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Research Article

The Issue of Religious Freedom in the Baltic Countries (in the post-Soviet Period)

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Abstract

Certain thoughts that have existed for decades in various circles of society that religion would lose its importance or disappear from the main spheres of society's life that religions would take more tolerant, enlightening, and philosophical forms, and faith would no longer be the driving force for people's unification and political activity, was not justified. No regime has succeeded in banishing religion from public life, despite severe persecution. On the contrary, religion often acts as an important factor even in several political processes. We have to admit that even in the space of the former Soviet Union, where it was believed that the religious factor was insignificant, and despite decades of persecution and the introduction of atheism, destroyed, empty churches and mosques, religion took an important place again in the post-Soviet period. Moreover, often a wide circle of politicians use the religious factor in their rhetoric. Therefore, the study of the issue of religious freedom on the example of the Baltic countries, which are members of the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, is relevant and interesting, both for the countries of the post-Soviet space that want to join these organizations and for other countries as well, because the freedom of religion is one of the important indicators of democracy in the country. The paper aims to present the reality of the Baltic states, the existing legislation on freedom of religion, the relations between the state and religious organizations, and various aspects related to the freedom of religious organizations, based on the study and analysis of existing official documents and secondary sources. Due to its relevance, the mentioned topic has a general, public nature. In the Baltic countries, in the post-Soviet period, during the formation of a new political reality, several requirements. For instance, there were identified for the introduction of freedom of religion, were amended legislations. All these were good practices for other countries (including Georgia) for the establishment of a coherent state policy of freedom of religion, for the issues of freedom of religion and belief of religious organizations, and last but not least to raise public awareness.

INTRODUCTION

At the modern stage of globalization, the ongoing socio-political processes in the world, which in many cases are caused by population migration processes, have activated such issues as the protection of human rights, terrorist threats, and others, where religion and inter-religious relations are often one of the main factors in these problems. Therefore, it is important to study topics related to the freedom of religion, to correctly understand different experiences for the correct regulation of inter-religious relations, and to take into account the results of desired examples/experiences. Due to the topicality of the issue, we have chosen the example of the Baltic countries - Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, which are members of the European Union and NATO, and the current situation is acceptable according to the standards of these organizations, it means that they meet the standards of democracy. The goal of the paper is to present the issue of legal, political, and religious education in the Baltic

states related to the freedom of religion and belief, by reviewing and analyzing various aspects of the post-Soviet period, using the method of historicism.

The Question of Freedom of Religion in the Baltic Countries

In the contemporary secular world, in the conditions of globalization, the issue of freedom of religion is important, therefore, various international organizations have adopted several documents on freedom of religion and belief, which gives us an idea of the challenges faced by this or that state, as well as the ways and necessary actions to overcome these challenges. First of all, we consider it necessary to become familiar with the religious policies of the countries that interest us, because I believe that this is interesting and important for multi-confessional and multi-ethnic countries, including our country. First of all, we consider it necessary to familiarize ourselves with the religious policy of the countries that interest us, because I believe that it is interesting and important for multi-confessional and multi-ethnic countries, including our country (Vashakmadze, 2017). To present the issue, we will discuss the law on religious organizations adopted by the Parliament of the three Baltic countries: Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

The Case of Latvia

The Law of the Republic of Latvia on Religious Organizations was adopted by the Parliament on September 7, 1995, and includes 20 articles, where it is explained that the law complies with the country's constitution, as well as with the international agreement on human rights in the field of religion, regulates public relations arising from the exercise of freedom of belief and religious Regarding the activities of organizations. The purpose of the mentioned law is to ensure the freedom of religion of the population of Latvia, which includes the right to freely express one's religious opinion individually or together with others to adhere or not to adhere to any religion, to freely change one's religion or to perform religious activities, as well as to express one's own religious beliefs, following the legal acts in force (Legislation on Religious Activities and Religious Bodies, 1995).

