

# LITHUANIA 2022 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 September 29, for the second time, the Seimas (the country’s unicameral parliament) rejected a bill to grant state recognition to the Romuva, an ancient Baltic neopagan religious community. On November 21, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) issued a recommendation that the Seimas reject the 2017 application by Jehovah’s Witnesses for state-recognized religious association status. On December 29, President Gitanas Nausėda signed into law a revision to the 2011 Good Will Compensation law, passed by the Seimas on December 20, that will provide an additional €37 million (\$39.5 million) in compensation for Jewish private and heirless property expropriated by the Nazis and Soviets. The legislation provides symbolic compensation for property that belonged to Lithuanian Jews before or during World War II and was not covered by earlier legislation. Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, who personally sponsored the bill, stressed the country’s unfulfilled obligation to compensate survivors for remaining Jewish private and heirless property and to recognize the Holocaust past. On December 22, the President signed a law that creates a process for removing monuments promoting the ideologies of the Soviet and Nazi occupation eras. These include monuments to widely accused Nazi collaborators Juozas Krikštonis, who is honored by a monument in Ukmergė District, and Jonas Noreika, who is recognized with plaques in Vilnius and Šiauliai. On January 27, Prime Minister Šimonytė said the Vilnius Palace of Concerts and Sports could become a museum or memorial dedicated to the history of the country’s Jews.

There were numerous incidents during the year of Holocaust memorial sites being defaced with the “V” and “Z” symbols of Russia’s military and its invasion of Ukraine. The government denounced and investigated these incidents. Anonymous online commentators continued to express negative views of Muslim migrants. Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives said their community members

often faced hostility in society and that religiously motivated crimes went unreported due to a lack of faith in law enforcement.

In December, the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues visited the country and met with government officials and conducted several public outreach events to reinforce the importance of religious tolerance, Holocaust education, and compensation for Holocaust-era survivors. The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers met regularly with a wide range of government officials to promote religious freedom and discuss related issues, including restitution of private and heirless property for Holocaust victims and their families, and integrating religious minorities, including Muslim migrants, into society. They also discussed these issues with Jewish community leaders. The Ambassador also met with Catholic and Karaite community leaders to discuss issues related to religious freedom. Embassy officers held discussions on religious freedom with Russian Orthodox and Tatar community members. The Ambassador and embassy officers also took part in, and delivered remarks at, multiple events throughout the year commemorating the Holocaust. The embassy 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 2022). According to the 2021 census, of the 90 percent of the population that responded to a question regarding religious affiliation, 74 percent identify as Roman Catholic, and 6 percent do not identify with any religious group. Religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population based on the census include Russian Orthodox, Old Believers, Lutherans, Evangelical Reformed, Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics, Karaites, 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. The number of Orthodox Christians has increased in recent years, due in part to an influx of refugees fleeing Ukraine after the Russian invasion.

According to the 2021 census, 3,917 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 numbers 2,256 individuals. Of those, 196 are Karaite, who traditionally live in Trakai and in the greater Vilnius region. The Sunni Muslim population numbers 2,165, 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, and the right to broadcast religious services on national radio.

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 (\$34). Traditional communities also have a simpler registration procedure and need to submit only an application, decisions of their governing body on the appointment of their leader, and their headquarters address. The MOJ may refuse to register a religious group if full data are not included in the application, the activities of the group violate human rights or public order, or a group with the same name has already registered. According to the Ministry of Justice, there are 1,129

traditional and 198 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. The Seimas 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 the Seimas, 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 country has passed a series of laws focused on restitution and compensation of seized religious property. Under these laws, registered religious communities had until 1997 to apply to the appropriate ministry or municipality for restitution or compensation of religious property that they owned before June 19, 1948, the date on which the Soviet Union nationalized all religious buildings. 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 cannot apply for restitution.

In some cases, religious groups continued to use nationalized buildings after June 19, 1948, to support religious activities. 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 completed its review process in 2014, and no appeals were filed.

