



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Latvia

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

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

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religions.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, lingering suspicions remained toward newer, nontraditional faiths.

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 approximately 25 thousand square miles, and an estimated population of approximately 2.3 million. The three largest faiths were Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity. Denominational membership statistics were self-reported estimates and were not completely precise. Sizeable religious minorities included Baptists, Pentecostals, and various evangelical Protestant groups. The once large Jewish community was virtually destroyed in the Holocaust during the 1941-1944 German occupation; the community was an estimated 6,000 to 13,500 persons during the reporting period.

As of April 2006, the Board of Religious Affairs had registered 1,174 congregations. This total included: Lutheran (303), Roman Catholic (250), Orthodox (118), Baptist (93), Old Believer Orthodox (67), Seventh-day Adventist (50), Jehovah's Witnesses (13), Methodist (13), Jewish (13), Buddhist (4), Muslim (15), Hare Krishna (11), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (4), and more than 100 other congregations.

Interest in religion increased markedly since the restoration of independence; however, a large percentage of adherents did not regularly practice their faith. In 2005, religious groups provided the following estimates of membership to the Justice Ministry: Lutherans (458,424), Roman Catholics (500,000), Orthodox (350,000), Baptists (7,119), Old Believer Orthodox (2843), Seventh-day Adventists (3,957), Jehovah's Witnesses (161), Methodists (1,002), Jews (638), Buddhists (87), Muslims (380), Hare Krishnas (127), and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (867). Although no precise statistics existed, it was widely acknowledged that a significant portion of the population was atheist. Orthodox Christians, many of whom were Russian-speaking, non-citizen, permanent residents, were concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics lived in the east.

#### 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. However, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religions. There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions. In practice, this has not resulted in government discrimination against any particular religion.

Jews are considered an ethnic group and can be listed as such in passports, rather than as Latvian or Russian. Prior to 2002, regardless of the bearer's wishes, all passports listed the bearer's ethnicity on the front bio-page as Latvian, Russian, or Jewish. In 2002, new passports were introduced that indicate ethnicity only when requested by the bearer. If the bearer requests that the ethnicity be listed, it is listed on the backside of the bio-page at the front of the passport.

Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter Monday are national holidays. The Orthodox Church has been seeking recognition of Orthodox Christmas for several years, but the Government had not adopted this proposal by the end of this reporting period.

The Latvian Lutheran Church established its own clergy education center, the Luther Academy in Riga, in 1998. The Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church each have their own seminary. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

There are two councils that comment on religious issues for the Government: the New Religions Consultative Council (NRCC) and the

Ecclesiastical Council (EC). The NRCC consists of doctors, academics, and an independent human rights ombudsman. It meets on an ad hoc basis and offers opinions on specific issues, but it does not have decision-making authority. It has not published any information or warnings concerning "cults." The Ecclesiastical Council is an advisory body organized in 2002 by the prime minister and is chaired by either the sitting prime minister or the deputy prime minister. It includes representatives from the major churches: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Orthodox, Jewish, Adventist, Methodist, and Old Believers. The Ecclesiastical Council met during the reporting period to discuss a new draft law on traditional confessions. The draft law outlines which religions are considered traditional religions (those that existed during the country's first period of independence), and further defines the relationship between church and state. Under current law, traditional religions enjoy certain rights and privileges that nontraditional religions do not. It is not clear at this point how the relationship between church and state will be defined and/or changed. The U.S. Embassy will continue to monitor this draft law and report further in the next reporting period.

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

According to the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations, any twenty citizens or persons over the age of eighteen who have been registered in the Population Register may apply to register a church. Asylum seekers, foreign staff of diplomatic missions, and those in the country temporarily in a special status may not register a religious organization. Congregations that do not belong to a registered church association must reregister each year for ten years. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination and with permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only churches with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. The decision to register a church is made by the Board of Religious Affairs, a semi-autonomous body within the Ministry of Justice. The director of the Board of Religious Affairs reports directly to the Minister of Justice. According to Board of Religious Affairs officials, most registration applications are approved eventually once proper documents are submitted. The Bureau of Human Rights has proposed to abolish the religious association membership requirement and reduce the new congregation registration requirement to three years. By the end of the reporting period, Parliament had not acted on this recommendation and no legislation has been introduced.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association (church) in a single confession. During the reporting period, the Government had not registered or been requested to register any offshoots of established religious groups. According to the Board of Religious Affairs, they were not aware of any offshoot Jewish groups who were denied registration. A Chabad-Lubavich organization was registered in 1997. In the past, a group from the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, which was originally denied registration in 1997, was asked in 2005 by the Board to submit their registration request again, but the group had not done so during the reporting period. There were twenty nonassociated Old Believer groups registered with the Board during the reporting period.

In 2005, the Religious Affairs Administration again proposed amendments to the Law on Religious Organizations that would abolish restrictions on single association registration. However, neither the Ecclesiastical Council nor the Government had acted on this recommendation by the end of the period covered by this report.

