

ESTONIA 2013 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.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy maintained a dialogue with the government and religious groups on religious freedom issues, including Holocaust education and anti-Semitism. The ambassador and other U.S. government officials participated in local events involving religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2011 census data, 13.7 percent of the population belongs to one of the two Orthodox Churches: the Estonian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (EAOC), and 8.4 percent of the population is Lutheran. Other Christian groups, including Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of Christian Free Congregations, and Pentecostals, constitute 1.2 percent of the population. Members of the Russian Old Believers live primarily along the west bank of Lake Peipsi in the east. There are also small Jewish and Muslim communities. According to 2011 census data, 29 percent of the population is religiously affiliated and 54 percent do not identify with any religion. Most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population are Orthodox and reside mainly in the capital or the northeastern part of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

Two laws regulate the activities of religious associations. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are registered with city courts. Church congregations or unions of congregations are required to have a management

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board. Citizens and legal residents may be members of the board. In order to register formally, the management board of a religious association must submit an application signed by all its members. 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 board members serve as supporting documents for the registration application. The government treats registered churches and religious organizations as non-profit entities receiving tax benefits. According to the government, there are more than 500 registered religious associations.

The law requires the commanding officer of each military unit to provide defense force members the opportunity to practice their religion. Prison directors must also provide the opportunity for inmates to practice their religious beliefs.

Basic instruction on religious themes is available in public schools. A school must offer religious studies at the primary or secondary level if at least 12 students request it. Comparative religious studies are available in public and private schools on an elective basis.

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

Government Practices

On January 25, 80 elementary school history and civics teachers from across the country participated in a Holocaust memorial conference in the capital organized by the Estonian Atlantic Treaty Association with support from the ministry of education and the German embassy. The conference was dedicated to victims of the Holocaust and aimed to introduce teachers to best classroom practices for Holocaust commemoration.

The government observed January 27 as an annual memorial day for victims of the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity, and schools in the country participated in commemorative activities. The Jewish community organized a commemoration event in which high-ranking government officials participated.

On September 16, Minister of Culture Rein Lang opened an outdoor exhibition of the Estonian History Museum “Klooga camp and the Holocaust” at the Klooga memorial. The exhibition was dedicated to the Holocaust victims of the Klooga mass murder in 1944.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On July 27, an annual ceremony took place outside the northeast village of Sinimae to commemorate Estonians, including veterans of the 20th Estonian Waffen SS Grenadier Division, who died in the World War II battle of Sinimae. No national government officials participated in the ceremony. Participants laid wreaths at monuments for soldiers from both sides who died in battles nearby. No Nazi symbols or insignia, or any other anti-Semitic acts, were observed. The government did not participate in or support this event; freedom of expression and assembly are protected under Estonian law.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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 religious leaders. The ambassador and embassy officers continued to engage with government officials and members of civil society and religious groups to promote dialogue and education on the Holocaust and on issues affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. government funded the participation of two history and civics teachers in a summer teacher training program at a university in the United States to foster Holocaust education. These teachers incorporated the training into the Holocaust education program already in the curriculum.

In September, the Department's Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with representatives from education and research organizations, the ministry of culture, the ministry of foreign affairs, as well as representatives from NGOs, civil society, and students to promote Holocaust education and remembrance.

The U.S. government sponsored an exhibition of photos and letters, "Letters to Sala," a traveling exhibition based on the Sala Garnarcz Kirchner Collection in the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, at the Museum of Occupations in the capital.