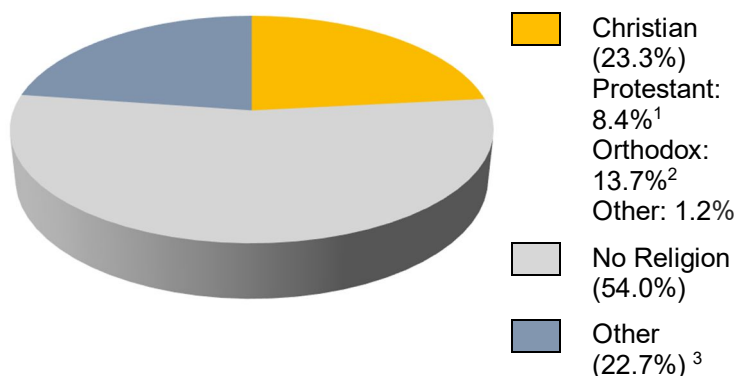


ESTONIA



Area: 45,200 km ²	Population⁴: 1.325 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Estonian, Võro, Setu
--	---	---------------------------------------	---

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The constitution states that everyone has a right to practise their religion, both alone and in community with others, in public or in private. Exceptions to this rule are only made should this freedom be “detrimental to public order, health or morals”. The constitution also states: “The incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination shall be prohibited and punishable by law.” This punishment varies from a fine up to a three-year prison sentence. There is no state Church.

The law differentiates between religious associations and religious societies. Religious associations are defined as Churches, congregations, unions of congregations and monasteries. Meanwhile religious societies are understood as being organisations which undertake confessional or ecumenical activities outside the traditional forms of religious rites of a church or congregation and which need not be connected with a specific church or congregation.

Religious associations are registered by county and city courts. Churches, congregations, and unions of congregations are required to have a management board, and monasteries are required to have an elected or appointed superior. Citizens and legal residents may be members of the board. In order to register formally, the management board of a religious association must submit an application signed by all its members. A congregation must have at least 12 adult members. The minutes of the constitutive meeting, a copy of statutes and a notarized copy of signatures of the board members serve as supporting documents for the registration application. Religious societies register under the law governing non-profit associations.

The law treats registered churches and religious organisations as non-profit entities entitled to tax benefits. There are more than 500 religious associations registered with the government. Activities of unregistered religious associations are not prohibited by law. Unregistered entities, however, cannot present themselves as legal persons and cannot exercise the rights or seek the protections accorded to a legally registered religious entity.

The law requires the commanding officer of each military unit to provide defence force members the opportunity to practise their religion. Prison directors must also provide the opportunity for inmates to practise their religious beliefs.

In state schools a basic instruction on religious themes is optional and available. If at least 12 students request it, a school must by law offer religious studies at the primary or secondary level. Comparative religious studies are available in state and private schools on an elective basis.⁵

The government has by law no permission to force individuals to divulge their religious or other convictions and in addition it may not collect such information against an individual's will.⁶

Incidents

A report on *foxnews.com* warned about a possible recurrence of anti-Semitism in the Baltic Countries. In Estonia this was connected with a controversial Holocaust-themed museum exhibition in February 2015 and the relative success of a far right party during elections held in the same month. The exhibition in Tallinn showed among its exhibits a picture of the iconic Hollywood sign replaced with the word "Holocaust". Some visitors and critics perceived this as a suggestion that the genocide was an entertainment event. In addition, 20 naked actors played tag in a recreated gas chamber in an apparent humorous interpretation of events in Auschwitz and elsewhere. There were a number of protests and in response the exhibition closed.

In the February 2015 Parliamentary elections, seven members of the national conservative EKRE party became delegates (the total number of delegates was 101). An article on *foxnews.com* attacked Mart Helme, the leader of the party, describing him as controversial. Helme was accused of racism by Efraim Zuroff, the Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Jerusalem, for coining the slogan "Estonia. For the Estonians". Helme defended himself by arguing that a Russian TV station deliberately mistranslated the slogan to present Estonians as xenophobic and intolerant of minorities. The slogan, which was used during several demonstrations, was supposed to say "For Estonia", which Helme alleged sounds very similar in the Estonian language. Furthermore, Helme denied the existence of anti-Semitism in Estonia, pointing out that there are very few Jews left in the country. At the same time, the leader of EKRE explained that his movement opposes Muslim immigration, citing the failures of integration in the West, especially in France and Sweden.⁷

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

According to the Freedom House Report, religious freedom is greatly respected in Estonia both in theory and in practice.⁸ Some Western media outlets remain sensitive and possibly biased about what they perceive as enduring xenophobia and anti-Semitism in the Baltic countries. It is possible that Russian reports, through defamation and misinformation, fuel this impression in the West.

¹ Lutheran

² Estonian Orthodox Church and Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church

³ 2011 census

⁴ US Government (2014 estimate)

⁵ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238376#wrapper>

⁶ https://www.eesti.ee/eng/inimoigused/inimoigustega_seotud_teemad/sonavabadus

⁷ <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/03/12/jews-in-baltics-fear-creep-anti-semitism.html>

⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/estonia>