

# LITHUANIA 2019 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. Religious groups must register with the government to gain legal status. Parliament did not approve the recognition application by the indigenous religious group Romuva, despite a favorable recommendation by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and again did not consider the recognition application from the United Methodist Church, pending since 2001. The MOJ did not provide a recommendation to parliament for the Jehovah's Witnesses' recognition application, pending since 2017. In October a court dismissed an appeal by a Jehovah's Witness who, as a conscientious objector, refused any form of service under military authority. In March a local court dismissed a case against the Center for the Study of the Genocide and Resistance of the Residents of Lithuania brought by a U.S. citizen who sued the center for concluding that Jonas Noreika, an anti-Soviet partisan leader, did not participate in the mass killing of Jews in the country during World War II (WWII). In December the center issued a report stating that Noreika was actually an anti-Nazi resistance fighter who worked to save Jews from the ghetto; academics, Jewish groups, and NGOs criticized this report as factually unsupported (it cited a single source from the 1980s) and misleading. In July the Vilnius mayor removed a plaque honoring Noreika, but it was reinstated subsequently without permission by the nationalist NGO Pro Patria. The government continued with plans to begin the conversion of a Soviet-era sports arena, which was built on top of a Jewish cemetery, into a conference center. A Lithuanian Jew residing in Israel petitioned to stop construction on the grounds that it would disturb human remains. On December 2, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Ambassador-at-Large for Jewish Issues Dainius Junevicius and Member of Parliament and chairman of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania (International Commission) Emanuelis Zingeris attended a regional conference in Vilnius commemorating the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Terezin Declaration. On December 10, the MFA organized a session on the importance of religious freedom and belief during the country's second annual human rights forum. Experts participating in the session included an MOJ official.

There were six recorded anti-Semitic acts of vandalism between September and November, including one on October 6 in Vilnius involving an unknown person spray-painting a swastika on the side of a building and leaving an apparent makeshift explosive near the entrance of that building. On November 13, three teenagers spray-painted the words “Heil Hitler” on a Kaunas synagogue’s information board. On November 17, three teenagers broke the windows of a mosque in Kaunas. In March some participants at a nationalist march in Vilnius of approximately 1,000 persons wore fascist symbols and carried banners of Lithuanian partisans who critics said were Nazi collaborators. Some participants at another nationalist march of 300 persons in February carried a banner with a picture of a WWII-era anti-Semite, Kazys Skirpa. Anonymous anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim internet postings in response to articles about Jewish or Muslim issues were common, but observers said media portals generally removed them when these postings were brought to their attention.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers met with government officials, including Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, ministers and vice ministers at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, and the speaker and members of parliament (MPs). They also met with the International Commission and the head of the Lithuanian Jewish Community (LJC) to discuss ways to combat intolerance and anti-Semitism and to resolve compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi and Soviet eras. In September the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues released a statement on social media encouraging Lithuanians to review objectively the actions of historical anti-Soviet resistance fighters whose actions directly led to the persecution and mass killing of persons during the Holocaust. On October 27, the Charge d’Affaires attended the opening of a Holocaust education seminar for teachers and delivered remarks emphasizing the responsibility of teachers in educating youth about the country’s role in the Holocaust. On October 29, the Charge attended the unveiling of a memorial stone commemorating the individuals killed during the Holocaust in the forest near Zarasai on August 26, 1941. On December 2, the Charge and other embassy officers attended a regional conference in Vilnius commemorating the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Terezin Declaration.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.8 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, of the 90 percent of the population that responded to the question about religious affiliation, 86 percent are Roman Catholic, and 7 percent do 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, Karaite Jews, 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.

In the 2011 census, approximately 5,100 persons identified as followers of Romuva, a religion practiced in the country since before the introduction of Christianity. According to the census, the Jewish population is predominately concentrated in larger cities and is estimated at 3,050. The population of Karaite Jews, who traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region, is estimated at 250. The Sunni Muslim population numbers approximately 2,800, the majority of whom are Tatars, a community living 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 Muslim.

## **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.

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.

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 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 requires the police to take preemptive measures against illegal activities, giving special attention to maintaining order on specific historical dates and certain religious or cultural holidays.