For Jewish-owned communal property nationalized under totalitarian regimes, a law was passed in 2011 establishing a compensation fund 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 (\$40.82 million at that time) over the decade ending March 1, 2023. Funds go to the Good Will Foundation (GWF), a public institution governed by national and international Jewish leaders, which distributes government funds provided “for projects that contribute to building a strong and active Jewish community.”

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. Those laws initially excluded individuals who either lacked citizenship or regained it after 2001. In December, the Seimas passed a new law providing €37.7 million (\$39.5 million) as symbolic compensation to remaining private claimants and for heirless private property seized during the Nazi era.

The government uses the term “confession” to refer to one or more traditional religious communities, grouped under a single faith. The government allocates funds to each of nine confessions for refurbishing houses of prayer, restoring old cemeteries, and preserving cultural heritage sites. Each of the nine confessions receives €3,075 (\$3,300) 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.

According to the National Association of Catholic Schools, there are 27 private Catholic schools as well as Catholic technological and preschool educational institutions. There is one Jewish school. 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 (\$1,200) per student. National minority schools, which include a Jewish school, receive 20 percent more than other private schools – a total of €1,318.80 (\$1,400) 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 Ombudsperson (OEO) investigates complaints of discrimination, including those based on religion, directed against state institutions, educational institutions, employers, and product and service sellers and producers. The Seimas 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 but may recommend cases to the Prosecutor General's Office for pretrial investigation.



The parliamentary ombudsperson is a separate entity that examines the conduct of state authorities in serving the population. The parliamentary ombudsperson may investigate complaints, recommend changes in the law or draft legislation to parliamentary committees and ministries, and recommend cases to the Prosecutor General's Office for pretrial investigation.

On April 19, the Seimas banned the public display of pro-Russian war symbols conveying support for the war in Ukraine viewed as having Russian pro-war messages, such as the St. George's ribbon, and the pro-war letters "V" and "Z", in public places. The Nazi swastika and other Nazi symbols are forbidden by law and incur punishment under the Lithuanian Administrative Violations Code. Violators are subject to fines of €300-700 (\$320-\$750).

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

### **Government Practices**

On November 21, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) issued a recommendation that the Seimas reject the 2017 application by Jehovah's Witnesses for state-recognized religious association status. The MOJ concluded that, while the Jehovah's Witnesses association had sufficient support in society, its teachings against military service fell short of the country's constitutional standard of public morals. Furthermore, the MOJ found that the association's teaching on blood transfusion was in conflict with both Lithuanian law and public morals. Jehovah's Witnesses church members pointed out that, as conscientious objectors, they were willing to perform alternative civilian national service in lieu of conscription, should such an option be created. However, such an option did not exist. With regard to blood transfusions, members pointed out that the state had existing legal means to overrule parents in cases of children's health. Jehovah's Witnesses appealed to the administrative court to annul the MOJ's negative recommendation to the Seimas on December 21. They asked the court to annul the MOJ recommendation to the Seimas, because, they stated, they were not given a chance to participate/comment during its preparation. Due to the fact that there is a pending judgement from an administrative court, the Seimas has not yet considered the Jehovah's Witness application for state-recognized status. In addition, a case of a Jehovah's Witness, "Rutkauskas v. Lithuania," has been pending at the European Court of Human Rights since 2020. The applicant, a

Jehovah's Witness clergyman, claimed that the European Convention on Human Rights was violated because he was not exempted from military service.

An application for religious association status by the United Methodist Church of Lithuania, which the MOJ submitted to the Seimas with a favorable recommendation in 2001, remained pending.

On September 29, the Seimas again did not approve the Romuva community's application for status as a state-recognized religious community. Seimas voted to deny the Romuva an upgrade to their religious status, despite a 2019 ruling from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) that the government had violated the rights of the Romuva by not recognizing their religion. According to media, Kestutis Masiulis, a member of Seimas, said, "I have no sympathy for... Romuva, but the decisions of the ECHR must be respected." Media outlets also reported the resolution was returned for more development before being presented to the Seimas for further action. Following the September vote, the community appealed to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe with a request to apply enhanced supervision of the implementation of the ECHR's decision.

