

FINLAND 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination “without an acceptable reason” and provides for the right to profess and practice a religion and to decline to be a member of a religious community. The law prohibits breaching the sanctity of religion, which includes blasphemy, offending that which a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. According to representatives of their respective groups, immigration authorities continued to deny most asylum applications from Jehovah’s Witnesses from Russia and Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan. While a United Nations Human Rights Committee ruling granted two families that are members of Jehovah’s Witnesses positive interim decisions halting deportation proceedings, 15 other cases of Jehovah’s Witness asylum applicants were pending before the Supreme Administrative Court at year’s end. At least 47 members of Jehovah’s Witnesses previously denied asylum renewed their applications. In July and September, the Helsinki Police Department fired two officers and were investigating at least five others for engaging in communications that included antisemitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. A Finnish People First Party chairman and a Finns Party Member of Parliament (MP) were convicted of aggravated defamation and ethnic agitation respectively for comments against Muslims and asylum seekers. In September, authorities charged a former city councilor with ethnic agitation for making threatening comments about Muslim immigrants and refugees. The attorney general declined to prosecute a Social Democratic Party (SDP) MP regarding antisemitic comments made in 2011 because the attorney general declared that the MP had actively and independently sought to minimize the harm from his previous actions. Prosecutors charged Christian Democrat MP Paivi Rasanen, a former Minister of the Interior, with ethnic agitation and incitement to hatred on the basis of sexuality in connection with a booklet she published in 2004 and a 2019 tweet. Rasanen said her statements were an expression of her freedom of speech and religion.

Police reported 108 hate crimes involving members of religious groups in 2020, the most recent statistics available, compared with 133 such incidents in 2019, but did not specify how many were motivated solely by religion. Police stated the largest drop in hate crimes were crimes reported at bars and restaurants and were driven by COVID-19 protocols. The nondiscrimination ombudsman’s office received 34 complaints of religious discrimination in 2020, compared with 37 in 2019. The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) continued to post anti-Muslim and antisemitic statements online and acted to circumvent the ban of the

organization by continuing activities as part of Towards Freedom and far-right websites such as *Partisaani*. There were several demonstrations by neo-Nazi or nativist groups. The Jewish community reported continued incidents of antisemitic vandalism in Helsinki throughout the year. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working with migrants, including the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre, continued to raise concerns about the inability of religious minorities housed in migrant reception centers to worship without harassment from other migrants housed within the same center. Some Muslim groups reported that currently available places of worship did not suit the full needs of their communities, but there was disagreement across communities as to the need for additional places of worship or the need for a grand mosque and disagreement as to how these places of worship could best serve the diverse Muslim population.

U.S. embassy staff engaged with government ministries to discuss government support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, government and police responses to antisemitic incidents, and the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses and Ahmadi Muslims seeking asylum. Embassy staff met with the Jewish and Muslim communities to discuss their shared concerns about the impact of government guidelines discouraging male circumcision and addressed religiously motivated crimes and continuing problems involved in establishing or maintaining mosques sufficient for the diverse Muslim population. Embassy staff also discussed the state of religious freedom with these communities, other religious minority groups, and interfaith networks.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.6 million (midyear 2021). According to Finnish government statistics from December 2020 that count only registered members of registered congregations, 67.8 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELC) and 1.1 percent to the Finnish Orthodox Church, while 0.3 percent (approximately 17,000) have official membership in Islamic congregations, and 29.4 percent do not identify as belonging to any religious group. The census combines other minority religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jews, and members of the Free Church of Finland, that together account for 1.4 percent of the population.

Multiple sources indicate the Muslim population has grown rapidly in recent years because of a significant inflow of immigrants. Muslim religious leaders estimate

the number of Muslims rose to 100,000 in 2018 (most recent data available), of which approximately 80 percent is Sunni and 20 percent Shia. In 2017, the latest year for which statistics are available, the Pew Research Center estimated 2.7 percent of the population, or approximately 150,000 persons, were Muslim. According to a survey by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Muslim population numbered approximately 65,000 in 2016. According to the Islamic Society of Finland, discrepancies among these sources and between them and official government statistics may occur because only a minority of Muslims register with registered Islamic societies. Apart from Tatars, who immigrated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well as during the Soviet Union period, most Muslims are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who arrived in recent decades from Somalia, North Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. There are 300 registered members of the Ahmadi community, according to leaders of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Finland.

