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Belarus

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice.

Respect for religious freedom continued to decline and be uneven during the period covered by this report, though some improvements occurred. The Government continued to restrict religious freedom in accordance with the provisions of a 2002 law on religion and a 2003 Concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC). Although there is no state religion, the Concordat grants the BOC privileged status. Authorities continued to harass certain religious groups and denominations, particularly those that the authorities appeared to regard as bearers of foreign cultural influence, or as having a political agenda. Protestants in particular attracted negative attention for their perceived links with the United States. A 2002 law on religion required religious groups to re-register. The authorities refused to re-register some minority religious groups, including some Protestant groups, Orthodox confessions outside of the BOC, and some Eastern religions. Without registration many of these groups faced problems with authorities and found it difficult to function.

Nevertheless, the situation improved during the period covered by this report for a few minority religious groups, including the Roman Catholics and the Seventh-day Adventists, and the vast majority of religious groups successfully completed the registration requirements of the 2002 law.

The generally amicable relationship among religions and a widely held ethic of tolerance in society contributed to religious freedom; however, hostile or intolerant attitudes by some government officials and in some parts of the press encouraged negative attitudes toward some minority faiths and toward Jews.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 80,154 square miles and its population is approximately 9,990,000.

The country historically has been an area of interaction, as well as competition and conflict, between Belarusian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. According to polls, approximately 50 percent of Belarusians consider themselves religious. The Government indicates that of all persons who profess a religious faith approximately 80 percent belong to the BOC, 14 percent are either practicing Roman Catholics or identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, and 2 percent are Protestant. Between 50,000 and 70,000 persons identify themselves as Jewish. There are also adherents to the Greek Catholic Church, Orthodox religions outside the BOC, and some Eastern religions. Minority religious groups include, but are not limited to: Hare Krishnas, Hindus, Baha'i, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Calvinists, and Lutherans. According to the Committee of Religious and Nationality Affairs (CRNA), as of May 2005, Belarus had 2,829 registered religious communities. This includes the Presbyterian Church, which authorities registered for the first time in 2004. It also includes 1,290 Belarusian Orthodox, 450 Roman Catholic, 70 Seventh-day Adventist, 25 Jewish, 30 Muslim, and 30 Old Believers. Exact numbers for registered evangelical Christian, Baptist and Greek Catholic communities were not available.

The country was designated an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989, creating the BOC under Patriarchal Exarch Metropolitan Filaret. The number of parishes throughout the country was approximately 1,290 by the end of the period covered by this report. Other Orthodox confessions also exist in the country, but suffer from strong discrimination. Unable to register without the consent of the BOC, they are effectively banned. These include the Belarusian Autonomous Orthodox Church (BAOC), the Catacomb Orthodox Church, the True Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad.

There were approximately 400 Roman Catholic parishes in the country. The head of the Roman Catholic Church generally does not involve the Church in political issues. The cardinal has prohibited the display of all national and political symbols in churches. During the period covered by this report, the Catholic Church's situation in Belarus improved. On February 8 2005, President Aleksandr Lukashenko and Cardinal Swiatek met and committed to improving the relationship between the Government and the Roman Catholic Church.

Approximately 120,000 citizens were considered to have Jewish nationality near the end of the Soviet period in 1989, compared to between 50,000 and 70,000 at the end of the period covered by this report. At least half of the present Jewish population is thought to live in or near Minsk. The majority of the country's Jewish population, 98 percent, is not actively religious. Of those who are, most are believed to be either Reform or Conservative. There is also a small but active Lubavitch community and a Chabad community. In 2002, a Jewish community center in Minsk opened with assistance from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Adherents of Protestant faiths, while still small, continued to grow in number. Since 1990, the number of Protestant congregations, registered and unregistered, has more than doubled. The two largest Protestant groups are registered under separate Pentecostal and Baptist unions.

