

LATVIA: A NGO denounces the interference of the Parliament in the choice of the Orthodox Church leadership

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (21.10.2019) – At the OSCE/ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting held in September 2019 in Warsaw, [the Latvian Human Rights Committee](#) criticized [the law](#) adopted in June 2019 by the Latvian Parliament (Seima) requiring Orthodox hierarchs to be Latvian citizens. Additionally, it requires them to have lived in the country for at least ten years. The law will apply to heads of the church, metropolitans, bishops and candidates for these positions.

Two readings were held, with [79 deputies](#) in favor and none against. This new law will have a significant impact for this church since many of its followers (mostly ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians) are stateless, and some are foreign citizens. The Latvian Orthodox Church is, under canonical law, an autonomous part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The current primate, Metropolitan Alexander of Riga, was born in Latvia and holds Latvian citizenship.

The law states that the citizenship and permanent residence criteria would apply to officials of religious organizations whose leadership is located outside of Latvia.

Alleged security issues were behind the initiative of the lawmakers who state that the aim is to avoid potential influence from abroad.

At the same OSCE/ODIHR conference in Warsaw, their Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Kishan Manocha, announced the publication of a 71-page document titled "[Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security, Policy Guidance](#)".

In 2002, an analogous provision was inserted in the [Agreement between the Republic of Latvia and the Holy See](#), requiring Roman Catholic bishops to be Latvian citizens.

According to the latest [sociological survey](#) carried out by SKDS research center, Orthodoxy is the largest religion in Latvia, with 26% of the population identifying as an Orthodox Christian. The second largest religion is Catholicism at 20% and the third is Lutheranism at 17%. Another 14% believe in God but do not identify with any particular religion or Church, and 15% of Latvians identify as atheists.