



Estonia

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues 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 1.35 million (including 68 percent ethnic Estonian, 26 percent Russian, 2 percent Ukrainian, 1 percent Belarusian, and 1 percent Finnish). The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) is the largest denomination, with 165 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 59 congregations with approximately 25,000 members. There are smaller communities of Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Methodists, and other religious groups. There is a small Jewish community of approximately 2,500 members, with a synagogue, community center, and day school in operation. A new synagogue opened in May 2007, the only building in the country specifically designated for use as a synagogue. There are also communities of Muslims, Buddhists, and many other religious groups; each has fewer than 6,000 adherents.

The ethnic Estonian majority is mainly Lutheran, while most religious adherents among the country's 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. The renovation of two churches--St. John's Lutheran Church in Tartu and St. Simeon's and St. Anne's Orthodox Church in Tallinn--was completed during 2004-06. In May 2007 St. Simeon's and St. Anne's Orthodox Church in Tallinn was consecrated. The city of Tallinn and other municipalities have their own ongoing projects for renovation of churches. The Government's continuing renovation and development program of churches included churches such as St. John's Lutheran Church in Tallinn, St. John's Lutheran Church in Tartu, St. Mary Magdalene's Church in Rapla, and Alexander's Church in Narva. Church attendance, which saw a surge coinciding with the independence movement in the early 1990s, has since decreased significantly.

In recent years many groups have sent foreign missionaries into the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution states that there is no state church.

There are other laws and regulations that directly or indirectly regulate individual and collective freedom of religion. 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. Military chaplain services extend to service members of all faiths. The Churches and Congregations Act also decrees that prison directors shall ensure inmates the opportunity to practice their religious beliefs. Soldiers and prisoners exercised this right in practice.

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 anti-bias and tolerance education. Since 2003 the Government has observed on January 27 the annual Holocaust and Other Crimes against Humanity Victims' Memorial Day. The country is a liaison 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 co-financed by the Government, was made available to teachers. This teacher's 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 CD and a DVD.

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 Principles of the Ownership Reform Act, passed in 1991. 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 EAOC. The Government transferred seven properties to the EOCMP during the previous reporting period and the three remaining properties during this 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.

Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Christmas, and Pentecost are national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 belief or practice.

Although the majority of citizens were nominally 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 confirmed acts of anti-Semitism.

In April 2007 two graveyards were vandalized. Vandals damaged 2 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 by the end of the reporting period.

In April 2007 Tartu Rural Court sentenced a graveyard vandal to probation for two years for stealing metal figures from Raadi cemetery. Earlier thefts of church property prompted the Estonian Council of Churches and the Board of Antiquities to initiate a database of items under protection. The database, which comprises digital photos and detailed descriptions, is shared as needed with law enforcement agencies.

In June 2006 two vandals damaged seven grave plaques and several lanterns in Rakvere cemetery. Police took two suspects into custody, and they pled guilty. In September 2006 the court sentenced one of them to 5 months in prison.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues 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.

In November 2006 the U.S. Government provided partial funding to the Jewish cultural center to organize a Jewish cultural festival.

The U.S. Government funded a travel grant for two history and civics teachers to attend a teacher-training program at Keene College's Cohen Center for Holocaust Studies in July 2006.

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