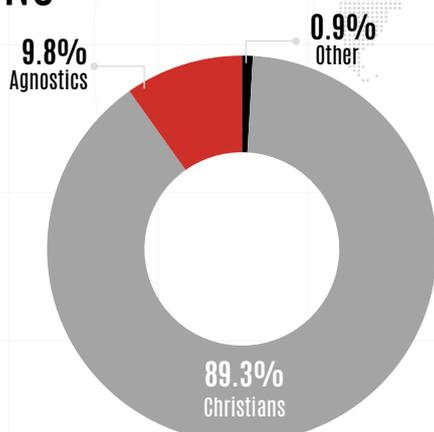




# LITHUANIA

## RELIGIONS



Population

**2,852,478**

GDP per capita

**29,524 US\$**

Area

**65,286 Km<sup>2</sup>**

GINI INDEX\*

**37.3**

\*Economic Inequality

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Lithuania guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which includes the right to choose, profess, and practise a religion, to express one's beliefs and to belong to - or not belong - to a religious community (Article 26).<sup>1</sup> The law specifically protects a person's right to teach, "profess and spread his religion or belief" and this right may only be limited when necessary to "guarantee the security of society, the public order, the health and morals of the people as well as other basic rights and freedoms of the person" (Article 26). Everyone is equal before the law; no one may "be granted any privileges on the ground of gender, race, nationality, language, origin, social status, belief, convictions, or views" (Article 29).

Freedom of expression is guaranteed, and may only be limited to protect the "health, honour and dignity, private life, and morals of a human being, or to defend the constitutional order" (Article 25). Incitement of "national, racial, religious, or social hatred, violence and discrimination" is illegal (Article 25).

Article 4 of the 1995 Law on Religious Communities and Associations defines religious groups as (1) religious commu-

nities; (2) religious associations, which are comprised of at least two religious communities under a common leadership; and (3) religious centres, which are the governing bodies of religious associations.<sup>2</sup>

Article 5 of the law recognises nine traditional religious communities and associations that are part of Lithuania's "historical, spiritual and social heritage," namely Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, and Karaite Jewish. Traditional religious groups do not need to register with the government. They can perform marriages recognised by the state, set up joint private/public schools (Article 14), offer religious education in public schools (Article 9) and benefit from public funds on an annual basis (Article 7).

According to Article 6 of the aforementioned law, other religious associations may apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for state recognition if they have been officially registered in the country for at least 25 years. The Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) then votes whether to grant this status upon recommendation from the MOJ (Article 6). The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Pentecostal Evangelical Belief Christian Union, and New Apostolic Church of Lithuania are the only state-recognised

non-traditional religious groups.<sup>3</sup>

Religious groups must register if they want to open a bank account, own property or legally operate as a community. All registered religious groups can legally own property to use for various purposes such as prayer houses or homes, as well as apply for construction permits to build the facilities they need for their religious activities.<sup>4</sup>

In June 2019, the Lithuanian parliament refused to recognise the Romuva, a “neopagan Baltic” religious community, despite a favourable recommendation from the Ministry of Justice. Under the law, the group will now have to wait a decade before reapplying for recognition. The community said it will turn to the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>5</sup> The United Methodist Church’s application for recognition has been pending, unconsidered by the parliament, for over 15 years.<sup>6</sup>

Alternate service/employment is available to those who conscientiously object to compulsory military service.<sup>7</sup>

A restitution fund was established by law in 2011 for Jewish-owned communal property seized by Soviet and Nazi regimes. The government is committed to pay about €37 million (around US\$45 million) by 2023 to the Good Will Foundation, an NGO headed by Lithuanian and international Jewish leaders. The funds are used for projects “which deal with religious, cultural, health care, sports, educational and scientific goals pursued by Lithuanian Jews in Lithuania”.<sup>8</sup>

Lithuania has also set up the Office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson to investigate complaints of discrimination based on, among others, belief, convictions or views, and religion.<sup>9</sup> In 2018, the Office received 34 requests for inquiries or complaints about discrimination based on religion, belief, convictions and views.<sup>10</sup> In 2019, 16 investigations were carried out, 19 inquiries were answered, and 51 consultations were provided (39 on the basis of “beliefs or views”).<sup>11</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In September 2018, Pope Francis visited Lithuania as part of a Baltic tour. He met with officials and paid tribute to the victims of the Soviet and Nazi occupations.<sup>12</sup> In a public address, the pontiff encouraged Lithuanians to continue “welcoming differences” to become “a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe”.<sup>13</sup>

In October 2018, a cemetery was vandalised with anti-Christian graffiti.<sup>14</sup>

In January 2019, during a visit to Israel, Lithuanian Prime

Minister Saulius Skvernelis called for “zero tolerance” against “any form of anti-Semitism”.<sup>15</sup>

On 10th May 2019, the United Nations’ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination issued its concluding observations on the combined 9th and 10th periodic reports on Lithuania. It found a “lack of policies directed against hate speech and incitement of hatred” and “a low level of reporting of hate speech and hate crimes”.<sup>16</sup>

The Lithuanian Jewish community expressed concern about neo-Nazi participation in Lithuanian Independence Day celebrations (11th March) in 2018 and 2019. After the removal of a plaque commemorating a Nazi collaborator, the Jewish community received threats and the Vilnius Synagogue was closed for a few days in August 2019 due to security concerns.<sup>17</sup>

The Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) reported that despite anti-Muslim rhetoric online, mostly on far-right websites, “Islamophobic cases are quite rare in Lithuania”.<sup>18</sup> In September 2019, the Seimas (Parliamentary) Ombudsman reported that Muslim immigrants staying in a migrant registration centre in Pabradė were not offered an alternative to pork dishes.<sup>19</sup>

In October 2019, a suspected bomb and a spray-painted swastika were discovered in front of a Vilnius residence.<sup>20</sup> Five other incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism were reported around the same period<sup>21</sup> including an incident in November 2019 in which three teenagers were suspected of painting “Heil Hitler” on a sign at the Kaunas synagogue. The same youths were suspected of smashing windows at the Kaunas mosque.<sup>22</sup>

Restrictions on public religious gatherings due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 resulted in the suspension of religious services, including during Ramadan, Easter, and Passover. Lithuania’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.<sup>23</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

It appears that there were no significant new or increased governmental restrictions on religious freedom in Lithuania during the period under review. Despite persistent anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim comments online, the overall societal situation remains stable for Lithuania’s various religious communities.

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