

LITHUANIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom of religious practice, and state recognition of religious organizations, provided they do not contradict the constitution or the law. The government extends special benefits to nine “traditional” religious groups and more limited benefits to four “recognized” religious groups, one of which received recognition status from the parliament in March. Religious groups must register with the government to gain legal status. The government continued to provide restitution or compensation to religious groups for property seized during World War II or by the communist regime. It funded Jewish education and culture projects, allocating 448,000 euros (\$538,000) for the renovation of synagogues in three towns, and participated officially in Holocaust remembrance events. Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis gave remarks at commemoration events at the Paneriai Holocaust site on April 26, and for the annual March of the Living on September 26; he stressed Jewish history was integral to the country’s history and called for more discussion about how collaborators took part in the Holocaust, calling it the “darkest page” in the country’s history. The government registered the Jewish Ghetto Library in Vilnius and the underground remains of the Vilnius Great Synagogue as cultural heritage sites. In May the Martynas Mazvydas National Library opened the Judaica Research Center. Senior government officials at public commemorations spoke out against anti-Semitism.

A television program was cancelled after a judge on a game show gave a Nazi salute while contestants sang a song made popular by a Jewish singer. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported Muslim refugees faced discrimination in their applications for housing and employment. Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim postings on the internet were common, such as statements that all Jews collaborated with the Soviet Union and equating Muslims with terrorists. Nationalists organized demonstrations in Kaunas and Vilnius in which some of the participants wore fascist symbols and carried anti-Semitic signs.

U.S. embassy officials and the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with government officials, including at the prime minister’s office, and community leaders to discuss ways to combat intolerance and anti-Semitism and to encourage resolution of the remaining issues regarding compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi and Soviet eras, as well as the integration of Muslim refugees. Embassy representatives met with government officials,

religious leaders, and NGOs to continue to encourage resolution of concerns such as property restitution, cultural preservation, and greater inclusion of religious minorities – including Muslim refugees – in society. The embassy provided funding for a museum on religious and ethnic tolerance named after a Holocaust victim. The Ambassador and Charge d’Affaires spoke on the importance of tolerance at an anti-Semitism conference and a Holocaust commemoration.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 2.8 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, of the 90 percent of the population that responded to the question about religious affiliation, 86 percent is Roman Catholic and 7 percent does not identify with any religious group. Religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Russian Orthodox, Old Believers, Lutherans, Reformed Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics, and Karaites. Karaites traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region. The Jewish population is predominately concentrated in larger cities and is estimated at 3,100. According to the census, the Sunni Muslim population numbers approximately 2,800, the majority of whom are Tatars, a community found primarily in Vilnius and Kaunas. The Muslim community also includes recent converts, migrants, refugees, and temporary workers from the Middle East and Africa, most of whom are Sunni.

According to the 2011 census, less than 1 percent of the population belongs to other religious groups. Among these, the most numerous are Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the Full Gospel Word of Faith Movement, Pentecostals/Charismatics, Old Baltic faith communities, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, and members of the New Apostolic Church and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates there is no state religion and provides for the right of individuals to choose freely any religion or belief, to profess their religion and perform religious practices, individually or with others, in private or in public, and to practice and teach their beliefs. It states no one may compel another person (or be compelled) to choose or profess any religion or belief. The constitution allows limits on the freedom to profess and spread religious beliefs when necessary to

protect health, safety, public order, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. It restricts freedom of expression if it incites religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. It stipulates religious belief may not serve as justification for failing to comply with laws.

The constitution acknowledges the freedom of parents or guardians to oversee the religious and moral education of their children without interference and stipulates public education shall be secular, although schools may provide religious instruction at the request of parents. The constitution grants recognition to “traditional” religious groups and provides for recognition of other religious groups if they have support in society and their teachings and practices do not conflict with law or public morals. It states the status of religious groups shall be established by agreement or law, and recognized religious groups shall be free to carry out their activities as long as they are not in conflict with the constitution or laws.