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 Jewish. “Traditional” religious groups 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, hospitals, and prisons. 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 groups and associations may apply to the MOJ for state recognition if they have legal entity status, meaning they have been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years. Parliament votes whether to grant state recognition status upon recommendation from the MOJ. The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Pentecostal Evangelical Belief Christian Union, and New Apostolic Church of Lithuania are the only state-recognized “nontraditional” religious groups registered in this manner.

Recognition entitles “nontraditional” religious groups to perform marriages that will be recognized by the state, similar to marriages officiated by traditional

religious groups, and to provide religious instruction in public schools. Recognition also grants “nontraditional” religious groups eligibility for annual subsidies from the state budget and for certain social security and healthcare contributions by the state.

The MOJ handles official registration of religious communities, associations, and centers. Groups wishing to register must submit an application and supporting documentation to the MOJ, including 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 may register as a legal entity with the State Enterprise Center of Registers. Registration is voluntary for religious communities, associations, and centers affiliated with traditional religious groups and mandatory for nontraditional communities wishing to receive legal status.

Registration of “traditional” religious communities, associations, and centers is free of charge, while “nontraditional” communities pay a fee of 32 euros (\$36). Traditional communities also have a simpler registration procedure and need to submit only an application, decisions of their governing body on the appointment of their leader, and their headquarters address. 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. According to the Center of Registers, there are 1,121 traditional and 197 nontraditional religious communities, associations, and centers that are officially registered legal entities.

For all religious groups, 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.

The country has compulsory military service for males between the ages of 19 and 26 and up to the age of 38 for those with higher education. The country has approximately 3,500 conscripts each year. Military service is for nine months. Clergy from registered groups are exempt from compulsory military service. In the event of a military conflict, clergy would be called to serve as chaplains. The Constitutional Court recognizes the right to conscientious objection on any grounds. The law provides an alternative to military service in civilian institutions

unless the military deems it necessary to perform an alternative service in a national defense institution.

Unregistered communities have no legal status, but 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, a government-sponsored organization whose head is appointed by parliament, investigates complaints involving the violation of regulatory laws governing the provision of information to the public, including print media and the internet. These laws include prohibition of the publication of material that fuels religious hatred. The inspectorate may levy administrative fines on newspapers or refer cases to the Office of the General Prosecutor.

The Soviet Union nationalized all religious buildings on June 19, 1948, some of which continued to serve religious communities. On March 21, 1995, the national government passed a law on the restitution of religious property permitting registered religious communities to apply to the appropriate ministry or municipality for restitution or for compensation of religious property they owned before June 19, 1948. The deadline to apply for restitution of religious property was in 1997. The government continues to review cases from registered religious groups filed by the 1997 deadline but is not accepting any new claims. Religious groups may appeal ministry or municipality decisions in court. Unregistered religious groups could not apply for restitution.

In 2011 the national government adopted a law permitting registered religious groups to register previously nationalized religious property that was not officially registered under their name but which they owned before 1948 and continued to use during the Soviet period. The deadline for registered religious groups to register this property was in 2014. The government continues to review cases from registered religious groups filed by the 2014 deadline but is not accepting any new claims. Religious groups may appeal the MOJ's decisions in court.

For individuals, the country's private property restitution laws provided a mechanism through which the country's citizens who had received citizenship

before the restitution deadline (December 31, 2001) and resided in the country had the right to submit a claim for private property restitution. The laws excluded those who either lacked citizenship or regained it after 2001.

For Jewish-owned communal property nationalized under totalitarian regimes, a compensation fund was established in 2011 to support Jewish educational, religious, scientific, cultural, and healthcare projects with public benefits. Pursuant to the law, the government is committed to disbursing a total of 36 million euros (\$40.45 million) over the decade ending March 1, 2023. Funds go to the Good Will Foundation, 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, restoring old cemeteries, and preserving cultural heritage sites. Each traditional religious group receives 3,075 euros (\$3,500) every year as a base fund plus an additional amount that is calibrated according to the number of adherents in each community.