In a report released in 2020, the Institute of Jewish Policy Research estimated the Jewish population at 1,300. There are 18,000 members of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country, according to Church representatives. According to Catholic Diocese statistics from 2021, there are 15,902 registered Catholics in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution bars discrimination based on religion “without an acceptable reason.” It stipulates freedom of religion and conscience, including the right to profess and practice a religion, to express one's convictions, and to be a member or decline to be a member of a religious community. It states no one is under the obligation to participate in the practice of a religion.

The law criminalizes blasphemy, or the “breach of the sanctity of religion,” which includes “blaspheming against God,” publicly defaming or desecrating to offend something a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Violators are subject to fines or imprisonment of up to six months. The amount of a fine is dependent both on the severity of the offense and the financial standing of the sentenced offender. Authorities have occasionally applied the law, most recently in 2019.

The constitution cites the ELC, the only religious group it mentions, stating that “provisions on the organization and administration [of the ELC] are laid down in the Church Act.”

It is considered a crime of ethnic agitation if any person makes available or spreads to the public an expression of opinion or any other message that threatens, defames, or insults a certain group on the basis of race, skin color, birth status, national or ethnic origin, religion, belief, sexual orientation, or disability. This includes the distribution of hate material intended to incite discrimination in print or in broadcast media, books, or online newspapers and journals. Punishment includes a fine based on the severity of the defamation or insult or up to two years’ imprisonment. If the ethnic agitation involves incitement or enticement to serious violence, a person may be charged with aggravated ethnic agitation, which carries a punishment of imprisonment of between four months and four years. Hate speech is not a separate criminal offense but may constitute grounds for an aggravated sentence for other offenses. In principle, any act that is considered a crime in legislation may be a hate crime, depending on the underlying motive. The victim does not need to be a part of a defined group for a crime to be considered a hate crime; it is enough that the perpetrator assumes the victim to be a member of the group.

The law prohibits religious discrimination and establishes the position of a nondiscrimination ombudsman responsible for supervising compliance with the law, in investigating individual cases of discrimination, and having the power to issue fines in noncriminal cases. The ombudsman advocates on behalf of victims, offers counseling, promotes conciliation, and lobbies for legislation, among other duties and authorities. The ombudsman may also refer cases to the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal (NDET), which also enforces fines issued by the ombudsman and assists plaintiffs seeking compensation in court. Individuals alleging discrimination may alternatively pursue legal action through the NDET, which may issue binding decisions that may be appealed to the courts or through the district court system. Litigants may appeal the decisions of the NDET and the district courts to the higher Administrative Court. Neither the ombudsman nor the NDET has the authority to investigate individual cases of religious discrimination involving employment. Such cases fall under the purview of the Occupational Safety and Health Authority.

Individuals and groups may exist, associate, and practice their religion without registering with the government. To be eligible to apply for government funds, however, religious groups must register with the Patent and Registration Office as

a religious community. To register as a religious community, a group must have at least 20 members, the public practice of religion as its purpose, and a set of rules to guide its activities. A registered religious community is a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims. A religious group may also acquire legal status by registering as an association with a nonprofit purpose that is not contrary to law or proper behavior. Registered religious groups and nonprofit associations are generally exempt from taxes. According to the MEC, as of August, there were approximately 156 registered religious communities, most of which had multiple congregations.

According to the MEC, several additional religious communities are organized under the name the Pentecostal Church of Finland but have registered as associations and not as separate religious communities. Similarly, other organizations, such as revivalist congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, have independent theological or functional operations but have remained administratively under the Evangelical Lutheran Church and have not registered as independent religious communities. Persons may belong to more than one religious group.

In March, parliament passed an amendment to the Church Act that governs the practices of the ELC. The amended Church Act provides greater freedom to the ELC administration for holding meetings in an online setting. It allows members participating in meetings virtually to be considered as present for the purposes of reaching a quorum.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or Finnish Orthodox Church pay a church tax, collected together with their income tax payments. Congregations collectively decide the church tax amount, currently set at between 1 to 2 percent of a member's income. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Members may terminate their membership by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office, either electronically or in person. Local parishes have fiscal autonomy to decide how to use funding received from taxes levied on their members.

Registered religious communities other than the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church are eligible to apply for state funds in lieu of the church tax. In addition to receiving the church tax, the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church may also apply for state funds. The law states registered religious communities that meet the statutory requirements, including ELC and Orthodox congregations, may apply to

receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious community's percentage of the population.

