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Estonia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, and in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 17,666 square miles and a population of 1.3 million. The population is 13.6 percent Evangelical Lutheran, and approximately 15 percent of the population belongs to one of the two Orthodox Churches in Estonia: 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, 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 comprised of 11 congregations numbering approximately 15,000 persons. There are also small Jewish and Muslim communities. Thirty-two percent of the population is unspecified or other, 34.1 percent is unaffiliated, and 6.1 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

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, and in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

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

The Churches and Congregations Act requires the commanding officer of each military unit to guarantee defense force members the opportunity to practice their religion. Chaplains extended their services to members of all religious groups. The act also decrees that prison directors must ensure inmates the opportunity to practice their religious beliefs. Defense force members and prisoners exercised this right in practice.

Three police chaplains and a chief police chaplain provided religious services to police officers and other police employees during the reporting period.

A church, congregation, or association of congregations must have a management board. Citizens and legal residents may be members of the board. In order to formally register with the city court, the management board of a religious association must submit an application signed by all members of the board. 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The property restitution process, by which the government transferred religious properties back to religious associations, was carried out under the 1991 Principles of the Ownership Reform Act. The process has largely been completed. Ownership of a small number of properties is currently being decided through court proceedings. According to the government protocol of intent from 2002, all listed properties have been transferred.

According to local Jewish leaders, property restitution was not an issue for the community, since most pre-war religious buildings were rented, not owned.

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom, including religious prisoners and detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

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

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

Criminal proceedings continued against two individuals charged in 2008 with damaging 44 gravestones, including four crosses in the old Haapsalu cemetery that were under protection as historic memorials. On November 18 the Parnu County Court began hearing the case.

There was one report of anti-Semitic vandalism. On September 20 the Israel-based Coordination Forum for Countering Anti-Semitism reported that unknown persons spray-painted swastikas on trees at the entrance to a Holocaust memorial at Klooga.

On July 31 a march 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 additional reports of anti-Semitic statements or actions associated with the event.

The government took steps to promote antibias 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. 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. During the reporting period, 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 Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine, also known as the Michael Klahr Center, located at the University of Maine at Augusta, funded two history teachers' participation in a summer institute in the United States to foster Holocaust education from July 12-16.

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