On December 29, President Nausėda signed into law a revision to the 2011 Good Will Compensation law, passed by the Seimas on December 20, which will provide an additional €37 million (\$39.5 million) in compensation for Jewish private and heirless property expropriated by the Nazis and Soviets. The legislation provides symbolic compensation for property that belonged to the country's Jews before or during World War II and was not covered by earlier legislation. Prime Minister Šimonytė, who personally sponsored the bill, stressed the country's unfulfilled obligation to compensate survivors for remaining Jewish private heirless property and recognize its Holocaust past. Of the €37 million, five to ten million (\$5.3 million - \$10.6 million) will be allocated to private claimants who were previously not able to apply for restitution under a 2001 law that required recipients to be citizens of the country. The remainder of the funds from the new law will be distributed to projects benefiting the Jewish community through the GWF, which the government created in the 2011 restitution law.

The municipal government of Ukmergė District continued to resist removing a monument to anti-Soviet partisan Juozas Krikštaponis. Archival evidence documents the fact that Krikštaponis participated in the killing of Jews in Belarus

in 1941. Plaques to anti-Soviet partisan Jonas Noreika, accused of involvement in Nazi atrocities, remained on an external wall of the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius and on the wall of the municipal building in Šiauliai. According to the Vilnius municipal government, authority to remove the Noreika plaque rests with the academy. A stone in memory of Noreika also remained standing in Šukoniai village of Pakruojis District. In major cities and towns throughout the country, there also remained streets named in honor of Noreika and another person accused of collaborating with the Nazis, Kazys Škirpa.

On December 22, the President signed a law that creates a process for removing monuments from the Soviet and Nazi occupation eras, beginning in May 2023. It bans the promotion of totalitarian and authoritarian occupation regimes and their ideologies in public places. The law applies to the perpetuation or representation of symbols, persons, organizations, events, or dates linked to the Soviet occupation from 1940-1941 and 1944-1990 and the Nazi occupation from 1941-1944. Decisions regarding the removal of such monuments will be made by an inter-institutional commission, established by the Seimas and chaired by the director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Center, a state-funded research institute.

In her January 27 interview with the public service broadcaster Lithuanian Radio and Television (LRT), Prime Minister Šimonytė reversed the previous government's decision and said the run-down Palace of Concerts and Sports in central Vilnius could become a museum or memorial dedicated to the history of the country's Jews. The Sports Palace is located on the site of the 15th-century historic Šnipiškės Jewish cemetery. "For the whole past year, we have held consultations on ways to change the attitude and agree that that place, which has special value for Lithuania's Jewish history, should be dedicated to the history of Lithuanian Jews and it should be told there. Be it a museum, memorial, or a specific object for that purpose," Šimonytė said. Vilnius mayor Remigijus Šimasius welcomed the Prime Minister's position on the future of the Palace of Concerts and Sports. In his words, the previous government's decision to terminate the convention center project was a mistake, "but the commemoration of the history of the Jewish people in this sensitive place is a very good choice." At year's end, there were no further developments on remodeling the site.

As it has done annually since 2012, the government disbursed €3.62 million (\$ 3.8 million) to the GWF, in accordance with its agreement with that institution. The government did not resolve any pending restitution or compensation claims by other religious groups for property seized by the Soviet Union.

The government provided €1.59 million (\$1.7 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 €1.28 million (\$1.37 million) to the Roman Catholic Church and €67,600 (\$72,200) to the Russian Orthodox community. The remaining €249,000 (\$266,000) was divided among the Old Believer, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Sunni Muslim, Jewish, Karaite Jewish, and Greek Catholic communities.

The OEO received one complaint of discrimination based on religion but determined that there was no discrimination in the incident.

On June 7, the ECHR found that the government violated the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion of a Jehovah's Witness called up for military service and denied alternative civilian service. The court ordered the government to pay the individual €3,000 (\$3,200) by December 9, which the Ministry of Finance paid.