The law requires the ELC to maintain public cemeteries using its general allocation from state funds and church taxes and to account for monies used for this purpose. Other religious communities and nonreligious foundations may maintain their own cemeteries. All registered religious communities may own and manage property and hire staff, including appointing clergy. The law authorizes the ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church to register births, marriages, and deaths for their members in collaboration with the government Digital and Population Data Services Agency. State registrars do this for other persons.

Parents may determine their child's religious affiliation if the child is younger than 12. The religious affiliation of children between the ages of 12 and 17 may only be changed by a joint decision of the child and his or her parents or guardian, and the family must pursue specific administrative procedures with their religious community and the local population registration officials to change or terminate the religious affiliation.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with students' religion. All students must take courses either in religious studies or ethics, with the choice left up to the student. Schools must provide religious instruction in religions other than the Lutheran faith if there is a minimum of three pupils representing that faith in the municipal region, the religious community in question is registered, and the students' families belong to the religious community. Municipalities may arrange for students from different schools to take a combined course to meet this requirement. Students who do not belong to a religious group or belong to a religious group for which special instruction is not available may study ethics. Students aged 18 or older may choose to study either the religious courses pertaining to their religion or the ethics courses. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parents decide in which religious education course the student participates. The national and municipal governments fund private, including religiously based, schools. Despite the name, private schools are in fact completely financially dependent on government funding, to ensure equitable education nationwide. With the exception of international and foreign-language schools, by law private schools may not charge tuition. They do not practice selective admission based on students' religion.

Religious education focuses on familiarizing students with their own religion, other religions, and on general instruction in ethics. Teachers of religion must have

state-mandated training for religious instruction. The state appoints them, and they are not required to belong to any religious community. The National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about Orthodox and Lutheran Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular ethics.

By law, conscientious objectors, including those who object on religious grounds, may choose alternative civilian service instead of compulsory military service. Conscientious objectors who refuse both military and alternative civilian service may be sentenced to prison terms of up to 173 days, one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service ranges between 165 and 347 days.

The law requires that animals be stunned prior to slaughter or be stunned and killed simultaneously if done pursuant to religious practice.

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

Government Practices

YLE, the Finnish English news site, administered a poll revealing that a majority of MPs did not want to change Finland's law on the sanctity of religion, which includes the possibility of a six-month prison sentence for blasphemy. The survey, however, also indicated that MPs of the Greens Party, part of the governing coalition, and opposition Finns Party were united in favor of making changes to the law, with their views based on the same issue: freedom of speech. The UN Human Rights Committee called on Finland to change the "vague and broadly worded" criminal provision on the sanctity of religion, stating that it restricts freedom of expression.

Religious communities reported a consistently high level of autonomy in how they were allowed to implement COVID-19 protocols and said that inspections by government officials were unobtrusive and generally helpful. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, restrictions imposed on public events did not apply to the characteristic activities of religious communities organized in community premises or similar facilities. According to legal analysts in an interview with the newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat*, the legislation on communicable diseases that provides the legal basis for limiting public gatherings does not apply to religious gatherings because the latter are legally distinct from public events, as defined by the relevant legislation regarding public assembly. Catholic Church

officials said that when more than 100 persons were potentially exposed to COVID-19 after attending a funeral service in Kouvola, which led to a public outcry, the Church worked closely with government officials to develop improved internal protocols to continue offering regular services without additional public backlash.

In August, the Helsinki District Court ruled that men who carried swastika flags in an Independence Day Towards Freedom rally in 2018 were not guilty of ethnic agitation. According to the court, while flags carried in the demonstration were associated with the Nazi ideology of persecution and genocide of Jews, carrying a swastika flag was not sufficient for an ethnic agitation conviction. The court found that the defendants had not been shown to have spread a message that threatened and insulted specific ethnic groups. Prosecutor General Raija Toiviainen stated that he intended to appeal the decision. Leaders in the Jewish community spoke out against the ruling, saying that displaying a swastika flag represented expressing advocacy of genocide. According to a survey by the public broadcaster *Yle News*, most political parties supported criminalizing public use of the swastika flag, either through legislative action or through a Court of Appeal's decision. Of the major parties, only the Finns Party, citing concerns for individual freedom, responded that swastika flags should not be banned.