This law refers to the concept of religious organizations, the equality of officials regardless of their religious views, and the foundations of the relationship between the state and religious organizations, where the activity of the "Council of Religious Affairs" is worth noting. It has the following purpose: to facilitate and improve the coordination of the state and religious organizations (established in 1996), religious organizations and education, the procedure for establishing a religious organization, institutions of religious organizations, and their registration (newly established parishes are re-registered every year for 10 years), the list of documents to be submitted to the registering institution, Information to be included in the register, founding documents (statutes) of religious organizations, rights of religious organizations and their general activities as well as economic and entrepreneurial activities, their property, liquidation and reorganization, grounds and consequences of termination of activity of the religious organization and its institutions, transitional provisions. Here we have to highlight that Latvia is a multi-denominational/multi-confessional Christian country. Most of the population is Lutheran (ethnic Latvians from central and western Latvia) about 25-35% of the total population. The second largest faith, Roman Catholics, is 20-25% of the total population, mainly Eastern Latvians and migrants, some southern Latvians, as well as the Polish and Lithuanian minorities of Latvia. Next is the Russian Orthodox faith, which is 18%-22% of Latvian residents, mainly Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian minorities. The Old Believers are the representatives of the 4th faith in Latvia - with 1.7%, they are confessors of the old form of Russian Orthodoxy (the reform was carried out in Russia by Patriarch Nikon in 1653), which is why they are displaced in Latvia (a traditional wooden church of the Old Believers also functions in Riga).

There are many small, mostly Protestant Christian confessions, which together constitute 1.5%-2.5% of the population of Latvia. There is also a religious movement in Latvia that claims to have restored the pre-Christian pagan beliefs of Latvia. It is the largest non-Christian faith, with about 700 followers known as the Dievturis (0.035% of the total). It is worth noting that the Jewish faith has a long history in Latvia, but now it is only 0.025% of the total population. Regarding Islam, Latvia has the lowest proportion of Muslim population in Europe (0.05%) and is among the few countries without a mosque. As for atheism in Latvia, it is mainly a product of the Soviet occupation, when it was greatly popularized, in total -18% of the Latvian population is now non-religious (On Latvia, 2023).

The Case of Lithuania

The Law of the Republic on Religious Communities and Associations was adopted on October 4, 1995, and aims to establish legal relations between religious communities, associations, and the Lithuanian state and to implement the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution of Lithuania, other laws, and international agreements. It discusses the following: the basic principles of relations between the state and religious communities and associations; freedom to perform religious rituals; formation of the legal status of traditional religious communities and associations; granting legal entity status to other religious communities and associations; refusal to register the charter and relevant documentation of a religious community or association; property rights of religious communities, associations and centers; educational, charitable and charitable activities; economic and publishing activities; as well as taxation of persons employed in them; legal regulation of labor relations; social security and welfare; international cooperation between religious communities and associations; suspension or termination of the activities of a religious community, association or center. (Parliament of Lithuania, 1995).

The law deals with several issues, namely freedom of religion, and equality of individuals regardless of religion, and defines such issues as religious communities, associations, and centers. We have to say that the state recognizes nine traditional religious communities and associations that represent the historical, spiritual, and social heritage of the country. Particularly, Roman Catholic (85.9%), Russian Orthodox (4.6%), Old Believers (Starovers (0.9%), Evangelical-Lutheran (0.7%), Reformed Evangelical (0.2%), Greek-Catholic, Muslim (Sunni) and Karaite (the Karaites are originally from Crimea and settled in Lithuania in the late Middle Ages). The law refers to the manner of recognition of other religious associations. It is noteworthy that religious associations can request recognition after the expiration of 25 years from the moment of first registration, if the request is not met, re-request is possible only after the expiration of 10 years from the moment of refusal (the issue of recognition is discussed by the Seym of the Parliament, after the conclusion received from the Ministry of Justice). In the globalized world of the 21st century, few will be surprised by multi-religious cities. However, the multi-religious atmosphere in Lithuania is centuries old. In the 19th century, Vilnius had more than 10 churches of different religions, including non-Christian ones. Lietuva is a unique crossroads of East and West in that you can see here the centuries-old heritage of many different faiths. After the restoration of state independence (1990), state atheism was replaced by religious freedom. At the same time, the number of followers of new or foreign religious movements has increased, but together they remain less than 1%. Of this, 0.5% belong to various small Christian denominations. Lithuania, as mentioned, recognizes religious freedom. Traditional religious institutions are treated like any other cultural institution.