In May, Prime Minister Šimonytė wrote to Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople expressing support for those priests and believers in the Lithuanian Orthodox Church who wished to break from the Moscow Patriarchate over Patriarch Kirill's public support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She said, "...It is natural and humane that Lithuanian Orthodox have the right to profess their faith without conflict of conscience," and she invited the Constantinople Patriarchate to resume activities in the country. In June, the government banned Patriarch Kirill from entering its territory.

In April, in response to the defacement of the Paneriai Holocaust memorial with "V" and "Z" symbols in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Prime Minister said the act was "a clear provocation aimed at antagonizing the public of Lithuania. In one of the most tragic places in Lithuania's history, where the Nazis and other criminals murdered thousands of innocent people, the provocateurs have splashed another symbol of hatred."

The Human Rights Committee of the Seimas condemned the desecration of the memorial and on April 19, the Seimas passed amendments to the Law on Administrative Offences and the Law on Assemblies. The amendments prohibit the use of “symbols of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, which were used or are being used by those regimes for their past or present military aggression and/or propaganda of crimes against humanity and war crimes that were committed or are being committed.” The amendments specify in particular that “the two-color [black and orange] St. George's Ribbon shall be deemed such a symbol in all cases.” The St. George's Ribbon is a Russian military symbol associated with pro-Russian and separatist sentiment, with Seimas members saying the symbols were used for propaganda and intimidation. The ban also covers the letters “Z” and “V”, which have become the symbols of Russia's war in Ukraine.

On September 29, President Nausėda met in Vilnius with Katharina von Schnurbein, the European Commission Coordinator on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life. According to media reports, they discussed the implementation of the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism. The meeting also focused on Jewish life, the preservation of Jewish traditions in the country, and Holocaust remembrance. Media outlets also reported that in a separate September 29 meeting with von Schnurbein, Prime Minister Šimonytė said, “Our government adheres to zero tolerance towards any manifestations of antisemitism, Holocaust denial, or disrespect for the victims of the Holocaust.”

On September 28, the Prime Minister stated, “The Holocaust was an unspeakably difficult trauma for Lithuania and its wounds are still felt today. Not only did we lose an important part of ourselves physically, but our identity was also shattered. This is evident when we start discussing ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and when great Litvak [Jews of Lithuania and surrounding areas] creators are still not unequivocally accepted as an integral part of Lithuania's cultural history.” She also stressed the importance of reacting “firmly and swiftly” to a hateful and violent way of thinking, noting that failure to react to manifestations of antisemitism does not amount to tolerance of other opinions, but rather is “cowardice with destructive consequences.”

On September 25, Prime Minister Šimonytė issued a video statement on behalf of the government congratulating all Jews in the country and around the world on the occasion of Rosh Hashanah. “I send you greetings from Vilnius, a city that has a special place in the Jewish world,” she said.

On September 23, the National Memorial Day of the Genocide of the Lithuanian Jews, Prime Minister Šimonytė took part in events held in Rūdninkai Square and Paneriai paying tribute to victims of the Holocaust in the country. She said, “The Shoah mercilessly destroyed everything – people, their dreams, their talents, their relationships – and it did so under the guise of conspiracy theories, absurd deductions, and fear of otherness. Our state and nation, and the destinies of our people fell into pieces. Jerusalem of Lithuania ceased to exist.” She continued, “We are learning the lessons of history every day. And we come to fully realize that we all must do our part for the world to hear the pain of the victims, for the truth to prevail and never be hidden again and rest there for good and all, irrespective of the challenges. I firmly believe that we will all do everything together, protecting the common values of humanity, the unique heritage of Litvaks and educating the younger generation in the spirit of humanism.”