There are a number of congregations of the Greek Catholic Church, which once had a membership of approximately three quarters of the country's population but suffered from severe persecution under Tsarist and Soviet rule. Following the 1991 reestablishment of Belarusian independence, the attempt to revive the Church, which maintains Orthodox rituals but is in communion with the Vatican, has had only limited success due to determined opposition by the BOC.

In 2002, a Muslim organization, the Spiritual Office of Muslims, split from the Belarusian Muslim Religious Association, the main organizational body of the 30,000 Muslims in the country. The Spiritual Office of Muslims currently claims about 300 members. Some members of a community of approximately 10,000 ethnic Tatars, with roots dating back to the 11th century, practice Sunni Islam.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. Although the 1996 amended Constitution reaffirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law, it also contains restrictive language that stipulates that cooperation between the State and religious organizations "is regulated with regard for their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people." The CRNA regulates all religious matters in the country.

In 2002, President Lukashenko signed a religion law into effect, despite protests from human rights organizations, the European Union, and domestic religious groups. The law recognizes the "determining role of the Orthodox Church in the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people" as well as the historical importance of Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism, groups commonly referred to as "traditional faiths" in society. However, key omissions indicate present interests rather than historical reality influenced the list. The "traditional faiths" do not include religious communities with deep historical roots in the country such as the Greek Catholic Church, established in 1546; Calvinist churches, active in the country by the mid 17th century; or Priestless Old Believer communities, which began the country at the end of the 17th century.

Despite the law's stated intention to guarantee religious freedom, it contains a number of very restrictive elements that increase the Government's control of the activities of religious groups. The 2002 law requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute literature and prevents foreigners from leading religious organizations, and it denies religious communities the right to establish religious schools to train their own clergy. In addition, the law confines the activity of religious communities to the areas where they register. Further, the law establishes complex registration requirements that some religious communities, both traditional and nontraditional, have difficulty fulfilling. The 2002 law also requires all previously registered groups to re-register by November 17, 2004, and banned immediately at the passing of the law all religious activity by unregistered religious groups.

Domestic religious groups continued to appeal for revocation of at least part of the 2002 law. In September 2004, Protestant groups sent petitions to President Lukashenko, the National Assembly, the Council of Ministers, and the Constitutional Court calling for revision of the most restrictive elements of the religion law. They declared that the law was inconsistent with the Constitution and international standards. They specifically mentioned parts restricting activity to the area where a group was registered, the difficulty of obtaining permission to worship in a public place, and the preamble identifying the BOC as having a defining role and influence in the country. As of the end of the period covered by this report, the President had yet to respond to these and all previous appeals by religious groups to revise the law. However, an

official in Parliament wrote a reply to justify maintaining the status quo and leaving the law as it presently stands.

The 2002 law established three tiers of religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and Republican religious associations. Religious communities, or local individual religious organizations, must comprise 20 persons over the age of 18 who live in neighboring areas. Religious associations comprise 10 communities, one of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years, and can be formed only by a Republican (national level) religious association. Republican religious associations are formed only when there are active religious communities in the majority of the country's six regions. All applications to establish associations and Republican associations must be submitted to the CRNA.

Previously registered religious communities were able to re-register with the former minimum requirement of 10 members, instead of the 20 now needed for registering a new community. To register, a community must submit a list of founders with their full names, places of residence, citizenships, and signatures, copies of their founding statutes, minutes of their founding meeting, and permission confirming the community's right to any property indicated in their founding statutes. For those communities practicing religions not previously known to the Government, information on their faith must also be submitted. The Regional Executive Committees (for those groups outside of Minsk) or the Minsk City Executive Committee handles all application requests for religious communities.

While the law denies communities the right to establish institutions to train religious clergy, it permits them to operate Sunday schools. Furthermore, authorities generally accommodate members of religions with special requirements with respect to various holy days.