Visa regulations effective since 1999 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. The visa application process, requiring letters of invitation and proof of seminary training, remained cumbersome, although the Government generally was cooperative in helping resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations criticized this provision.

The Law on Religious Organizations stipulates that only representatives of the traditional Christian churches (i.e., Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, and Baptist churches) may teach religion 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 the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations and religions that do not have their own state-supported minority schools, such as the Jewish community, may provide religious education only in private schools.

Property restitution had been substantially completed, although most religious groups, including the Lutheran, Orthodox, and Jewish communities, continued to wait for the return of some properties. The status of these remaining properties was unclear and was the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes concerning ambiguous ownership, competing claims, and the destruction of the Jewish communities to which properties belonged before World War II. The Office of the Prime Minister established a working group to address the restitution-related concerns of the country's religious communities. The Jewish community expressed concern about the terms under which some properties were restored.

In early 2006, a law was proposed that would return approximately 200 properties to the Jewish community. The proposal would create a centralized list of all the contested properties and the compensation requested for each item. The Jewish community and the Government continued productive discussions on this issue. By prenegotiating the properties, the community hoped to expedite the legislative process. The Jewish community was optimistic regarding a favorable outcome.

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.

## Anti-Semitism

In 2003, vandals overturned tombstones and sprayed anti-Semitic graffiti on the walls of Riga's New Jewish Cemetery. National leaders condemned the act and city authorities quickly repaired the damage. Similar desecrations, although on a much smaller scale, occurred in both 2004 and 2005, with similar reactions from leading local citizens. In the spring of 2005, the Orthodox rabbi of Riga was accosted, threatened, and subjected to violently anti-Semitic epithets in Old Town Riga. In late 2005, during the Jewish Hanukkah holiday, vandals deliberately knocked over and broke a large outdoor menorah in Riga.

## Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In early 2006, Latvian police participated in a U.S. government-sponsored training course to address racial intolerance, which also included a component on anti-Semitism. The course was designed to educate police officers to identify criminal behavior based on intolerance and to explore best practices to combat intolerance on the streets. As a result of this initial course, the Latvian Police Academy incorporated a tolerance training segment into their overall course for new police recruits.

## Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Ecumenism continued to be a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude toward the concept. Although government officials encouraged a broader understanding and acceptance of newer religions, many citizens continued to doubt the validity of newer, nontraditional faiths.

The Latvian Historical Commission, under the sponsorship of President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, continued to promote Holocaust awareness throughout society. A monument to Zanis Lipke, who saved forty Jews from the Riga ghetto, was planned for completion in 2006. In June 2004, the country was admitted as a permanent member of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. In July 2006, the country will hold its first Holocaust Remembrance conference, hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and presided over by the president. The conference will address issues relating to the awareness and remembrance of the Holocaust. Participants will include Latvians and delegates from the United States, western Europe, and central and eastern Europe.

Many government leaders—the president in particular—have reacted to a perceived increase in public anti-Semitism by speaking out against all forms of xenophobia and appearing prominently at Holocaust-related commemoration events. The Government actively discourages anti-Semitism, although anti-Semitic sentiments persisted in some segments of society, manifested in occasional public comments and resistance to laws and memorials designed to address Holocaust remembrance. Books and other publications appearing in Latvia that address the World War II period generally dwelt on the effects of the Soviet and Nazi occupations on the state and on ethnic Latvians, sometimes at the expense of comment on the Holocaust or some Latvians' role in it.

## 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.

During the period covered by the report, the U.S. embassy worked to support the principle of religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with the president, the prime minister, and appropriate government bodies, including the director of the Office of Religious Affairs, human rights nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries. The embassy also held regular discussions with local immigration authorities and section meetings with the Department of Religious Affairs.

The embassy actively supports the Latvian Historical Commission. It has funded the travel of scholars to the United States for education on ethnic and religious tolerance, and of U.S. experts to the country for Historical Commission activities. In addition, the embassy worked with the Government to develop a Holocaust education curriculum for all students in grades 9-12. The embassy funded the training of teachers in curriculum development, the production and publication of a Holocaust education curriculum, and the preparation of teachers to teach Holocaust history and awareness. The completed Holocaust curriculum was published in late spring 2005 and, following teacher training throughout the summer, was implemented in the 2005-2006 school year in some history and social studies classes.

At the end of the summer of 2006, the U.S. Embassy will send two teachers on a U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum study tour. The embassy, through a Democracy Commission Grant, also assisted with the production and publication of the book "Jewish Cemeteries in Latvia," released in spring 2006.

Embassy officials maintain an open and productive dialogue with the Government's director of the Board of Religious Affairs. Embassy officials also meet regularly with visiting missionary groups as well as representatives of different religious confessions, both local and foreign. Officials often discuss problems that certain minority religious groups had experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits.

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