



Latvia

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 reporting period; however, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religious groups.

There were at least two reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; lingering suspicions remained toward newer, "nontraditional" religious groups.

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 percent), Lutheran (20 percent), and Orthodox Christian (16 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 2008, according to official sources, 10,139 persons identified themselves as ethnically Jewish.

As of April 2009, approximately 1,200 congregations were registered with the Government. These included Lutheran congregations (301), Catholic (250), Orthodox Christian (119), Baptist (92), Old Believer Orthodox (70), Seventh-day Adventist (51), Muslim (17), Jehovah's Witnesses (14), Methodist (13), Jewish (12), Hare Krishna (11), Buddhist (4), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (4), and 194 other congregations.

Interest in religion increased markedly following the restoration of independence; however, many adherents do not regularly practice their faith. In 2008 religious groups provided the following estimates of membership in congregations to the Justice Ministry: Catholics (500,000), Lutherans (435,000), Orthodox Christians (370,000), Baptists (7,062), Seventh-day Adventists (3,950), Old Believer Orthodox (2,607), Mormons (494), Methodists (635), Muslims (332), Jews (586), Jehovah's Witnesses (176), Hare Krishnas (124), and Buddhists (100). 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. However, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religious groups. 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 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 organized in 2002 and chaired by the sitting 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 amendments to the Law on Religious Organizations and proposals for ethical standards in public media. Only traditional organizations are represented on the Ecclesiastical Council, limiting the input of other religious organizations into government decisions on religious matters.

In December 2008 the Board on Religious Affairs and the New Religions Consultative Council were disbanded. Their functions were taken over by the Ministry of Justice, which cited increased efficiency and cost savings as the reasons for the change.

Under current law traditional religious groups enjoy certain rights and privileges that nontraditional ones do not. The Government has been seeking to define in law the relations between the state and the traditional religious groups. Parliament adopted laws during the reporting period that regulate relations between the state and the Lutheran and Russian Orthodox Churches. Laws had already been established for Baptist, Old Believer Orthodox, Jewish, Methodist, and Adventist organizations.

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.

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 Russian 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 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.

Visa regulations require foreign religious workers to present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology and letters of invitation. The process remained cumbersome, although the Government generally was 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.

A private Jewish school in Riga, Ohel Menachem Chabad Day School, has petitioned the Ministry of Education for several years not to schedule compulsory national exams on the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, which often falls during the exam period. In contrast to the previous year, the exams did not coincide with Shavuot in 2009. The Ministry promised in a letter to the school to provide an alternative test date for Jewish students on the nearest available date for any future exams that would conflict with Shavuot, but it did not make any policy changes to avoid the scheduling conflict in future years.

Property restitution had been substantially completed, although most religious groups -- including the Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities -- continued to wait for the return of some 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. In September 2008 the Government convened a task force to study the issue of communal property, but the group had not issued any recommendations or begun discussions with the Jewish community by the end of 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 at least two reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period. Both cases involved attacks against religious groups on the Internet -- one against Catholics and the other against Jews.

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.

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. In contrast to prior years, there were no acts of vandalism of Jewish memorials or cemeteries. However, 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.

In 2008 there were 10 officially registered cases of ethnic incitement. Law enforcement institutions do not collect or publish data specifically on hate crimes (there is no definition of hate crimes in the country's laws), but there is a law against "incitement of ethnic, racial, or religious hatred." For 2008, of the 10 cases, none involved Jews. Of the four cases in 2009 through May, one was connected with Jews. In this case, the defendant was accused of posting hateful comments on the Internet against Jews, Russians, and homosexuals.

There is also a separate law against incitement of hatred against religious groups. During the reporting period, there was one registered case, which involved distribution on the Internet of anti-Catholic messages.

Of 16 hate crime cases in 2007, only one was connected with Jews -- a hate speech case which involved hostile comments about Jews and Roma. Anti-Semitic literature was sold openly at a bookstore in Riga, despite the law banning incitement of ethnic hatred.

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.