On October 1, Director General of the Finnish National Gallery Kimmo Leva stated the COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt plans to prepare a formal study of the state of research on the provenance of Holocaust-era art in museum collections, as recommended by the MEC in June 2019. At the same time, the Finnish Heritage Agency organized a roundtable discussion for Finnish museums on art provenance (the record of ownership of a work of art) related to both Nazi art and colonialism. Articles published in 2020 and 2021 through *MuseoPro*, a publication of the Finnish Association of Museums, showed an increasing consensus regarding the complications of art provenance. Leva suggested the Finnish Association of Museums might crowdsource the research, following the example of the Finnish National Gallery, which had published a list online of all its art lacking sufficient provenance from the period 1933-1945.

Yle News in May reported that the Ministry of the Interior continued its previously postponed study regarding whether religious symbols, including headscarves, could be worn as part of police uniforms. In January, the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* reported the story of Fardowsa Mohamad, a Muslim woman who withdrew from voluntary military service due to a similar hijab ban in the Defense Forces.

In November, the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture requested public commentary for proposed changes to animal welfare laws. Proposals included a section on the stunning of animals before slaughter, and explicitly did not include religious exceptions for ritual slaughter. These legal changes, which would affect kosher and halal practices in the country, were met by vocal opposition by Muslim and Jewish organizations. The Central Council of Jewish Communities in Finland in a public statement said the law trampled on religious rights and was in contradiction of rights protected under the European Human Rights Convention. Religious groups also stated that as the proposal did not include measures to rectify what they said were other problematic issues concerning animal rights, including tightening of animal stunning procedures, the effect was a culturally subjective law that exclusively limited the cultural traditions of religious minorities.

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health guidelines discouraged the circumcision of males and continued to withhold public healthcare funding for such procedures. In its guidelines, which were recommendations rather than requirements per prior Supreme Court rulings, the ministry stated only licensed physicians should perform nonmedical circumcision of boys, a child's guardians should be informed of the risks and irreversibility of the procedure, and it should not be carried out on boys old enough to understand the procedure without their consent. The ministry termed nonmedical male circumcision a violation of child bodily integrity and self-determination. Members of the Muslim and Jewish communities continued to express disagreement with the guidelines and stated that each time the issue came up for public debate, it was accompanied by antisemitic or anti-Muslim rhetoric in the press and more broadly.

Parliament took no action on a proposal submitted by 16 parliamentarians in 2020 that "the government... identify the need for regulation of non-medical circumcision of boys and take the necessary legislative measures to clarify the legal situation and define the legal boundaries of non-medical circumcision." In the parliamentary Legal Affairs Committee discussion on the October proposal, however, pro-ban MPs were able to get a mention in the committee report that the matter should be brought under consideration in the future.

According to representatives from Jehovah's Witnesses, the number of Russia-origin members of Jehovah's Witnesses applying for asylum based on stated religious persecution continued to decline for the second consecutive year, in part because of COVID-19 travel restrictions. The Finnish Immigration Service (FIS) rejected most of the claims by members of Jehovah's Witnesses and continued to

state that asylum adjudicators did not consider membership in the Church alone to be sufficient basis for an asylum claim. Information from representatives for Finnish Jehovah's Witnesses and the FIS showed 15 cases pending before the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) in the first half of 2021. At least 47 individuals who received negative decisions from the SAC renewed their asylum applications with the FIS based on changed circumstances and were awaiting new decisions at year's end.

In its Concluding Observations on the Seventh Periodic Report of Finland submitted in April, the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern "that the Act Repealing the Act on the Exemption of Jehovah's Witnesses from Military Service in Certain Cases (330/2019) has removed the exemption from military and civilian service accorded to Jehovah's Witnesses, in contrast to the Committee's previous recommendations to extend such exemption to other groups of conscientious objectors." The Human Rights Committee and the Finnish branch of Amnesty International both noted that alternative nonmilitary service amounted to the longest period of conscripted service, placing a burden on those who exercised their right to conscientious objection, including those who did so on religious grounds.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses representatives, two asylum-seeking families who identified as members of Jehovah's Witnesses faced deportation to Russia during the year because the families had exhausted all domestic legal remedies in seeking asylum. The families applied for interim measures to the United Nations Human Rights Committee; both received positive interim decisions that halted their deportation. While their applications were pending under the domestic immigration system, legal employment was no longer possible. As a result, the families became dependent on limited government services.

