

# **LATVIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, primarily demonstrations of anti-Semitism.

The U.S. embassy engaged in regular exchanges on religious freedom with government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and representatives of religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the 2011 census, the population is 2.1 million. The Justice Ministry reports the largest religious groups are Roman Catholics (22.7 percent), Lutherans (19.7 percent), and Orthodox Christians (16.8 percent). Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and other evangelical Protestant groups. The census estimates that approximately 6,400 persons (less than 1 percent) self-identify as Jews, while the Council of Jewish Communities estimates there are 10,000 Jews. Other small religious groups include Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Hare Krishnas, and Buddhists.

Many Orthodox Christians are Russian-speaking noncitizen permanent residents and live mainly in major cities. Many Catholics live in the east.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. There is no state religion, but the law gives eight religious groups a number of rights and privileges not given to other religious groups. Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews are the only religious groups represented on the government's Ecclesiastical Council. Other distinctions relate to the teaching of religion courses in public

## LATVIA

schools. Religion-specific laws define relations between the state and each of these eight groups. Other religious groups are covered by a general law dealing with religious organizations.

The law distinguishes between religious groups registered for at least 10 years and those registered for fewer than 10 years, which are subject to annual registration requirements.

The prime minister chairs the Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body that meets irregularly to comment on and issue recommendations on religious issues. The council's recommendations do not carry the force of law, but typically warrant government attention because of the prime minister's participation.

Although the government does not require religious groups to register, the law accords registered religious groups a number of rights and privileges, including legal entity status for owning property or for conducting financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also allows religious groups to hold services in public places such as parks or public squares. Non-registered groups may not worship in public places.

By 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. Those with temporary residency status, such as asylum seekers and foreign diplomatic staff, may register religious groups only during the authorized period of their residency permit. Ten or more congregations of the same faith or denomination, with permanent registration status, may form a religious association. Congregations not belonging to a registered religious association must reregister each year for 10 years. Only groups with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. The Justice Ministry determines whether to register a religious group. The ministry may deny an application if registration would threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, public safety, welfare, or morals.

The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association in a single faith or denomination. For example, the law prevents any church other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word "Orthodox" in its name.

## LATVIA

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 law stipulates that foreign missionaries may hold meetings and proselytize only if invited by domestic religious groups to conduct such activities.

The law stipulates that representatives of certain Christian churches (Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, Old Believer, Baptist, Methodist, and Adventist) and Jewish groups may teach religion in public schools to students who elect to take such classes. The government provides funds for these classes. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may attend classes on a voluntary basis on the religion "characteristic of the national minority." Other religious groups without their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Depending on the grade level, courses range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved instructors to nondenominational Christian teachings to overviews of major world religions. Parents can also register their children for voluntary nonreligious ethics classes.

The law criminalizes incitement to hatred on the basis of religious affiliation.

The government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The legal necessity for groups registered for fewer than 10 years to re-register annually imposed additional bureaucratic requirements on recently established religious groups. One group registered for fewer than 10 years noted that re-registration was problem-free, but reported that police annually canvassed their neighborhood to inquire about the group's activities.

By restricting membership on the Ecclesiastical Council to eight religious groups, the government limited the ability of other religious groups to consult on government decisions on religious matters.

## LATVIA

A 2011 Ecclesiastical Council recommendation tasked the Education Ministry with assessing a council proposal to extend optional religious education in public schools beyond the third grade. At year's end the ministry's decision was pending. The council did not meet during the year.

The process of obtaining visas for foreign religious workers remained cumbersome. However, the government helped to resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionaries. Some religious groups criticized the legal requirement for foreign missionaries to have an invitation from a domestic religious group in order to hold meetings and proselytize.

In February the president and religious leaders signed a clergy-drafted "goodwill manifesto" calling for peace and unity in the country. As of November, approximately 4,000 people had signed the manifesto.

Restitution of individual property confiscated or nationalized during World War II and thereafter was substantially completed under an expired denationalization law. However, some religious groups, including the Lutheran, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities, continued to seek restitution of additional communal and religious properties. The status of many of these remaining properties was the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes resulting in part from ambiguous ownership, competing claims, and destruction of the Jewish communities to whom the properties belonged before World War II.

On June 21, the justice minister resigned from his post, allegedly over the restitution issue, after the prime minister tasked the Justice Ministry with creating a working group to identify properties eligible for restitution. By year's end, the ministry had not established a working group. The government took the position that restitution was a political question requiring parliamentary action, although by year's end the government had not proposed legislation to parliament, and the issue of property restitution remained unresolved.

The government continued discussions with the Lutheran Church over the restitution of St. Peter's Church in Riga. In September parliament rejected a proposal by the opposition party Harmony Center aimed at consolidating the Riga City Council's ownership of the church.

In March parliament rejected a proposal to recognize Orthodox Christmas as a national holiday. The Orthodox Church continued to seek official recognition for

## LATVIA

Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas as observed according to the Orthodox Church's calendar.

The prison administration allowed prisoners and detainees to observe religious practices with some limitations, including security-related restrictions on religious articles kept in cells and dormitory rooms. Following a 2011 court ruling in favor of prisoners, the justice ministry continued to work on revising these restrictions.

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

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

Law enforcement institutions did not collect or publish data specifically on hate crimes because there was no legal definition of hate crimes. However, they reported violations of the law against incitement of ethnic, racial, or religious hatred.

There were reports of anti-Semitic incidents, including several cases of vandalism and anti-Semitic statements. Anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some segments of society.

On March 20, hosts of a Radio NABA show and their guest, a Latvian who served as a Waffen SS legionnaire during World War II, made anti-Semitic comments. In response, the Embassy of Israel wrote to the Council on Electronic Mass Media (NEPLP) criticizing the statements. The government warned the NEPLP that freedom of speech did not include the right to incite ethnic hatred. On April 18, the NEPLP initiated an administrative case regarding the Radio NABA broadcast for anti-Semitic statements and incitement to ethnic hatred. The radio station removed the show from the air.

On June 27, vandals damaged a stained-glass window in a chapel at the New Jewish cemetery in Riga. The Jewish community asked the police to investigate. The police initiated a criminal case for intentional destruction of and damage to property. At year's end, the case was still under investigation.

On March 15, the Riga Regional Court delivered its judgment on a 2010 case involving the vandalism of 89 headstones in the New Jewish Cemetery of Riga. The perpetrators, three teenage members of the Russian-speaking community, possessed neo-Nazi materials published by Russian skinhead groups. The

## LATVIA

offenders admitted their guilt. The court sentenced one offender, charged with incitement, to an eight-month suspended sentence and probation. Another offender, charged with acts of desecration, received a one-year suspended sentence, probation, and a fine of LVL 3000 (\$5,562). The court sentenced the third offender, charged with nonreporting of crime, to 40 hours of community service.

Leaders of religious groups reported that interfaith dialogue, both among Christian groups and between Christians and other religious groups, continued to develop. In general, relations between major Christian churches and the Jewish community were positive. Muslim leaders said that Muslims, most of whom came from Central Asia during Soviet times, generally felt well integrated into society.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. embassy engaged in regular discussions of issues affecting religious freedom with the president, the prime minister, government bodies, human rights NGOs, and representatives of religious groups, including missionaries. These issues included the role religious groups can play in bringing together ethnic Latvians and ethnic Russians. The embassy included religious leaders in discussions on human rights and civil society. The embassy supported the Jewish community in its ongoing efforts to secure restitution of communal property.