious instruction in public schools for traditional and other

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state-recognized religious groups. Parents may choose either religious instruction 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.

There are 30 private religious schools with ties to Catholic or Jewish groups, although students of different religious groups may 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 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 Catholic schools.

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 duties to serve the population. The law on the parliament ombudsperson specifically includes religious beliefs 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.

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.

Government Practices

Three applications for status as a state-recognized religious association continued to await parliamentary approval. The parliament approved a law to permit kosher and halal ritual slaughter. The government provided compensation to a number of

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religious groups for property seized during World War II and the Communist regime, including the Jewish community. The government commemorated the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Kaunas and Siauliai ghettos.

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

On January 8, the OEO determined the Foreigners' Registration Center in Pabrade failed to provide meals consistent with its detainees' diverse religious beliefs. Ministry of the Interior officials visited the detention center and issued an order mandating respect for religious dietary restrictions for all detainees.

The Ministry of Defense (MOD) provided 15 Roman Catholic chaplains to offer religious services to members of the military. There were no chaplains provided from other religious groups, although the chaplaincy was authorized to ask the MOD to support religious services for other religious groups based on need or requests from service members.

On September 23, the Seimas (parliament) passed a law permitting kosher and halal ritual slaughter. The new law will take effect in January 2015, and will enable the export of meat to predominantly Muslim countries and Israel. Jewish community leaders praised the law's passage. Sunni Mufti Romas Jakubauskas also publicly supported the law.

The prime minister's staff included an adviser for religious issues, as well as several unpaid advisors on such matters as Jewish community and Holocaust issues.

Members of the Muslim community said police had checked the identification cards of participants before a July 12 iftar in Vilnius. On July 19, the non-governmental organization European Network Against Racism asked the interior minister to apologize to the Muslim community. The Ministry of the Interior subsequently recommended changes to the police's *Long-Term Program of Terrorism Prevention*, specifically eliminating the phrase "radical Islam" from the plan. The police implemented this change on September 30.

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The government provided a total of LTL 1.61 million (\$567,101) 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 1.5 million (\$528,355) of that amount. The Archdiocese of the Lithuanian Orthodox community received LTL 89,100 (\$31,384), the Lithuanian Church of Old Believers LTL 22,200 (\$7,820), the Vilnius Old Believers LTL 2,500 (\$881), the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church LTL 21,600 (\$7,608), the Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania Unitas Lithuanian Synod LTL 14,300 (\$5,037), the spiritual center of Lithuanian Muslims LTL 11,700 (\$4,121), the Jewish religious community LTL 7,800 (\$2,747), the religious community of Kaunas Jews LTL 2,000 (\$704), the religious community of Vilnius Jews Chassidie Chabad Lubavitch LTL 1,000 (\$352), the St Joseph Basilian Vilnius Monastery LTL 10,400 (\$3,663), and the Lithuanian Karaite religious community LTL 10,200 LTL (\$3,593).

In July, Minister of Culture Sarunas Birutis designated the former Jewish cemetery in the Vilnius district of Snipiskes as a site “under state protection.” Jewish community leaders expressed pleasure with the decision, as the cemetery site became eligible to receive European Union and national funding for additional restoration and preservation activities.

The government continued to engage actively on Holocaust legacy issues and supported Jewish educational, cultural, scientific, and religious projects. On June 3, the Seimas amended the law to allow the Jewish community to deposit undisbursed funds into a long-term bank account and use interest returns to fund activities.

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 approached the massacre sites in the forest. During the event, the first deputy chancellor said the Holocaust must never be forgotten and that it robbed the country of many citizens who helped to build and strengthen the state.

On September 19 – the National Memorial Day for the Genocide of the Jews – President Dalia Grybauskaite awarded 51 Life Saving Crosses to those who risked their own lives to rescue Jews during World War II. On October 1, people named “Rescuers of Jews” began receiving a monthly state pension of LTL 400 (\$141).

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The Seimas held a special commemorative session to mark the ghetto liquidation of Kaunas and the massacre at Paneriai. On September 22, government officials participated in an event marking the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Kaunas ghetto at the Ninth Fort memorial site. A similar event occurred the same day at the massacre site of Paneriai.

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

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Individuals made anti-Semitic postings on the internet. On July 10, vandals overturned seven monuments at the Kupiskis Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius, and on July 15, vandals overturned 40 monuments at the Jewish Cemetery of Kaunas.

On August 8, the OEO received a complaint regarding a high school graduation held in a church. The complaint stated that the ceremony's location violated the rights of nonreligious students. The ombudsperson recommended the school director consult students and parents regarding the location of future events.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy continued to maintain a regular dialogue with senior government officials on the importance of religious freedom. 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.

The Ambassador and embassy staff met regularly with the Jewish community and other religious groups to promote religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officers met with religious leaders, parliamentarians, and nongovernmental organizations to discuss the level of funding religious groups received from the government. Some of these contacts also discussed their efforts to obtain the status of state-recognized "nontraditional" religious groups.

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In July the U.S. Special Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism visited Vilnius, where he met with members of the Jewish community, the director of the Tolerance Center and Jewish Museum, the executive director of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, and numerous government officials. He discussed ways to reduce the impact of anti-Semitism, including the importance of education. The Special Envoy also toured the Vilnius Ghetto and met with young activists whose “Bagel Shop” project aimed to promote religious tolerance and understanding. In July embassy officers visited a prominent mosque in Kaunas and met with the Lithuanian mufti to discuss the challenges that Muslims faced with regard to public prejudice.

In September embassy officers participated in commemorative events to mark the 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the Kaunas and Siauliai ghettos.