In addition to re-registering religious associations that were older than 20 years, the CRNA also allowed re-registration of some religious associations that existed before the 2002 law but could not meet the 20-year rule. To register, associations must provide a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and minutes from the founding congress of the association. By law, associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions, invite foreigners to work with respective religious groups, and organize cloister and monastic communities.

The CRNA reported in December 2004 that of the 2,780 religious communities subject to the re-registration requirement, 2,676 successfully re-registered. Of the 140 religious associations and Republican religious associations required to re-register, 128 were re-registered. The CRNA attests that the 12 religious associations not re-registered self-liquidated for lack of members and activity. Of the 104 religious communities not re-registered, 84 self-liquidated. Representatives of several religious groups reported that the CRNA offered significant assistance throughout the process. The remaining 20 "did not manage to go through re-registration due to irregularities of critical importance," according to the CRNA. The 20 denied re-registration all represent religions the Government considers non-traditional. For example, some Full Gospel churches and the Hare Krishnas were denied re-registration.

The 2003 Concordat between the BOC and the Government guarantees the BOC autonomy in its internal affairs and the freedom to perform all religious rites and other activities, as well as the right to consider itself in a special relationship with the State. The Concordat recognizes the BOC's "influence on the formulation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people." The Concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to cooperate in implementing policy in various fields, including education, development and protection of cultural legacies, and security. Although it states that the agreement will not limit the religious freedoms of other faiths, the Concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society." Despite a series of cooperation agreements signed over the past few years between the BOC and various Government ministries, BOC involvement in state institutions is reportedly fairly low.

Nevertheless, in October 2004, President Lukashenko emphasized the continued importance of the BOC: "I very much want the Orthodox Church to stay within the framework of our state. I want the Orthodox Church to be an institution of our state and one of its main supporters." Lukashenko went on to encourage the protection of the status quo against "foreign" religions: "Some members of the opposition, instigated by foreign minions, make provocative suggestions about narrowing the sphere of activities of traditional religions, primarily the Orthodox Church, for the benefit of various sects and religions that are nontraditional in this country."

In March 2004, the National Intellectual Property Center granted the BOC the exclusive right to use the word "Orthodox" in its title and to use the image of the Cross of Euphrosynia, the patroness saint of Belarus, as its symbol. These moves are seen as further instruments to solidify the standing of the BOC as the only permitted Orthodox faith in the country.

The Government refers to groups that it does not consider to be traditional faiths as "nontraditional," and government officials and state media also widely use the term "sect" when referring to nontraditional religious groups, although it is not an official designation.

Under regulations issued in 2001, the Government requires an inviting organization to make a written request to invite foreign clergy, including the dates and reason for the visit. Even if the visit is for nonreligious purposes such as charitable activities, representatives must obtain a visa and permission from the CRNA. The CRNA has 20 days in which to respond, and there is no provision for appeal of the CRNA's decision. Legislation restricts "subversive activities" by foreign organizations in the country and prohibits the establishment of offices of foreign organizations whose activities incite "national, religious, and racial enmity" or could "have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people."

Some restrictions on freedom of religion arise from other Belarusian laws that circumscribe basic freedoms. As the CRNA stated in its response to the U.S. State Department's 2004 International Religious Freedom Report, "Sanctions against representatives of religious associations are applied for breaching the law and are not aimed at limiting religious freedom." The most common charge against religious leaders is organizing or hosting an unauthorized meeting, a charge that arises from a law constraining freedom of assembly, not any law on religion.

According to the Government, the law permits residential property to be used for religious services only after it has been converted from residential use. The Housing Code permits the use of such property for nonresidential purposes with the permission of local executive and administrative bodies.

Government employees are not required to take any kind of religious oath or practice elements of a particular faith.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Religious freedom was restricted both actively and passively by the Government. The Government actively passed laws that limit freedom to worship, freedom to speak, and freedom to assemble. The Government also failed to condemn acts of religious insensitivity or intolerance. Some of the 2,829 registered religious communities were registered only on a local basis, which provided limited rights. With or without official registration, some faiths had encountered difficulty renting or purchasing property to establish places of worship, building churches (e.g., the Greek Catholics and Protestant groups), or openly training clergy.

