

LITHUANIA 2021 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. On June 8, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued a decision recognizing that the parliament had violated the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms when it denied recognition to the Romuva, an ancient Baltic neopagan religious community, in 2019. On October 8, the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee reintroduced a draft resolution on the recognition of the Romuva community. On August 17, local media reported the government’s decision to cancel plans to redevelop the former Vilnius Sports Palace into a convention center. Some Jewish communities in the country and internationally had opposed the project because of plans for the redevelopment on the site of an historic 15th century Jewish cemetery. The spokesperson for the Prime Minister said that the COVID-19 pandemic “changed the market for conference tourism, and earlier visions of the project are being adjusted.” On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Member of Parliament (MP) Valdas Rakutis wrote an article in which he said, “There was no shortage of Holocaust perpetrators among the Jews themselves, especially in the ghetto self-government structures.” Senior government officials, including Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte, Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, and Speaker of Parliament Viktorija Cmilyte-Nielsen, rejected Rakutis’ remarks. On June 15, parliament adopted a resolution marking the 80th anniversary of the start of deportations of Jews and the resistance to the Soviet and Nazi occupations.

On August 10, protesters opposed to government measures promoting vaccination against COVID-19 carried signs in front of parliament comparing government COVID-related restrictions to the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust and that featured references to Nazis. On September 9, workers at the Jewish cemetery in Kaunas reported that grave sites had been vandalized, including at least three graves that had been dug up allegedly by thieves searching for valuables. In August, vandals damaged a sign listing information about a site in Kretinga where Jews were killed during the Holocaust. In both cases, police started investigations, which remained open at year’s end. Anonymous online commentators continued to express negative views of Muslim refugees.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers met regularly with government officials, including the Prime Minister, the President's foreign policy advisor, the Prosecutor General, the Ministers of Justice, Foreign Affairs, and Culture, the Speaker of Parliament, and MPs to promote religious freedom and discuss related issues, including restitution of private and heirless property for Holocaust victims and their families and combating religious discrimination. They also discussed these issues with Jewish community leaders. The Ambassador also met with the Archbishop of the Catholic Church of Vilnius and Tatar community leaders and discussed issues related to religious freedom with them. During a visit to the country in June, the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and the chair of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad met with government and civil society representatives to encourage the government to provide private and heirless property restitution for Holocaust victims and their families, promote an objective evaluation of the Holocaust, and identify specific Jewish heritage sites for preservation and restoration. On October 15, the Ambassador joined the director of International Jewish Affairs at the American Jewish Committee and cochair of the Good Will Foundation for meetings with senior government officials to discuss projects to preserve the country's Jewish heritage and prospects for private and heirless property restitution. The Ambassador and embassy officers also took part in and delivered remarks at multiple events throughout the year commemorating the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Holocaust in the country. In meetings with senior government officials, the Ambassador and embassy officials encouraged them to find ways to promote tolerance and integration of religious minorities, including Muslim refugees, into society. The embassy also used social media to promote respect for human rights, including religious freedom, throughout the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.7 million (midyear 2021). 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 5 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 neopagan religion practiced in the Baltic region 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.

Recognition entitles nontraditional religious groups to perform marriages that will be recognized by the state in the same manner as 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 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.

Religious groups may apply to the government for state registration, state recognition, or both. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) handles official registration of religious communities, associations, and centers. Groups wishing to register must submit an application and supporting documentation to the ministry, 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 data from the Center of Registers, there are 1,121 traditional and 197 nontraditional religious communities, associations, and centers that are officially registered legal entities.

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 ministry. 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.

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 it 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 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 ministry'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 application 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 (\$40.82 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, for distribution.

The country has no law for the restitution of private and/or heirless private property seized during the Nazi era.

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 members of religious orders. 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, of which 26 are Catholic and four are 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 (\$1,200) per student. National minority schools, which include schools established by the Jewish community, receive 20 percent more than other private schools – a total of 1,318.80 euros (\$1,500) – per student. This funding supports additional language study, as minority communities often do not speak Lithuanian as their first language. The per-student stipend covers only the program costs of school operation. Private school operators generally bear responsibility for covering capital outlays; however, according to 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 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 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 (\$160-\$330).

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.

