

LATVIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides every person the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and it specifies the separation of church and state. By law, eight “traditional” religious groups (seven Christian groups and Jews) receive rights and privileges other groups do not. The government approved the applications of four new religious groups to register during the year. In October, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled on a 2016 religious discrimination case brought by a Jehovah’s Witness family who sought to take their child abroad for surgery in order to avoid a blood transfusion but were refused authorization by the Ministry of Health. The ECJ found religion could be taken into consideration in this case, and the Supreme Court, which had sought the ECJ determination, returned the case to the appellate court, which had denied the family’s appeal of the ministry’s decision. Raivis Zeltits, a member of the National Alliance (NA) political party, who in his writings likened diversity, including religious diversity, to “cultural terrorism,” established a nationalist nongovernmental organization (NGO) with a logo that resembled a stylized swastika. Zeltits denied any association between the NGO’s symbol and the Nazi swastika. According to the annual report of the security police, authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities but made no interventions during the year. Muslim community members again said they did not feel pressured or singled out by authorities due to their faith. President Egils Levits and other senior government officials attended several Holocaust memorial events throughout the year.

Jewish and Muslim groups cited instances of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate speech in news articles and on social media. A Muslim community leader said Muslims generally did not feel suppressed or subject to discrimination. In response to COVID-19 restrictions, most of the annual March 16 commemorations of the Latvian Legionnaires who fought in German Waffen-SS units against the Soviet Army in World War II, were canceled. Organizers converted the annual memorial march into a wreath-laying event, which was attended by at least one NA parliamentarian. On November 30, approximately 200 persons lit thousands of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga in remembrance of Jews massacred by the Nazis in Rumbula Forest in 1941.

In October, the Secretary of State wrote Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics to reiterate the importance of resolving the country’s obligations under the Terezin Declaration. U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged with senior government

officials and parliamentarians on the importance of religious tolerance and restoring expropriated property to the Jewish community. Embassy officials also engaged with NGOs MARTA Center and Safe House as well as representatives of various religious groups, including the Lutheran Church and the Jewish and Muslim communities, to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities published by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), based on 2019 data, the largest religious groups are Lutheran (37 percent), Roman Catholic (18 percent), and Latvian Orthodox Christian (13 percent), the latter predominantly native Russian speakers. Thirty-one percent of the population is unaffiliated with any religious group. The Latvian Orthodox Church is a self-governing Eastern Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Central Statistical Bureau reports there are 4,436 persons who identify as Jewish, and the Council of Jewish Communities believes there are around 8,200 persons with Jewish heritage. The Muslim community reports approximately 1,000 Muslims resident in the country, while the MOJ's report of religious organizations lists 58 active members in three Muslim congregations. Separately, there is a small Ahmadi Muslim community. Other religious groups, which together constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, evangelical Christians, Methodists, Calvinists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states everyone has the right to “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion,” and provides “The church shall be separate from the state.” It allows restrictions on the expression of religious beliefs to protect public safety, welfare, morals, the democratic structure of the state, and others' rights. The law gives eight “traditional” religious groups – Lutherans, Catholics, Latvian Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jews – some rights and privileges not given to other religious groups, including the right to teach religion courses in public schools and the right to officiate at marriages without obtaining a civil marriage license from the MOJ. These eight groups are also the only religious groups represented on the government's Ecclesiastical

Council, an advisory body established by law and chaired by the Prime Minister that meets on an ad hoc basis to comment and provide recommendations on religious issues. These recommendations do not carry the force of law.

Separate laws define relations between the state and each of these eight groups. The rights and activities of other religious groups are covered by a law on religious organizations.

Although the government does not require religious groups to register, the law accords registered religious groups a number of rights and privileges, including legal status to own property and conduct financial transactions, eligibility to apply for funds for religious building restoration, and tax deductions for donors. Registration also allows religious groups to perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, and military units and to hold services in public places such as parks or public squares, with the agreement of the local government. The law accords the same rights and privileges to the eight traditional religious groups, which it treats as already registered.

Unregistered groups do not possess legal status and may not own property in the name of the group, although individual members may hold property. Unregistered groups may not conduct financial transactions or receive tax-free donations. They may not perform religious activities in hospitals, prisons, or military units and generally may not hold worship services in public places without special permission. The law stipulates fines ranging from 40 to 200 euros (\$49 to \$250) if an unregistered group carries out any of these activities.

