

# **ESTONIA 2017 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 provides the procedure for 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. The government continued to provide funds for the Council of Churches for ecumenical activities. Government officials participated in annual memorials for victims of the Holocaust and continued their sponsorship of programs on the best classroom practices for teaching about the Holocaust. On January 27, the government held its annual commemoration at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, during which a government representative emphasized the Holocaust's universal relevance and the need to continue studying its lessons. The Conservative People's Party of Estonia's (EKRE) platform for local elections in Tallinn included a promise not to allow the construction of a mosque in the capital city.

In 2016, the latest year for which data was available, police registered six hate crime cases involving religion.

U.S. embassy officials continued meeting with government officials to promote religious tolerance and diversity. The Ambassador and embassy staff continued to support dialogue on anti-Semitism and Holocaust education in meetings with government officials, religious leaders, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 29 percent of the population is religiously affiliated, 54 percent does not identify with any religion; and 17 percent does not state an affiliation. According to January 1 data from the Council of Churches, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church has 180,000 members (13.8 percent of the population), while the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP) has 170,000 members (13.1 percent). The Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church has 30,000 members (2.3 percent). The Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia and the Roman Catholic Church in

Estonia both have over 6,000 members (0.9 percent each). Other Christian groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Methodists, and 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. 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 census data, most of the country's community of Russian Old Believers lives 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. The law 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 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. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are required to have a management board; only citizens and legal residents who are eligible to vote in local council elections may be members of the board. 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, 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 and religious societies.

In order 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 if they apply for them, such as a value-added tax exemption. There are more than 550 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. In order 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 department.

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 must guarantee religious services for individuals of all faiths.

Optional basic religious instruction is available in public and private schools, 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 or clergy provided by religious groups. There are also private religious schools. All students, regardless of their religious affiliation or nonaffiliation, may attend religious schools. Attendance at religious services at religious schools is voluntary. The majority of students attending a private religious school are not associated with the school's religious affiliation. Most congregations have Sunday schools.

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

## **Government Practices**

According to the NGO register, at least two religious associations registered during the year, including evangelical Protestant groups.

The government increased its allocation of funds to the Estonian Council of Churches by approximately 50,000 euros (\$60,000) to 710,000 euros (\$852,000) from 646,000 euros (\$776,000) in 2016. The council, which comprises 10 Christian churches – including the Lutheran Church and both Orthodox churches – continued to serve as an organization joining the country’s largest Christian communities. Funds provided by the state were given to the Council of Churches for ecumenical activities, including ecclesiastical programs aired on the Estonian Broadcasting Company, youth work by churches, activities promoting interreligious dialogue, and religious publishing. The government did not play a role in determining how the council distributed the funds.

The Conservative People’s Party of Estonia’s (EKRE) platform for local elections in Tallinn included a promise not to allow the construction of a mosque in the capital city.

A political candidate from EKRE posted a platform for the 2019 European Parliament elections that included decriminalizing Holocaust denial and implementing the “correct teaching of the history of the Third Reich.” Although his statements received coverage from international media, he received only 91 votes (0.6 percent of the total votes cast in the district in which he competed) in October local elections and was not supported by his party.

On January 27, the government held its annual commemoration for International Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. Schools throughout the country also participated in commemorative activities. The Ministry of Education and Research, in cooperation with the Unitas Foundation, Estonian NATO Association, and Jewish community, sponsored a seminar for history and civics teachers from across the country to introduce them to best practices in the classroom for teaching about the Holocaust.

On September 19, the president of the parliament, Eiki Nestor, laid a wreath to commemorate approximately 1,800 to 2,000 persons, mostly Jews, killed at the Nazi concentration camp at Klooga. In his remarks, Nestor said it was necessary to continue to “commemorate the innocent people that had been murdered” and to recognize that “the evil that murdered people had not disappeared from the world.”

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

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

In 2016, the latest year for which data was available, police registered six hate crime cases involving religion.

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

Embassy officials discussed the continued appearance of anti-Muslim sentiment on social media with officials from the ministries of internal, social, and foreign affairs and engaged the government on promoting religious tolerance.

Embassy officials met with members of the Jewish community, representatives of the Council of Churches, and NGOs to discuss religious tolerance. In January the Ambassador hosted religious group leaders to a commemoration of U.S. National Religious Freedom Day, where he urged them to engage in more interreligious dialogue to help increase religious tolerance.

In November the Ambassador hosted a follow-up meeting with religious leaders and government officials to further discuss respect for religious diversity and pluralism in honor of the International Day of Tolerance.

The embassy again joined with the Ministry of Education to fund the travel of two teachers to a summer teacher-training program on Holocaust education in the U.S. The teachers said they had incorporated what they had learned into the Holocaust education portion of the national curriculum.