The Seimas declared 2022 as the Year of the Lithuanian Karaites in recognition of its 625th anniversary of their settling in the country. During the first half of the year, government institutions organized more than 20 programs dedicated to Karaites, including media reports, exhibitions, meetings, and an international scientific conference held at Vilnius University. On May 20, the Prime Minister congratulated the Karaites gathered at a commemoration event, noting, “The Karaites nurture their culture that has developed over millennia, and I am very happy that the restoration of independence significantly contributed to the national revival of the Karaites.”

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Prime Minister Šimonytė issued the following statement, “No statutory limitations are applied to crimes against humanity, and each passing year further highlights the scale of the Holocaust tragedy. During the Holocaust, we lost the large community that had created Lithuania, and its loss impoverished us. This testament of pain obliges generations to bear the burden of shared responsibility for what has happened and to make every effort to ensure that it never happens again.”

From January 2021 to June 2022, the New Religions Research and Information Center, together with the Lithuanian journalists' union, implemented a project entitled "Freedom of religion and beliefs in Lithuania: overcoming stigmatization and intolerance." The aim of the project was to raise awareness about human rights by cooperating with media and providing the public with information about the diversity of religions and beliefs in the country. According to the project, the research data showed that Lithuanians profess various religious beliefs and apply them differently in their lives, while religious minorities remained stigmatized and marginalized.

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 migrants, many of whom entered the country via the border with Belarus in 2021 but who have since moved onwards to other parts of the European Union. For example, one post on the news website *Delfi.lt* read, "Let them emigrate. Nobody is waiting for them here, and the more of them there are in Lithuania, the stronger nationalism in the country will be." When media site editors became aware of such comments, they removed them without maintaining a log, making the comments difficult to track routinely.

During the year, there were numerous incidents of Holocaust memorial sites being defaced with the "V" and "Z" symbols in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On April 1, and again on April 21 and September 18, the Holocaust monument in Paneriai was vandalized. On May 12, a monument to Holocaust victims in Darbenai village, Kretinga District, was vandalized. On August 23, monuments for Holocaust victims in Virbalis village in Vilkaviskis District were desecrated. On March 3, in Pasaltuonis village in Jubarkas District, assailants vandalized a monument to Soviet troops with a swastika. In all of these incidents, the Jewish community lodged complaints and police undertook investigations, which remained pending at the end of the year. In responding to the April attacks on the Holocaust memorial in Paneriai, the Jewish Community of Lithuania said it

“condemns the recent cynical vandalism at the Ponar memorial complex mass-murder site. Institutional and public apathy regarding such attacks is unacceptable,” and it called on the country’s leaders to investigate “this disgusting vandalism as quickly as possible.” On April 12, the Human Rights Committee of the Seimas condemned the defacement of the Paneriai memorial and “urged (*sic*) not to tolerate actions that denigrate the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, (*sic*) incite discord between the people of Lithuania, (*sic*) support the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine.”

On September 18, the Holocaust monuments at Paneriai, including those to Lithuanian freedom fighters and the Soviet-era memorial, were defaced for the second time during the year with “Z” letters. Police began investigating the violation of public order, and the Jewish community condemned the vandalism.

The police reported that on August 23, monuments for Holocaust victims in Virbalis village of Vilkaviskis District were found painted with “Z” letters. The Jewish community reported the incident, and police started a pretrial investigation.

On May 12, a monument to Holocaust victims in Darbenai village, Kretinga District, was vandalized. After the Jewish community brought the desecration to the attention of authorities, police reported that a pretrial investigation was started “for acts of vandalism in a cemetery or other place of public respect or for a grave vandalized because of national or religious motives.”

On April 21, police reported the Holocaust memorial in Paneriai was vandalized again with symbols of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Police investigating a Jewish community complaint said two “V” letters had been painted on the memorial, and that the incident was being investigated.

On March 3, in Pasaltuonis village of Jurbarkas District, a monument to Soviet troops was vandalized with the inscription “Putler Kaput!” (“Putler is broken,” a slogan used by individuals opposed to Putin) and a swastika. Police continued to investigate; the Jewish community condemned the vandalism.

