

ESTONIA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares there is no state church and protects the freedom of individuals to practice their religion. It prohibits the incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. The law establishes registration of religious associations and religious societies and regulates their activities. Unregistered religious associations are free to conduct religious activities but are not eligible for tax benefits.

During the year, government officials expressed concern that the Russian government was attempting to manipulate the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP) to spread disinformation that supported the Kremlin's foreign policy. According to press reports, on October 10, following statements by Russian Patriarch Kirill supporting Russia's war in Ukraine, the Ministry of Interior summoned Estonian Metropolitan Yevgeny (Reshetnikov), a Russian national who heads the EOCMP, and gave him two days to clarify his position on the war. On October 12, Yevgeny released a statement on the church's official website saying that the church is guided by Estonian legislation, its own statutes, and Eastern Orthodox teachings in condemnation of war.

Board members of the Estonian Council of Churches met regularly with high-level government officials, including Prime Minister Kaja Kallas in May, to discuss the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and funding issues for the Council of Churches. Members also met in May with the President of Parliament, Juri Ratas, to provide an overview of member congregations' activities and discuss legislation concerning churches. On January 27, the government held an annual memorial event on Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Liiva Cemetery in Tallinn. The government continued to provide funds to the Council of Churches for ecumenical activities.

On June 9, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) published a review of human rights in the country. Since its last report on Estonia in 2017, ECRI found that public discourse had become less tolerant and political speech had "taken on divisive and antagonistic overtones," particularly targeting religious and other minorities. The ECRI review stated,

“anti-Muslim, antisemitic and anti-immigrant narrative have been documented on several occasions, primarily through verbal insults in public places” and that anonymous inflammatory comments against Muslims as well as other minority groups were commonplace on social networking sites and user-generated content.

On September 19, the Jewish community held a remembrance ceremony on the anniversary of the 1944 massacre of Jewish prisoners at the Klooga concentration camp. Officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture and the Chief Rabbi of Estonia participated in the ceremony. Local observers, including the heads of religious associations, stated that public discourse has reflected greater tolerance and such rhetoric generally was not an issue during the year, and cited the departure of the far-right party from the government in 2021 as a possible reason.

U.S. embassy officials raised the importance of combating antisemitism, promoting religious tolerance, and promoting Holocaust education in meetings with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Culture, Education and Research, and Foreign Affairs. On September 23, the Charge d’Affaires met the leaders of the Jewish community at a Shabbat dinner to launch the annual Yahad Conference, a three-day forum on Estonian Jewry in the city of Parnu. Embassy officials also met with members of the Jewish community, leaders of religious associations, including members of the Muslim community, representatives of the Council of Churches, civil society groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss religious tolerance and the state of religious freedom in the country. The embassy used social media to highlight the importance of religious freedom as a shared value.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2022 census (the most recent data available), the country has a population of 1.3 million; 29 percent of the population is religiously affiliated, 58 percent do not identify with any religion, and 13 percent do not state an affiliation.

According to Estonian Council of Churches data from 2020, 13.9 percent of the population belong to the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, 8 percent to the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and 2.3 percent to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. The Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia and the Roman Catholic Church together comprise 1 percent of the population. Other Christian groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Russian Old Believers, collectively constitute 1.1 percent of the population. According to the 2011 census, there are small Jewish and Muslim Communities of 2,500 members and 1,500 members, respectively. According to the head of the Jewish Community of Estonia, however, there are over 3,500 members affiliated and according to the founder of the Islamic Center of Estonia, the Muslim population continues to grow, with approximately 7,000 Muslims currently residing in the country. Most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population belong to the EOCMP and reside mainly in the capital or the northeastern part of the country. According to 2022 census data, the majority of the country's 2,290 Russian Old Believers live along the west bank of Lake Peipsi in the eastern part of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares there is no state church and stipulates freedom for individuals to belong to any religious group and practice any religion, both alone and in community with others, in public or in private, unless doing so is "detrimental to public order, health, or morals." The constitution also prohibits incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. According to the penal code, an act inciting hatred is a crime if it results in danger to the life, health, or property of a person. The law also states that violations are punishable by fines or up to three years in prison. The constitution recognizes the right to refuse military service for religious reasons but requires conscientious objectors to perform alternative service for the same amount of time required for military service as provided by law.