By law, to register as a congregation, a religious group must have at least 20 members age 18 or older. Individuals with temporary residency status, such as asylum seekers and foreign diplomatic staff, may count as members for the purpose of registration only during the authorized period of their residency permits. To apply, religious groups must submit charters explaining their objectives and activities; a list of all group members (full name, identification number, and signature); the names of the persons who will represent the religious organization; minutes of the meeting founding the group; confirmation that members voted on and approved the statutes; and a list of members of the audit committee (full name, identification number, and title). The audit committee is responsible for preparing financial reports on the group and ensuring it adheres to its statutes. The MOJ determines whether to register a religious group as a congregation. The ministry may deny an application if it deems registration would

threaten human rights, the democratic structure of the state, public safety, welfare, or morals. Groups denied registration may appeal the decision in court.

Ten or more congregations with a total of at least 200 members of the same faith or denomination, each with permanent registration status, may form a religious association or church. Groups with religious association status, or status as a private society or foundation, may establish theological schools and monasteries. The law does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association of a single faith or denomination or of more than one religious group with the same or similar name.

According to the law, all traditional and registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the MOJ by March 1 regarding their activities and goals. They must also provide other data, including congregation size, number of clergy, number of weddings, other ceremonies performed, and details of group governance and financial status.

The law criminalizes hate speech and the incitement of hatred on the basis of religious affiliation but requires legal proof, determined at trial, of substantial harm for conviction. Penalties range from community service or fines to up to three years of imprisonment. Committing a crime for religious reasons may also be considered an aggravating factor at trial.

The government funds required religion and ethics classes in public schools in first through third grade. A school must receive the approval of the parents of at least 10 students in order to hold religion classes in any of the eight traditional groups; if such approval is not obtained or if they prefer not to enroll in religion classes, students take courses on general ethics. The Center for Educational Content at the Ministry of Education must review the content of the classes to verify they do not violate freedom of conscience. Starting in fourth grade, religious subjects are incorporated into elective ethics and social science classes. If there is demand, schools are permitted to teach classes on the history of religion. Students at state-supported national minority schools may attend classes on a voluntary basis on the religion “characteristic of the national minority.” Other nontraditional religious groups without their own state-supported minority schools may provide religious education only in private schools. Religion courses in public schools range from doctrinal instruction by church-approved government-certified instructors, usually at the lower grades, to nondenominational Christian teachings or overviews of major world religions by certified teachers who are proposed by a religious group and approved by the Ministry of Education, usually at higher grades. Education

guidelines require inclusion of Holocaust education in Latvian history and world history classes, which are mandatory for all students in public schools.

The law establishes an independent Ombudsman's Office for Human Rights. Its mandate includes helping to resolve cases of religious discrimination through collaboration with authorities. While it does not have enforcement powers, it may issue recommendations to specific authorities. Parliament appoints the ombudsman.

The law stipulates foreign missionaries may be issued a residency permit, hold meetings, and proselytize only if a registered domestic religious group invites them to conduct such activities. Visa regulations require foreign religious workers to present letters of invitation, typically from a religious organization, and either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology. Religious workers from European Union or Schengen countries do not require visas.

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

Government Practices

During the year, the MOJ approved the applications of four religious groups that applied to register for the first time: the Latvian Orthodox Autonomous Congregation of Riga, St. Alexander Nevsky; the Latvian United Brothers Congregation; the Jurmala Jewish Congregation; and the Christian Congregation "Victory."

In October, the Supreme Court received a ruling from the ECJ on a 2016 religious discrimination case brought by a Jehovah's Witness family who sought to take their child to Poland for surgery to avoid a blood transfusion, but the Ministry of Health refused to authorize the trip and the associated expenses. The ECJ's ruling supported the consideration of religious beliefs in these types of treatment decisions, with exceptions. The ECJ stated that, when considering the requirement for prior authorization for hospital care, "The criteria and the application of those criteria, and individual decisions of refusal to grant prior authorization, must be restricted to what is necessary and proportionate to the objective to be achieved, and may not constitute a means of arbitrary discrimination or an unjustified obstacle to the free movement of patients." Based on this ruling, the Supreme Court returned the case to the appellate court, which was expected to issue a decision in 2021 regarding whether the health ministry's decision was restricted to

what was necessary and proportionate. A Ministry of Health representative stated that a 2018 policy change better addressed costs for patients choosing treatment outside of the country.

In October, media reported NA member Zeltits established an NGO named Austosa Saule (Rising Sun) with a logo resembling a stylized swastika. He denied the NGO's symbol was associated with the Nazi swastika. In his writings, Zeltits said Rising Sun was a nationalist movement rather than a political party, with an aim of "mobilizing the nation to defend its interests." He advocated for Latvian nationalism, criticized neo-Marxism, and likened diversity, including religious diversity, to "cultural terrorism." Zeltits encouraged members of Rising Sun to join the National Guard, leading news outlets and commentators on social media to express concern regarding the National Guard's possible radicalization and intolerance towards minority religious groups.

