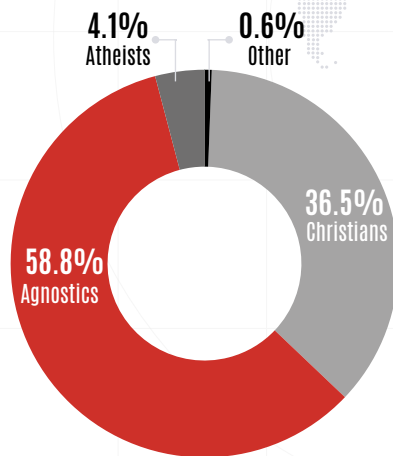




ESTONIA

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Article 40 of the Estonian Constitution provides that there is no state Church and declares that everyone is 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 they are required by law to perform an alternative service.

The 2002 Churches and Congregations Act regulates the activities of religious associations and societies.² Religious associations are defined as “churches, congregations, associations of congregations and monasteries” (Section 2, 1). 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” (Section 4, 1).

Churches, congregations and associations of congregations are obliged to set up their own management boards which must be located in Estonia “regardless of the location of its spiritual centre” (Section 6, 2). To petition for formal registration, a religious association needs a minimum of 12 adult 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 (Section 13). Registration of religious associations and societies falls under the Non-profit Associations Act (Sections 5, 2 and 4, 2). This gives registered religious associations and societies certain tax breaks.³ There are more than 500 registered religious associations in Estonia.⁴ Unregistered religious associations can conduct religious activities but cannot act as legal bodies.⁵

Optional religious education in municipal and state schools is non-confessional and based on a national curriculum which covers different religions and world-views.⁶ In private schools, voluntary religious education

may be of a confessional nature.⁷

As the “bearers of historical and cultural tradition”, all religious associations may apply for support to maintain and restore religious buildings.⁸ According to the US State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report for 2019, the government paid €6.75 million (US\$7.58 million) to the Evangelical Lutheran Church Estonian and €1.15 million (US\$1.29 million) to the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church as compensation for damage to their properties during the Second World War and under Soviet occupation.⁹ The government also provided funding to the Estonian Council of Churches, a 10-member body that includes the Lutheran Church and the country’s two Orthodox Churches.¹⁰ In October 2020, the government allocated €1 million (US\$1.2 million) for the construction of a Lutheran church in Jõgeva.¹¹

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

According to the Ministry of Justice, police recorded six hate crimes in 2018, five of which were related to religion, race, or origin.¹² The government did not report any hate crimes to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe for 2018 or 2019.¹³

The Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), a Turkish-based think tank, reported a graffiti attack on an Islamic centre in 2018.¹⁴ The following year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported the physical assault of a Muslim person as well as anti-Muslim insults against an asylum seeker due to his perceived religion.¹⁵

In August 2018, the Kalevi-Liiva Holocaust Memorial was vandalised with anti-Semitic graffiti and set on fire with a blowtorch.¹⁶ The incident was condemned by Estonia’s prime minister and justice minister.¹⁷ Gravestones were also broken and overturned in the Rahumae Jewish Cemetery in June 2019 and swastikas were spray-painted near a bus stop.¹⁸

During a September 2018 visit to Estonia, Pope Francis urged Catholics in the country to “leave our fears behind and go forth from our safe places, because today most Estonians do not identify themselves as believers.”¹⁹ Being few in numbers is a call to “bear witness as a holy people.”²⁰

In 2019, the Holy See reported an incident in which

four tombstones and a cross were overturned in a cemetery.²¹

In September 2019, the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory held an international conference to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the massacre of approximately 2,000 Jews at the Klooga concentration camp.²² In 2020, a memorial ceremony was organised by the Jewish Community of Estonia.²³

Pope Francis received the Estonian President in a private audience at the Vatican in November 2019.²⁴

Churches in Estonia remained open during the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, but in-person religious services were suspended from March to May.²⁵ The Estonian Islamic Centre in Tallinn cancelled its in-person Eid al-Fitr celebrations in May.²⁶ The Tallinn Synagogue delayed reopening beyond May, stating “the Jewish Law requires us to take additional precautions.”²⁷

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

As in previous years, the situation in Estonia remains stable, with no significant new or increased governmental restrictions on religious freedom, as well as few incidents of religious violence.

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