

LITHUANIA 2020 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 “nontraditional” religious groups. Religious groups must register with the government to gain legal status. Parliament again failed to act on a recognition application by the United Methodist Church pending since 2001, and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) again did not act on a Jehovah’s Witnesses’ recognition application pending since 2017. A 2019 appeal to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) by the indigenous religious group the Romuva of parliament’s denial of recognition remained pending. On June 12, in response to a Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objector whose appeal the Supreme Administrative Court rejected in 2019, the ECHR announced it would examine whether the country provided a suitable alternative to religiously motivated conscientious objectors. On April 1, the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed a case against the Genocide and Resistance Research Center 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. On July 8, the Vilnius municipal council authorized the city to sign an agreement to refurbish the grounds of the former Vilnius Sports Palace, which was built on top of a Jewish cemetery. The Vilnius Jewish Community continued to oppose the project.

In January, at a ceremony in parliament, a man called the head of the Lithuanian Jewish Community (LJC) a little Jew-girl and told her there was no place for Jews in the country. Police reported five anti-Semitic acts of vandalism during the year compared with six such acts in 2019. In June, vandals splashed white paint on a monument of Jewish historical figure Dr. Zemach Shabad. A bust of Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, an 18th century Jewish historical figure known as the Vilna Gaon, was vandalized twice, in June and in August. In March, police detained a man suspected of having drawn swastikas in the city of Kaunas. Anonymous anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim internet postings in response to articles regarding Jewish or Muslim issues were common; 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 the President's foreign policy advisor, the Prosecutor General, senior officials at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Culture, and the speaker and members of parliament (MPs) to discuss religious freedom issues, including private property restitution and combating discrimination. They raised the same issues with Jewish community leaders. The U.S. Deputy Secretary of State also met with senior government officials during his visit in September and raised these issues. In September, the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues released a statement on social media saying it was imperative for institutions such as the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania to be apolitical and that overlooking or downplaying events of the Holocaust created divisions and tarnished the country's reputation. The Ambassador and embassy officers took part in events marking 2020 as the year of the Vilna Gaon and of the history of the Jews of Lithuania, as well as the year of Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat who helped save more than 6,000 Jews in the country during the Holocaust.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.7 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census, of the 90 percent of the population that responded to a question regarding religious affiliation, 86 percent identify as Roman Catholic, and 7 percent do not identify with any religious group. Religious groups that together constitute less than five percent of the population include Russian Orthodox, Old Believers, Lutherans, Evangelical Reformed, 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 3,300, of whom approximately 250 are Karaite Jews, who traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region. 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.

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 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 religious communities; religious associations, which comprise at least two religious communities under common leadership; and 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 on whether to grant state recognition status upon recommendation from the MOJ. If parliament votes against extending state recognition, a group must wait 10 years before reapplying. 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 (\$39).

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 data currently available from 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. 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 law recognizes the right to conscientious objection to military service on any grounds and provides for alternative service in civilian institutions or, if the military deems it necessary, 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 by 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 religious groups continued to use after that date to serve religious communities. By law, registered religious communities had until 1997 to apply to the appropriate ministry or municipality for restitution or compensation of religious property they owned before June 19, 1948. 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.

The law permits 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 such properties with the MOJ was 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 (\$44.17 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 (\$3,800) 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. 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 of 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, Science, and Sport through a voucher system based on the number of pupils. Each private school receives 1,099 euros (\$1,300) per student. National minority schools, which include schools established by the Jewish community, receive 20 percent more – 1,318.80 euros (\$1,600) – 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, Science, and Sport 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. Its recommendations are not mandatory, but the OEO may appeal to the courts in cases of noncompliance. The office also makes proposals to state and municipal institutions and government agencies concerning the improvement of legal acts and priorities for the implementation of equal rights policy. The OEO ombudsperson does not levy

monetary penalties. It may recommend cases to the Prosecutor General's Office for pretrial investigation.

The parliamentary ombudsperson is a separate entity that examines the conduct of state authorities in serving the population. The 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 Nazi symbols or national anthems. Violators are subject to fines of 144-289 euros (\$180-\$350).

