



UN experts express concern over the escalation of legislative and administrative measures against the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church



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On 15 December 2025, the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published a press release in which United Nations experts expressed serious concern about the escalation of legislative and administrative measures against the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church (formerly the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate - ed.). The statement was made by UN Independent Expert D. Katrougalos, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief N. Ghanea, and the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues N. Levrat.

The publication notes that these actions may constitute impermissible restrictions on freedom of religion and minority rights.

"We are concerned that recent steps taken by the Estonian authorities - ranging from legislative

amendments to administrative decisions - appear to disproportionately affect one specific religious community," the experts emphasized. It was also noted that "canonical affiliation, church hierarchy, and spiritual allegiance are integral components of freedom of religion and are fully protected under international law."

The experts pointed to amendments to the Churches and Congregations Act, a court decision of May 2025, and public statements challenging the canonical affiliation of the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church, which, in their view, create a risk of stigmatization of the country's largest Christian denomination - an important institution both for ethnic Estonians and for Estonia's significant Russian-speaking community.

They expressed concern over the termination of state funding for the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church and its exclusion from consultations. The experts were also troubled by restrictive residence permit decisions affecting clergy and by reliance on "undisclosed security assessments." "National security is not a permissible ground for restricting freedom of religion or belief," the experts stated, recalling Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In this context, they stressed that any restrictions must be justified through strict compliance with all human rights standards, including proportionality, necessity, and non-discrimination.

The experts specifically mentioned such facts as the sudden termination of a long-term lease agreement with the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church, a "significant and unexplained increase in insurance premiums" for the Pühtitsa Convent, as well as the "expulsion or effective removal of senior clergy without adequate procedural safeguards." "Such actions disrupt normal religious life and may undermine the autonomy that should be guaranteed by freedom of religion or belief," the published press release states.

The publication on the website of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also notes that although the amendments to the Churches and Congregations Act are formulated in general terms, they were justified and are being applied in practice almost exclusively with regard to the historical canonical ties of the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church to the Moscow Patriarchate. Even before the adoption of the law, certain state bodies, according to the experts, had created a "confrontational environment" incompatible with the state's duty to maintain neutrality in matters of religion or belief.

The experts welcomed President Alar Karis's decision not to sign the amendments and to refer them for constitutional review to the Supreme Court. At the same time, they called on the Estonian authorities to suspend administrative and judicial actions against the Estonian Orthodox Christian Church until the review is completed and to begin comprehensive consultations with religious and ethnic communities.

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