On June 8, the ECHR ruled that the government had violated articles of the European Convention on Human Rights and Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion, and Non-Discrimination and the right to a fair trial when in 2019 the parliament did not approve the Romuva community's application for status as a state-recognized religious community, despite a positive conclusion from the MOJ. On September 7, the Constitutional Court ruled as unconstitutional the provision of law that states that if an application for recognition of a religious community is not approved, it may reapply but only after 10 years. Following the ruling, on September 30, the Romuva community resubmitted its application, and on October 8, the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee registered the application for consideration. At year's end, the application remained pending before the full parliament.

On August 17, local media reported the government cancelled a project to redevelop the Vilnius Sports Palace into a convention center because the COVID-19 pandemic "changed the market for conference tourism, and earlier visions of the project are being adjusted." The Jewish community opposed the project because it was located on the site of the 15th-century historic Snipiskes Jewish cemetery. Mayor of Vilnius Remigijus Simasius and business leaders publicly criticized the decision, commenting on the importance of the space as a venue for conference tourism.

As it has done annually since 2012, the government disbursed 3.62 million euros (\$4.10 million) to the Good Will Foundation, a public institution that distributes government funds provided "for projects that contribute to building a strong and active Jewish community," in accordance with its agreement with that institution. The government did not address compensation for Jewish private and/or heirless 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 1.59 million euros (\$1.80 million) to traditional religious groups to reconstruct religious buildings and to support other religious community activities. This amount was distributed to religious groups based on the number of adherents published by the Department of Statistics. Of this total, it granted 1.46 million euros (\$1.66 million) to the Roman Catholic Church and 80,700 euros

(\$91,500) to the Russian Orthodox community. The remaining 155,000 euros (\$176,000) was divided among the Old Believer, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Sunni Muslim, Jewish, Karaite Jewish, and Greek Catholic communities.

The OEO ombudsperson received four complaints of discrimination based on religion and decided that all of them fell outside its jurisdiction. One of the complaints, a legal challenge to the requirement that clergy of nonrecognized religions must pay compulsory health insurance tax, remained under consideration by a court at year's end. There were no court cases related to the other three complaints.

Seventeen researchers employed by the government-funded Genocide and Resistance Research Center of Lithuania (GRRCL) signed a letter on January 17 to the Speaker of Parliament expressing their concerns regarding GRRCL director Adas Jakubauskas. The letter described Jakubauskas as supporting the use of the GRRCL's research to wage "memory wars" by rehabilitating historical figures who resisted the Soviet occupation of the country but also collaborated with the Nazis during the Holocaust. On February 3, GRRCL advisor Vidmantas Valiusaitis, appointed by Jakubauskas, resigned from the GRRCL; he publicly cited the letter signed by the researchers as the reason for his departure. On April 1, the parliament dismissed Jakubauskas after a parliamentary working group issued a decision that he had caused the "polarization" of GRRCL staff. On April 15, the parliament appointed as GRRCL director Arunas Bubnys, who was then head of the GRRCL's Department of Historical Research. During his tenure in that position, Bubnys ran for parliament as a candidate of the National Union Party, described as far-right and nationalist, in the October 2020 parliamentary election. He was not elected, and in April, he announced he had left the party.

On August 10, in response to protesters criticizing government COVID-19 restrictions by comparing them to the Holocaust, Prime Minister Simonyte issued a public apology for the protesters' use of Holocaust and Nazi imagery, stating, "I apologize to those who were insulted by the use of Jewish symbols and comparisons with ghettos of Nazi occupation times by some of the protesters," and he described their use as "an unacceptable devaluation" of "a horrible tragedy of humanity." Speaker of Parliament Cmilyte-Nielsen and other public figures also made statements to media rejecting the protesters' references to the Holocaust.

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, MP and then chair of the Parliamentary Commission for the Cause of Freedom and the National

Historical Memory Valdas Rakutis wrote an article published on the news portal *LRT.lt* in which he said, “There was no shortage of Holocaust perpetrators among the Jews themselves, especially in the ghetto self-government structures.” Rakutis’ article drew public criticism from Prime Minister Simonyte, Foreign Minister Landsbergis, Speaker of Parliament Cmilyte-Nielsen, and other officials. Two days later, Rakutis stepped down as head of the Parliamentary Commission for the Cause of Freedom and the National Historical Memory. On February 22, Vilnius prosecutors announced they had declined to open a pretrial investigation into his comments on the Holocaust, and the Vilnius District Prosecutor’s Office concluded that Rakutis’ article did not constitute a crime or misdemeanor.