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

Government Practices

The MOJ again made no recommendation to parliament on a 2017 Jehovah's Witnesses application for state-recognized religious association status.

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. At year's end, the group stated that it had not yet decided whether it would raise the issue with the government elected during October parliamentary elections.

At year's end, the ECHR had yet to rule on a case filed in September 2019 appealing the decision of parliament earlier that year not to grant state recognized religious association status to the Romuva. In their appeal, the Romuva asked the ECHR to rule on whether the country violated the articles of the European Convention on Human Rights on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Religious groups stated the rejection of the Romuva's application led other religious organizations to hesitate before advocating for their applications.

On April 1, the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed a case against the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania brought by a U.S. citizen who sued the center for concluding that Jonas Noreika, an anti-Soviet partisan leader and Nazi collaborator, did not participate in the mass killing of Jews in the country during World War II. The center published a report in 2019 stating that Noreika had fought the Nazis and helped rescue Jews during the Holocaust. The court did not grant the petitioner's request that it order the center to conduct

research and revise its historic conclusion regarding Noreika and said the case was not related to the center's activities, falling within the realm of public administration. The court's finding was not subject to appeal. The court also ruled the plaintiff must pay additional court costs to the center.

Media reported that during a meeting of the parliamentary National Security and Defense Committee on May 20, MP Audrys Simas (Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, the then-ruling party) "raised his right hand with two fingers extended" in the fashion that prevailed in Nazi Germany. On May 27, the LJC published a statement, asking the Speaker of the Parliament, the Security and Defense Committee, and prosecutors to investigate the incident. On October 2, the parliamentary Ethics and Procedures Commission, which investigated the case, concluded Simas violated the principle of respect for human beings and the state but did not impose a penalty. The commission recommended Simas avoid actions that could be interpreted as disreputable, offensive, or derisive towards different people or groups of people.

In December 2019, Arunas Gumuliauskas, a then-MP for the Farmers and Greens Union, announced he was drafting legislation declaring that neither the country nor its leaders participated in the Holocaust. "The Lithuanian state did not participate in the Holocaust because it was occupied, just as the Lithuanian nation could not participate in the Holocaust because it was enslaved," said Gumuliauskas. His proposal was condemned by Jewish community leaders and led then-Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis to make a statement on January 22, in which he called on Lithuanians to "refrain from any attempt to reinterpret the brutal consequences of World War II and the occupation regimes on the Lithuanian state and its citizens" and stated, "It is particularly important to bear in mind as we speak about the suffering and the unbearable loss of the Jewish people." Gumuliauskas ultimately did not introduce the draft legislation.

On June 30, parliament passed a resolution naming 2021 as the year of Juozas Luksa-Daumantas, a Lithuanian partisan leader whom the Soviets killed in 1951. Israeli and other media reported accusations that Luksa was a leader of the pro-Nazi Lithuanian Activist Front (LAF) during World War II and cited several persons, including the former chair of the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Israel, who said they had seen Luksa participate in a massacre of Jews in Kaunas in 1941. On July 2, the cochairs of the Lithuanian Good Will Foundation (LJC Chair Faina Kuliansky and a member of the American Jewish Committee) wrote to Speaker of Parliament Viktoras Pranckietis, asking that parliament not honor Luksa, who, according to the letter, was a leader of the "proudly anti-Semitic" LAF, even

though it might not be possible to provide irrefutable evidence that he had committed war crimes against Jews. A number of historians and Lithuanian Jews and the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania disputed the charges against Luksa. On July 14, four members of the country's Jewish community, who were not associated with the LJC, wrote to the President, Foreign Minister, and parliament, rejecting the views of the cochairs of the Good Will Foundation on Luksa and calling for their removal as cochairs. On July 22, Emanuelis Zingeris, the sole Jewish MP and chair of the international commission, released a letter stating the attacks against Luksa were part of a Russian disinformation campaign and that the international commission had found no evidence that he had been a prominent member of the LAF or participated in the killing of Jews. Parliament did not revoke the resolution.