The constitution and other laws permit and fund religious instruction in public schools for traditional and state-recognized religious groups. Most religious instructors are regular state-employed teachers, but some are priests, seminarians, or monks. Parents must choose either religious instruction or secular ethics classes for their children but may not opt out of both offerings. Schools decide which of the traditional or state-recognized nontraditional religious groups will be represented in their curricula based on requests from parents of children up to the age 14, after which students present the requests themselves.

There are 30 private schools established by religious communities, 26 Catholic and four Jewish. Students of different religious groups may attend these schools. All accredited private schools (religious and nonreligious) receive funding from municipalities and the Ministry of Education and Science through a voucher system based on the number of pupils. Each private school receives 1,099 euros (\$1,200) per student. Beginning with the 2017-18 school year, national minority schools, which include schools established by the Jewish community, receive 20 percent more – 1,318.80 euros (\$1,500) – per student than other private schools. The per-student stipend covers only the program costs of school operation. Private school operators 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.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of hatred and discrimination based on religion and stipulates fines or up to two years in prison for violations. The code penalizes interference with religious ceremonies of recognized religious groups, with community service, fines, or detention for up to 90 days. The law does not address interference with or incitement of hatred against unrecognized religious groups.

The Office of the Equal Opportunities (OEO) ombudsperson investigates complaints of discrimination, including those based on religion, directed against state institutions, educational institutions, employers, and product and service sellers and producers. Parliament appoints the ombudsperson for a period of five years. The office conducts independent investigations, publishes surveys and independent reports on discrimination, and provides conclusions and recommendations on any discrimination-related issues. The office also makes proposals to state and municipal institutions and government agencies concerning the improvement of legal acts and priorities of the implementation of equal rights policy. The OEO ombudsperson does not levy monetary penalties.

The parliamentary ombudsperson often works with the OEO ombudsperson but is a separate entity. The parliamentary ombudsperson examines the conduct of state authorities in serving the population. The law governing the parliamentary ombudsperson specifically includes religious discrimination within its purview. The OEO and parliamentary ombudsperson may investigate complaints, recommend changes in the law or draft legislation to parliamentary committees and ministries, and recommend cases to the Prosecutor General's Office for pretrial investigation.

The criminal code prohibits public display of Soviet and Nazi symbols or national anthems. Violators are subject to fines of 144-289 euros (\$160-\$320).

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

### **Government Practices**

In March a local court dismissed a case against the state-funded Center for the Study of the Genocide and Resistance of the Residents of Lithuania, brought by a U.S. citizen who lost relatives in Holocaust-era killings attributed to Jonas



Noreika, a Soviet-era partisan and Nazi collaborator who signed documents establishing a Jewish ghetto and confiscating Jewish property in Siauliai during WWII. The U.S. citizen sued the center for concluding that Noreika did not participate in the mass killing of Jews in Lithuania during the war. In December the center issued a report stating Noreika was an anti-Nazi resistance fighter who actively worked to rescue Jews during the Holocaust, based solely on the 1986 testimony of a Jesuit priest in a U.S. district court. The LJC and a number of prominent academics rejected this claim because it was based on a single witness whom they stated was of dubious credibility.

On July 27, Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Simasius removed a plaque honoring Noreika based on historical evidence that concluded Noreika was a Nazi collaborator. On July 30, President Gitanas Nauseda called for a moratorium on the removal of WWII-era monuments and proposed an initiative to provide municipalities with criteria to evaluate historic property.

In July the Vilnius City Council voted to rename a street, Skirpa Alley, previously named in honor of Kazys Skirpa, the leader of the Lithuanian Activist Front, a WWII anti-Soviet resistance group that was also found to have cooperated with the Nazis in the roundup of Lithuanian Jews. According to media reports, because of Skirpa's anti-Semitism, the street was renamed Trispalves Aleja. On August 7, media reported that approximately 300 individuals gathered in central Vilnius to protest the city's decision to rename Skirpa Alley. Attendees also protested the removal of the Noreika plaque.

On September 5, the nationalist NGO Pro Patria reinstalled the Noreika plaque without permission from the Vilnius municipality. Mayor Simasius told media the municipality would not remove the plaque again. On September 6, Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius told media that glorifying figures like Noreika would harm the country's international image.