The municipal government of Ukmerge District continued to resist removing a monument to Juozas Krikstaponis. Archival evidence documented that Krikstaponis participated in the killing of Jews in Belarus in 1941. In May, the Minister of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to the mayor of Ukmerge urging removal of the monument.

On June 15, parliament adopted a resolution marking the 80th anniversary of the start of deportations of Jews and the resistance to the Soviet and Nazi occupations. The resolution passed with 103 MPs supporting and three abstaining. The single opposing vote was cast by the chair of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, Emanuelis Zingeris, the only Jewish MP. Zingeris stated publicly that he opposed the resolution because it omitted specific wording that had been included in similar resolutions from previous years, stating that the Nazis carried out the genocide in the country “with the help of local collaborators.” Jewish Committee of Lithuania (JCL) chair Faina Kukliansky stated she agreed with Zingeris’ concerns.

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, President Gitanas Nausėda tweeted, “Today we remember those who perished in the ghastly Shoah fire ignited by hatred, fueled by indifference. We remember because #NeverAgain.” Prime Minister Simonyte stated in a press release, “The horrors of the Holocaust brought tragedy to all of humanity.”

On April 8, Foreign Minister Landsbergis, Speaker of Parliament Cmilyte-Nielsen, members of the Jewish community, and Holocaust survivors attended a ceremony at Paneriai Memorial to commemorate Holocaust victims and to mark Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day. “It is a warning to all of us that the aggressive policy of violence, mutual hatred must be prevented today to ensure that such a tragedy will never happen again. To this end, we must constantly teach and

educate our society, especially the younger generation. We should not be afraid to speak boldly and openly about our painful history,” Landsbergis said.

On June 4, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a conference entitled “A Divisive Past: The Soviet-German War and Narratives of Mass Violence in East Central Europe.” The event featured prominent Lithuanian and international historians and critically examined the events of June 1941 (a revolt against the Soviet forces then in Lithuania, followed by a wave of violence against Jews when the Nazis invaded that marked the beginning of the Holocaust in the country). The conference also examined historical narratives surrounding resistance to the Soviet occupation and violence against Jews. Prime Minister Simonyte and Speaker of Parliament Cmilyte-Nielsen delivered opening remarks. Simonyte stated in her remarks, “The maturity of society is measurable as to whether it can accept truth from historians.”

On June 18, President Nauseda delivered remarks at a second conference on the topic, “June 1941: Occupations, Great Losses, and Resistance.” Nauseda praised the “patriotism” of the June 23, 1941, uprising, a revolt against the Soviet forces then in Lithuania and that also included a wave of violence against Jews that marked the beginning of the Holocaust in the country. He alluded to the role of Lithuanians in the Holocaust by adding, “Today we would have fewer victims of mass deportations in the Holocaust if it had not been for the collaborators, who willingly stood in the service of one of the occupation governments.”

On July 28, President Nauseda and Prime Minister Simonyte congratulated the Tatar community on the Year of Lithuanian Tatar History and Culture, as officially designated by parliament, which passed a resolution in October 2019 declaring 2021 the Year of Lithuanian Tatar History and Culture. In his congratulatory message, President Nauseda emphasized that the majority-Muslim Tatars had left a significant mark on the history of the country. Prime Minister Simonyte stated that Lithuanian Tatars are part of the country’s multicultural identity.

On September 23, the parliament passed a resolution to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Holocaust in the country, calling on municipalities to mark all sites of the mass murder of Jews, put old Jewish cemeteries in order, and set up appropriate direction signs and interpretive displays. The resolution also stressed that monuments and commemorative markers to those who collaborated with the Nazis and the Soviets must not remain in public spaces or be commemorated in educational programs. It also emphasized the need to continue documenting the

names of Jews who perished during the Holocaust for the purpose of including this information at massacre sites.

On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the wave of violence against Jews that began in June 1941 and marked beginning of the Holocaust in the country, the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania initiated a national project entitled, “Memory Road 1941-2021,” which took place from June to December.

On June 23, Prime Minister Simonyte participated in the first event of the Memory Road project, in the city of Gargzdai. In her remarks, she stated, “You cannot change that atrocious past; it is paramount that we remember it. We must tell our children and grandchildren what happened, just to make sure that this never happens again.”

