

# ESTONIA 2021 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 approved a plan to combat antisemitism designed by representatives of the Ministries of the Interior, Culture, Foreign Affairs, Education and Research, and Justice, the Police and Border Guard Board, the Estonian Jewish Community, and the Estonian Jewish Congregation. Authorities arrested Kristo Kivisto for threats and defamation of a foreign symbol after Kivisto had advocated for the formation of a new cell of the violent far-right Nordic Resistance Movement. Kivisto also made antisemitic comments online. In February, the Parnu County Court sentenced him to six months' probation. On April 2, individuals desecrated the site of the Holocaust Memorial in Rahumae Jewish Cemetery. Police identified the individuals involved and filed charges.

According to 2020 government statistics, the most recent data available, police registered three cases of physical abuse, breach of public order, or threats (as defined by law) that included hatred against persons belonging to religious or other minorities, compared with eight cases in 2019. According to government sources, most of the cases were tied to the victim's race or national origin.

Embassy officials raised the importance of combating antisemitism, promoting religious tolerance, and promoting Holocaust education in meetings with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Culture, Education and Research, and Foreign Affairs. The Charge d'Affaires regularly met with the leader of the Jewish community and participated in its Yahad Conference, a forum on Estonian Jewry held in the city of Parnu. Embassy officials met with members of the Jewish community, leaders of religious associations, including members of the Muslim community, representatives of the Council of Churches, civil society groups, and nongovernmental organizations (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.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (midyear 2021). 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 Estonian Council of Churches data from December 2020, 13 percent of the population belong to the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, while 13.9 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 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 live 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.

Although gender discrimination and discrimination based on race or ethnicity are prohibited in employment, housing, healthcare, social welfare, education, goods and services, and other forms of discrimination, including that based on religion, are only prohibited for employment. For these forms of discrimination there is no mechanism for affected individuals to receive state assistance or to claim compensation.

The law criminalizes activities that publicly incite hatred, violence, or discrimination on the basis of religion or other minority status if they result 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 the 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, such as a value-added tax exemption, if they apply for them. 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 it 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**

Authorities arrested Kristo Kivisto for threats and defamation of a foreign symbol after Kivisto had advocated for the formation of a new cell of the violent Nordic Resistance Movement, generally characterized as far right. Kivisto also made antisemitic comments online. In February, the Parnu County Court sentenced him to six months' probation on those charges.

On April 2, individuals threw eggs at the site of the Holocaust Memorial in Rahumae Jewish Cemetery. Police identified those involved and filed charges under the penal code's section on desecration of graves.

According to the government NGO register, two religious associations – both Christian congregations – registered with the government during the year.

The government allocated 646,000 euros (\$732,000) to the Estonian Council of Churches. The council, comprised of 10 Christian churches, including the Lutheran Church and both the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate and the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, continued to serve as an organization encompassing 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.

The Ministry of the Interior provided 103,179 euros (\$117,000) in subsidies for the salaries of religious association employees to compensate for losses caused by COVID-19 restrictions. All registered religious associations had the opportunity to apply for salary compensation.

in cases of suspected arson in February and again in June, fires broke out at the Orthodox Church of Narva Joesuu, in the northeast of the country. The police opened a criminal investigation, which was pending at year's end. Due to the significant destruction of church property of historical and cultural value, the National Heritage Board allocated 100,000 euros (\$113,000) to the restoration of the church.

In March and April, the government provided 65,100 euros (\$73,800) to support televised prayer services on the Estonian Broadcasting Company when in-person religious services were restricted due to COVID-19.

In April 2020, the government pledged two million euros (\$2.27 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.

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 Estonian Jewish community, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the Estonian Memory

Institute, and the Museum of Occupation, again organized an essay writing competition for schoolchildren on topics related to the lessons of the Holocaust.

The government is a member of IHRA.

In May, the government announced a reorganization and reduction of the military chaplain service due to state budget cuts.

On May 8 and in the last week of July, the Chaplain Service of the Estonian Defense Forces held annual commemorations honoring victims who lost their lives in the Second World War.

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

In August, unknown persons defaced a poster promoting vaccination with antisemitic graffiti in Tallinn. City council member Vladimir Svet denounced the incident saying, “The district government takes such situations very seriously and condemns antisemitism and any incitement of hatred against any group.” Police did not file formal charges due to what they stated was a lack of evidence and suspects.

According to government statistics, in 2020, the most recent year for which data was available, police registered three cases of physical abuse, breach of public order, or threats (as defined by law) that included hatred against persons belonging to religious or other minorities, compared with eight cases in 2019. According to government sources, at least two of these cases were tied to the victim’s race or national origin. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

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

On September 5, the Jewish Community held its annual commemoration for the victims of the Holocaust at the memorial for the victims of Nazism at Kalevi-Liiva, with the participation of foreign diplomats and representatives of the state, municipalities, and public organizations.

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

Embassy officials raised the importance of combating antisemitism, promoting religious tolerance, and promoting Holocaust education in meetings with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Culture, Education and Research, and Foreign Affairs. The Charge regularly met with the leader of the Jewish community and participated in the Jewish community's Yahad Conference, a forum on Estonian Jewry held in the city of Parnu.

Embassy officials met with members of the Jewish community, leaders of religious associations, including members of the Muslim community, 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.