On June 27, parliament voted 46 (31 opposed and 15 abstentions) to 40 against granting Romuva state-recognized religious association status, despite their receiving a positive recommendation from the MOJ in 2018. According to the Romuva, a member of the Conference of Lithuanian Bishops sent a letter to MPs advising them against granting state recognition to Romuva. The letter, which was subsequently made public, asserted that state recognition of Romuva as a religion would "unduly mislead Lithuanian citizens and discriminate against all other religious communities." Some MPs told media the Romuva did not present a counterargument to the claims raised in the letter, and other MPs said they viewed

Romuva as a cultural organization rather than a religious institution. The law stipulates that Romuva must wait 10 years before reapplying for recognition. Sources stated that the rejection of Romuva led other religious organizations to hesitate before advocating for their applications.

The MOJ was still reviewing the Jehovah's Witnesses 2017 application for state-recognized religious association status at year's end. The MOJ says it was conducting research to verify the application dates before recommending the group to parliament.

An application for religious association status by the United Methodist Church of Lithuania, which the MOJ submitted to parliament with a favorable recommendation in 2001, remained pending. According to the MOJ, it was incumbent on the United Methodist Church to advocate for its application in parliament, but the group had not done so. United Methodist Church minister Remigijus Matulaitis said an application rejection would devastate the morale of the Methodist community, and thus the group decided to wait until after parliamentary elections in 2020 to consider advocating for the proposal in parliament.

In April Yousef Yizhak, a Lithuanian Jew residing in Israel, petitioned a Lithuanian court to prevent the renovation of the Vilnius Sports Palace, located on the site of the Snipiskes Jewish Cemetery, stating the renovation into a conference center "would...disturb the human remains surrounding the Sports Palace, and [the remains] that the Soviets mixed into the Sports Palace's building materials." The government said the claim would not affect renovation plans until the court made a final decision, expected in 2020 or 2021. The LJC concurred with the government's decision to continue with the renovations in the meantime. In April the government approved plans to create a permanent exhibition in the conference center devoted to the history of the Snipiskes Jewish Cemetery. On September 23, members of the Vilnius Jewish Community, one of 33 regional branches of the LJC, and visiting rabbis from abroad gathered in front of the Sports Palace with signs urging the government, "to stop these disgraceful plans for construction and allow the dead to rest."

The government again disbursed 3.62 million euros (\$4.07 million) to the Good Will Foundation, in accordance with its agreement with that institution.

The government said it was open to discussions with the LJC, World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO), and American Jewish Committee to find a

mechanism to compensate the country's Jewish citizens whose personal property was confiscated during the Nazi and Soviet eras.

The government provided 1.2 million euros (\$1.35 million) to traditional religious groups to reconstruct religious buildings and to support other religious community activities. Of this total, it granted one million euros (\$1.12 million) to the Roman Catholic Church (some of which was to assist with preparations for the visit of Pope Francis in September) and 61,100 euros (\$68,700) to the Russian Orthodox community. The remaining 139,000 euros (\$156,000) was divided among the Old Believer, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Sunni Muslim, Karaite and other Jewish, and Greek Catholic communities. These levels were all identical to the previous year's funding.

The OEO ombudsperson received five complaints of discrimination based on religion. The OEO decided that three of these complaints fell outside its jurisdiction; the OEO considers only complaints based on protected categories such as ethnicity, religion, or gender. The fourth complaint was regarding the process to obtain a temporary residence permit. The fifth complaint was related to employment discrimination. The ombudsperson ruled that neither case constituted religious discrimination.

On September 19, the Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman reported Muslim detainees at the Pabrade Foreigners' Registration Center, a detention center for migrants and asylum seekers, complained about the lack of halal food options and poor sanitary conditions.

The government and civil society organizations continued to work together to promote Holocaust education and tolerance in schools. On January 27, the International Commission for the Evaluation of Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania (the International Commission) held an annual conference entitled "Stories of Jewish Kids" in honor of International Remembrance Day of Holocaust Victims. Students from schools across the country prepared theatrical performances and retold the stories of child victims of the Holocaust.

