

# **LATVIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides every person the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and specifies the separation of church and state. By law eight “traditional” religious groups receive rights and privileges that other groups do not. Religious groups registered for fewer than 10 years must reregister every year. Thirty religious groups reregistered during the year, and six groups registered for the first time. Several high-ranking politicians spoke against anti-Semitism throughout the year and also participated in various Holocaust memorial ceremonies.

On March 16, approximately 250 persons, including 10-15 SS veterans and three members of parliament from the All for Latvia Party, participated in an annual march commemorating Latvians who fought in the Waffen SS against the Soviet Union in World War II. Police arrested five persons protesting the march. Organizers said the march remembered those who fought for independence and was not a glorification of Nazism. Various groups, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center, again condemned the march. Jewish and Muslim community members reported instances of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate speech on the internet.

The U.S. embassy engaged with government officials, including representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of the Ombudsman, and Department of Religious Affairs, on the importance of restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community, religious tolerance, and Holocaust education. It also engaged with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Latvian Center for Human Rights, and representatives of various religious groups, such as the Old Believers, Jewish community, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Muslims, on the role they could play in promoting religious tolerance. The embassy funded two projects designed to address Holocaust issues.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the largest denominations are Lutheran (37 percent), Roman Catholic (18 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christian (19 percent), the latter of which are predominantly native Russian speakers; 24 percent are unaffiliated with any religious group. The Latvian

Orthodox Church is a self-governing Eastern Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Central Statistical Bureau reported there are 4,873 persons who identify as Jewish, and the Council of Jewish Communities believes there are between 6,000 and 8,000 persons with Jewish heritage. The Islamic community reports approximately 1,000 Muslims, while the MOJ Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities lists 295 Muslim community members. Other religious groups, which together constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, evangelical Christians, Methodists, Calvinists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states everyone has the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and “the church shall be separate from the state.” It allows restrictions on the expression of religious beliefs in order to protect public safety, welfare, morals, the democratic structure of the state, and others’ rights. The law gives eight “traditional” religious groups – Lutherans, Catholics, Latvian Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews – some rights and privileges not given to other religious groups, including the right to teach religion courses in public schools and the right to officiate at marriages without obtaining a civil marriage license from the MOJ. These eight groups are also the only religious groups represented on the government’s Ecclesiastical Council, an advisory body established by law and chaired by the prime minister that meets on an ad hoc basis to comment and provide recommendations on religious issues. These recommendations do not carry the force of law.

Separate laws define relations between the state and each of these eight groups. The rights and activities of other religious groups are covered by one law on religious organizations.

Although the government does not require religious groups to register, the law accords registered religious groups a number of rights and privileges, including legal status to own property and conduct financial transactions, eligibility to apply for funds for religious building restoration, and tax deductions for donors. Registration also allows religious groups to perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units and hold services in public places such as parks or public squares with the agreement of the local government. The law

accords the same rights and privileges to the eight traditional religious groups, which it treats as already registered.

Unregistered groups do not possess legal status and may not own property, conduct financial transactions, or receive tax-free donations. They may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units, and generally may not hold worship services in public places without special permission. The law stipulates fines if an unregistered group carries out any of these activities.

The law stipulates that, in order to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members aged 18 or older. Individuals with temporary residency status, such as asylum seekers and foreign diplomatic staff, may count as members for the purpose of registration only during the authorized period of their residency permits. To apply, religious groups must submit statutes stipulating their aims and tasks; a list of all group members (full name, identification number, and signature); the names of the persons who will represent the religious organization; minutes of the meeting founding the group; confirmation that members voted on and approved the statutes; and a list of members of the audit committee (full name, identification number, and title). The audit committee is responsible for preparing financial reports on the group and ensuring it adheres to its statutes. The MOJ determines whether to register a religious group as a congregation. The ministry may deny an application if it deems registration would threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, public safety, welfare, or morals. Groups denied registration may appeal the decision in court.

Ten or more congregations – totaling at least 200 members – of the same faith or denomination, each with permanent registration status, may form a religious association or church. Groups with religious association status, or status as a private society or foundation, may establish theological schools or monasteries. The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association of a single faith or denomination, or of more than one religious group with the same or similar name. For example, the law prevents any association other than the Latvian Orthodox Church from registering with the word “orthodox” in its name. Independent Orthodox groups, such as Old Believers, are registered as separate religious associations.

The law requires religious groups registered for fewer than 10 years to reregister every year. Reregistration requires an MOJ evaluation of the group’s activities in the previous year and submission of the same documentation as first-time registrants.

According to the law, all traditional and registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the MOJ by March 1 regarding their activities and goals. They must additionally provide other data, including congregation size, number of clergy, number of weddings and other ceremonies performed, and details of group governance and financial status.

The law criminalizes hate speech and the incitement of hatred on the basis of religious affiliation but requires legal proof, determined at trial, of substantial harm for conviction. Penalties range from community service to up to 10 years of imprisonment. Committing a crime for religious reasons may also be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The government funds religion and ethics classes in public schools. The school must receive the approval of the parents of at least 10 students in order to hold religion classes; if such approval is not obtained, students take courses on general ethics. The Center for Educational Content at the Ministry of Education must review the content of the classes to verify they do not violate freedom of conscience. First through third-grade public school students must take either a class on religious beliefs of one of the eight traditional groups or an ethics class; starting in fourth grade, religious subjects are incorporated into elective ethics and social science classes. If there is demand, schools are permitted to teach classes on the history of religion. Students at state-supported national minority schools may attend classes on a voluntary basis on the religion “characteristic of the national minority.” Other nontraditional religious groups without their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Religion courses in public schools range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved government-certified instructors (usually at the lower grades), to nondenominational Christian teachings or overviews of major world religions by certified teachers who are proposed by a religious group, and approved by the Ministry of Education (usually at higher grades).

