

ESTONIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects the freedom to practice one's religion and prohibits the incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. The government held several memorial events for victims of the Holocaust and sponsored educational programs for teachers to introduce them to best classroom practices for Holocaust commemoration.

There were no reports of societal actions significantly changing the state of religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious affairs with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and continued to engage the government on issues promoting religious tolerance. Embassy staff and Department of State officials met with religious leaders, civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote dialogue on anti-Semitism and education on the Holocaust.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2014 estimate). According to 2011 census data, 29 percent of the population is religiously affiliated, 54 percent does not identify with any religion, and 17 percent declined to answer the question on the census. According to the census, 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), while 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. Most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population are EOCMP Orthodox and reside mainly in the capital or the northeastern part of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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The constitution grants everyone the freedom to practice his or her religion, both alone and in community with others, in public or in private, unless this is “detrimental to public order, health, or morals.” The constitution also says the incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination shall be prohibited and punishable by law. This punishment may vary from a fine up to a three-year prison sentence. There is no state church.

The law regulates the activities of religious associations and religious societies. Religious associations are defined as churches, congregations, unions of congregations, and monasteries. Religious societies are defined as organizations which undertake confessional or ecumenical activities outside the traditional forms of religious rites of a church or congregation and which need not be connected with a specific church or congregation.

Religious associations are registered by county and city courts. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are required to have a management board, and monasteries are required to have an elected or appointed superior. 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. Religious societies register under the law governing non-profit associations.

The law treats registered churches and religious organizations as non-profit entities entitled to tax benefits. There are more than 500 religious associations registered with the government. The law does not prohibit activities of religious associations, which are not registered. Unregistered entities, however, cannot present themselves as legal persons and cannot exercise the rights or seek the protections accorded to a legally registered religious entity.

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 optional and available in public schools. A school must offer religious studies at the primary or secondary level if at least 12

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students request it. Comparative religious studies are available in public and private schools on an elective basis.

Government Practices

On January 27, the government held the annual memorial event on the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day at the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. Following the event, the government sponsored a seminar for history and civics teachers from across the country to introduce them to best classroom practices for Holocaust commemoration. The government also observed January 27 as an annual memorial day for victims of the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity and schools participated in commemorative activities.

On September 19, Prime Minister Taavi Roivas said at a separate memorial service for the Holocaust victims of the Klooga mass murder: “We should remember all the innocent victims of the Holocaust. Estonia condemns the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and crimes against humanity.” The memorial service was attended by members of the government.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to Internal Security Service reports, a few dozen right wing extremists organized events that were directly associated with propagating National Socialist ideas. These included celebrations of Adolf Hitler's birthday in Tallinn and Tartu, celebrations of other important dates related to the Third Reich, and the participation of individuals who favored or propagated National Socialism and xenophobia at various memorial events. The Internal Security Service publicly stated these incidents evoked little response within Estonian society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious affairs with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and continued to engage the government on issues promoting religious tolerance. Embassy staff and Department of State officials met with religious leaders, civil society, NGOs, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote dialogue on anti-Semitism and education on the Holocaust.

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The U.S. government, in cooperation with the education and research ministry, funded the travel of two history and civics teachers to 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 national curriculum.

In May the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism held meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jewish community leaders, the Human Rights Center, and the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, to discuss anti-Semitism and government education programs about the Holocaust.

The U.S. government sponsored an exhibition in Tallinn, Narva, Tartu, and Parnu of photos and letters from the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library for the use of schools in teaching about the Holocaust, religious persecution, and the importance of religious tolerance.