

# **ESTONIA 2020 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. The government continued to provide funds to the Council of Churches for ecumenical activities. On January 27, the government held an annual memorial event on Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. In April, the government pledged two million euros (\$2.45 million) for support of religious associations struggling as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, both to the members of the Council of Churches and to other independent congregations, including the Estonian Jewish Congregation and the Jewish Community of Estonia.

According to government statistics, in 2019 (the most recent data available), police registered eight cases of physical abuse, breach of public order, or threats (as defined by law) that included hatred against persons from religious or other minorities, compared with no cases in 2018. According to government sources, most of the cases were tied to the victim's race or national origin. On October 25, at the height of the renewal of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, pigs' heads were found in front of the Estonian Islamic Center and the embassies of Turkey and Azerbaijan. The perpetrator was charged for littering and fined 20 euros (\$25).

U.S. embassy staff continued to support dialogue on religious freedom, anti-Semitism, and Holocaust education in meetings with government officials, religious leaders, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The embassy used social media to promote religious freedom, including a Facebook post celebrating International Religious Freedom Day.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census (the most recent data available), 29 percent of the population is religiously affiliated, 54 percent do not identify with any religion, and 17 percent do not state an affiliation. According to the Estonian

Council of Churches data from December 2019, 13.8 percent of the population belong to the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, while 13.1 percent belong to the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), and 2.3 percent belong to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. The Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia and the Roman Catholic Church in Estonia 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. 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 2011 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. 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.

The law criminalizes activities that publicly incite hatred, violence, or discrimination on the basis of religion or other minority status if it results 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 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. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are required to have a management board. The management board has the right to invite a minister of religion from outside the country. The residence of at least half the members of the management board must be 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 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. 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 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.

### **Government Practices**

According to the government's NGO register, two religious associations – one Protestant and one Buddhist – were registered during the year.

The government allocated 646,000 euros (\$793,000) to the Estonian Council of Churches. 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. 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.

In April, the government pledged two million euros (\$2.45 million) for support of religious associations struggling as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, both to the members of the Council of Churches and to other independent congregations, including the Estonian Jewish Congregation and the Jewish Community of Estonia.

During the year, project coordinators completed plans for the restoration and renovation of Alexander's Cathedral of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Narva. The project was being carried out using 844,000 euros (\$1.04 million) in government funds pledged in 2019.

On January 27, the government held its annual memorial event for Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. Schools again participated in commemorative activities throughout the country. The Education and Research Ministry, in cooperation with the Jewish Community of Estonia, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the Estonian Memory

Institute, and the Museum of Occupation, organized an essay-writing competition for children on topics related to the Holocaust again this year.

The government is a member of IHRA.

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

On October 25, at the height of the renewal of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan, pigs' heads were found in front of the Estonian Islamic Center and the embassies of Turkey and Azerbaijan. Police identified the perpetrator and initiated misdemeanor proceedings pursuant to article regulating incitement to hatred. The perpetrator was ultimately charged for littering and fined 20 euros (\$25).

According to government statistics, in 2019, the most recent year for which data was available, police registered eight cases of physical abuse, breach of public order, or threats (as defined by law) that included hatred against persons from religious or other minorities, compared with no cases in 2018. According to government sources, most of these cases were tied to the victim's race or national origin.

According to many religious and other civil society leaders, there was societal support for religious freedom and tolerance.

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

Embassy officials raised the importance of combating anti-Semitism, promoting religious tolerance, and promoting Holocaust education in meetings with government officials from the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs.

Embassy officials met with members of the Jewish community, leaders of religious associations, 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 promote religious freedom, including a Facebook post celebrating International Religious Freedom Day.