The law defines religious groups as (1) religious communities, (2) religious associations, which comprise at least two religious communities under common leadership, and (3) religious centers, which are higher governing bodies of religious associations.

The law recognizes as “traditional” those religious groups able to trace back their presence in the country at least 300 years. The law lists nine “traditional” religious groups: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, and Karaite. Traditional religious groups have a simplified registration procedure. They may perform marriages that are state-recognized, establish joint private/public schools, provide religious instruction in public schools, and receive annual government subsidies. Their highest ranking leaders are eligible to apply for diplomatic passports, and they may provide chaplains for the military, social care institutions, and hospitals. The state provides social security and healthcare insurance contributions for clergy, religious workers, and members of monastic orders of the traditional religious groups. Traditional religious groups are also not required to pay social and health insurance taxes for clergy and most other religious workers and members of monastic orders.

Other religious associations may apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for state recognition if they have been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years. Parliament votes whether to grant this status upon recommendation from the MOJ. The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania, the Seventh-day Adventist

Church, the Pentecostal Evangelical Belief Christian Union, and the New Apostolic Church of Lithuania are the only state-recognized nontraditional religious groups.

Recognition entitles nontraditional religious groups to perform marriages and provide religious instruction in public schools. Unlike traditional groups, however, they are not eligible for annual subsidies from the state budget, and their clergy and theological students are not exempt from military service. The law provides recognized nontraditional religious groups with legal entity status, but they do not qualify for certain social security and healthcare contributions by the state.

The MOJ handles official registration of religious communities, associations, and centers. Unrecognized nontraditional groups must submit an application and supporting documentation to the MOJ, including their bylaws describing their religious teachings and governance, minutes of the founding meeting, and a list of the founders, at least 15 of whom must be citizens. Upon approval of its application, a religious community, association, or center is registered as a legal entity with the State Enterprise Center of Registers. Religious communities and associations associated with traditional religious groups have a simpler registration procedure, needing to submit only an application, decisions of their governing body on the appointment of their leader, and their headquarters address.

Traditional religious communities and associations are registered free of charge, while nontraditional communities pay a fee of 32 euros (\$38). The MOJ may refuse to register a religious group if full data are not included in the application; the activities of the group violate human rights or public order; or a group with the same name has already registered. As of November 1, there were 1,114 traditional and 189 nontraditional religious communities, associations, and centers officially registered in the register of legal entities.

Official registration is a prerequisite for opening a bank account, owning property, and acting in a legal or official capacity as a community. The law allows all registered religious groups to own property for use as prayer houses, homes, and other functions, and permits construction of facilities necessary for religious activities. All registered groups are eligible for public funds from municipalities for cultural and social projects.

Unregistered communities have no legal status; however, the constitution allows them to conduct worship services and seek new members.

The Interministerial Commission to Coordinate Activities of Governmental Institutions that Deal with Issues of Religious, Esoteric, and Spiritual Groups coordinates investigations of religious groups if there is a concern a group's actions may be inconsistent with what the commission perceives to be "principles that stress respect for human freedom of expression and freedom of religion."

The Journalist Ethics Inspectorate investigates complaints under a law that bars publishing material that instigates hatred, including religious hatred. The inspectorate may levy administrative fines on newspapers under administrative law or refer cases for criminal prosecution.

Under the constitution, the government may temporarily restrict freedom of expression of religious belief during a period of martial law or a state of emergency, although it has never invoked this right.

The Soviet Union nationalized all religious buildings, some of which it redistributed, while others continued to serve religious communities. The law permits registered groups to apply to the MOJ for the restitution of, or compensation for, religious property owned before June 19, 1948. Religious communities may also register a claim for property not officially registered under their name but which they used during the Soviet period. If the ministry determines the claim is legitimate, it drafts a resolution officially returning the property to its original owner. Religious groups may appeal the decisions of the ministry in court.