According to representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Finland, the FIS continued to deny most asylum applications for Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan. The representatives said the FIS only considered "prominent persons" in the Ahmadi community to be in danger, while other Ahmadis should be able to move to safer areas of Pakistan instead of seeking asylum. The representatives said that when deportation orders were appealed, authorities requested proof that the individuals in question were in danger instead of considering the systematic persecution Ahmadis faced in Pakistan. Ahmadi community leaders said they were never consulted on how to confirm or verify membership or persecution status in seeking asylum. They said that asylum applications had decreased during the past two years because individuals who faced persecution were unwilling to

start the asylum process, knowing that it would ultimately be unsuccessful. The representatives said the group had met with several government representatives, but that it had not yet been able to secure a meeting with the Ministry of Interior to discuss the challenges the community faced. In the past, the Ministry of the Interior had formally declined to meet with the community and had directed representatives to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

According to a senior military officer, the military continued to maintain a zero-tolerance policy regarding hate speech and hate crimes, including religiously motivated incidents. Unit commanders initiated investigations of reported incidents. If a commander judged the infraction to be minor, he or she administered a formal reprimand or other punishment. For more serious offenses, the commander reported the investigation up the chain of command, and military authorities might refer the case to civilian courts. The officer also stated that the military accommodated, per regulation, religious dietary needs and fasting requirements, and granted religious leave and prayer time to all personnel. The officer said that these procedures were maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic and that recruits still had access to military chaplains while pandemic protocols were in place.

Yle News reported in July and September that the Helsinki Police Department fired two officers, including the chief of staff, for engaging in communications with far-right hate groups that included anti-Muslim and antisemitic messages. Text messages revealed discussion of an upcoming “civil war,” with language particularly targeting the country’s Muslim, Somali, and Roma populations. The report indicated that an additional five police officers and one guard with ties to far-right groups were under investigation.

Religious community leaders repeatedly stated that reported hate crime statistics likely significantly undercounted incidences of hate crimes. A member of the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions (CORE Forum), an interfaith dialogue group, stated that many members of Muslim communities, particularly women who wear hijabs, encountered verbal and physical harassment that had gone unreported because previous reports were unaddressed. One Muslim woman said that she no longer used public transit, and a Jewish woman stated she was considering leaving the country due to increased harassment, but neither had reported incidents to the police. In October, the hashtag #miksienluotapoliisiin (“why I do not trust the police”), trending on Twitter, included citizens’ statements of religious harassment and neo-Nazi, racist, and anti-Muslim rhetoric that they

said police ignored. Representatives from the Helsinki police responded that they were taking the discussion seriously.

On January 5, *Yle News* reported that Jyrki Aland, the chairperson of the Turku local association of the Finns Party, said he wished for increased COVID-19 deaths in the Varissuo district of Turku in light of the area's ethnic composition. Sources quoted Aland as saying that the reports of COVID-19 deaths in Sweden in 2020 would be good for Varissuo because "it is a neighborhood where migrants live and possibly a small Corona cleaning job would do a lot of good there." Aland later stated that the comments were made in jest and apologized for them. According to *Yle News* on January 11, police were investigating the statements. More than 48 percent of the population and more than 80 percent of school-age children in Varissuo identify as speaking neither Finnish nor Swedish as their first language, and the suburb is home to significant Muslim and Catholic immigrant populations. Aland resigned as local association chairperson on September 20.

Yle News also reported in January that the Attorney General's office announced it would not prosecute SDP MP Hussein al-Tae for Facebook posts from 2011-2012, before he was elected to parliament. At a press conference in September 2019, al-Tae apologized to Jewish and Sunni Muslim communities for the posts, which were directed at those communities, and did not contest police findings that his posts promoted ethnic agitation. The Attorney General's office stated in its decision that al-Tae had actively and independently, without the intervention of authorities, sought to apologize and minimize the harm from his previous actions. On his website, al-Tae apologized to Jewish, Egyptian, and Sunni Muslim communities for the posts and stated that his previous writings are incompatible with his current worldview.

On April 30, the *Helsinki Times* reported that Christian Democrat MP Paivi Rasanen, a former Minister of the Interior, had been charged with ethnic agitation and incitement to hatred on the basis of sexuality in connection with a booklet she published in 2004 and a 2019 tweet. According to the article, the prosecutor examined statements in Rasanen's booklet, entitled "Male and Female He Created Them – Homosexual Relationships Challenge the Christian Concept of Humanity," and a tweet responding to news that the ELC was partnering with the Helsinki Pride Festival that stated, "How can the Church's doctrinal foundation, the Bible, be compatible with the lifting up of shame and sin as a subject of pride?" The prosecutor determined that these comments disparaged gays and lesbians, violated their equality rights, and fomented intolerance and hatred. Incitement to hatred on the basis of sexuality was outlawed in 1995. Rasanen defended her statements by

stating her religious beliefs were an expression of her freedom of speech and religion. Dr. Juhana Pohjola, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, faced a similar charge related to distribution of the 2004 booklet.

