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## Latvia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

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; however, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religious groups and lingering suspicions remained toward religious groups considered to be nontraditional.

There was a report of societal abuse based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice related to an act of vandalism in a Jewish cemetery.

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 25,000 square miles and a population of 2.2 million. The largest religious groups and their percentages of the population include: Roman Catholic (22.7 percent), Lutheran (19.7 percent), and Orthodox Christian (16.8 percent). Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and evangelical Protestant groups. The once large Jewish community was virtually destroyed in the Holocaust during the 1941-44 German occupation. In 2009, according to official sources, 9,915 persons identified themselves as ethnically Jewish.

As of January 2010, 1,137 congregations were registered with the government. These included Lutheran congregations (297), Catholic (250), Orthodox Christian (119), Baptist (93), Old Believer Orthodox (68), Seventh-day Adventist (51), Evangelical Christians (41), Muslim (15), Jehovah's Witnesses (14), Methodist (13), Jewish (12), Hare Krishna (11), Buddhist (3), and 150 other congregations.

Interest in religion increased markedly following the restoration of independence; however, many adherents do not regularly practice their faith. In 2009 religious groups provided the following estimates of membership in congregations to the Justice Ministry: Catholics (500,000), Lutherans (433,000), Orthodox Christians (370,000), Baptists (6,874), Seventh-day Adventists (3,977), Old Believer Orthodox (2,500), Methodists (685), Mormons (609), the Dievturi (567), Jews (413),

Jehovah's Witnesses (156), Hare Krishnas (133), and Buddhists (110). Orthodox Christians, many of whom are Russian-speaking, noncitizen permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

## 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion; however, the government distinguishes between traditional Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Old Believers, Baptist, Methodist, Adventist, and Jewish – and new religious groups. In practice, this has resulted in increased bureaucratic regulations and requirements for new religious groups that are not applicable to traditional ones.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas. For several years the Orthodox Church has been seeking official recognition for Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas as observed according to the Orthodox Church's calendar, but the government had not adopted this proposal by the end of the reporting period.

The Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches have their own seminaries. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

The Ecclesiastical Council (EC) comments on religious issues for the government. The EC is an advisory body chaired by the prime minister. It includes representatives from major religious groups: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, Baptist, Adventist, Old Believers, Methodist, and Jewish. The EC met during the reporting period to discuss issues including teaching the Christian faith in public schools and the possibilities for religious organizations to participate in European Court of Human Rights cases as third parties. Only traditional organizations are represented on the Ecclesiastical Council, limiting the input of other religious organizations into government decisions on religious matters.

The Board on Religious Affairs was disbanded in 2008. Starting from January 1, 2009, its functions were divided between the Justice Ministry and the Enterprise Register. The Justice Ministry carries out policies regarding religious issues, while the Enterprise Register ensures the registration of religious organizations.

By law traditional religious groups enjoy certain rights and privileges that nontraditional ones do not. Religion-specific laws have been established that define relations between the state and each of the traditional religious groups.

Although the government does not require the registration of religious groups, the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges if they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or for financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rules for holding public gatherings.

According to the 1995 law, any 20 citizens or other persons over the age of 18 who have been recorded in the population register may apply to register a religious group. Asylum seekers, foreign staff of diplomatic missions, and those in the country temporarily in a special status may not. Congregations that do not belong to a registered religious association must reregister each year for 10 years. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination and with permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only groups with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. The decision to register a group is made by the Ministry of Justice with technical review by the Enterprise Register.

Based on the principle of state neutrality in religious affairs, in November 2009 the Law on Religious Organizations was amended to remove part of clause 10 based on a complaint that the clause was inconsistent with both the constitution and

the European Human Rights Convention. This part of clause 10 previously required any parish seeking autonomy (i.e., breaking away) from the church's hierarchy to receive the authorization of that church's leadership before establishing an autonomous parish. The law was, however, amended to add a norm requiring these newly autonomous parishes to use titles and names that would not confuse them with the larger denominations.

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#### 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 Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association (church) in a single confession. The law on the Latvian Orthodox Church in particular prevents other churches from registering with the word "Orthodox" in their names.

One request for registration, from a Scientologist organization, was denied during the previous reporting period. The Ministry of Justice concluded that the practice of Scientology included elements of medicine, and therefore it could not be registered as a religious organization. The Scientologists reapplied for registration during the reporting period; the decision by the Justice Ministry and the Enterprise Register was pending as of June 30, 2010.

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 process remained cumbersome, although the government was generally cooperative in helping to resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionaries.

The law stipulates that foreign missionaries may hold meetings and proselytize only if invited by domestic religious organizations to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations criticized this provision.

The Law on Religious Organizations and other laws stipulate that only representatives of traditional Christian churches (i.e., Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, Old Believer, Baptist, Methodist, and Adventist) and Jewish groups may teach religion in public schools to public school students who volunteer to take the classes. The government provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on a voluntary basis on the religion "characteristic of the national minority." Other denominations and religious groups that do not have their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools.

Property restitution was substantially completed, although most religious groups--including the Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities--continued to wait for the return of some communal and heirless properties. The status of these remaining properties was the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes concerning ambiguous ownership, competing claims, and the destruction of the Jewish communities to whom properties belonged before World War II. The Jewish community expressed concern about the terms under which some properties were restored.

During the reporting period, the government and Jewish community continued to consider a legislative solution to outstanding claims on communal property and heirless private property last owned by members of the Jewish community that could not be regained earlier under the denationalization laws, since there were no identifiable heirs to the property according to the denationalization laws. The government stopped considering claims under the denationalization laws in 2008. In September 2008 the government convened a task force to study the problem of communal property, but the group had not issued any public recommendations or begun discussions with the Jewish community by the end of the reporting period.

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

### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There was one report of societal abuse based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period. Although law enforcement institutions do not collect or publish data specifically on hate crimes, as there is no definition of hate crimes in the country's laws, they report on violations of the law against the incitement of ethnic, racial, or religious hatred. There is also a separate law against incitement of hatred against religious groups. According to the Interior Ministry, no criminal cases were opened during the reporting period based on incitement of religious hatred or hatred against religious groups. The Security Police initiated four criminal cases based on incitement of interethnic hatred in Internet comments.

Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some segments of society, manifested in occasional public comments and resistance to laws and memorials designed to foster Holocaust remembrance. According to media reports, the local prosecutor in the western town of Talsi opened a criminal case in January 2010 against two individuals for vandalizing a Jewish and a Soviet cemetery in October 2009. In addition books and other publications appearing in the country that address the World War II period generally dwelt on the effects of the Soviet and Nazi occupations on the country and on ethnic Latvians, sometimes at the expense of comment on the Holocaust or some citizens' role in it.

Ecumenism continued to be a relatively new concept in the country, and traditional religious groups have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude toward the concept. Although government officials encouraged a broader understanding and acceptance of newer religious groups, many citizens remained suspicious of such groups.

### 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.

During the reporting period, the U.S. embassy worked to support religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with the president, the prime minister, and appropriate government bodies, human rights nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries.

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