

# **ESTONIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The constitution protects the freedom to practice one's religion and prohibits the incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. Religious groups must register with county or city courts to receive tax benefits. The government held a memorial event for victims of the Holocaust. The government sponsored educational programs for teachers on best classroom practices for teaching about the Holocaust.

According to media reports, instances of hostility based on ethnicity, race, and anti-Muslim sentiment were more frequent than in previous years. The Jewish community confirmed unidentified individuals painted a swastika on a Holocaust monument in Harju County in August.

The U.S. embassy engaged the government on religious freedom issues, including promoting tolerance and diversity, in meetings with officials at the ministries of foreign, social, and internal affairs. The ambassador and embassy staff met with religious leaders, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote dialogue on anti-Semitism and education on the Holocaust.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to 2011 census data, 29 percent is religiously affiliated, 54 percent does not identify with any religion, and 17 percent declined to answer the question on the census. According to 2015 data from churches and congregations, the Estonian Orthodox Church (EOCMP), which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, has approximately 170,000 members (13.1 percent of the population), while the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church has 159,000 members (12.2 percent). The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church has 30,000 members (2.3 percent). Other Christian groups, including Baptists, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Russian Old Believers, members of the Christian Free Congregations, and Pentecostals, collectively constitute 1.2 percent of the population. Members of the Russian Old Believers live primarily along the west bank of Lake Peipsi in the east. According to the census, there are more than 2,000 Jews and 1,500 Muslims. Most religious adherents among the Russian-speaking population are EOCMP members and reside mainly in the capital or the northeastern part of the country.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal Framework

The constitution states 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. 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 as provided by law.

The law regulates the activities of religious associations and religious societies. Religious associations are defined as churches, congregations, unions of congregations, and monasteries. Religious societies are defined as voluntary organizations whose main activities include religious or ecumenical activities relating to morals, ethics, culture, and social rehabilitation activities outside the traditional forms of religious rites of a church or congregation and need not be connected with a specific church or congregation.

The registration office of the Tartu County Court registers religious associations. Associations that are churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are required to have a management board; only citizens and legal residents may be members of the board. Monasteries are required to have an elected or appointed superior. In order to register formally, a religious association must have at least 12 members, and its management board must submit an application signed and notarized by all board members, the minutes of its constitutive meeting, and a copy of its statutes. The registration requirements for religious associations fall under the law governing nonprofit associations. The law treats registered religious associations as nonprofit entities entitled to some tax benefits, such as a value-added tax exemption. There are more than 550 religious associations registered with the government.

The law does not prohibit activities of religious associations that are not registered. Unregistered religious associations, however, cannot act as legal persons and do not receive tax benefits.

Religious societies are registered according to the law governing nonprofit associations and are entitled to the same tax benefits as religious associations. In

order to register as an NGO, a religious society must have a founding contract and statutes approved by its founders, which may be physical or legal persons. The minimum number of founders is two. The society must submit its registration application to the business registry electronically or on paper.

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 military and prison chaplains, who may belong to any registered religious denomination and must serve individuals of all faiths.

Optional basic religious instruction is available in public and private schools, funded by the state. A school must offer religious studies at the primary or secondary level if at least 12 students request it. Courses offer a general introduction of different faiths. Religious studies instructors may be lay teachers or clergy provided by religious groups. There are no restrictions on private religious schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

Two religious associations were registered throughout the year, one in Valga, the Rescue Ship Christian Pentecostal Congregation, and one in Narva, the 12 Sacred Apostles Congregation of the Estonian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate.

The government provided 646,000 euros (\$681,000) to the Estonian Council of Churches, comprised of 10 Christian churches, including the Lutheran Church and both Orthodox churches. The state did not determine how the funds were allocated; some of these funds were distributed among the member churches and some were used for ecumenical projects and training for members of the boards of council-member congregations to encourage participation in civil society. The government consulted with representatives of the Muslim community and the Council of Churches regarding pending legislation on refugee and immigration issues.

On February 6, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), which held seven seats in parliament, organized events at cafes to protest against immigration

and the “Islamization of Europe.” EKRE participated in Fortress Europe, which united anti-immigration movements (such as PEGIDA) in European countries.

On January 27 the government, in association with the Jewish Community, held an annual memorial event on Holocaust Remembrance Day at Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. The minister of culture delivered a speech on religious tolerance and laid a wreath in memory of victims of the Holocaust. On the same date schools participated in Holocaust commemorative activities throughout the country.

On January 29 the ministry of education and research in cooperation with other organizations sponsored a seminar for history and civics teachers to introduce them to best practices in the classroom for Holocaust commemoration. The event took place in the Museum of Occupations.

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

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Local media, including the newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht*, reported more instances of hostility based on anti-Muslim sentiments than in previous years. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

The Soldiers of Odin, a self-proclaimed patriotic group, which professed its aim as countering crime by “Islamist intruders,” started a branch in Finland early in the year. According to *Reuters* and other media, the group announced plans to set up vigilante groups in several cities throughout the country. The prime minister and defense minister condemned the plans. By year’s end, there were no reports of any vigilante groups having formed.

The Jewish Community confirmed in August that unidentified individuals vandalized a Holocaust monument with a swastika in Kalevi-Liiva, Harju County. Police investigated the incident but had not identified the perpetrators by year’s end.

Two Lutheran congregations, Harju Risti Congregation and Tallinn Bethel Congregation, accommodated refugee families.

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

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom issues with the ministries of internal, social, and foreign affairs and engaged the government on promoting religious tolerance, particularly in light of the crisis of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe.

Embassy officials met with members of the Jewish community, the NGO Human Rights Center, and the Estonian Council of Churches, an association of Christian groups, to discuss religious freedom in the country.

The education ministry and embassy jointly funded the travel of two teachers to a summer teacher-training program on Holocaust education in the United States. The teachers incorporated the training into the Holocaust education program included in the national curriculum.

The ambassador spoke about the importance of a thriving Jewish community at the annual Yahad event, organized by the Jewish community.