Yle News reported in May that authorities sentenced former chairman of the Finnish People First Party Marco de Wit to six months' probation for three counts of aggravated defamation and 13 counts of defamation, one of which concerned "violating the peace of religion." De Wit had published several articles online threatening and insulting Muslims, Afghans, refugees, and asylum seekers on the basis of their religion, skin color, and ethnic origin. More than 20 plaintiffs joined the defamation case against de Wit, who had posted social media items linking Finnish Muslims and police officers with child sexual exploitation. In addition, the court ordered de Wit to delete his social media posts and pay more than 40,000 euros (\$45,400) in compensation to the victims.

On October 7, *Helsingin Sanomat* reported that the Oulu District Court convicted former Oulu city councilor Junes Lokka of ethnic agitation and sentenced him to 70 day-fines with a value of 420 euros (\$480). The severity of a sentencing fine is measured by the number of day-fines while the monetary value of the day-fine is set by one's income level. The court had previously convicted Lokka on two counts of ethnic agitation regarding videos Lokka posted online in 2016 depicting Muslim immigrants and other immigrants as being inferior to other human beings. The prosecution brought the new charge as a result of comments Lokka made at an Oulu city council meeting in February 2020 in which he threatened Muslim immigrants and refugees and promoted the hiring of "death squads" to promote migration of minorities out of the municipality of Oulu.

In October, a court convicted Finns Party MP Sebastian Tynkkynen on charges of ethnic agitation in connection with 2017 Facebook posts that were part of a municipal election campaign. In the posts, Tynkkynen published several pictures and texts referencing "the criminal behavior of Muslim asylum seekers and immigrants towards women and children." Tynkkynen denied all charges, stating that his posts were moderate and in accordance with freedom of expression. The court fined Tynkkynen 70 day-fines, totaling 4,410 euros (\$5,000) and demanded Tynkkynen delete the posts from his Facebook account.

Ministry of the Interior and MEC statistics indicated the government allocated 117 million euros (\$132.65 million) to the ELC, compared with 115.6 million euros (\$131.07 million) in 2020, and 2.6 million euros (\$2.95 million) to the Finnish Orthodox Church, compared with 2.58 million euros (\$2.93 million) in 2019. The

MEC allotted a total of 824,000 euros (\$934,000) to all other registered religious organizations, equal to the amount allotted in 2020. This sum includes 524,000 euros (\$594,000) distributed across communities in relation to the number of registered members and 300,000 euros (\$340,000) to the Helsinki Jewish Congregation to continue its investments in security at facilities and events following antisemitic incidents. Religious leaders of minority religions indicated concern over the funding allocation. Several Muslim community leaders noted what they said was that a lack of cultural understanding regarding individual registration hurt funding for Muslim communities, while the Catholic Church lobbied for the ability of its members to designate funds for the Church through their taxes, as ELC and Finnish Orthodox Church members are able to do.

The MEC awarded 80,000 euros (\$90,700) to promote interfaith dialogue, consistent with funding in 2020. Three organizations split the funding: the CORE Forum, composed of representatives from the largest religious denominations; Fokus, an interfaith and intercultural organization; and Ad Astra, an organization promoting dialogue, interfaith projects, and inclusivity for children in schools, preschools, and daycare facilities.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2020, the latest period for which data were available, police reported 108 hate crimes against members of religious groups, including crimes involving assault, threats and harassment, discrimination, and vandalism, compared with 133 such incidents in 2019. There were 39 incidents involving Muslims, 28 involving Christians, including two involving Jehovah's Witnesses, 18 involving Jews, and 21 involving others or unknown religious groups. Police did not, however, cite any details of the incidents or release information on how many were motivated solely by religion. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Despite the ban on the self-described Pan-Nordic neo-Nazi NRM in the country, the group continued to operate a website, make statements promoting discrimination or violence against Jews and Muslims, and participate in demonstrations. Authorities stated that in 2020, Finnish members of the NRM began operating as part of the Towards Freedom group, considered to be the NRM's successor by the National Bureau of Investigation. While Towards Freedom's website remained active, it had not been updated since December 2020.

