



CONCLUSIONS

The report on Freedom of Religion in Estonia 2013 shows that the freedom of religion is guaranteed in Estonia. Even so, the survey of the population and interviews conducted with experts yielded an entire range of topics that merit more in-depth study. An example of one such topic is the need to make people better-informed on issues related to religion and freedom of religion, using the options afforded by the educational system and the media.

In the opinion of 91 per cent of respondents, protection of freedom of religion is not a problematic area in Estonia (4 per cent of respondents had an opinion to the contrary). In the case of 92 per cent of respondents, they said freedom of religion had not been violated, while 2 per cent on the other hand said that it had happened. This study did not determine in more detail what types of cases were considered by respondents to be violations, nor how respondents construed the definition of freedom of religion.

4 per cent of the population said they have had to conceal their religious convictions. Thus it can be said that, in general, society is tolerant; but in certain cases, disapproval or fear thereof may be encountered. Such cases were encountered more frequently by youths, by Estonians more often than by non-Estonians, and likely also by native religion adherents.

The media is the primary source of information on freedom of religion topics – 56 per cent. The Internet and acquaintances come next. 14 per cent said they had not obtained information on the topic anywhere. 65 per cent of respondents said that there has been sufficient information on freedom of religion topics, including 32 per cent who answered “completely sufficient.” 15 per cent said there was too little information.

Just over one-half of respondents say – correctly – that there is no state church (53 per cent), while 18 per cent believe such an institution does exist. 28 per cent said they could not respond to the question. Awareness is higher among males, the two younger age groups, Estonians and higher-educated respondents.

Similarly to studies conducted previously on the same topic, 68 per cent of the respondents said they believed that general educational curricula should include comparative world religion as a subject. 25 per cent of the population are against this. 54 per cent of respondents believe school



curricula should include an overview of major Biblical stories. A total of 31 per cent of the population considered private schools operated by religious societies to be necessary, while 51 per cent considered them unnecessary.

A total of 26 per cent of respondents considered religious societies' opposition to same-sex marriage a human rights violation and 58 per cent said it was not.

Respondents felt the status of freedom of religion in Estonia had not become worse in the last 10 years and it is not feared that the situation will get worse in the near future.

64 per cent of the population agreed that the values of no one religion should dominate in the country, yet 54 per cent found that society should be based on Christian values. 94 per cent of respondents were in favour of observing the major Christian holidays as public holidays.

Similarly to the general population, the experts (religious societies, non-profits, media and government representatives, theologians and legal scholars) found that freedom of religion is well protected for inhabitants of Estonia. There is no state church, and various religions engage in cooperation with a lack of restrictions related to religion.

With regard to more specific questions, experts hold very divergent opinions based on the respondent's background.

For representatives of Estonian Council of Churches (ECC)-affiliated organizations, shortcomings in the educational system are considered a fairly major problem as the religious are not guaranteed scholastic education corresponding to the religious convictions of their parents. They find it is also necessary to ensure balanced religious studies in schools that would help young people to make decisions on religion and understanding developments in the world.

According to the representatives of the non-ECC religious societies, the state sometimes shows unequal treatment, as the opinions of churches in the ECC are given more weight, they claim.

In the opinion of several respondents, critical attitudes from society and media toward the religious and toward religions in the broader sense amounts to a fairly major problem related to freedom of religion. In the opinion of respondents with views critical of religion, religious practices



“forced” on people by the state – and which are not in conformity with legislation – are an irritating factor.

Compared to other European countries, the freedom of religion situation in Estonia is very good, but it is not easy to draw a direct comparison and the historical specifics of countries are always to be taken into consideration. Church representatives are generally content with how communication with the state is organized, but some smaller problems were mentioned as needing review and resolution. Several respondents mentioned problems concerning taxation of private schools’ activities, as a number of religious societies have been hard-hit on this front.

Government representatives say that much has been done to accommodate religious societies and that cooperation continues toward finding a solution. Restrictions often stem from ignorance, but representatives of religious societies have been active themselves and they have communicated such cases.

In commenting on the results of the survey of the population, several experts noted the general lukewarm attitudes from Estonians on the topic of religion and it was thought that perhaps this kept cases of violation of freedom of religion from being noticed. Yet they concurred with the main result of the population survey: the status of freedom of religion is good.

Experts were not very surprised that over half of the population considers Christian values the correct fundamental basis. After all, Estonia has a very deep Christian background, which has taken root over centuries. Even the non-religious people consider Estonia to be a part of Europe and Europe to be part of Christian civilization – this is more of a question of cultural context. The fact that 64 per cent of respondents believed the values of no one religion should dominate over others can be seen as logical – this is seen as a matter of basic freedom of the individual and human rights.

A result that pointed to perceived necessity of religious studies in schools seemed surprising to the experts – there had previously been quite substantial opposition in this regard. Yet awareness has been seen as increasing in recent times, as people travel widely, and the improvement in the attitude can be viewed as a positive result.

International organizations have not had criticisms regarding the situation of freedom of religion in Estonia and indeed there have been no recommendations or comments made regarding compliance with relevant



articles of these conventions. The freedom of religion situation has received positive marks in the annual US State Department reports which are compiled for all countries in the world. The report from Pew Research Center lists Estonia as among the countries with very few restrictions on religious affairs.

The last part of the report provides a number of suggestions and recommendations for government agencies that could be a basis for discussions between government and representatives of religious societies and specialists. Such discussions could lead to solutions that contribute to even more effective protection for religious freedom in Estonia.

The recommendations and suggestions made pertain to the legal status of religious societies as legal persons, the definition of religious society, confessional secrets, possible amendment of the Income Tax Act and matters related to simplification of the reports submitted by religious societies to the state.