



**Religion**

**Population**

**Area**

- Christians : **89.2%**
- Agnostics : **9.9%**
- Others : **0.9%**

2,850,000

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

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 26 of the constitution<sup>[1]</sup> stipulates that there is no state religion and provides for the right of individuals to choose freely any religion or belief, to profess their religion and perform religious rites, individually or with others, in private or in public, and to practise and teach their beliefs. It states that no one may be compelled – or compel others – to choose or profess any religion or belief. The constitution reserves the right to limit the freedom to profess and spread religious beliefs in order to protect health, safety, public order or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Article 25 restricts freedom of expression if it incites religious hatred, violence or discrimination. Article 27 stipulates that religious beliefs may not serve as justification for failing to comply with laws.

Article 4 of the 1995 Law on Religious Communities and Organizations<sup>[2]</sup> defines religious groups as (1) religious communities, (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.

Article 5 of the law recognises as “traditional” those religious groups that can trace their presence in the country back at least 300 years, listing nine “traditional” religious groups: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, and Karaite. 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, offer religious education in public schools and benefit from public funds on an annual basis.<sup>[3]</sup> The government contributes to social security and healthcare plans that benefit members of the clergy, monastic orders and religious workers who belong to traditional religious groups. The latter are also exempt from paying social and health insurance taxes for members of their clergy, monastic orders and most other religious workers.<sup>[4]</sup>

According to article 6 of the Law on Religious Communities and Organisations, other (non-traditional) 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.<sup>[5]</sup> The Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) then votes whether to grant this status upon recommendation from the MOJ. The Evangelical Baptist Union of Lithuania, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Pentecostal Evangelical Belief Christian Union are the only state-recognised non-traditional religious groups.<sup>[6]</sup>

Religious groups must register if they want to open a bank account, own property and 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>[7]</sup>

Traditional religious communities receive public funds for the upkeep of their houses of prayer and other needs. This involves a base fund of EUR€3,075 (US\$3,240), as well as a variable component based on the size of each community.<sup>[8]</sup>

In 2018 the funds were nearly doubled over the preceding year. This points to greater governmental support for religious groups.<sup>[9]</sup>

## | Incidents

Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim comments on the Internet were commonplace. There are recurring attacks on Jews for allegedly dominating the economy, controlling the United States or for believing that they are a chosen people. Muslims, on the other hand, have been linked to terrorism. It is possible that this may be the result of Internet trolls who have become increasingly active over the last few years. There are reports of civil volunteer groups forming to combat the rising tide of hate speech and misinformation on the Internet.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the NGO community, groups including the Institute for Ethnic Studies, as well as members of Lithuania's Muslim community, have reported a steady rise in anti-Muslim sentiment because of the ongoing influx of refugees.<sup>[11]</sup> Most of the several hundred refugees taken in under the European refugee relocation programme left the country for the higher benefits offered in Germany.<sup>[12]</sup>

In January 2018 the European Court for Human Rights declared the use of religious symbols in advertising as legal. It fined the Lithuanian government for punishing a company which had used images of Christ and Mary in their commercials in 2012.<sup>[13]</sup>

In October 2017 there was a public debate over the advertising by a newly opened branch of the German-based discount supermarket chain Lidl.<sup>[14]</sup> The advertisement showed a view of the Lithuanian city of Kaunas, with all the Christian symbols, such as the crosses on tops of the numerous churches, airbrushed from the image. The reactions were mostly negative. The company said that it was unintentional, but, as several commentators observed, the German company has used the same marketing tactic to erase religious symbols from images in other countries including Greece, Italy, Belgium and Germany. The company defended the practice in the name of religious neutrality.

In February 2018 the ombudsman for academic ethics and procedures, Vigilijus Sadauskas, was asked to resign after he proposed to reward a research thesis on Jewish crimes in the 20th century.<sup>[15]</sup> He defended the proposal saying that he wanted to see how the public would react to the notion of collective responsibility of a group for the actions of a few individuals. Sadauskas claims that Lithuania as a whole is considered guilty for the crimes of individual Lithuanians, while the Jewish nation is exempt from such a ruling. He has so far refused to step down. The case came at a time of public debate about the notion of the collective guilt of nations for wartime atrocities. Lithuania outlawed such claims in 2010 but the discussion was revived after neighbouring Poland adopted a similar law.<sup>[16]</sup>

## | Prospects for freedom of religion

Compared to preceding years, societal tensions over religion have increased somewhat. This can be attributed to specific incidents, but also to heightened media interest in such cases.

The government is active in promoting religious tolerance and increased financial support for religious communities, while judicial authorities remain very responsive to any complaints related to abuse and discrimination. On 25th March 2018, there was a hearing in Parliament about persecuted Christians. Among the topics discussed was the nomination of an ambassador for International Freedom of Religion and direct cooperation with the churches in countries where persecution takes place.<sup>[17]</sup>

At a societal level, there was an outcry on several occasions about advertising perceived as blasphemous, statements seen as anti-Semitic and hostility towards predominantly Muslim refugees. Overall, the situation is stable.

## Endnotes / Sources

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- [2] The Law on Religious Communities and Organisations, Republic of Lithuania <http://www.litlex.lt/litlex/eng/frames/laws/Documents/332.HTM> (accessed 22nd March 2018).
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- [6] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] 'Dwukrotnie wyższe dofinansowanie wspólnot religijnych' (Twice more funding for religious communities), Zw.lt, 18th February 2018, <http://zw.lt/wilno-wilenszczyzna/dwukrotnie-wyzsze-dofinansowanie-wspolnot-religijnych/> (accessed 19th February 2018).
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- [11] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, op. cit.
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