A compensation fund for Jewish-owned communal property nationalized under totalitarian regimes is designed to support Jewish educational, religious, scientific, cultural, and healthcare projects with public benefits. Pursuant to the law, the government is committed to disbursing 37 million euros (\$44.4 million) over the course of the decade ending March 1, 2023. Funds go to the Foundation for the Disposal of Good Will Compensation for the Immovable Property of Jewish Religious Communities, a public institution governed by national and international Jewish leaders.

The country has no law for the restitution of heirless private property.

The government allocates funds to traditional religious communities for refurbishing houses of prayer and other needs. Each traditional religion group receives 3,075 euros (\$3,690) as a base fund plus a variable component that depends on the number of believers of each community. Traditional religious

communities received 697,000 euros (\$837,000) during the year, of which approximately 90 percent went to the Catholic Church.

The law permits and funds religious instruction in public schools for traditional and other state-recognized religious groups. Most religious instructors are regular state-employed teachers, but some are priests, seminarians, or monks. Parents may choose either religious instruction or secular ethics classes for their children. Schools decide which of the traditional religious groups will be represented in their curricula on the basis of requests from parents of children up to age 14, after which students present the requests themselves.

There are 30 private religious schools with ties to Catholic or Jewish groups, although students of different religious groups may attend these schools. All accredited private schools (religious and nonreligious) receive funding from the Ministry of Education and Science through a voucher system based on the number of pupils. This system covers only the program costs of school operation. Founders generally bear responsibility for covering capital outlays; however, per an agreement the government signed with the Holy See, the Ministry of Education and Science funds both the capital and operating costs of private Catholic schools, and the Vilnius municipality funds the Jewish gymnasium (high school), with support from the Jewish community.

The criminal code prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides penalties of up to two years in prison for violations. The code penalizes interference with religious ceremonies of recognized religious groups with imprisonment or community service and penalizes inciting religious hatred with imprisonment of up to three years.

The Office of the Equal Opportunities (OEO) ombudsperson investigates complaints of discrimination based on religion directed against state institutions, educational institutions, employers, and product and service sellers and producers.

The parliamentary ombudsperson examines whether state authorities properly perform their duties to serve the population. The law on the parliament ombudsperson specifically includes religious discrimination within the purview of the office. The OEO and parliamentary ombudspersons may investigate complaints, recommend changes to parliamentary committees and ministries regarding legislation, and recommend cases to the prosecutor general's office for pretrial investigation.

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

Government Practices

On March 30, parliament granted the status of state-recognized religious association to the Lithuanian New Apostolic Church, which had submitted its application in 2003. The United Methodist Church of Lithuania continued to await parliamentary approval of its application for state-recognized religious association status, which it submitted in 2001.

In March the Ministry of Finance returned a Catholic monastery in Vilnius to the Franciscan Conventual Order after a four-year dispute with the former private owners and lengthy deliberations as to applicability of the law. In accordance with its 10-year agreement with the Foundation for the Disposal of Good Will Compensation for the Immovable Property of Jewish Religious Communities, the government again provided the fund with 3.62 million euros (\$4.35 million) during the year. Since 2011, the foundation had received a total of 19 million euros (\$22.8 million) from the government.

In October 2016, the government approved the restoration of ownership rights to seven religious buildings, three Old Believer and four Catholic, in different towns around the country. At year's end the government had adjudicated all such claims that were submitted before the deadline of July 2015.

The government provided 697,000 euros (\$837,000) to traditional religious groups to reconstruct religious buildings seized during the Nazi or Soviet eras and to support other religious community activities. As in previous years, the Roman Catholic Church received 626,500 euros (\$750,000), 90 percent of the total; the Russian Orthodox community 33,000 euros (\$39,600); and the remaining 36,000 euros (\$43,200) was divided among the Old Believer, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Sunni Muslim, Jewish, Greek Catholic, and Karaite communities.