On July 24, the government approved the 2020 schedule of commemoration events in honor of Vilna Gaon, a prominent 18th century rabbi. In 2018 parliament unanimously dedicated 2020 to Gaon's legacy and to the history of Lithuanian Jews. Vice Chancellor Deividas Matulionis told media these events would raise public awareness of the country's "rich history, which is inseparable from the

history of Lithuania's Jews." The government coordinated with the LJC and cultural institutions to schedule public lectures and design exhibitions to highlight the contributions of Lithuanian Jews and the country's role in the Holocaust.

On September 23, the International Commission coordinated a student march to massacre sites around the country entitled "Memory Road." The program included 165 schools traveling to more than 35 different Holocaust sites.

In October the International Commission cosponsored a Holocaust education teacher training with Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. The Kaunas Ninth Fort Museum coordinated a seminar for teachers entitled "Pages of Jewish History" and provided teachers with materials to use during classroom instruction. On October 27, the International Commission and the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum in partnership with the Olga Lengyel Institute sponsored a week-long Holocaust education seminar for teachers. The program included presentations, discussions, group work, videos, visits to Holocaust sites, and survivors' testimonies.

On June 16, Mayor of Birzai Vytas Jareckas, the LJC, and foreign dignitaries attended the unveiling of a memorial stone. Attendees walked the historic path from the train station through the forest to a mass killing site. In opening remarks, Jareckas said, "This event taking place in Birzai will be an opportunity to remember and honor former residents of our country." Government officials continued to participate in ceremonies to commemorate the Holocaust.

In July government and nongovernmental bodies organized events to mark the 75th anniversary of the liquidation of the Kaunas and Siauliai ghettos. On July 14, Mayor of Kaunas Visvaldas Matijosaitis, MPs, the Catholic Archbishop of Kaunas, the LJC, and foreign dignitaries attended commemoration events in Kaunas. On July 15, Mayor of Siauliai Arturas Visockas, MPs, the LJC, and foreign dignitaries attended two commemoration events in Siauliai. In opening remarks, Visockas recounted the stories of Jews from Siauliai who died during the Holocaust and emphasized the importance of remembering Jewish contributions to the development of the city.

On July 19, the Jurbarkas municipality, with support from the Good Will Foundation and foreign donors, erected a Holocaust memorial to commemorate the lives of Jews who lived in Jurbarkas. According to a press statement by Mayor of Jurbarkas Skirmantas Mockevicius, the memorial "is a wonderful creation,

commemorating the city's history and people who lived here as well as Jurbarkas residents who saved Jews during the war.”

President Nauseda's address on September 20 during a state ceremony to honor families that helped save Jewish lives during the Holocaust condemned intolerance and any attempts to intimidate Jewish citizens.

On September 23, the anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto, Speaker of Parliament Viktoras Pranckietis, Minister of Culture Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, Vice Chancellor Matulionis, Mayor of Vilnius Simasius, MPs, foreign dignitaries, the LJC, and Lithuanian Jewish organizations from Israel and Poland attended a Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony at the Paneriai Memorial. Pranckietis in his remarks said, “Let this heavy, cruel, and inhumane burden of responsibility teach Lithuanians how to proceed today.” Also on September 23, in his remarks given near the site of the former Vilnius ghetto, Prime Minister Skvernelis stated, “Every effort must be taken to stamp out any manifestations of incitement to ethnic hatred or anti-Semitism in the modern, democratic state of Lithuania.”

On October 4, Mayor of Sakiai Edgaras Pilypaitis with the support of Rami Reznik, an Israeli with Lithuanian Jewish heritage, dedicated a memorial stone to mark the entrance of a previously unmarked Jewish cemetery in Pilviskiai. Mayor Pilypaitis and Reznik restored the old cemetery. Members from the municipality, the LJC, and Lithuanian Jews from Israel attended the commemoration event. In October Mayor of Zarasai Nikolajus Gusevas and the LJC unveiled a Holocaust memorial to commemorate the lives of Zarasai's Jews lost during the Holocaust.