The law establishes an independent ombudsman’s office for human rights. Its mandate includes helping to resolve cases of religious discrimination through collaboration with authorities. While it does not have enforcement powers, it can issue recommendations to specific authorities. Parliament appoints the ombudsman.

The law stipulates foreign missionaries may be issued a residency permit, hold meetings, and proselytize only if a registered domestic religious group invites them

to conduct such activities. Visa regulations require foreign religious workers to present letters of invitation, typically from a religious organization, and either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

Thirty religious groups, all of those that applied, reregistered during the year, and the MOJ approved the applications of six other religious groups that applied to register for the first time.

President Raimonds Vejonis and other senior government officials, including the prime minister's legal advisor, the president's legal advisors, representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and members of parliament, met with Jewish groups to discuss property restitution. Despite the talks, the government did not take any additional steps to reconstitute property in accordance with the 2009 Terezin Declaration, which called for measures to provide for assistance, redress, and remembrance for victims of Nazi persecution. There were differing views about the number of properties that remained to be restituted.

The new prayer center of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Latvia (ICCL) again failed to open. In 2016, the Riga City Construction Board said the center failed to meet fire and other safety requirements because of an increase in the number of persons who would use the building. The leader of the ICCL, Janis Hamza Lucins, stated the delays were unwarranted but addressing them was not a priority, and the ICCL did not act to satisfy the construction board by year's end.

Authorities continued to monitor ICCL activities, according to the annual report of the Security Police. ICCL leader Lucins again said he did not view government monitoring of his group to be discrimination or a violation of ICCL members' rights.

President Vejonis and other senior government officials, including Speaker of the Parliament Inara Murniece, Prime Minister Maris Kucinskis, and Minister of Defense Raimonds Bergmanis, attended or spoke at Holocaust memorial events, including International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Latvian Holocaust Memorial Day, and the Rumbula Forest Massacre Memorial.

On October 15, the Bauska County Municipality and the Council of Jewish Communities unveiled the Memorial Synagogue Garden at the site of the destroyed Bauska synagogue, burned down by the Nazis in 1941. The Jewish community reported that, after 15 years of appealing without success to former city authorities to establish the memorial, the current municipality administration fully supported and expedited the project.

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

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On March 16, an annual march took place commemorating Latvians who fought in the grenadier divisions of the Waffen SS against the Soviet Red Army in World War II. Approximately 250 persons, including 10-15 SS veterans and three members of parliament from the All for Latvia Party, participated. Protesters also attended. The organizers, the Daugava Hawks group, characterized the annual march as a commemoration of national identity and remembrance of those who fought for independence, rather than as a glorification of Nazism. Police arrested five persons protesting against the march. As in previous years, the march drew strong condemnations from various groups, including the Simon Wiesenthal Center. German Member of Parliament Volker Beck supported the protesters of the march in a speech at the Latvian Embassy in Berlin, stating that Holocaust victims and survivors were “repeatedly injured through this annual commemoration.”

Riga Jewish community Executive Director Gita Umanovska stated there were instances of anti-Semitic hate speech on the internet, mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments on news articles, although none were reported to police. She stated anti-Semitic hate speech centered on the assertion that Jews were taking something that did not belong to them. For example, one website posted, “Are there any Jews in Latvia? What are they doing here, and what do they want? Let them go home.” Another site, referencing Jewish restitution claims, posted, “They don’t deserve anything! No one is to blame for the fact that they missed the application deadline. All they’re doing now is thinking of their personal business. The Jews who owned something are not the same Russian Jews or [are] Jews who themselves were involved in all the repressions....”

ICCL leader Lucins also reported incidents of hate speech on the internet, mostly posts on social media and comments on news articles, which he stated were due to

anti-Islamic sentiment. According to Lucins, anti-Islamic hate speech focused on the theme that Islam was incompatible with the country's society. For example, one site carried the message, "How long are they [Muslims] going to continue with this? I'm sick and tired of all this information, how good Islam is etc.!!!! Latvia DOES NOT NEED Islam, nor do we want any Muslims here!!!" Another message read, "Personally I would not like to have my children go to the same school with her children... MY STRONG BELIEF IS THAT LATVIA DOES NOT NEED ISLAM, and whoever practices it should move to ISLAMIC COUNTRIES." In a third instance, a poster wrote, "Islam is a cult of death, pedophilia, and totalitarianism. Muhammad slept with a 9-year-old girl, chopped off heads, and was constantly at war, and demanded total obedience, and slavery is the norm in Islam."

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers engaged in regular discussions with government officials, primarily at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education, and with members of parliament, on the importance of restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community, religious tolerance, and Holocaust education.

Additionally, embassy staff met with leaders of the Jewish community, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma, Old Believers, and NGOs, including the Latvian Center for Human Rights and Safe House, to discuss their concerns with religious tolerance and acceptance in the country.

The embassy funded the visit of five history teachers who participated in the Rumbula's Echo project, the first film documenting the killing of 25,000 Latvian Jews, to the United States for a teacher training program on Holocaust education. In January to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the embassy funded the traveling exhibition "NOT the Last Butterfly," a project to make a representation of a butterfly for each of the 1.5 million children killed during the Holocaust. Embassy officials went to schools to show a film about the project and help children make and paint butterflies while they learned about the deceased children's stories. Embassy officials also spoke with high school students about the country's own Holocaust history.

The embassy funded publication of the second edition of the book "I Survived Rumbuli," a first-person account of the Rumbula Forest massacre, in which Nazi

SS troops and Latvian auxiliaries killed approximately 25,000 Jews over two nonconsecutive days in 1941.