

ESTONIA 2019 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. Prime Minister Juri Ratas condemned the public harassment of the country's chief rabbi, Shmuel Kot, stating discrimination based on religion, nationality, origin, or any other reason was unacceptable. The government continued to provide funds to the Council of Churches for ecumenical activities. Media reported Jewish leaders expressed concern in April when the prime minister formed a coalition government that included the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE). According to media, some EKRE members of parliament (MPs) had made anti-Semitic statements prior to joining government, including praising Nazi Germany. Media reported that on August 1, EKRE member of the European Parliament Jaak Madison stated on his Facebook page that it was "time for the Final Solution" regarding refugees in Europe. According to media, on March 16, a man shouted anti-Semitic remarks at the country's chief rabbi in public, including "Jews to the oven" and "Heil Hitler." The prime minister condemned the incident, and a court sentenced the man to eight days in prison. According to the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry (NCSEJ), on July 27, three MPs attended the annual commemoration of the World War II (WWII) battle of Tannenberg Line in the town of Sinimae, a battle in which the Estonian Waffen SS fought under the leadership of German Nazi forces against the Soviets. On January 28, the government held an annual memorial event on Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. In September government officials participated in an international conference and memorial service commemorating the 75th anniversary of the massacre of Jews at Klooga concentration camp.

The Police and Border Guard Board reported that on June 23, unidentified individuals knocked over five gravestones at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn and spray-painted a swastika nearby. Police opened a criminal investigation, which continued at year's end. In 2018, the most recent year for which data was available, police registered no hate crime cases (as defined by law) involving religion, compared with no cases in 2017 and six cases in 2016. In September a European Commission study found that 17 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in the

country. In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey indicating 86 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in the country.

The Charge d’Affaires and 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 U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues engaged the government on Holocaust history, education, and Jewish cultural property and provenance research (property restitution) related to the Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Now (JUST) Act. 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 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census (the most recent data available), 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 current data from the Council of Churches, 13.8 percent of the population belongs to the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, while 13.1 percent belongs to the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (EOCMP), and 2.3 percent belongs 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. 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 the act results in danger to the life, health, or property of a person. The law also states 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 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, 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 at religious schools is voluntary. According to the director of a major private religious school, the majority of students attending the school were not associated with the school's religious affiliation.

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

Government Practices

According to the government's NGO register, five religious associations were registered during the year, including three Lutheran and two Buddhist groups.

In January the government allocated 6.75 million euros (\$7.58 million) to the Evangelical Lutheran Church and 1.15 million euros (\$1.29 million) to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church as compensation for the damage to Church properties during WWII and the subsequent Soviet occupation.

In September the government pledged 844,000 euros (\$948,000) to renovate Alexander's Cathedral of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Narva, which is located in the eastern part of the country near the border with Russia.

As in 2018, the government allocated 596,000 euros (\$670,000) 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 on the Estonian Broadcasting Company, youth work by churches, activities promoting interreligious dialogue, and religious publishing.

According to media, in March a man reportedly under the influence of drugs verbally abused the country’s chief rabbi. The man shouted anti-Semitic remarks, including, “Heil Hitler” and “Jews to the oven.” The prime minister condemned the incident, stating discrimination based on religion, nationality, origin, or any other reason was totally unacceptable. A court found the man guilty of harassment and sentenced him to eight days in prison.

In April Prime Minister Ratas formed a new coalition government that included EKRE. Some members of the party had made anti-Semitic statements prior to joining government, including praising Nazi Germany. Media quoted MP Ruuben Kaalep, former leader of EKRE’s youth wing Blue Awakening, as saying during the year that “Hitler was a rather good commander in the context of WWII.” According to media, in the lead-up to the coalition government being formed, leaders of the Jewish community expressed concern about including EKRE. Media reported that in August EKRE member of the European Parliament Madison stated on his Facebook page it was “time for the Final Solution” regarding refugees in Europe. Madison used the term in German, which was associated with the Nazi campaign to exterminate European Jews during WWII.

According to the NCSEJ, on July 27, three MPs attended the annual commemoration of the WWII battle of Tannenberg Line in the town of Sinimae, a battle in which the Estonian Waffen SS fought under the leadership of German Nazi forces against the Soviets.

On January 28, the government held its annual memorial event for Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn. Schools also participated in commemorative activities throughout the country. The Education and Research Ministry, in cooperation with the Jewish Community of Estonia, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), Estonian Memory Institute, and Museum of Occupation, organized an essay writing competition for children on topics related to the Holocaust.

On September 18, the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory held an international conference to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the September 19, 1944, massacre of approximately 2,000 Jews at Klooga concentration camp and to study and disseminate information about the Holocaust history and preservation of memory. Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Reinsalu opened the conference and Cecilia Stockholm Banke, head of the Danish delegation to the IHRA, delivered the keynote address. On September 19, Minister of Population Riina Solman and other government officials attended a commemorative event at the camp site, at which the country's chief rabbi read a memorial prayer. The minister stated, "It is our duty to commemorate the victims, stand up for historical truth, and pass on knowledge from the past to future generations so that ideologies against humanity can never prevail."

The government is a member of IHRA.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2018, the most recent year for which data was available, police registered no hate crime cases, as defined by law, the same as in 2017.

In May the European Commission carried out a study in each EU member state on perceptions of discrimination and published the results in September. According to the findings, 17 percent of respondents believed discrimination on the basis of religion or belief was widespread in the country, while 64 percent said it was rare; 70 percent would be comfortable with having a person of a different religion than the majority of the population occupy the highest elected political position in the country. In addition, 85 percent said they would be comfortable working closely with a Christian, and 81 percent said they would be with an atheist, 80 percent with a Jew, 64 percent with a Muslim, and 70 percent with a Buddhist. Asked how they would feel if their child were in a "love relationship" with an individual belonging to various groups, 83 percent said they would be comfortable if the partner were Christian, 77 percent if atheist, 67 percent if Jewish, 70 percent if Buddhist, and 40 percent if Muslim.

In January the European Commission published a Special Eurobarometer survey of perceptions of anti-Semitism in December 2018 in each EU member state. According to the survey, 86 percent of residents believed anti-Semitism was not a problem in the country, and 60 percent believed it had stayed the same over the previous five years. The percentage who felt that anti-Semitism was a problem in nine different categories was as follows: Holocaust denial, 9 percent; on the

internet, 12 percent; anti-Semitic graffiti or vandalism, 8 percent; expression of hostility or threats against Jews in public places, 7 percent; desecration of Jewish cemeteries, 9 percent; physical attacks against Jews, 5 percent; anti-Semitism in schools and universities, 7 percent; anti-Semitism in political life, 6 percent; and anti-Semitism in the media, 7 percent.

According to the Police and Border Guard Board, on June 23, unidentified individuals knocked over five gravestones at the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in Tallinn and spray-painted a swastika on the large stones nearby. Police opened a criminal investigation, which continued at year's end.

According to many religious and other civil society leaders, there was societal support for religious freedom and tolerance in the country, including a biannual interreligious event, which last occurred in 2018.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On June 6-7, embassy officials and the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues discussed the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country with officials from the internal, social, cultural, and foreign affairs ministries and engaged the government on the importance of promoting religious tolerance, including Holocaust history, education, and Jewish cultural property and provenance (property restitution) research related to the JUST Act.

Embassy officials met with members of the Jewish community, leaders of religious associations, representatives of the Council of Churches, and NGOs to discuss religious tolerance.

The embassy made use of social media to promote religious freedom, including a Facebook post celebrating International Religious Freedom Day.