Gender discrimination and discrimination based on race or ethnicity are prohibited in employment, housing, healthcare, social welfare, education, and

provision of goods and services. Other forms of discrimination, including that based on religion, are only prohibited for employment. For these forms of discrimination there is no mechanism for affected individuals to receive state assistance or to claim compensation.

The law criminalizes activities that publicly incite hatred, violence, or discrimination on the basis of religion or other minority status if they result in danger to the life, health, or property of a person. Violators are subject to a fine or detention. The law prohibits any activity that knowingly interferes, without legal grounds, with the acknowledgement or declaration of religious beliefs or the absence thereof, or the exercise of religion or religious rites. Violators are subject to a fine or up to one year's imprisonment.

The law regulates the activities of religious associations and religious societies. Religious associations are defined as churches, congregations, unions of congregations, and monasteries. The law required religious associations to have a management board. The management board has the right to invite a minister of religion from outside the country. At least half the members of the management board must reside in the country, in another member state of the European Economic Area, or in Switzerland. The elected or appointed superior of a monastery serves as the management board for the monastery. Religious societies are defined as voluntary organizations whose main activities include religious or ecumenical activities relating to morals, ethics, and culture and social rehabilitation activities outside the traditional forms of religious rites of a church or congregation. Religious societies do not need to affiliate with a specific church or congregation.

The registration office of the Tartu County Court registers all religious associations and religious societies. To register, a religious association must have at least 12 members, and its management board must submit a notarized or digitally signed application, the minutes of its constitutive meeting, and a copy of its statutes. The law treats registered religious associations as nonprofit entities entitled to some tax benefits, such as a value-added tax exemption, if they apply for them. According to Ministry of Interior official data, there are more than 600 religious associations registered with the government.

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

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

The law requires the commanding officer of each military unit to provide its members the opportunity to practice their religion. Prison directors must also provide the opportunity for inmates to practice their religious beliefs. The state funds police and border guard, military, and prison chaplains, who may belong to any registered religious denomination, and it must guarantee religious services for individuals of all faiths.

Optional basic religious instruction is available in public and private schools and is funded by the state. All schools must provide religious studies at the primary and secondary levels if students request these studies. The courses offer a general introduction to different faiths. Religious studies instructors may be lay teachers. There are also private religious schools. All students, regardless of their religious affiliation or nonaffiliation, may attend religious schools. Attendance at religious services in religious schools is voluntary.

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

Government Practices

During the year, government officials expressed concern that the Russian government was attempting to manipulate the EOCMP to spread disinformation that supported the Kremlin's foreign policy. According to press reports, on October 10, following statements by Russian Patriarch Kirill supporting Russia's war in Ukraine, the Ministry of Interior summoned Estonian Metropolitan

Yevgeny (Reshetnikov), a Russian national who heads the EOCMP, and gave him two days to clarify his position on the war. Minister of Justice Danilson-Yarg stated that, “If it turns out that the clergy here really justify the war and terror that Russia is waging in Ukraine, there is no doubt that the state will have to react very strongly to this, including suspending the activities of this church in Estonia.” Minister of the Interior Lauri Laanemets said that he would propose to revoke Yevgeni’s permanent residence permit in Estonia if the metropolitan did not unequivocally condemn the statements of Patriarch Kirill by October 12. On October 12, Yevgeny released a statement on the church’s official website saying that the church is guided by Estonian legislation, its own statutes, and Eastern Orthodox teachings in condemnation of war.

During the year, three new religious organizations registered as NGOs in the government’s official registry: Vabadus Kristuses Teenistus (Freedom in Christ Service), Campus Mission International Europe, and Fides Foundation.

The Ministry of Interior granted €828,000 (\$884,000) to religious associations in 2022, from which the Estonian Council of Churches received the largest amount, €575,000 (\$614,000) or approximately 11 percent less than in 2021. The council, comprised of 10 Christian churches, including the Lutheran Church and both the EOCMP and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, and encompassed the country’s largest Christian communities. In addition to the Council of Churches the Ministry of Interior provided smaller grants to the Russian Old Believers, the Jewish Community, and the Anglo-Catholic church. The government continued to fund ecumenical activities, including ecclesiastical programs broadcast by the Estonian Broadcasting Company, youth work by churches, activities promoting interreligious dialogue, and religious publishing. The Ministry of Education and Research provided equal level of financial support to all private schools, including the religious private schools.