The Case of Estonia

The Law on Churches and Parishes was adopted in 2002 and aims to regulate the membership procedures and activities of churches, parishes, associations of parishes, monasteries, and religious communities while respecting the universal right to freedom of religion as enshrined in the constitution (Legislation Online, 2002). The law concerns religious associations, their main activities; religious community; passive legal rights; registered office; and name. The second chapter of the law deals with freedom of religion and belief; where the rights of the individual are included; freedom of belief and religion stipulates that persons who are in medical and educational institutions, prisons, places of public gathering, and military forces have the right to freely perform religious rites, if they do not violate public order, the by-laws of the institution and do not endanger the health of others. Religious associations do not have the right to perform religious rituals and religious services without the permission of the heads of educational and medical institutions, prisons, and military forces. It is worth noting that the procedure for joining children in parishes has been discussed. The third chapter, the Establishment and Reorganization of the Religious Association, includes the establishment of the religious association; the charter of the religious association; the rules of registration in the register, suspension of proceedings in the register and refusal of registration; entering information and making changes to the register; merger, separation, and liquidation of religious associations. The fourth chapter, the registration of the religious association, refers to the registration procedure (the religious association is registered in the register as a non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entity and all the provisions apply to it. As for non-entrepreneurial legal entities (unless otherwise provided by this

act) restrictions apply to public information; certificate of registration of religious organization (certificate of registration of religious association is issued by the Ministry of Justice); Board of Governors and Clergy (Clergy of a religious association may be a person eligible to participate in local government elections). Other requirements may be established by the religious association. The management group of the religious association can invite the president from outside Estonia and give him the right to work and reside (based on the residence of foreigners and other legislation) dispose of the professional dress of a clergyman; professional secrecy; Board of Governors (a church, parish and association of parishes) has the right to have a board of governors. The minimum and maximum number of members of the Board of Governors is determined by the statute. At least half of the members of the management group must be in Estonia, the rest - in the European Economic Area or Switzerland. According to this act, the highest representative of the monastery (meaning the governor of the monastery) is responsible for the representative authority and responsibility of the board of governors. The fifth chapter of the law "Assets of religious association" includes property rights and obligations. In this regard, it includes many interesting issues, in particular, religious associations have the right to charge fees for religious rituals and receive donations for certain purposes; dispose of annual reports; supervise them; and the rule of distribution of assets. Chapter Six contains transitional provisions and deals with the extension of this Act to religious associations; applications for registration in the register; register entries; revocation (the religious association registered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and which did not submit an application to the register before January 1, 2005 or made an application late is subject to revocation) and notification.

We have to highlight that discussions on religious issues and freedom of religion are relevant in Estonia. Accordingly, the principles of religious freedom, religious topics about rights and contractual obligations, and legal parameters affecting the influence of religion in politics and public life are covered in many works (Kiviorg, 2016). It is important to study/discuss the mentioned issues in a legal direction about religion in such specific areas as church funding, labor and employment, marriage, and family law. Comprehensive reviews of relevant legislation and legal doctrine demonstrate that freedom of religion is an important current issue that is directed not only by state policy but also by a broad spectrum of society. It is worth pointing out that while working on the paper, the attitude and interest of Baltic countries towards various topics were highlighted, starting with religious development in the ancient Near East, to the dynamics of religiosity in modern society, the role of religion in medieval Japan, as well as among the peoples of Siberia (Peedu, 2019). Therefore we can claim that the topic draws great interest among researchers.