In August President Dalia Grybauskaite stated in response to concerns about the planned renovation of the Vilnius Sports Palace, which was built on a Jewish cemetery in Vilnius in 1971, that “decisions on Jewish cemeteries are taken together with the Lithuanian Jewish community (LJC) and the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe,” both of which expressed support for the renovation. Some Jews in and outside the country opposed the project and an online petition against it garnered approximately 40,000 signatures.

In September Member of Parliament Emanuelis Zingeris said it was time that the country remove monuments to citizens who had written anti-Semitic propaganda or were suspected of having collaborated with the Nazis. Members of the Jewish community stated street names and monuments honoring Kazys Skirpa and Jonas Noreika were their primary concern.

The government continued to support Jewish educational, cultural, and historical projects, including exhibitions, youth camps, such as a project in Mazeikiai for high school students to explore Jewish history in their community, and synagogue restoration, for both historical purposes and current use. In May the Martynas Mazvydas National Library opened the Judaica Research Center to study the country's Jewish heritage and organize educational projects for the public. In September the government's cultural heritage department organized a program of activities on the theme of "Diaspora and Heritage: the Shtetl" to mark the European Days of Jewish Culture. Tours, lectures, concerts, exhibitions, conferences and other events took place in 24 cities and towns, including Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, Alytus, Jurbarkas, Kelme, Siauliai, Silale, Jonava, Joniskis, Kupiskis, Seduva, Sveksna, Ukmerge, and Zarasai. The government's cultural heritage department allocated 448,000 euros (\$538,000) for the renovation of synagogues in Vilnius, Alytus, and Ziezmariiai, with local municipalities contributing 54,840 euros (\$65,800) to the latter two projects.

In July the Constitutional Court ruled there were no legal grounds to exempt clergy of traditional religious groups from mandatory military or alternative service. Previously, the government had granted exemptions to clergy and theological students from the military service requirement. The decision stemmed from a court case filed by a Jehovah's Witness, who had sought an exemption from military service on religious grounds.

Government officials took part in ceremonies to commemorate the Holocaust organized by the government's Jewish State Museum and the Jewish community. On January 26, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Darius Skusevicius and Vice Speaker of Parliament (Seimas) Rima Baskiene participated in International Holocaust Remembrance Day with a program including a candle-lighting ceremony and the chanting of the *El Malei Rachamim* prayer at the Choral Synagogue of Vilnius. On February 16, President Dalia Grybauskaite gave an award to Holocaust survivor Fania Brantsovsky for her work in the field of Holocaust education. On March 22, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Skusevicius participated in an International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance event in Vilnius

entitled “As Mass Murder Began: Identifying and Remembering the Killing Sites of Summer-Fall 1941.” On September 4, Minister of Culture Liana Ruokyte-Jonsson and Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Simasius gave opening remarks at a conference to discuss future plans for the Vilnius great synagogue.

On September 25, parliament held a conference on Jewish heritage, which was opened by Speaker Viktoras Pranckietis and accompanied by an exhibition on the country’s Jewish past. Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis gave remarks at commemoration events at the Paneriai Holocaust site on April 26, and for the annual March of the Living on September 26. At the September 26 event, the prime minister stressed that Jews were integral to the country’s history and called for more discussion about how Lithuanian collaborators took part in the Holocaust, calling it the “darkest page” in the country’s history. On September 27, President Grybauskaite presented 43 non-Jews who rescued Jews during World War II with awards, thanking them for having “passed the test of humanity in the most difficult of years.” On November 16, Minister of Culture Ruokyte-Jonsson and Vilnius Mayor Simasius spoke at the opening of a museum and center for the promotion of religious and ethnic tolerance, named in honor of a Jewish artist, who survived the Holocaust in Vilnius.