In August, the LJC issued a statement against the appointment of journalist Vidmantas Valiusaitis to the post of adviser to the general director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania. They said Valiusaitis had distorted history in his publications for several years and presented “untrue facts about the anti-Semitic actions of the [World War II-era] Lithuanian Activist Front and the Provisional Government of Lithuania,” denying conclusions of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania “regarding the clearly anti-Semitic views and actions of these organizations...”

On July 8, the Vilnius municipal council authorized local officials to sign an agreement with Turto Bankas, the centralized public property management agency, under which the municipality would convert the former Vilnius Sports Palace building, located on the site of the Snipiskes Jewish Cemetery, into a convention center by 2023. In December 2019, Turto Bankas announced it had, together with the LJC and the Committee for Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, reached agreement on the redevelopment of the former Vilnius Sports Palace. In 2019, Yousef Yizhak, a Lithuanian Jew residing in Israel, petitioned the Vilnius District Court to prevent the renovation of the sports palace, stating it “would...disturb the human remains surrounding the Sports Palace, and [the remains] that the Soviets mixed into the Sports Palace's building materials.” Initial court hearings took place on October 1 and 6. In October, Turto Bankas, when announcing the renovation of the former Vilnius Sports Palace would begin in 2022, said the project had been coordinated with the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe. The Vilnius Jewish Community and its chair, Simonas Gurevicius, continued to disagree with the LJC and object to the

project. In October, media reported an initiative known as the “Save Vilna” project was seeking signatures on a petition objecting to the renovation of the sports palace. In November, activist Andrius Kulikauskas initiated a global letter-writing campaign to urge MPs and the cabinet to cut government funding for the reconstruction of the sports palace. During the budget debate, MP Kestutis Masiulis proposed removing 515,000 euros (\$630,000) from the budget allocation designated for the redesign. Parliament accepted the proposed removal. Turto Bankas said that, despite the removal of the funds from the budget, it had contractual obligations to implement the project.

On May 1, members of the tourism industry protested next to the former sports palace. They placed dozens of empty chairs at the site with sheets of paper on them symbolizing 1,000-euro (\$1230) banknotes to protest the money they said was lost by delaying plans to build the convention center. In reaction, Gurevicius said, “...it is at least immoral to build chairs with euro banknotes over the heads and remains of the people who created the Jerusalem of the North.” Defending History, an organization and online news site that opposed the construction plan, condemned the display.

The government again disbursed 3.62 million euros (\$4.44 million) to the Good Will Foundation, in accordance with its agreement with that institution. The government did not address compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi era or resolve any pending restitution or compensation claims by other religious groups for property seized by the Soviet Union.

The government provided 1.2 million euros (\$1.47 million) to traditional religious groups to reconstruct religious buildings and to support other religious community activities. Of this total, it granted one million euros (\$1.23 million) to the Roman Catholic Church and 61,100 euros (\$75,000) to the Russian Orthodox community. The remaining 139,000 euros (\$171,000) was divided among the Old Believer, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Sunni Muslim, Jewish, Karaite Jewish, and Greek Catholic communities. These levels were all identical to the previous year’s funding.

The OEO ombudsperson received one complaint of discrimination based on religion but decided that it fell outside the OEO’s jurisdiction. The complaint concerned a Muslim prisoner who said he found a piece of pork in his food.

On September 2, the parliamentary ombudsman reported the Pabrade Foreigners’ Registration Center, a detention center for migrants and asylum seekers, started

providing a pork-free food option. In September 2019, the Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman reported Muslim detainees at the center complained about the lack of halal food options and poor sanitary conditions.

The government declared 2020, the 300th anniversary of the birth of Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, a rabbi, scholar, and religious authority known as the Vilna Gaon, the year of the Vilna Gaon and of the history of the Jews of Lithuania. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government limited in-person commemorative events honoring the Vilna Gaon; most events were moved to an online platform or postponed. On September 10, Minister of Culture Simonas Kairys opened an exhibit at the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum.