The Issue of Religious Education in the Baltic Countries

Nowadays, education is the main mechanism by which we can ensure the formation of a society that is tolerant of other religious beliefs and does not allow conflict on this ground. For this, a teenager must master the basics of religious education from secondary school, namely, knowledge about religion, the existence of religions in different nations and their cultural coexistence, etc. In addition, the school is obliged to provide the child with religious education, for his personal growth, and social development, to prepare him to face the challenges of life, because they have to live in diverse/multi-religious circumstances and to have acceptance of other religions and cultures and critical thinking. Interest in the issue is increased by the fact that the Soviet authorities separated the church from the educational process, closed religious schools, removed religious content from the curriculum, and banned group catechesis. For these respective republics, only after the restoration of state independence, it became possible to raise the issue and discuss it, some of which we will consider the main issues.

The Case of Latvia

It is noteworthy that religious education in state schools in Latvia was already active before the Second World War. The Education Acts of 1919 and 1934 included provisions for denominational religion classes in both elementary and secondary schools (Balodis, 2000). Religious education was re-introduced in Latvian public schools in 1991, right after the state's independence. The Law on Religious Organizations, which guaranteed freedom of religion and conscience, allowed children to choose between religion and ethics subjects or to study both.

Article 6 of the "Religious Organizations and Education" Law of the Republic of Latvia dated September 7, 1995 "Religious Organizations and Education" (with amendments dated June 17, 1996, February 19, 1998) includes 5 quite interesting and noteworthy points, particularly:

1. Everyone has the right to acquire religious teachings independently or through educational institutions or religious organizations.
2. The teachings of the Christian faith may be taught in state and local government schools to persons who have expressed in writing a desire to acquire this knowledge. Minors, by written agreement with their parents or guardians, must submit a statement of their desire to study the teachings of the Christian faith. In the case of minors under the age of 14, a parent or guardian must apply on their behalf.
3. Teachings of the Christian faith are conducted according to the program approved by the Ministry of Education and Science by teachers of the Evangelical-Lutheran, Roman-Catholic, True-Glorified, Old Believer, and Baptist denominations if at least 10 students in the school express their desire to acquire the relevant denominational education. Teachers can be nominated by denominations, and their attestation is provided by the Ministry of Education and Science.
4. Schools of national minorities under the administration of the state and local authorities can provide religious education appropriate to the wishes of the students or their parents or guardians and specific to the national minority, following the procedures established by the Ministry of Education and Science.
5. The teaching of Christian faith and ethics is financed from the state budget, as we see in Latvia, even though according to the constitution religious associations are separated from the state, Christian teaching is financed by the state (LiCoDu, 1995).

The analysis of the study of several materials proves that the issue of the development of religious education in the public education system of Latvia is important and it consists of three parts. The first part deals with the social context of the post-Soviet society and its influence on the development of religious education. The second part describes four approaches to religious education in public schools that have emerged in Latvia in recent decades: the confessional approach, ecumenical Christian approach, world religions approach, and Christian ethics approach (Filipsone, 2011). Last but not least analyzes the problems and possibilities of the current stage of the multiplicity of approaches.

The Case of Lietuva

Religious education in Lithuania is conducted by the Law on Religious Communities and Associations adopted on October 4, 1995. Where, in particular, the ninth article mentions that religious education can be carried out in houses of worship, state, and non-state educational and training institutions, as well as in other places. Traditional and other, state-recognized, religions can be taught in state educational institutions, based on the request of students' parents and guardians. Here we will find that according to the law, the state recognizes after the registration of the training program in the Ministry of Education and the submission of documents confirming the qualifications of the persons providing education. It should be noted that classes and religious education for students are conducted according to the religion recognized by their family or relatives. In addition, the rule of religious education in state educational institutions is regulated by the legislation on education.