The government’s cultural heritage department registered two new Jewish sites as culturally valuable: the Jewish Ghetto Library in Vilnius on March 22, and the underground remains of the Vilnius Great Synagogue on May 9. On October 13, Vilnius city municipality began a project to deliver more than 1,000 tons of Jewish gravestone fragments, which were taken from the historic Olandu and Snipiskiu cemeteries and used for construction material during the Soviet era, to the site of a former Jewish cemetery on Olandu Street in Vilnius.

The government and civil society continued to work together to promote Holocaust education and tolerance in schools with the local Jewish community and NGOs such as the Human Rights Center. Students across the country participated in Holocaust commemoration events and marches: on April 26, they marked Holocaust Memorial Day at Paneriai; on September 22, they participated in the national Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust at Paneriai, Kaunas, Panevezys, Alytus, and Siauliai and performed Jewish plays and Yiddish songs at the Sauletkio School in Vilnius. A total of 194 educational institutions took part in the Holocaust-remembrance initiative “Memory Road,” in which students carried stones bearing names of Jews who lived in their communities to commemorate the Jewish communities exterminated in the Holocaust. On April 24, the government-appointed International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi

and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania and Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Research Institute organized a Holocaust workshop for educators.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January during a television game show, while a group was singing a song popularized by a Jewish singer, one of the judges, actress and former parliamentarian Asta Baukute stood up, gave a Nazi salute and repeatedly shouted "Jew." Following protests, the producer and host of the show issued apologies and the station, Lithuanian National Radio and Television, cancelled the show.

In January a group of students at the Laisves High School in Naujoji Vilnia, a suburb of Vilnius, protested the school principal's dismissal of a teacher, Marius Janulevicius, who had worked with the students to produce a video commemorating Lithuanian Jews killed in the Holocaust. According to a *Jerusalem Post* op-ed by a senior official at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, the dismissal was due to Janulevicius' work on the video, but school officials said it was because he had spoken harshly to a janitor. Neither the Lithuanian media nor the Lithuanian Jewish community indicated that Janulevicius' dismissal was an act of anti-Semitism, and Janulevicius never publicly stated his dismissal was due to his work on the video. Authorities subsequently reinstated Janulevicius and dismissed the school principal.

Following controversial allegations from author Ruta Vanagaite against national hero and anti-Soviet fighter Adolfas Ramanauskas-Vanagas, Vytautas Landsbergis, the country's first head of state after its independence from the Soviet Union, called Vanagaite "Mrs. Dushanski," a reference to a Jewish KGB officer and Holocaust survivor, who participated in Ramanauskas-Vanagas' capture. In response, Vanagaite issued a statement calling the Dushanski reference "blatantly anti-Semitic."

International and local Jewish organizations expressed concern over verbal attacks directed at Vanagaite. The LJC issued a statement calling upon "all sides to refrain from making rash statements leading to public discord," and inviting "the public, professional historians, and national leaders to take measures to halt the further division of society and the spread of hate."

NGOs, including Caritas and the Lithuanian Red Cross, reported Muslim refugees faced discrimination in their applications for housing and employment. According to a poll by the Institute for Ethnic Studies, 46 percent of respondents said they would not want Muslims as neighbors, which was the highest negative view expressed about any religious or ethnic group. Respondents also were more opposed to accepting Muslim refugees compared to non-Muslim refugees: 72 percent opposed accepting Muslims from Iraq and Syria, while 55 percent opposed non-Muslims from Iraq and 50 percent opposed Christians from Syria.

Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim comments on the internet were common. Anti-Semitic examples included justifying the Holocaust because “all Jews collaborated with the Soviet Union” and statements that Jewish greed was destroying the country and that Jews could not be citizens. Anti-Muslim examples included equating Muslims with terrorists, statements that Muslims would kill all Christians in the country, and that it was better to have 100 dead Muslims than one dead innocent person.