On December 2, MFA Ambassador-at-Large for Jewish Issues Dainius Junevicius and MP and chairman of the International Commission Emanuelis Zingeris attended a regional conference in Vilnius commemorating the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Terezin Declaration. The Good Will Foundation, in cooperation with WJRO and the International Commission, organized the conference. Experts from the United States, Israel, Germany, Poland, Latvia, Hungary, Moldova, and the Czech Republic shared best practices for restituting Holocaust-era assets.

On December 10, the MFA organized a session on the importance of religious freedom and belief during the country's second annual human rights forum. Experts included MOJ official Donatas Glodenis; Vytautas Magnus University sociologist and Religious Studies Professor Milda Alisauskiene; a priestess from the Romuva religious community, Migle Valaitiene; and the director of Italy's Center for Studies on New Religions, Massimo Introvigne. Forum participants

discussed the Catholic Church's intervention in parliament's decision not to approve the application for recognition submitted by the Romuva community, despite a favorable recommendation by the MOJ. Professor Alisauskiene said parliament had only approved recognition applications from Christian organizations, and minority religions such as Romuva experienced discrimination as a result.

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

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

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 15 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in Lithuania, while 73 percent said it was rare; 60 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 95 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 80 percent said they would be with an atheist, 79 percent with a Jew, 67 percent with a Buddhist, and 62 percent with a Muslim. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a "love relationship" with an individual belonging to various groups, 93 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 68 percent if atheist, 65 percent if Jewish, 50 percent if Buddhist, and 35 percent if Muslim.

In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism based on interviews it conducted in December 2018 in each EU member state. According to the survey, 75 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in Lithuania, and 63 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who believed that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 19 percent; on the internet, 21 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 23 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 15 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 30 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 17 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 13 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 15 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 15 percent.

On November 13, three teenagers spray-painted the words “Heil Hitler” on the Kaunas synagogue’s information board. Police said they suspected the same teenagers broke the windows of a mosque in Kaunas on November 17. Police launched a pretrial investigation into both acts of vandalism on November 25 and detained an 18-year-old suspect on November 28. The Kaunas municipality removed the graffiti from the information board.

On October 6, media reported that a swastika and a homemade bomb were left outside of a building in Vilnius. Police removed the apparent bomb and launched an investigation.

On February 16, nationalists held a march in Vilnius to commemorate the anniversary of the restoration of the country’s independence, similar to previous years. The march attracted approximately 1,000 participants, an increase from 300 in the previous year, which some NGOs attributed to better organization and publicity. Some of the participants held torches and carried national Lithuanian flags. The march included a banner with a picture of, and a quote by, WWII-era anti-Semite Kazys Skirpa. Nationalists also organized a march in Vilnius on March 11, the country’s official Restoration of Independence Day, involving approximately 1,000 persons, similar to the previous year. According to media, some of the participants displayed fascist or neo-Nazi symbols, such as a skull-and-crossbones flag, and carried a banner with the images of Lithuanian partisans who were Nazi collaborators, such as Kazys Skirpa and Jonas Noreika.

Anonymous anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim comments on the internet were common, for example, on Lithuanian media portal Delfi. Examples of anti-Semitism in this forum included statements that Jews who collaborated with the KGB should be condemned by the LJC for “serving in the repressive Soviet structures and participating or otherwise contributing to the genocide of the Lithuanian nation.” Anti-Muslim examples included equating Muslim refugees entering the country with “a swarm of insects” and urging the government and citizens “to chase those [Muslim] refugees from Lithuania.” Media portals generally removed such comments promptly after becoming aware of them.

In the wake of the Noreika controversy, LJC Chairwoman Faina Kukliansky reported to media the LJC had received threatening calls and letters, and on August 6, she temporarily closed the local synagogue and the Jewish community’s headquarters. In response, Prime Minister Skvernelis condemned all examples of ethnic hatred and called on law enforcement to guarantee the security for every

citizen and every community living in the country. Kukliansky reopened the synagogue and community center shortly thereafter.

On September 15, media reported an unidentified person created a large soil swastika near the LJC headquarters. The swastika appeared during the Festival of the Nations, an annual festival displaying the country's national minority cultures. Prime Minister Skvernelis in a press release denounced it as an act of vandalism and warned that such activities tarnished the country's image internationally. Foreign Minister Linkevicius condemned the act as "deplorable" and called for police to investigate. On September 16, police launched an investigation; no results were available at year's end.

