

ESTONIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution declares there is no state church and protects the freedom of individuals to practice their religion. It prohibits the incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. The law provides the procedure for registration of religious associations and religious societies and regulates their activities.

Unregistered religious associations are free to conduct religious activities but are not eligible for tax benefits. The government continued to provide funds to the Council of Churches for ecumenical activities. On January 26, the government held an annual memorial event on Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust.

In August unidentified individuals burned and defaced the Kalevi-Liiva Holocaust memorial with anti-Semitic graffiti. A police investigation continued at year's end. Jewish groups expressed concern about a September 2 demonstration involving the temporary erection of a monument depicting an Estonian soldier in a World War II-era German uniform. In 2017, the most recent year for which data was available, police registered no hate crime cases involving religion, compared with six cases in 2016.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom and the importance of religious tolerance with government representatives. The embassy made use of social media to promote religious freedom, including producing a featured video to commemorate National Religious Freedom Day. The Ambassador and embassy staff continued to support dialogue on anti-Semitism and Holocaust education in meetings with government officials, religious leaders, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (September 2018). According to the 2011 census, 29 percent of the population is religiously affiliated, 54 percent does not identify with any religion, and 17 percent does not state an affiliation. According to current data from the Council of Churches, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church has 180,000 members (13.8 percent of the population), while the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP) has 170,000 members (13.1 percent). The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church has 30,000 members (2.3 percent). The Union of Free Evangelical and

Baptist Churches of Estonia and the Roman Catholic Church in Estonia both have more than 6,400 members (1 percent together). Other Christian groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Russian Old Believers, collectively constitute 1.1 percent of the population. According to the 2011 census, there are small Jewish and Muslim communities of 2,500 members and 1,500 members, respectively. Most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population belong to the EOCMP and reside mainly in the capital or the northeastern part of the country. According to census data, most of the country's community of Russian Old Believers lives along the west bank of Lake Peipsi in the eastern part of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares there is no state church and stipulates freedom for individuals to belong to any religious group and practice any religion, both alone and in community with others, in public or in private, unless doing so is "detrimental to public order, health, or morals." The constitution also prohibits incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. The law states that violations are punishable by fines or up to three years in prison. The constitution 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. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are required to have a management board. The management board has the right to invite a minister of religion from outside the country. The residence of at least half of the members of the management board must be in the country, in another member state of the European Economic Area, or in Switzerland. The elected or appointed superior of a monastery serves as the management board for the monastery. Religious societies are defined as voluntary organizations whose main activities include religious or ecumenical activities relating to morals, ethics, culture, and social rehabilitation activities outside the traditional forms of religious rites of a church or congregation. Religious societies do not need to affiliate with a specific church or congregation.

The registration office of the Tartu County Court registers religious associations and religious societies.

To register, a religious association must have at least 12 members, and its management board must submit a notarized or digitally signed application, the minutes of its constitutive meeting, and a copy of its statutes. The law treats registered religious associations as nonprofit entities entitled to some tax benefits if they apply for them, such as a value-added tax exemption. There are more than 550 religious associations registered with the government.

The law does not prohibit activities by unregistered religious associations. Unregistered religious associations, however, may not act as legal persons. Unlike registered religious associations, unregistered associations are not eligible for tax benefits.

Religious societies are registered according to the law governing nonprofit associations and are entitled to the same tax benefits as religious associations. To register as an NGO, a religious society must have a founding contract and statutes approved by its founders, who may be physical or legal persons. The minimum number of founders is two. The society must submit its registration application either electronically or on paper to the Tartu County Court registry office.

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 police and border guard, military, and prison chaplains, who may belong to any registered religious denomination and must guarantee religious services for individuals of all faiths.

Optional basic religious instruction is available in public and private schools, funded by the state. All schools must provide religious studies at the primary and secondary levels if students request these studies. The courses offer a general introduction to different faiths. Religious studies instructors may be lay teachers or clergy provided by religious groups. There are also private religious schools. All students, regardless of their religious affiliation or non-affiliation, may attend religious schools. Attendance at religious services at religious schools is voluntary. The majority of students attending a private religious school are not associated with the school's religious affiliation.

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

Government Practices

According to the NGO register, six religious associations registered during the first 10 months of the year, including evangelical Protestant, Pentecostal, and other groups.

The government allocated 596,000 euros (\$683,000) to the Estonian Council of Churches. The council, which comprises 10 Christian churches – including the Lutheran Church and both Orthodox Churches – continued to serve as an organization joining the country’s largest Christian communities. The government provided the funds for ecumenical activities, including ecclesiastical programs broadcast on the Estonian Broadcasting Company, youth work by churches, activities promoting interreligious dialogue, and religious publishing.

Following the burning and defacing of the Kalevi-Liiva Holocaust memorial in August, Prime Minister Juri Ratas and Minister of Justice Urmas Reinsalu publicly condemned the vandalism and declared the state would “seriously investigate” the incident. The investigation continued at year’s end. The state forestry agency and heritage organization repaired the damage on August 23.

On January 26, the government held an annual memorial event on Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. Schools participated in commemorative activities throughout the country. On January 26, the Ministry of Education and Research, in cooperation with the Estonian Memory Institute, sponsored a Jewish culture and history seminar for history and civics teachers from across the country and the public on Holocaust history and commemoration.

On September 25, the government hosted the visit of Pope Francis to Tallinn. At a meeting with civil society, diplomatic, and cultural leaders during the visit, President Kersti Kaljulaid stated, “The freedom of religion is precisely one of the unyielding bedrocks on which our democracy is founded.”

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2017, the most recent year for which data was available, police registered no hate crime cases involving religion, compared with six cases in 2016.

According to representatives of the Jewish community, either on August 20 or 21, unidentified individuals burned and defaced the Kalevi-Liiva Holocaust memorial with anti-Semitic graffiti.

Jewish groups expressed concern about a September 2 demonstration, organized by activists affiliated with the Estonian Conservative People's Party, involving the temporary erection of a monument depicting an Estonian soldier in a World War II-era German uniform.

According to many religious and other civil society leaders, there was societal support for religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Interreligious events involving religious minorities were frequent, including conferences celebrating Estonian religious life and the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country with officials from the ministries of internal, social, and foreign affairs and engaged the government on the importance of promoting religious tolerance.

The embassy again joined with the Ministry of Education to fund the travel of two teachers to a summer teacher-training program on Holocaust education in the United States. The teachers said they had incorporated what they had learned into the Holocaust education portion of the national curriculum.

The embassy made use of social media to promote religious freedom, including making a video about a female American Anglican pastor serving in the country and retweeting the Secretary of State on publishing the 2017 religious freedom report. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with members of the Jewish community, leaders of religious associations, representatives of the Council of Churches, and NGOs to discuss religious tolerance.