Authorities continued to monitor Muslim community activities, according to the annual report of the security police, but made no interventions during the year. Muslim community members again said they did not feel pressured or singled out by authorities due to their faith.

According to a 2018 report by the NGO National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry (NCSEJ), the latest available, the country made progress in assessing its role in the Holocaust, and senior government officials expressed their solidarity with the country's Jewish victims and with Israel. NCSEJ, however, expressed concern over the country's ultra-nationalist movement.

By year's end, local Jewish community leaders and parliamentary sponsors did not reintroduce Holocaust property restitution legislation to satisfy the country's commitments under the 2009 Terezin Declaration.

Public funding continued to support Holocaust education in schools.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, events commemorating the Holocaust were smaller than in previous years. President Egils Levits and other senior government officials, including Speaker of the Parliament Inara Murniece, Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins, and Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics, attended Holocaust memorial events, including International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Latvian Holocaust Memorial Day, and the Rumbula Forest Massacre commemoration. Officials held a smaller, socially distanced public event in July to commemorate the 1941 burning of the Great Choral Synagogue with victims inside. The

President, Speaker of Parliament, and Prime Minister participated in the silent vigil and flower-laying ceremony at the memorial stone of the victims of the Holocaust.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Riga Jewish Community executive director Gita Umanovska and Jews of Latvia Museum director Ilya Lensky said anti-Semitic hate speech that appeared during the year was mostly in the form of posts on social media and comments in news articles, although no one reported such incidents to the police. Sources stated the level of online anti-Semitic hate speech appeared anecdotally to be similar to that of previous years. In June, one online commenter wrote, “Who would pay for the millions of executed people in USSR – most of the executors were Jews and their crossbreeds.” In June, another online commenter wrote, “The Jews even earn using the Holocaust. Everyone knows – Zionism is the root of Nazism and Fascism.”

Some hate speech characterized as racist or anti-Muslim appeared on social media and the internet during the year, mostly in individual posts and comments in news articles. For example, in February, one site had the comment, “Ragheads will rarely go and work in a normal job; these Pakistani kebabs think only about how to deceive Christians, who only bow in front of ragheads.”

In response to COVID-19 restrictions, most of the annual March 16 commemorations of the Latvian Legionnaires, who fought in German Waffen-SS units against the Soviet Army in World War II, were canceled. Organizers converted the annual memorial march into a wreath-laying event. As in recent years, turnout continued to decline; however, at least one parliamentarian, Janis Iesalnieks from the NA, attended and posted a picture of the event on social media. According to media and police reports, the event has received less attention each year and was generally viewed as a commemoration of national identity and remembrance of those who fought for independence, rather than as a glorification of Nazism. NA chairman Raivis Dzintars aired a short film on television portraying Legionnaire actions as defending the country and made no mention of Nazis.

On November 30, approximately 200 persons lit thousands of candles at the Freedom Monument in Riga in memory of the approximately 30,000 Jews killed in the Rumbula Forest by the Nazis in 1941. A separate Rumbula Forest memorial

service on November 30 was well attended, including by President Levits's chief of staff, Andris Teikmanis, members of the diplomatic corps, leaders in the Jewish community, and religious leaders.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October, the Secretary of State wrote Foreign Minister Rinkevics to reiterate the importance of resolving the country's obligations under the 2009 Terezin Declaration.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers engaged in regular discussions with senior government officials, including at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MOJ, the Office of the Ombudsman, and with members of parliament, on the importance of restoring property expropriated by Soviets and Nazis to the Jewish community by passing a restitution bill satisfying the country's commitments under the Terezin Declaration.

Embassy staff met with leaders of the Lutheran Church, as well as representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities, to discuss religious tolerance and acceptance in the country. Staff also met with the MARTA Center, which works with immigrant women, including those who might be at risk of victimization as a result of their religious beliefs. Embassy staff also engaged representatives of Safe House, which assists with transition support and education for immigrants and refugees, many of whom are of minority faiths.

In response to COVID-19 restrictions, the embassy extended a grant until 2021 to fund a project with the Zanis Lipke Memorial Museum to support an exhibit, originally scheduled to take place during the year, with paintings and diary fragments of a Latvian-born Jewish-American artist, focusing on his experience surviving the Holocaust in the country and his later life in a New York City Latvian enclave.