In October three more anti-Semitic acts of vandalism took place around the country. On October 5, media reported that an unknown person painted a swastika on a statue of Chaim Frenkel, a 19th century Jewish industrialist, in Siauliai. The Siauliai municipality removed the swastika. The following day, someone spray-painted a swastika on a street in Vilnius. On October 12, a group vandalized a mural representing Jewish cultural life in Vilnius with a swastika. The Vilnius municipality removed all of the swastikas.

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

The embassy continued to maintain regular dialogue with senior government officials on the importance of religious freedom. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives met with Prime Minister Skvernelis, Speaker of Parliament Pranckietis, presidential advisors, a vice chancellor, mayors, ministers and vice ministers of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Culture, and Education, and MPs and continued to engage them on ways to promote tolerance and integration of religious minorities, including Muslim refugees, into society and combat anti-Semitism. Embassy representatives urged the government to address the remaining issues regarding compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi and Soviet eras. Embassy officials also discussed Holocaust education, remembrance, and property restitution at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government offices and with MPs.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met regularly with the Jewish community to discuss issues of concern, including property restitution, preservation and restoration of heritage sites, combating intolerance, and Holocaust remembrance.



On February 25, the Ambassador met with Minister of Culture Kvietkauskas to discuss embassy programs related to Holocaust education and preservation of Jewish cultural sites.

On March 7, the Ambassador spoke with Vice Chancellor Matulionis about the Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act and the embassy's outreach to government and nongovernmental agencies to discuss property restitution issues and Holocaust education. The Ambassador also spoke about the issues covered in the JUST report with Minister of Education, Science, and Sports Algirdas Monkevicius on March 18.

On May 9, the Ambassador accompanied an American Jewish Committee representative and LJC Chairwoman Kukliansky to meetings with Foreign Minister Linkevicius and Vice Chancellor Matulionis to discuss the removal of the Noreika plaque, the renovations of the Snipiskes Sports Palace, and private property restitution.

In June embassy officers attended the unveiling of the memorial stone in Birzai. On June 21, an embassy officer attended the unveiling of the YIVO plaque in Vilnius. On June 28, the Ambassador spoke with Foreign Minister Linkevicius about the importance of increasing societal tolerance for religious minorities, government visibility at annual Holocaust remembrance events, and support for Holocaust education and preserving Jewish cultural heritage sites.

On July 10, the Ambassador and Prime Minister Skvernelis discussed the necessity of government support for the Jewish community and continued cooperation and open discussions over the renovation of the Snipiskes Sports Palace. On July 14, a senior embassy official participated in a ceremony honoring the 75th Holocaust Memorial Day in Kaunas. The next day, embassy officials delivered remarks at the 75th Holocaust Memorial Day event in Siauliai, commenting on the importance of remembrance and Holocaust education. In July the embassy provided financial support for an expedition to discover a lost Jewish shtetl located beneath a lake. In his remarks at a July 16 reception announcing the results of the expedition, a senior embassy official highlighted the archaeological team's contributions to the discovery and preservation of Jewish cultural heritage sites in the country.

In September the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues released a series of tweets in response to the Noreika controversy encouraging Lithuanians to objectively review the actions of historical figures. The envoy advocated against honoring those whose actions directly led to the persecution and killing of Jews during the

Holocaust. On September 23, the Charge d'Affaires participated in a ceremony at the Paneriai memorial in honor of Holocaust Memorial Day.

On October 27, the Charge attended the opening of a week-long Holocaust education seminar for teachers and delivered remarks emphasizing the role of teachers in educating the youth about the country's role in the Holocaust. On October 29, the Charge travelled to Zarasai to attend the unveiling of a memorial stone commemorating the individuals killed in the forest on August 26, 1941. In his remarks, the Charge acknowledged the government's efforts to preserve Jewish history and cultural heritage and to raise awareness of the country's role in the Holocaust. On December 2, the Charge and other embassy officers attended the regional conference commemorating the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Terezin Declaration.