The government’s annual state budget included funds for preservation of architectural and cultural heritage, including for restoring historic buildings used for religious purposes. During the year, the National Heritage Board of the Ministry of Culture granted approximately €1,7 million (\$1.8 million) to the restoration and preservation of religious buildings. The board provided these grants to the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Estonian Apostolic

Orthodox Church and the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, as well as the Estonian Evangelical Brethren Church.

The government has laws and mechanisms in place for property restitution, and NGOs and advocacy groups reported no problems with the government's resolution of Holocaust-era claims, including for foreign citizens. According to the Department of Interior's Office of Religious Affairs, there were no problems or new claims concerning property restitution during the year. The chairperson of the Jewish Community of Estonia corroborated the department's statement.

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

On January 27, the government held its annual memorial event for Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Liiva Cemetery in Tallinn. President Alar Karis and the former Minister of Education and Research, Liina Kersna, spoke at the ceremony and unveiled a memorial for Holocaust victims.

Schools again participated in commemorative activities throughout the country. Former Minister of Education and Research Kersna, in cooperation with the Estonian Memory Institute, organized a winter school for students to learn about antisemitism, the Holocaust as a crime against humanity, and Jewish culture and history.

During May and June, parliament hosted an exhibition devoted to Eduard Profittlich, the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church who, after being arrested by Soviet authorities, died in 1942 in prison in Kirov, Russia. The exhibition, housed in parliament and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also marked 100 years of the country's diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

The board members of the Estonian Council of Churches met regularly with high-level government officials, including Prime Minister Kallas in May, to discuss the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and funding issues for the Council of Churches. Later that month, members met with the President of the Parliament Ratas to provide an overview of the congregations' activities and discuss legislation pending before parliament of concern to the churches. In September, board members also met with Interior Minister Laanemets and the

ministry's vice chancellor Raivo Kuut and discussed the council's activities and its budgetary situation. In October, Ratas attended a conference to mark the 20 years of the Common Interest Protocol between the government and the Estonian Council of Churches.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 9, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), an independent human rights body of the Council of Europe, published a review of human rights in the country. ECRI reviews each member state every five years. Since its last report on Estonia in 2017, ECRI found that public discourse had become less tolerant and political speech had "taken on divisive and antagonistic overtones particularly targeting refugees and migrants, ethnic or religious minorities and LGBTI persons." The ECRI review said that "anti-Muslim, antisemitic and anti-immigrant narrative have been documented on several occasions, primarily through verbal insults in public places" and that anonymous inflammatory comments against Muslims as well as other minority groups are commonplace on social networking sites and user-generated content. ECRI stated that there are several ongoing government and private efforts that aim to combat hate speech by developing a counter-narrative. Local observers, including the heads of religious associations, stated that public discourse has reflected greater tolerance and such rhetoric generally was not an issue during the year, and cited the departure of the far-right party from the government in 2021 as a possible reason.

According to government statistics, in 2020, the most recent year for which data was available, police registered three cases of physical abuse, breach of public order, or threats (as defined by law) that included hatred against persons belonging to religious or other minorities, compared with eight cases in 2019. According to government sources, at least two of these cases were tied to the victim's race or national origin. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On September 19, the Jewish community held its annual ceremony in remembrance of the anniversary of the 1944 massacre of Jewish prisoners of the Klooga concentration camp. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' head of the Estonian

delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, the Ministry of Culture's Head of International Relations on Integration Issues, the Chief Rabbi of Estonia, as well as students and teachers of the Tallinn Jewish School participated in the ceremony.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials raised the importance of combating antisemitism, advancing religious tolerance, and promoting Holocaust education in meetings with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Culture, Education and Research, and Foreign Affairs. The Charge d'Affaires met with key leaders of the Jewish community, including the head of the Jewish Community of Estonia, at a Shabbat dinner on September 23 to launch the annual Yahad Conference, a three-day forum on Estonian Jewry held in the city of Parnu.

Embassy officials also regularly met with members of the Jewish community, leaders of religious associations, including members of the Muslim community, representatives of the Council of Churches, civil society groups, and NGOs to discuss religious tolerance and the state of religious freedom in the country. The embassy used social media to highlight the importance of religious freedom as a shared value.