

ESTONIA 2015 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. Religious groups must register with county or city courts to receive tax benefits. The government held a memorial event for victims of the Holocaust. The government requested the removal of two videos from a controversial art exhibit, which it co-sponsored after widespread criticism that the videos made light of the Holocaust. The government sponsored educational programs for teachers on best classroom practices for teaching about the Holocaust and consulted with religious groups on such issues as new legislation in response to the refugee crisis in Europe.

The youth wing of the Conservative People's Party organized a torchlight march on the country's independence day in February that the director of the Israeli office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center characterized as anti-Semitic.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious affairs with the Ministries of Foreign, Social, and Internal Affairs and continued to engage the government on issues promoting religious tolerance. The Ambassador and embassy staff met with religious leaders, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) 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 2015 estimate). According to 2011 census data, 29 percent 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 the Estonian Orthodox Church (EOCMP), which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, or the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, while 8.4 percent is Lutheran. Other Christian groups, including Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the 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 members and reside mainly in the capital or the northeastern part of the country.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution grants everyone the freedom to belong to any religious group and 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 prohibits incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. Violations are punishable by fines or up to three years in prison. The constitution stipulates there is no state church. It recognizes the right to refuse military service for religious reasons but requires conscientious objectors to perform alternative service as provided by law.

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 that undertake confessional or ecumenical activities outside the traditional forms of religious rites of a church or congregation and need not be connected with a specific church or congregation.

Religious associations and societies are registered by county or city courts. Associations that are churches, congregations, and unions of congregations and are required to have a management board, while those that are 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 board 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 registration requirements of religious societies are the same; both associations and societies fall under the law governing nonprofit associations.

The law treats registered religious associations and societies as nonprofit entities entitled to some tax benefits. There are more than 550 religious associations registered with the government. The law does not prohibit activities of religious associations that are not registered. Unregistered entities, however, cannot act as legal persons and do not receive tax benefits.

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The law requires the commanding officer of each military unit to provide its members the opportunity to practice their religion. Prison directors must also provide the opportunity for inmates to practice their religious beliefs. The state funds military and prison chaplains, who can represent any registered religious denomination and must serve individuals of all faiths.

Basic religious instruction is available in public schools and is optional. 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. In both public and private schools, religious studies teachers, who may be lay or religious, are funded by the state. There are no restrictions on private religious schools.

Government Practices

Four small charismatic Christian congregations registered as religious associations: the Hiiumaa Christian Missionary Congregation; Tallinn Christian Pentecostal Congregation Resurrection; Tallinn Christian and Protestant Congregation Rebirth; and Tallinn Christian Living Space Congregation. The government did not deny any registrations during the year.

On February 7, an art exhibition featuring comics, paintings, and video projects dealing with Holocaust opened in the Tartu Art Museum, funded in part by the Ministry of Culture. Organizers said it dealt with Holocaust trauma through humor and irony. The works were part of an installation, *My Poland: On Recalling and Forgetting*, and included videos by Polish artists, one of which featured nude men and women playing tag in a gas chamber, while the second showed a Holocaust survivor having his concentration camp tattoo re-inked. According to the exhibit catalog, the works were intended to initiate discussion of the Holocaust and to address growing extremism and xenophobia. After public criticism and complaints, the Ministry of Culture said the two videos were offensive; at the ministry's request, the museum removed them from display and apologized.

The government provided 596,000 Euros (\$649,000) from the state budget to the Estonian Council of Churches, comprised of 10 Christian churches, including the Lutheran Church, both Orthodox Churches, and other denominations. The state did not intervene in how the funds were allocated; some of these funds were distributed among the member churches and some were used for ecumenical projects and training for members of the boards of council congregations to

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encourage participation in civil society. The government consulted with representatives of the Muslim community and the Council of Churches regarding pending legislation on refugee and immigration issues. Council of Churches' congregations offered help accommodating refugees and/or asylum seekers.

On January 23, the education ministry cosponsored a seminar for history and civics teachers from across the country on best classroom practices for Holocaust commemoration.

On January 27, on the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Foreign Minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus issued a public statement stating the country condemned all crimes against humanity, including the Holocaust. "A horrific chapter of World War II ended with the release of those who survived the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp," the foreign minister said. "Any form of hatred, intolerance or incitement of intolerance is unacceptable and Estonia stands firmly against it," she stated, adding that the history of the Holocaust needed to be studied in order to understand the importance of fighting against anti-Semitism and intolerance.

Education Minister Jevgeni Ossinovski participated with senior representatives from the Jewish community and others in a commemoration to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day at the site of the World War II-era Klooga concentration camp. Jewish community leaders commemorated Holocaust victims, and Ossinovski remembered Holocaust victims and called for tolerance of all religions.

Students across the country participated in Holocaust Remembrance Day activities at their local schools.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 24, the youth wing of the Conservative People's Party (EKRE) organized a torchlight march to mark the country's independence day. Efraim Zuroff, Director of the Israeli office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, called the march anti-Semitic, saying "in a country ...in which the Holocaust took place... such marches are a cause for serious concern." Members of a Swedish neo-Nazi youth organization participated at the invitation of EKRE's youth organization. At the time of the march, EKRE had no representatives in parliament.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom issues with the Ministries of Internal, Social, and Foreign Affairs and engaged the government on promoting religious tolerance, including in dealing with the crisis of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe. The education ministry and embassy jointly funded the travel of two history and civics teachers to a summer teacher-training program on Holocaust education at a university in the United States. The teachers incorporated the training into the Holocaust education program already in the national curriculum.

The Ambassador hosted an interfaith religious leaders' meeting to discuss the role of religion in the country, and embassy staff met with religious leaders from the Council of Churches and the Jewish and Muslim communities, as well as NGOs such as the Estonian Human Rights Center, to promote dialogue on religious freedom, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust education.