On September 23, the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews, which also marked the 77th anniversary of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto, the government organized a commemoration ceremony. Youth participated in a march from Rudininku Square in Vilnius to the Paneriai Memorial, a site where an estimated 70,000 Jews were killed during the Holocaust. Similar commemoration events took place in more than 50 locations across the country.

On October 19, a sculpture entitled “Water Carrier,” dedicated to the memory of the Vilnius Jewish community, was unveiled in the former Jewish residential quarter in Vilnius. On October 17, a bronze sculpture to commemorate Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat who saved more than 6,000 Jews from the Holocaust during World War II, was unveiled at a ceremony in Kaunas. President Gitanas Nausėda, Foreign Minister Linas Antanas Linkevičius, and Kaunas Mayor Visvaldas Matijosaitis participated in the ceremony. The sculptures were funded by the respective municipalities. On September 24, individuals who hid Jews during the Nazi occupation were honored as Righteous Among the Nations in Kaunas at a conference dedicated to Sugihara. The Foreign Minister said the deeds of Sugihara and Dutch honorary consul Jan Zwartendijk, who issued more than 2,000 transit visas to Curacao to Jews during the Holocaust, were an example to all. In 2019, parliament declared 2020, the 80th anniversary of the Japanese diplomat’s posting to Kaunas, the year of Chiune Sugihara.

On September 21, President Nausėda presented the Life Saving Cross to 44 persons who risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. The President presented awards to Vlade Markauskiene, Irene Ozekauskiene, and Leonarda Pliopiene at the ceremony. An additional 41 persons were awarded the cross posthumously, with family members attending the ceremony.

On October 20, Minister of Justice Elvinas Jankevicius announced the creation of a working group to analyze issues relating to the protection of the rights of Holocaust victims and the preservation of historical memory. LJC Chair Kukliansky was a member of the group.

On June 5, the Jewish Heritage Lithuania Association announced the creation of an interactive map of Jewish cultural heritage sites in the country. The map features more than 200 locations describing Jewish *shtetls* and other communities, surviving synagogues, and other places associated with notable Jewish individuals.

Also on June 5, the postal service issued a commemorative stamp to mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of the Vilna Gaon.

On January 28, the foreign ministry hosted an event to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In a speech, Foreign Minister Linkevicius said, “The genocide of the Jewish people is a scar on Lithuania and the whole humanity’s face, and we must do everything to prevent it from happening again.” The event included a photo exhibit by Saulius Paukstys on the Jewish community, as well as a series of video documentaries on the Righteous Among the Nations by Dominykas Kubilius. The series featured testimonials and memories of Holocaust survivors, as well as historians’ comments on the genocide and the individuals who resisted it. Representatives from the Jewish community, former Vilnius and Kaunas ghetto prisoners, foreign diplomats, and members of various cultural organizations attended the commemoration.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February, the Pew Research Center published a survey on attitudes towards democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society as well as religious freedom in 34 countries based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 48 percent of Lithuanian respondents considered religious freedom to be “very important,” ranking it the lowest among their priorities for democratic principles of the nine tested.

On February 25, prosecutors launched an investigation into incitement to hatred over an incident at parliament on January 13 when LJC Chair Kukliansky, who

was attending an event that marked the anniversary of the Soviet aggression against the country, said she was called “zydelka” (little Jew-girl) by an unknown man. She said the man told her to “stop polluting Lithuania” and that “there is no place” for Jews in the country.

Anonymous anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim comments on the internet were common throughout the year. On May 12, LJC Chair Kukliansky, issued a statement calling on the country’s Prosecutor General to initiate an investigation into anti-Semitic comments on the website of the daily *Lietuvos Rytas* responding to a three-part feature it published called “Lithuania and the Holocaust: Endless Seizures Instead of Healing Wounds.” Kukliansky said the comments included statements condemning and insulting Jews.

Anonymous online commentators continued to express negative views of Muslim refugees. One post read, “We need to drive them [Muslim refugees] out of the country.” Media sites generally removed such comments after becoming aware of them.