Following the fourteenth article - "Education, charity and charity - religious communities, associations and centers" religious communities, associations, and centers have the right to create and have general education schools, as well as other educational, educational, and cultural institutions, educational and preparatory institutions for clergymen and To train religious instructors, following the rules established by laws and other normative acts. Educational institutions of traditional and other religious communities, associations, and centers with the rights of a legal entity, and schools, associations, and centers of such religious communities, which carry out education established by the state, receive financial and other types of support from the state and local. Here we have to highlight that the state budget is established by laws and other normative acts.

Educational institutions of traditional religious communities and associations that provide the standard of general education established by the state receive financial support from the state or other institutions authorized by it under the order by allocating the same amount of budget funds by type. (level) correspondent. The amount of property of educational institutions is determined according to the expenses intended for educational institutions of the corresponding type (level) of the child, and school student. All religious communities, associations, and centers can participate in charity, and charity activities and establish medical institutions, as well as charitable institutions and organizations (LiCoDu, 1995).

We have to point out that during the Soviet Union, religious education in Lithuania was removed from the education system: the Soviet government separated the church from the state, closed existing Catholic schools, and excluded religious classes from the curriculum. In 1976, new regulations were extended to religious communities, introducing even greater prohibitions.

It is worthy to highlight that in 1988 among the other demands presented to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, was the question of religion. On May 23, 1988, the priests of the diocese of Panevezys addressed Gorbachev, who asked the USSR "not to limit the preparation of children for communion and to allow religious education (there were many such appeals from different places).

In this context, the idea of freedom of religion became an integral part of the concept of Lithuanian independence. One of the main conditions of freedom was good quality religious education, an important issue during the Lithuanian awakening. The idea of restoring religious education was especially welcomed by the Christian community and church representatives. The integration of religious lessons into the educational process was one of the clearest signs of the liberation of Lithuanian schools from Soviet ideology.

On November 29, 1989, the USSR Minister of Education and the Lithuanian cardinal signed a joint statement allowing the parish to create parish schools. Schools were instructed to provide space in state schools for parochial schools at the request of parents and to create favorable conditions for the teaching of religion. The document states that the bishops' conference was to appoint religious teachers, discuss religious education curricula and personnel issues, and report them to the Ministry of Education. And exactly this document laid the foundation for the legitimization of religious education in schools. Researchers of the religious expression of this period note that, compared to other Soviet republics, they exerted the greatest pressure and success in terms of religious lessons.

In the spring of 1991, the Supreme Council of Lithuania began to discuss the draft law on education. Although religion was already being taught in schools, the issue sparked intense discussion. A new law on education, adopted on June 25, 1991, strengthened the legal status of religious classes: it stated that students who did not attend religious classes were simultaneously taught other subjects - moral or civic education. In addition, religion was taught by persons authorized by the religious authorities. This approach has not been substantially changed by subsequent amendments to the Education Act. Overall, a review of the reintroduction of religious education in the Baltic states reveals that similar provisions were included in the Latvian Education Act in 1998; in 1996, Estonian parents were given the legal right to petition school authorities for their children's religious education, although schools were not obliged to comply with their requests. The legal right to religious education was officially enshrined in the Lithuanian Constitution in 1992. The Constitution granted parents and foster parents the unrestricted right to raise their children following their beliefs. The constitution states that there is no official/state religion in Lithuania, but the state recognizes traditional churches and religious organizations. Churches and religious organizations recognized by the state are granted legal rights and can freely practice their beliefs, hold religious services, and have houses of worship, charitable institutions, and schools for the training of clergy.

The study/analysis of the facts proves that in Lithuania, the discussions about religious education began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Here it should be said that they were very important for a large part of the Catholic population. However, the implementation of religious education had no legal or practical basis.