Former NRM members continued activities under new websites, including *Partisaani*, a far-right news aggregation website that spread anti-Muslim and antisemitic conspiracy theories and Finn Aid (Suomalaisapu), an organization that describes itself as a charity organization but also used anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric. These outlets often featured the traditional NRM logo that includes neo-fascist imagery.

Finnish researchers studying online extremism stated that neo-Nazi activities decreased significantly during the year following the ban of the NRM. *Helsingin Sanomat* reported in March, however, that the threat of terrorism posed by far-right groups, particularly as a response to racist and anti-Muslim “replacement theory” (which asserts that immigration and low birth rates among native populations will result in the replacement of native populations by foreigners of different races and religions), increased in the country, corresponding with the findings of a 2020 study by the National Bureau of Investigation.

In August, former Tampere City Council member and far-right party organizer Terhi Kiemunki led a protest organized by the Alliance of Nationalists commemorating the fourth anniversary of a terrorist attack by a self-identified soldier of ISIS in Turku, Finland. While the Alliance of Nationalists stated that it did not take a position on the activities or opinions of its members or discriminate against other nationalities, religions, and ethnicities, the alliance hosted regular “White Lives Matter” events and promoted news articles describing “replacement theory” ideology on its webpage. Leaders of the Alliance of Nationalists include former NRM members. Police estimated attendance at the protest at more than 100 participants, fewer than both previous memorial demonstrations. Police estimated attendance at a concurrent counterdemonstration by the anti-fascist group Turku Without Nazis as larger than the event sponsored by the Alliance of Nationalists. Police arrested one person for harassing behavior, but police did not comment on whether the detainee took part in the protest or counterprotest.

Stickers and posters with antisemitic images and messages were placed on the synagogue of Helsinki’s Jewish Congregation, in neighborhoods with significant Jewish populations, and on public property throughout the year. Sources stated the vandalism was both random and targeted. Antisemitic graffiti and stickers bearing iconography of the NRM also appeared at LGBTQI+ Pride events. Representatives of the Jewish community reported that despite available video and photographic evidence of those responsible, police made no arrests.

In September, anti-immigration activists organized a demonstration called Rise Finland (Nuose Suomi) in Helsinki's Parliament Park to protest the reception of Afghan refugees in the country. Speakers included former members of the NRM, and organizers advertised the event on the Norwegian branch of the NRM's website and on *Partisaani*. Speeches, broadcast live on YouTube, focused on what the organizers called "the Islamization of Finland" and called on Finns to take a stand for "Finnishness."

In a Swedish documentary series released in Finland in January, Linda Karlstrom, the coach of the IK Kronan gymnastics club of Kronoby, made several remarks questioning the existence of the Holocaust. The Swedish-speaking Sports Federation raised Karlstrom's case, but the Gymnastics Association Disciplinary Committee did not punish her on free-speech grounds. The disciplinary committee stated that, as a general rule, matters outside sports do not fall with its remit. As of March, Karlstrom no longer coached at IK Kronan.

Anti-Muslim and antisemitic organizations were active across a variety of social media platforms. "Replacement theory" references spread on Facebook, Twitter, the Russian social media network VK, and the American social media network Gab. The European Jewish Congress and leaders of the Helsinki Jewish community reported antisemitic incidents in European social networks, including posts in Finnish, throughout the year. Telegram, VK, Gab, and Twitter spread Holocaust denials and conspiracy theories of Jewish "world domination." According to *Helsingin Sanomat*, the Finnish Football Association announced in May that it would donate Nike sports hijabs to every soccer player who wanted one. The announcement was met with a backlash on Twitter, where a significant proportion of comments expressed opposition to the hijab.

NGOs working with migrants, including the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre, continued to raise concerns about the ability of religious minorities housed in migrant reception centers to worship without harassment from other migrants housed within the same center. A representative of the center said converts to Christianity in migrant reception facilities continued to face harassment, including social exclusion, threats, and blackmail but that there were limited security and social services resources to combat these issues.