On June 26, vandals splashed white paint or acid on a monument of Jewish historical figure Dr. Zemach Shabad. A bust of the Vilna Gaon was also vandalized on June 26 and again on August 3 with a liquid and then white paint or acid. Police launched an investigation. Media reports quoted Foreign Minister Linkevicius as stating “the attacks against memorials were attacks against Lithuania.” Vilnius Mayor Remigijus Simasius said on social media, “The desire of the villains to diminish and offend the Jewish community of Vilnius and Lithuania by their actions shows only the weakness of the vandals themselves.”

On March 13, police detained a man suspected of having drawn swastikas in the city of Kaunas. At year’s end, he remained under investigation for alleged incitement to hatred. If tried and convicted, he could face up to two years in prison.

On October 7, police reported a monument to the victims of the Holocaust in Kaunas was found toppled and launched an investigation. Chairman of the Kaunas Jewish community Gercas Zakas told media that he thought the damage might not be necessarily targeted against Jews. Local authorities told the Jewish community they would restore the monument at the municipality’s expense.

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, a presidential foreign policy advisor, a vice chancellor, mayors, Ministers and Vice Ministers of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Culture, Justice, 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 era. Embassy officials also discussed Holocaust education, remembrance, and property restitution with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government offices and with MPs.

In January, an embassy officer met with MPs to express concern regarding proposed draft legislation that would deny the country's participation, as a state, in the Holocaust. On May 26, the Ambassador spoke with Minister of Culture Mindaugas Kvietkauskas regarding programs of preservation of Jewish cultural sites and plans to honor Jewish history. In June, the Ambassador asked the Minister of Justice to form a working group on historical memory and the rights of Holocaust victims. On June 30, the Ambassador met the Prosecutor General to address the investigation and prosecution of anti-Semitic actions. On July 24, the Ambassador visited the site of the old Jewish cemetery in Snipiskes and spoke with representatives of the state company Turto Bankas, the Cultural Heritage Department, and the Vilnius municipality regarding plans to renovate the former sports palace and ensure preservation of the site. On August 26, a senior embassy official discussed Holocaust legacy issues with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials. On September 2, the Ambassador met Speaker of Parliament Pranckietis to express concern over the appointment of a controversial advisor to the Genocide Resistance and Research Center of Lithuania. The Deputy Secretary of State also met with senior government officials during his visit in September and raised these issues.

In September, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues released a statement on social media stating that it was imperative for institutions such as the Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania to be apolitical and willing to examine history without preconceived notions. The statement said that overlooking or downplaying events of the Holocaust created divisions and tarnished the country's reputation.

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. In July, an embassy officer met with members of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania and the head of the LJC to discuss ways to combat intolerance and anti-Semitism and to resolve compensation for Jewish private property seized during the Nazi era.

The embassy supported institutions devoted to raising awareness of the country's Jewish heritage, including the Tolerance Center and the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, a center that educates visitors regarding the country's Jewish heritage and promotes interfaith dialogue. The embassy also helped fund the publication of a book about the history of Lithuania's synagogues.

On May 8, the Ambassador addressed the media following a ceremony at the Jewish cemetery of Suderve to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of the World War II and to honor victims of the Holocaust. He said, "Although these monuments are symbols of the terrible tragedy that took place here during World War II, I believe they also represent a challenge, as well, for humanity to stand together and prevent such atrocities from ever happening again. The past cannot be undone. The best we can do is honestly assess it, even the unsavory parts, and use those lessons to ensure we do better in the future."

On October 23, the Ambassador delivered public remarks in Siauliai to mark the year of the Vilna Gaon and the year of Chiune Sugihara, stating, "Our common humanity compels us today to talk openly about what happened in places such as Siauliai and in other cities and towns across Lithuania."

On December 9, in remarks at the Jewish History Conference, organized by the LJC, in commemoration of the Vilna Gaon, the Ambassador stated, "As we celebrate the past, present, and future of Lithuania's Jewish heritage, we must also commit to defending the truth. We must never tolerate willful ignorance or distortion of history. Let us take the occasion of the year of the Vilna Gaon as a moment to recommit ourselves to this effort."