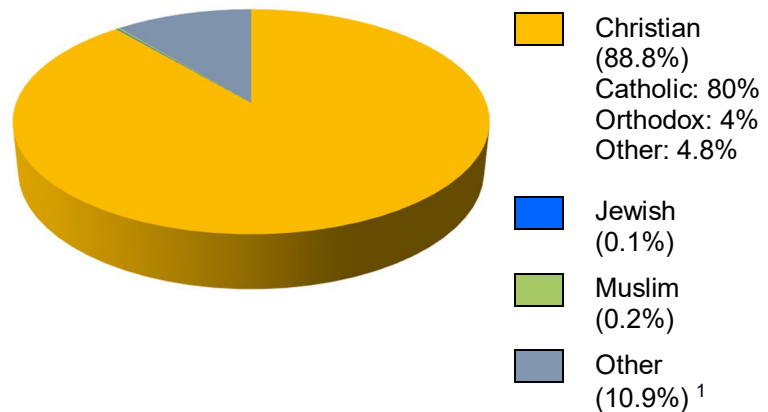


LITHUANIA



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|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Area: 65,300 km ² | Population: 3.32 million | Political system: Democracy | Major Language(s): Lithuanian |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

In Lithuania every citizen has the freedom to choose their own religious faith and to profess it individually or together with others, to engage in religious worship and attend religious services. According to the constitution, there is no state religion. The law defines religious groups as religious communities. Groupings of at least two religious communities under common leadership are called religious associations. Higher governing bodies of religious associations are defined as religious centres.

The law lists nine “traditional” religious groups: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, and Karaites. Religious groups able to trace their presence in the country back at least 300 years are recognized by the government as “traditional”. These religious groups may perform state-recognised marriages, establish joint private/public schools, provide religious instruction in public schools, and receive annual government subsidies. Their highest ranking leaders are eligible to apply for diplomatic passports, their clergy and theological students are exempt from military service, and they may provide military chaplains. Minimal social security and healthcare insurance contributions to religious leaders and members of monastic orders of the traditional religious groups are provided by the state. Traditional religious groups are not required to pay social and health insurance taxes for clergy and members of monastic orders who work at monasteries. Un-registered communities have no legal status or state privileges; however, the constitution allows them to worship and seek new members.

The constitution states that a person’s freedom to profess and spread religious beliefs may be limited only when necessary to protect health, safety, public order, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Although it has never invoked this right, during a period of martial law or a state of emergency the government may temporarily restrict freedom of expression of religious belief. Discrimination based on religion is prohibited by the Criminal Code, which provides for up to two years in prison for violations. The code penalises interference with religious ceremonies of “traditional” religious groups by imprisonment or community service, and penalises inciting religious hatred by imprisonment of up to three years. It is unlawful to make use of the religious teachings of churches and other religious groups, their religious activities, and their houses of prayer, for purposes that contradict the constitution or the law.

A law permitting *kosher* and *halal* ritual slaughter was passed by the Seimas (parliament) on 23rd September 2014. The new law has taken effect in January 2015, and enables the export of meat to predominantly Muslim countries and to Israel. Jewish community leaders praised the new law. Sunni Mufti Romas Jakubauskas also publicly supported the law. The government continued to tackle societal anti-Semitism and engaged actively in Holocaust legacy issues. It supported Jewish educational, cultural, scientific, and religious projects. Together with the civil society, it worked together to promote Holocaust education and tolerance in schools.

Incidents

Individuals placed anti-Semitic postings on the internet. On 10th July 2014, vandals overturned seven monuments at the Kupiskis Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius, and five days later, another 40 monuments had been vandalized at the Jewish Cemetery of Kaunas.²

In August 2015, a debate about a ban on the *burqa* was held in the Lithuanian parliament. The supporters of the ban pointed to France, which in 2011 implemented such a law. The government voiced the opinion that the question whether to impose legal regulations on clothing details or not is connected with the willingness of the Muslim refugee population to integrate into Lithuanian society.³

Prospects for freedom of religion

A Freedom House 2015 report on the status of freedom in Lithuanian society concluded that freedom of religion is guaranteed by law and largely upheld in practice. It points out, however, the special privileges given to the traditional religious groups.⁴

¹ http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_134_1.asp

² <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dclid=238402#wrapper>

³ <http://famagusta-gazette.com/lithuania-debates-whether-to-ban-burqas-p29165-69.htm>

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/lithuania>