On September 8, Foreign Minister Landsbergis participated in a Memory Road event in the city of Alytus. In his remarks, he stated, “The Holocaust was the largest tragedy of Europe of the 20th century; its scale in Lithuania is shocking.”

On September 14, President Nauseda presented state awards to 37 individuals who saved Jews during World War II. Almost all were awarded posthumously. In his remarks at the ceremony, Nauseda said, “Every September, as we mark the National Memorial Day for the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews, we honor the memory of Lithuanian Jewish citizens who were killed during World War II.”

On September 23, the Day of the Genocide of Lithuania’s Jews, Prime Minister Simonyte attended a ceremony in Vilnius to pay tribute to the victims of the genocide. In her remarks, she stated, “What happened is not only a tragedy of the Jewish nation, it is a tragedy of all nations.” Also on September 23, Speaker of Parliament Cmilyte-Nielsen attended a ceremony at the Paneriai Memorial, where she stated that the example of those Lithuanians who saved Jews during the Holocaust should be a part of the country’s public education.

The Presidential Palace hosted a September 23 concert in commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day in Lithuania. In pre-recorded remarks, President Nauseda stated, “Today we bow our heads in memory of hundreds of thousands of Jews lost during the Holocaust. In one blink of history a community that had been creating the multicultural state of Lithuania was annihilated.”

On October 13, President Nauseda attended the International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism in Malmo, Sweden. In his remarks at the event, he stated, “We still deeply feel the loss of our fellow Lithuanian Jewish citizens. We must ensure that future generations remember and reflect on the painful lessons of the Holocaust.”

In response to a Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objector whose appeal the Supreme Administrative Court rejected in 2019, the ECHR announced in 2020 that it would examine whether the country provided a suitable alternative to religiously motivated conscientious objectors. The case remained pending at year’s end.

On April 29, President Nauseda met with leaders of the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and issued a statement wishing Catholic, Orthodox, and Old Believer communities a happy Easter.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Anonymous antisemitic and anti-Muslim comments on the internet were common throughout the year.

Anonymous online commentators continued to express negative views of Muslim refugees. For example, one post on the news website *Delfi.lt* read, “They [Muslim refugees] need to be chased back; these are criminals. They are not going to work or follow culture, traditions, or the law.” When media site editors became aware of such comments, they removed them without maintaining a log, making the comments difficult to track routinely.

On September 9, workers taking care of the Jewish cemetery in Kaunas reported that grave sites had been vandalized, including at least three graves that had been dug up allegedly by thieves searching for valuables. Police started an investigation, which remained open at the end of the year.

In August, vandals damaged a sign listing information about a site in Kretinga where Jews were killed during the Holocaust. Police started a pretrial investigation, which remained open at year’s end.

On September 8, JCL representatives reported that a swastika had been drawn on a sign marking the Jewish cemetery at Snipiskes. Authorities did not investigate.

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 Simonyte, Speaker of Parliament Cmilyste-Nielsen, Foreign Policy Advisor to the President Asta Skaisgiryte, a vice chancellor, mayors, Ministers and Vice Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Culture, Justice, and Education, and MPs to engage them on ways to promote tolerance and integration of religious minorities, including Muslim refugees, into society and to combat antisemitism. Embassy representatives urged the government to address the remaining issues regarding compensation for Jewish private and heirless 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. The embassy also covered themes and events related to Holocaust remembrance and combatting antisemitism and intolerance extensively on social media and in interactions with local press.

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.

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. This included funding visits by students to the Tolerance Center and Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, as well as to historical sites related to the country's Jewish heritage.

Throughout the year, embassy officials participated in Memory Road events organized by the International Commission for the Evaluation of Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the beginning of Holocaust in the country.

On January 27, in reaction to the statement by MP Valdas Rakutis, the Ambassador tweeted, "It is shocking that on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, of all days, a member of the Seimas [Parliament] should espouse distortions regarding Holocaust collaborators in Lithuania and shamefully seek to accuse Jews of being Holocaust perpetrators." The Department of State Office of the Special Envoy for

Holocaust Issues retweeted the Ambassador's statement, adding "The Ambassador is exactly right. Distorting the facts about the Holocaust as one MP did today demeans the living and disrespects the dead."