In February, Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives said their community members often faced hostility in society and religiously motivated crimes went unreported



due to a lack of faith in law enforcement. For example, they cited the unreported experience of a Jehovah's Witness community member who knocked on a house door, and the owner opened the door holding a firearm.

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

In December, during her visit to the country, the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with government officials to discuss Holocaust education and property restitution. She visited numerous Holocaust sites and during public outreach events, she discussed the importance of religious tolerance.

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 Šimonytė; Speaker of the Seimas Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen; Foreign Policy Advisor to the President Asta Skaisgirytė; a vice chancellor; mayors; Ministers and vice ministers of Foreign Affairs, Culture, Justice, and Education; and members of parliament (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 successfully 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 met with Catholic and Karaite community leaders to discuss issues related to religious freedom. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in Lithuania and with Russian Orthodox members who advocated the church take a stronger position against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Embassy officials also met with the Catholic Archbishop of Vilnius, the leader of the Karaites, the head of the Tatar (Sunni Muslim) community, and Jehovah's Witnesses, to discuss the conditions of these communities and the challenges they face.

The Ambassador and other 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 issued a statement on December 6 welcoming and endorsing the government's new proposal for restitution of Jewish private property. During her visit, the Special Envoy visited numerous Holocaust sites and conducted public outreach to reinforce the message of religious tolerance – the livestreamed public panel at the National Library received more than 40,000 views.

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.

On September 23, the National Memorial Day for the Genocide of Lithuanian Jews, the Ambassador delivered remarks at the Paneriai memorial, noting, "We stand here today to honor the roughly 200,000 Jews murdered during the most brutal period in Lithuanian history.... They were terrorized and murdered not just by an invading force, but also by Lithuanians. And while there were circumstances in which courageous heroes protected Jews, this was far too little to prevent the near elimination of Lithuanian Jewry." The Ambassador expressed hope that "just as Lithuania is now removing monuments that glorify the Soviet legacy, that Lithuania will also remove monuments that elevate those who participated in Nazi atrocities, including Jonas Noreika and Juozas Krikštonis. This is a fitting way – and a morally right way – to remember those lost. This is a fitting way to stand against hate."

On September 19, an embassy officer attended the Holocaust commemoration event at Baltrusiai. In his remarks, he commented, "Four thousand Lithuanians were murdered here – Lithuanians who were also Jews. That they could be both patriotic Lithuanians and faithful Jews is a lesson to all of us about tolerance, about the complexity of our societies, about the need to see people as they are."

On September 4, an embassy officer attended a Holocaust commemoration event in Ukmergė and said, “You may recall that the Ambassador emphasized at last year’s gathering the importance of recognizing truth. The truth is that many Lithuanians protected their Jewish neighbors, hiding them at great personal risk. We recognize them to this day as ‘Righteous among the Nations.’ But the truth is also that some Lithuanians participated in the atrocities. We must recognize them as well. Among those collaborators was Juozas Krikštonis, whose monument stands not far from here.”

When speaking at the Paneriai memorial on April 28 to mark Yom HaShoah, the Ambassador said of antisemitism, “It is extremely difficult to bear the fact that these days there has been an increase in antisemitic incidents of vandalism in Lithuania, the wave of which has also reached this memorial. I condemn in the strongest possible terms these hateful acts that tarnish the image of this country and reflect someone’s efforts to distort the historical facts that we are working so hard to protect.”

On February 4, an embassy officer met with Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives to discuss religious freedom and the current situation of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the country.

On January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Ambassador spoke at the screening of the movie “The Good Nazi,” noting, “We remember the six million Jews, as well as the Roma, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, Slavs, and many others, who were murdered by the Nazis and their local collaborators. From working with local institutions to strengthen Holocaust education for students, to supporting exchanges between American and Lithuanian educators, to amplifying the voices of figures such as a Lithuanian American author and granddaughter of Jonas Noreika in speaking out against the memorialization of Nazi collaborators, we engage at every level of Lithuanian society nearly every day to promote the objective analysis of history.”