



Religion

Population

Area

- Agnostics : **50.2%**
- Christians : **44.9%**
- Atheists : **4.3%**
- Others : **0.6%**

1,309,000

45,227 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution establishes separation between Church and state. Article 40 declares that individuals are free to belong to any religious group and practise any religion, on their own and with others, publicly or privately, except if it is “detrimental to public order, health or morals”^[1] Article 12 bans inciting religious hatred, violence or discrimination. According to article 124, conscientious objectors have the constitutional right to refuse military service on religious grounds but are required by law to perform an alternative service.

The 2002 Churches and Congregations Act^[2] regulates the activities of religious associations and societies. Religious associations are defined as “churches, congregations, associations of congregations and monasteries”. Religious societies are defined as “voluntary associations” whose main activities are religious or ecumenical in nature relating to “morals, ethics, education, culture, confessional or ecumenical, diaconal and social rehabilitation outside the traditional forms of religious rites of a Church or congregation and which need not be connected with a specific church association of congregations or congregation”.

Religious associations have to register at the Tartu County Court.^[3] Churches, congregations and associations of congregations are obliged to set up their own management board whose members must be Estonian nationals or legal residents. Monasteries need a superior (elected or appointed).^[4] To petition for formal registration, a religious association needs a minimum of 12 members. Management board members must sign and notarise the application for registration, which must also contain the minutes of its constitutive meeting as well as a copy of the association’s statutes. Registration by religious associations falls under the Non-profit Associations Act. This gives registered religious associations certain tax breaks, such as exemption from value-added tax. In all, about 550 religious associations are registered with the authorities.^[5] Unregistered religious associations can conduct religious activities but cannot act as

legal bodies.^[6]

Religious societies also come under the Non-profit Associations Act. In common with religious associations, they too enjoy certain tax advantages. To register under the aforementioned Act, the founders of a religious society must draft a constitutive contract and statutes and submit their electronic or paper application to the business registry.^[7]

According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2016,^[8] the Estonian government funded the Estonian Council of Churches, a 10-Church body that includes the Lutheran Church and the country's two Orthodox Churches. The authorities played no role in allocating the funds. Some of the money went to individual Churches, some was used in ecumenical projects, and some was invested in training Church officials to operate in civil society. The government consulted representatives of Estonia's Muslim community as well as the Council of Churches in drafting refugee and immigration legislation.

In January 2018 the government decided to pay compensation to the Churches that suffered during World War II. The Estonian Lutheran Church is to receive EUR€6.8 million while the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church will get EUR€1.4 million. In exchange for the money, they will renounce all further claims to restitution. The Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate criticised the decision and will not receive any compensation despite its wartime suffering.^[9]

Incidents

According to a report by TIME magazine, Estonia, unlike other countries, saw no large-scale anti-Muslim backlash connected to the refugee crisis.^[10] The government remains one of the most eager to implement the European Union's refugee relocation plan. Attitudes within the population could be described as mostly indifferent. Yet the report notes that this might change in the future as a result of the refugees' overwhelming dissatisfaction with the relocation plan itself. Many refugees would rather risk travelling to Germany, as they initially intended to, than integrate into a society they did not choose. Their criticism includes the lack of suitable religious facilities, such as mosques, and halal food. The report suggests that in the future the attitude of the local Estonian population might change in a negative direction as a result of an apparent ungratefulness on the part of refugees who receive the same benefits as the locals.

Some local media, such as the newspaper Eesti Päevaleht, have reported more anti-Muslim hostility than in previous years, but it is hard to determine whether it is solely based on religious identity since religion and ethnicity often overlap.^[11]

Meanwhile, the "Soldiers of Odin", a far-right organisation that originated in Finland, has gained some popularity in Estonia. Its members have taken to patrolling the streets to monitor refugee movements. Muslims are explicitly excluded as recruits. Hannes Hanso, Estonia's Minister of Defence, has spoken out against vigilante groups with questionable aims.^[12]

The Conservative People's Party of Estonia, which currently holds seven seats in Parliament, advocates certain measures directed against Muslims, Jews and Orthodox Christians, including a ban on new mosques and Eastern Orthodox churches. One of its members, Georg Kirsberg, said he wanted to decriminalise Holocaust denial and "a correct teaching of the history of the Third Reich". The party leader said that such an opinion was not party policy.^[13]

Despite this, anti-Semitic incidents remain very rare in Estonia. Members of the Jewish community have stated that they feel very secure and are treated with warmth.^[14]

Prospects for freedom of religion

As in previous years, the situation in Estonia remains very stable, with little to no incidents of religious violence. For most religious groups there was no notable change. However, as the refugee crisis intensifies, it is possible that society's attitudes towards Muslims might worsen. So far, most Estonians have been largely indifferent towards refugees. Some

Lutheran congregations (Harju Risti and Talinn Bethel) have helped refugee families find accommodation!^[15]

Endnotes / Sources

- [1] Estonia's Constitution of 1992 with Amendments through 2015, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Estonia_2015.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [2] Churches and Congregations Act (2002), Riigi Teataja (State Gazette), <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013065/consolide>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Estonia, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dclid=268810> (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [4] Churches and Congregations Act (2002), op. cit.
- [5] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.
- [6] Churches and Congregations Act (2002), op. cit.
- [7] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] 'Estonia: rząd zapłaci Kościołom odszkodowania za straty wojenne' (Estonia: the government will pay Churches compensation for war losses), wiadomosci.onet.pl, 24th January 2018, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/estonia-rzadzaplaci-kosciolom-odszkodowania-za-straty-wojenne/bb35m68>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [10] Aryn Baker 'When Home isn't where the Heart is', TIME.com, 25th May 2017, <http://time.com/4793913/finding-home-estonia-where-the-heart-is/> (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [11] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.
- [12] Sam Klingsley, 'Estonian Defense Ministry doesn't want anti-migrant groups patrolling streets', Russia Today, 16 February 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/332683-estonia-anti-migrant-patrols-odin/>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [13] 'Estonian politician vows to legalize Holocaust denial', Jerusalem Post, 3 June 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Estonian-politician-vows-to-legalize-Holocaust-denial-494661>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [14] Tamara Zieve, 'Estonia celebrates 10 years of first Jewish Community Center since WWII', Jerusalem Post, 27 May 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Estonia-celebrates-10-years-of-first-Jewish-Community-Center-since-WWII-494058>, (accessed 23rd March 2018).
- [15] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.