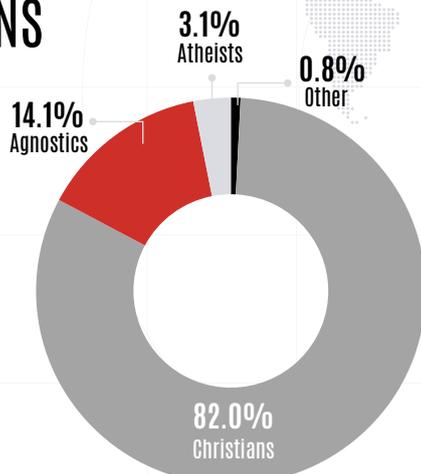




LATVIA

RELIGIONS

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION
AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

In its preamble, the Constitution of Latvia (Satversme) defines the country “as democratic, socially responsible and national state [. . .] based on the rule of law and on respect for human dignity and freedom; it recognises and protects fundamental human rights and respects ethnic minorities.” It ends by enunciating, “God, bless Latvia.”¹

Article 99 of the Latvian Constitution guarantees “freedom of thought, conscience and religion” as well as the separation of Church and state.² Limits to this are any acts that threaten “public safety, welfare, morals” and the rights of others, but “restrictions may also be imposed on the expression of religious beliefs” (Article 116). Freedom of expression is guaranteed and “censorship is prohibited” (Article 100).

The state protects and supports marriage, defined as “a union between a man and a woman”, as well as “the family, the rights of parents and the rights of the child” (Article 110).

The Law on Religious Organisations guarantees and defines the right to freedom of religion, including the freedom to choose, change, and express religious beliefs (Article 2,

2).³ The Law recognises the right of parents and guardians to bring up their children in accordance with their religious beliefs (Article 5, 3).

The law also regulates registration of religious organisations (Article 5). Religious groups are not required by law to register, but doing so provides them with certain rights and privileges. These include legal entity status for owning property (Article 16), conducting financial transactions and providing tax benefits for donors.⁴

Registered religious groups are permitted to conduct religious activities in hospitals, prisons and military units (Article 14, 5). With the agreement of local authorities, they may also hold services in public places such as parks and public squares (Article 14, 3).

In order to register, a religious group must have at least 20 members over the age of 18 recorded in the population registry (Article 7, 1). Should the registration of a religious group pose a threat to human rights, democracy or public safety, the Ministry of Justice has the right to deny the application (Article 8, 2). Foreign missionaries may only receive a residency permit, hold meetings or proselytise if they are invited by local religious groups (Article 14, 4). Registered organisations must submit annual reports on their activities to the Ministry of Justice (Article 14, 7).

On the basis of a curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education, Christian religious education can be offered in public schools (Article 6, 2) by Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, and Baptist teachers if there are at least 10 pupils who are interested (Article 6, 3). In public schools that cater to national minorities, religious education in that faith may also be taught (Article 6, 4). Religion and ethics education are financed from the state budget (Article 6, 5).

Incitement to national, ethnic, racial, or religious hatred, enmity, threats, or violence is a crime.⁵

In 2016, the Ministry of Justice proposed a law banning the full-face Islamic veil and other face coverings in public,⁶ and in 2017 the Cabinet of Ministers indicated its support for the law,⁷ but in 2017 the Human Rights Commission issued an opinion opposing the legislation and it never reached a first reading in parliament.⁸ Halal and kosher slaughter are allowed, but they require post-cut stunning.⁹

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In August 2020, the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia urged the parliament to revisit the 2019 proposed restitution and compensation law for properties seized from the Latvian Jewish community during the Second World War and Soviet occupation.¹⁰

In response to a media inquiry, the Latvian State Security Service said that there had been no criminal proceedings for incitement to religious hatred or enmity.¹¹ However, a Rīga Stradiņš University researcher said that there are signs of some intolerance against Muslims, as well as anti-Semitism, on social media platforms.¹² Nevertheless, Jewish and Muslim leaders felt that their communities were free to practise their religions and did not feel threatened or discriminated against.¹³

Hate crime data from Latvia was not made available to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe for inclusion in its hate crime reports for 2018.¹⁴ In its fifth monitoring report on Latvia, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance did not raise any concerns about hate crimes or bias-motivated incidents relating to religion.¹⁵

According to the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), “compared to the three previous years, Latvia did not see a strong increase in Islamophobic attitudes in 2018. No physical attacks on individuals

or organisations were reported in 2018”.¹⁶ SETA did not include Latvia in its 2019 Islamophobia Report.¹⁷

Restrictions on public religious gatherings due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 resulted in the suspension of services. Latvia’s approach was described as “high” (compared to “very high,” “moderate,” or “low”) because public religious gatherings were suspended but places of worship were open for private prayer.¹⁸

In September 2018, Pope Francis met with Latvian officials in Riga as part of a Baltic tour. The pontiff spoke of the “motherhood of Latvia”, which is demonstrated in the country’s promotion of “truly effective strategies centred on the family”.¹⁹

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

It appears that there were no significant new or increased governmental restrictions on religious freedom during the period under review and the overall societal situation remains, and is likely to continue, stable for Latvia’s various religious communities.

- 1 Latvia 1922 (reinst. 1991, rev. 2016), Constitute Project, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Latvia_2016?lang=en (accessed 8th October 2020).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Law on Religious Organisations (with amendments through 27 April 2018), Legal Acts of the Republic of Latvia, <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/36874-religisko-organizaciju-likums> (accessed 8th October 2020).
- 4 Office of International Religious Freedom, "Latvia," 2018 Report on Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/latvia/> (accessed 8th October 2020).
- 5 The Criminal Law, Legal Acts of the Republic of Latvia, Chapter IX, Section 78, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/88966> (accessed 1st June 2020).
- 6 Rachel Pells, "Islamic face veil to be banned in Latvia despite being worn by just three women in entire country," The Independent, 21st April 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/islamic-muslim-face-veil-niqab-burqa-banned-latvia-despite-being-worn-just-three-women-entire-country-a6993991.html> (accessed 8th October 2020); "Likumprojekts "Sejas aizsegšanas ierobežojuma likums," VSS-912 & TA-1412, Ministry of Justice of Latvia, 22nd September 2016, <http://tap.mk.gov.lv/mk/tap/?pid=40399697> (accessed 4th September 2020).
- 7 "Ministru kabinets atbalsta Sejas aizsegšanas ierobežojuma likumprojektu," Cabinet of Ministers, 22nd September 2017, <https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/aktualitates/ministru-kabinets-atbalsta-sejas-aizsegšanas-ierobezojuma-likumprojektu> (accessed 4 September 2020).
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- 10 "Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia calls on Saeima not to delay settling restitution issue," The Baltic Times, 4th August 2020, https://www.baltictimes.com/council_of_jewish_communities_of_latvia_calls_on_saeima_not_to_delay_settling_restitution_issue/ (accessed 4th September 2020).
- 11 Ilja Kozins, "Reliģiskā iecietība Latvijā: vai viss ir kārtībā?" TVNET, 21st August 2020, <https://www.tvnet.lv/7043807/religiska-iecietiba-latvija-vai-viss-ir-kartiba> (accessed 3rd September 2020).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "2018 Hate Crime Reporting – Latvia," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, <https://hatecrime.osce.org/latvia?year=2018> (accessed 28th August 2020).
- 15 European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, "ECRI Report on Latvia (fifth monitoring cycle)," ECRI Secretariat, Directorate General II – Democracy, Council of Europe, 5th March 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-latvia/1680934a9f> (accessed 15th August 2020).
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