Leaders of Muslim religious organizations were divided concerning the need for additional houses of worship that could accommodate the growing and diverse Muslim community. A representative of the CORE Forum said that Muslim groups continued to seek adequate houses of worship, but that they were hindered

by insufficient funds from purchasing property, given that most Muslims did not belong to congregations registered with the government and did not choose to register. Except for a handful of purpose-built mosques, most mosques were located in converted commercial spaces. Other members of the Muslim community noted that, in sum, the spaces available were sufficient, but that persons from some religious or ethnic backgrounds may not feel comfortable using the currently available spaces. According to one community leader, while the number of prayer rooms was sufficient, there were not enough spaces providing community services, particularly for women and children, or prayer services in Finnish. Members of the LGBTQI+ Muslim community noted that there were no “safe spaces” for Muslims who identified as LGBTQI+ and, in particular, for LGBTQI+ Muslims in asylum-seeker reception centers. Attempts to build a large grand mosque in the south of the country stalled; some Muslim community leaders identified politicization of zoning laws, anti-Muslim and racist attitudes in some local communities, and deep divisions across the diverse Muslim community as contributing factors.

Representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Finland stated that other Muslim groups continued to block the group’s formal membership in interfaith organizations. Representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Finland said the group planned to construct a mosque and cultural center in the future and that although the mosque would be built solely with funds from the Ahmadi community, it would be open to all religious and nonreligious individuals.

The nondiscrimination ombudsman’s office reported receiving 34 complaints of religious discrimination in 2020 – 3 percent of total discrimination complaints – compared with 37 complaints in 2019.

The website *Magneettimedia* continued to post antisemitic content and in January published an article entitled, “Biden: Jews in leadership positions in the White House, CIA, NSA, and Ministry of Finance,” and in April a piece entitled “World Power Aspirations of the Jewish Mafia.” The website also warned of what it said was a coming confrontation among the Christian and Islamic and Jewish worlds that could lead to the destruction of Christianity. Major companies and consumer brands continued to boycott the department store chain owned by the former owner of *Magneettimedia*, Juha Karkkainen, due to his antisemitic views.

In June, the Ministry of the Interior published a report by a working group dedicated to improving security at religious sites. The report found that while nearly all (93 percent) Christian respondents reported feeling safe in or near their

religious facilities, only 69 percent of Muslims and 33 percent of Jews reported feeling safe in the vicinity of designated religious spaces. The report's recommendations included improving state support for security for all religious communities. According to the leadership of the Central Council of Jewish Communities, proposed budget cuts to synagogue security funding were a significant concern. Representatives of the Ahmadi Muslim community said that they were not consulted in the production of the report and expressed additional security concerns, particularly about what they termed extremist groups.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, representatives of religious groups participated in virtual events hosted by other religious groups. Finn Church Aid (FCA), associated with the ELC, again hosted an interfaith iftar, bringing together virtually representatives from the largest religious groups, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and municipal governments. The theme of the event was "Loving Thy Neighbor in the Time of a Pandemic: An Inclusive Approach," and it discussed how interfaith dialogue and community organization might advance religious freedom during difficult times and restrictions, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, embassy staff engaged with officials from the Ministries of Justice, Interior, and Foreign Affairs to discuss religious intolerance, the promotion of interfaith dialogue, the provision of religious services for refugees and asylum seekers, and the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in asylum adjudications.

Embassy staff engaged with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clergy, lay activists from these communities, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other minority religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Embassy staff and members of the Jewish and Muslim communities discussed these communities' shared concerns about the impact of government guidelines discouraging male circumcision, religiously motivated crimes, and problems establishing or maintaining places of worship that fit the various needs of the diverse Muslim population. Embassy staff also discussed anti-Muslim discrimination with representatives from different Muslim congregations and met regularly with NGOs such as the CORE Forum. Embassy staff continued to engage with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses concerning the high rate of application denials for Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia seeking asylum on grounds of religious persecution. Embassy staff corresponded with representatives of the Ahmadi Muslim community, who expressed concerns over the high rate of

denials of asylum applications for Ahmadis from Pakistan and the security situation of the Ahmadi community in Finland. Embassy staff also engaged with the predominantly Muslim Uyghur community.

The embassy coordinated approaches on anti-Semitism with counterparts in the UK and Canadian diplomatic missions. Embassy officers used social media messaging to elevate minority religious voices and to promote greater Holocaust awareness.

Embassy staff participated in events hosted by minority religious groups and the CORE Forum. Embassy staff participated in an online seminar in September that promoted interfaith dialogue to confront persecution of religious minorities. In October, embassy staff participated in the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the CORE Forum, which included a seminar series on religious literacy and direct engagement with government officials and leaders of religious institutions on issues of religious expression, cooperation, and freedom.