On January 4, organizers of an *Uzgavenes* (Lithuanian Shrovetide, or Carnival) event in Naisiai village published on social media a picture of a typical anti-Semitic caricature used during *Uzgavenes* with the sign, “I sell fleas and lice or exchange them for real estate,” reminiscent of anti-Semitic propaganda used by the Nazis. Ruling Farmers and Greens Union Party leader Ramunas Karbauskis shared the picture in a social media invitation to the Naisiai *Uzgavenes* celebration. LJC President Faina Kukliansky publicly condemned Karbauskis’ post, comparing it to Nazi propaganda. Popular news outlets such as *Lietuvos Zinios* and *Bernardinai* ran articles criticizing the use of what they said were racist costumes in celebrations.

On February 16, nationalists held a march in Kaunas to commemorate the anniversary of the restoration of the country’s independence. The march attracted approximately 150 participants, compared with 250 in the previous year and 400 in 2015; some participants wore fascist symbols and carried anti-Semitic signs. The march included a banner with a picture of, and a quote by, the anti-Semite Kazys Skirpa, founder of the Lithuanian Activist Front during World War II. Participants reportedly marched near the Lietukis garage, where dozens of Jews were killed in 1941, and other Jewish execution sites. Nationalists also organized a march in Vilnius on March 11, the country’s independence day, involving approximately 500 persons, a decrease from previous years; the marchers chanted “Lithuania for Lithuanians.” According to local observers, some of the participants wore fascist symbols, gave Nazi salutes, and carried anti-Semitic signs. Lithuanian Nationalist

Union Party member Arunas Eigridas read a petition during the march, calling on the government to rescind the award President Grybauskaite had presented to Holocaust survivor Fania Brantsovsky in February. Police monitored both events, and there were no reports of violence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy continued to maintain a regular dialogue with senior government officials, including in the prime minister's office, members of parliament, and officials from the Ministries of Culture, Interior, Social Affairs, Justice, and Foreign Affairs, on the importance of religious freedom. Embassy officials continued to engage with the government on ways to promote tolerance and integration of religious minorities, including Muslim refugees, into society, combat anti-Semitism, and urge the government to address the remaining issues regarding compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi and Soviet eras. U.S. officials, including the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, discussed these restitution issues and the status of Jewish heritage sites with members of parliament and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture. In May embassy officers met with officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the government refugee reception center to discuss the integration of Muslim refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.

The Ambassador and embassy staff met regularly with the Jewish community and other religious groups to discuss issues of concern, including property restitution, preservation and restoration of heritage sites, combating intolerance, and Holocaust remembrance. In December the Ambassador visited a recently renovated synagogue in Pakruojis in addition to the 'Lost Shtetl' project in Seduva, which included a restored cemetery, three new Holocaust memorials, and a planned museum dedicated to rural Jewish communities, with ground breaking scheduled for 2018. In November the Ambassador delivered opening remarks at a conference on fighting intolerance and anti-Semitism hosted by the Jewish community. In August the Charge d'Affaires spoke at a Holocaust commemoration event in Kaunas on the need for inclusive societies. In March the Charge d'Affaires met with an AJC delegation to discuss Jewish priorities in the country.

The embassy financially supported the establishment of a museum and center for the promotion of religious and ethnic tolerance, which opened in November. It was named in honor of a Jewish artist, who survived the Holocaust in Vilnius. Other efforts included funding for U.S. government-led noninvasive archaeological research at Jewish and Holocaust sites in Vilnius and Kaunas and a public

screening of a PBS television NOVA documentary about that research and collaboration between the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the National Library to digitize more than a million Jewish historical documents.

In November the Ambassador met with members of the Tatar Muslim community to discuss their concerns. Embassy officers discussed ongoing Muslim refugee integration plans with NGOs and members of the refugee community. In October the embassy funded a \$25,000 project to assist grassroots efforts to promote tolerance for religious diversity and integrate new, primarily Muslim, communities into society.