On January 27, the embassy launched a virtual showing of *Nana*, a documentary film about the life of Holocaust survivor Maryla Michalowski-Dyamant. The event, which commemorated International Holocaust Remembrance Day, was part of U.S. government efforts to combat Holocaust distortion in the country. In response to a request by the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, on April 1, the embassy hosted a second virtual showing of *Nana* and a discussion with the filmmaker and the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues for teachers and students.

On March 24, the Ambassador, alongside the ambassadors of Israel and Germany, met with the Speaker of the Parliament and raised concerns regarding distortions of the role of Lithuanians who collaborated with the Nazis in the Holocaust.

On April 8, the Ambassador participated in a commemoration of Yom HaShoah at the Paneriai Memorial and delivered remarks, saying, "To distort history by diminishing the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust or rehabilitating the Nazis and their collaborators is to erode the values that bind our countries."

On April 22, the Ambassador spoke at the opening of Samuel Bak Path in Vilnius, where he stated, "As U.S. Ambassador to Lithuania, I am indebted to Samuel Bak, now a U.S. citizen, for his commitment to using artistic expression to guide us on a journey of tolerance and respect for the diverse voices of our world." Bak is an artist and Holocaust survivor.

On May 7, the Charge d' Affaires spoke at a commemoration ceremony for victims of the Nazi regime, stating, "Distortion of the Holocaust, including the memorialization of those who helped perpetrate it, remains a serious challenge, and it takes courage to examine it critically."

On June 4, the Ambassador delivered remarks at the conference "A Divisive Past: The Soviet-German War and Narratives of Mass Violence in East Central Europe." He stated, "We must acknowledge history. We must confront rising levels of antisemitism around the globe. We owe it to the eyewitnesses to speak their truth."

On June 13-17, the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues and the chair of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad visited the

country. With the Ambassador, they met with government officials and discussed restitution for private and heirless property seized during the Nazi era, the objective evaluation of history, and the preservation and restoration of Jewish heritage sites.

On June 23, the Ambassador joined Prime Minister Simonyte and Jewish community leaders at a memorial event in Gargzdai, the site of the first massacre of the country's Jews in 1941. The Ambassador spoke out against Holocaust distortion as "a threat to the bedrock values of our transatlantic alliance."

At a September 5 Memory Road event in Ukmerge, the Ambassador called for the removal of a monument to Krikstaponis, where he stated, "For people such as Krikstaponis – and sadly, he is not the only one – their grievous actions during the Holocaust cast a long and dark shadow over any good deeds that they may have committed during their lifetimes. These are not the true heroes of Lithuania." The Ambassador also sent a letter to the mayor of Ukmerge calling for the removal of the monument and raised the issue repeatedly with senior government officials.

On September 8, the Ambassador joined Foreign Minister Landsbergis at a Memory Road ceremony in Alytus, where the Ambassador said, "Today we recommit ourselves to educating our communities about the Holocaust. The United States is proud to continue to support Lithuania in this effort."

On September 23, Holocaust Memorial Day, the Ambassador spoke at the Paneriai Memorial, where he stated, "We must strengthen our commitment to democratic values and secure them for future generations. I can think of no more important way to honor the victims of the Holocaust and their families than by being here with you today. I remain as committed as ever to standing with you to accurately and objectively remember our history." The Ambassador also read portions of a letter written by an expert advisor to the Department of State on Holocaust issues and a senior U.S. official whose Jewish relatives were murdered in Lithuania during the Holocaust. The portions of the letter read by the Ambassador noted, "It is important to consider that Jonas Noreika might be both a national hero for his role in fighting the Soviet Union and a discredited icon for his antisemitism, and all must come to terms with his dark side as well as his exploits against the Soviets."

On September 28, the Ambassador hosted a reception in honor of the Tatar community in celebration of the Year of Lithuanian Tatar History and Culture. Members of the majority-Muslim Tatar community, as well as government officials, attended the reception.

In October, the Ambassador and the Director of International Jewish Affairs at the American Jewish Committee and cochair of the Good Will Foundation met with government officials, including Foreign Minister Landsbergis, Foreign Policy Advisor to the President Asta Skaisgiryte, and Mayor of Vilnius Remigijus Simasius to discuss Jewish heritage preservation projects and restitution of private and heirless property seized during the Nazi era.