



Estonia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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.

There were few 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 1.34 million (including 68.7 percent ethnic Estonian, 25.6 percent Russian, 2 percent Ukrainian, 1.2 percent Belarusian, and 0.8 percent Finnish). Less than one-third of the population are members of Christian congregations. According to statistics provided by congregations, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church has 165 congregations with an estimated 180,000 members. The Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), has 30 congregations with approximately 200,000 members, and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAO) has 64 congregations with an estimated 27,000 members. Groups that each constitute fewer than 5 percent of the population include Roman Catholics, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Methodists, and other religious groups. There is a Jewish community of approximately 2,500 members in Tallinn, a community center, day school, museum, and a synagogue. There are also small communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and other religious groups. Only 14 percent of persons polled answered positively to the question, "Is religion an important part of your daily life?" according to a Gallop poll released in February 2009.

The ethnic Estonian majority is mainly Lutheran, while 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 provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution states that there is no state church.

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

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 at the city courts.

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

Four police chaplains and a chief police chaplain provided religious services to police officers and 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 a management board. In order to formally register with the city court, the management board of a religious association submits 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.

A program of 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 took steps to promote antibias and tolerance education. Since 2003 the Government has observed January 27 as the annual Holocaust and Other Crimes against Humanity Victims' Memorial Day. In December 2007 the country became a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

In 2007 a *Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust*, compiled by the Estonian History Teachers' Association in cooperation with Living History Forum (Sweden) and cofinanced by the Government, was made available to teachers. The guide provides resources to assist in designing a program for classrooms to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day and offers additional materials for Holocaust lessons in history classes. These teaching materials include a compact disc and a digital video disc.

The International Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, established by President Meri in 1998 to investigate issues related to the German and Soviet occupations of the country, finished its work on December 9, 2008.

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. By the end of the reporting period, most Orthodox Church properties, including those in use by the EOCMP, were either under the legal control of congregations, were owned by the state, or were the property of local municipalities. The Government previously had transferred 17 properties to the EOCMP. During the reporting period, the state transferred three properties to the EOCMP; one property remained to be transferred.

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

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.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Although the majority of citizens are traditionally Lutheran, ecumenical services on national days, Christian holy days, or at public events were common. There is a deep-seated tradition of tolerance of other denominations and religious groups.

During the reporting period, there were no reported acts of anti-Semitism.

On December 9, 2008, vandals damaged 44 gravestones and crosses in the old Haapsalu cemetery, including four crosses which were under protection as historic memorials. The police started criminal proceedings against two suspects in December 2008. The outcome of the case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

In June 2008 the Tartu Rural Court sentenced three youths who had vandalized dozens of graves in a Tartu cemetery in the summer of 2007 to hundreds of hours of community work.

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 the Government and nongovernmental actors to promote dialogue and education on Holocaust issues in the country.

The U.S. Government funded a travel grant for two history and civics teachers to attend a program at the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust at Columbia College from July 11 to 18, 2008.