



Estonia

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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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 period covered by this report.

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 1.36 million (including 68 percent ethnic Estonian, 26 percent Russian, 2 percent Ukrainian, 1 percent Belarusian, and 1 percent Finnish). Approximately 60 percent of the population does not claim a religion. Less than 29 percent of the population are members of Christian congregations. The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church is the largest denomination, with 164 congregations and approximately 180,000 members. The Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), has 30 congregations with an estimated 170,000 members, and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC) has 61 congregations with approximately 25,000 members. The Roman Catholic Church has 9 congregations with an estimated 6,000 members. There are smaller communities of Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Methodists, and other religious groups. There is a Jewish community of approximately 2,500 members, with a community center, day school, and a synagogue that opened in May 2007, the only building in the country specifically designated for use as a synagogue. There are also small communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and other religious groups.

The ethnic Estonian majority is mainly Lutheran, while most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population are Orthodox.

Fifty years of Soviet occupation diminished the role of religion in society. Many neighborhoods built since World War II do not have religious centers, and many of the surviving churches require extensive renovation. In May 2008 the Lutheran Nommie German Savior Church was consecrated after several years of renovation. In July 2007 St. James' Lutheran Church in Viimsi, the first new Lutheran church structure built in the country in almost six decades, was consecrated. This coastal church commemorates those who perished at sea. The national Government as well as Tallinn and other municipalities have their own ongoing projects for renovation of churches.

Section II. Status of 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution states that there is no state church.

The Government observes Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Pentecost, and Christmas as national holidays.

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 soldiers 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. Soldiers and prisoners exercised this right in practice. Four police chaplains and a chief police chaplain started work in prefectures 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 members of the management board 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. There were no official statistics on how many students participated in these classes. There were two private church schools, one evangelical and one Catholic, in Tartu that had a religion-based curriculum.

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 January 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 individual 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 on issues related to the German and Soviet occupations of the country continued its work.

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 under the legal control of the EAO. The Government transferred seven properties to the EOCMP previously; three properties remained to be transferred at the end of the reporting period.

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 period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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.

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

In November 2007 the Harju Rural Court sentenced a youth to 45 days' imprisonment for damaging gravestones and crosses in a Tallinn cemetery.

In April 2007 two graveyards were vandalized. Vandals damaged two grave plaques in a Jogeva County cemetery and 13 crosses and grave plaques in a Laane County cemetery. The police started criminal proceedings; there was no additional information available at the end of the reporting period.

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. Embassy officials met with the Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), 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.

In September 2007 the U.S. Government provided a travel grant within the country to a religious freedom expert from a U.S. NGO, who spoke at a religious tolerance conference in Tartu.

The U.S. Government funded a travel grant for two history and civics teachers to attend a teacher-training program at the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust from July 13 to 22, 2007.

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