It should be noted that the involvement of the Catholic Church in the educational process of the country was finally strengthened in 2000 after the ratification of an international agreement,

particularly the agreement on cooperation in the field of education and culture between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania. Here we should point out that at the beginning of the 21st century, religious education in Lithuania had a legal basis and a firm status in the education system, and a network of Catholic schools was created (partially recreated) (Juškienė, 2020).

The Case of Estonia

Estonia is often considered the most secular country in Europe. The indifference to religion as a cultural phenomenon has been mentioned by several scientists even at the beginning of the twentieth century (Remmel, 2017). Religious education in Estonia is voluntary and religious education is an optional and not a compulsory course. Since the declaration of independence in Estonia in 1991, religious education has not been explicitly mentioned in the constitution. In the Estonian Education Law adopted in 1992, there is only once mentioned the fundamental principles of education which are based on the recognition of universal and national values, freedom of individual religion, and conscience (Riigi Teataja, 1992). Here it is worthy to say that the 4th paragraph of Article 4 of the Education Law mentioned by some scientists (Mateshvili, 2017) in 1992, where it was said - "The study of God's law, as well as its teaching, is voluntary" was removed from the law in 2010.

Religious education has been one of the most controversial issues related to religion in Estonia virtually throughout its history. During the first period of independence (1918–40), Estonia was one of the first countries to introduce a model of non-denominational religious education. The principle of separation of state and religion was established in the 1920 constitution, which included the issue of the study of different religions. A clear distinction was made - religious education in schools and religious teaching in churches. When the Soviet Union occupied Estonia in 1940, religious education was banned in schools. All forms of religious instruction were suppressed in schools and replaced by courses in scientific atheism. After the restoration of independence in the early 1990s, discussions about religious education started again. In 1991, the theological faculty of the University of Tartu and theology in private schools were restored.

The standard of Estonian education is formed by national curricula based on tradition. To develop the education new national curricula were adopted in 2010. The description of religious education was also included as an optional subject in the national curricula. The relevant subject syllabuses are based on the contextual approach model, the religious education subject syllabus for primary schools defines three courses: "Customs, Histories and Values" at the first stage, "Values and Choices" at the second stage, and "One World, Different Religions" at the third stage of study. The secondary school syllabus includes two courses 35 hours each: "Humanity and Religion" and "Religious Landscape of Estonia". Schools specify that the subject provides an introduction to different religions without advertising, the purpose of which is to improve the understanding of the role of religion in society and culture. General principles of subject syllabi define that:

1) The basic principle is recognition of freedom of religion and opinion;

2) Students are not expected to adopt any particular worldview as a norm;

3) Students are not guided to accept a specific religion;

4) The study of different religions and worldviews is based on a "balanced scientific approach";

5) Content may not be construed as promoting any particular church, congregation, or other religious association (Härm, 2022).

Thus we can claim that the official data presented show a high degree of freedom of religion in Estonia.

CONCLUSION

In general, there is a great experience and a wide discussion of religious relations in world history. The reviewed materials proved that the debate on the issue of freedom of religion is relevant in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. It is clear from the reviewed materials that the constitutions of all three Baltic countries declare that there is no state religion and protect the religious freedom of the individual. At the same time, it prohibits the incitement of religious hatred, violence, or discrimination. The law establishes the registration of religious associations and religious societies and

regulates their activities. Here we have to point out that unregistered religious associations are free to carry out religious activities. It should be noted that the study/analysis of several materials confirms that even at the modern stage there are challenges in basic schools, in particular, concerning the textbooks of religious education. Based on the results, it can be concluded that concerning religious education, although the idea of a "multi-religious" religious education that creates conditions for intercultural, interreligious communication and critical discussion is recognized, this requirement should be widespread and presented in textbooks. The teacher should ensure dialogue between students of different religious and non-religious backgrounds to teach the principles of tolerance and respect for people with different faiths. However, the general picture proves that the religious teaching defined by the law is also represented by the principles of democracy and does not contain any signs of restrictions or pressure.

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