Contrary to the expectations of many observers, the CRNA reported that Regional Executive Committees and the Minsk Executive Committee re-registered 99.3 percent of those religious communities that did not self-liquidate and the expectations that the Government would use re-registration for massive religious repression were not met. Even so, re-registration alone did not guarantee religious freedom, and the CRNA continued to deny re-registration to certain groups. The reasons for denial were based on provisions of the law, but the apparently arbitrary application of the law resulted in the restriction of religious freedom.

On August 18, 2004, the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union (UCSJ) was denied re-registration for submitting some documents late. The UCSJ is one of the primary Jewish human rights organizations in the country. It was previously registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a branch of a foreign organization. UCSJ appealed the denial to the Supreme Court, but for technical reasons the Court declined to take the case. This left the UCSJ with no option but to close. However, Government actions prevented UCSJ from being able to officially close. Following the re-registration denial, the authorities blocked UCSJ's bank account, preventing the organization from paying its lease, taxes, or providing severance pay to its employees. In mid-June 2005, the UCSJ was able to access its bank accounts and pay its rent and the salaries of its employees; however, the UCSJ remained unregistered by the end of the period covered by this report.

According to the Forum 18 News Service, in 2003, Vladimir Lameko, Vice Chairman of the CRNA, ordered local officials to increase monitoring of the activity of religious organizations, carry out regular visits during worship services and meetings with religious leaders, and conduct regular checks on unregistered religious groups to terminate their activities. Lameko cited "crude violations" of the law in Nesvizh "predominately by Protestant communities" and the need to improve local officials' ability to "regulate the ethnic-confessional situation." In addition, Lameko ordered local officials to prevent the main Polish minority organization in the country from using property owned by the Roman Catholic Church, and to conduct "systematic work" with local Catholic leaders to ensure that foreign Catholic religious workers use Belarusian or Russian in their sermons. Following Lameko's order, representatives from the Union Evangelical Faith Christians and Baptist communities reported that teachers questioned children who belong to these churches about their attendance at religious ceremonies to determine which students were attending Protestant ceremonies. During the period covered by this report, this questioning allegedly continued, although to a lesser degree.

Due to the provisions of the 2002 Law on Religion, groups that do not qualify as Republican associations, such as the Greek Catholic Church, cannot establish media publications, found a monastery, or invite foreign citizens to the country in order to engage in religious activity.

Citizens theoretically are not prohibited from proselytizing and may speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, authorities often intervene to interfere with, stop, or punish individuals who proselytize on

behalf of some registered and unregistered religions. Authorities regulate every aspect of proselytizing and literature distribution: who may participate, what may be done, when groups may participate, and where groups may be active. The Government continued to enforce a 1995 Council of Ministers decree that regulates the activities of religious workers, as well as a 1997 Council of Ministers directive that permits the teaching of religion at youth camps for registered religious groups.

Authorities continued to harass, fine, and detain Hare Krishnas for illegally distributing religious literature. Throughout the period covered by this report, Minsk city authorities repeatedly denied requests by Hare Krishnas for permission to distribute religious materials in the city, thereby rendering all Hare Krishna literature distribution illegal.

Foreign missionaries are not permitted to engage in religious activities outside of the institutions that invited them. The law requires one-year, multiple-entry "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries. Religious groups and individuals continue to experience difficulties in obtaining visas, even those that have a long history in the country. Even missionaries operating legitimately and openly with a missionary visa often experience harassment from authorities, particularly if they hail from the West.

Although there were no reports of visa denials or revocations to Western missionaries, authorities reportedly made some wait until the last minute for their visa renewals or forced them to incur the additional expense of going to Lithuania for short-term visas, while waiting for their missionary visa renewal. At least one Protestant missionary and the locals who worked with him were repeatedly summoned and questioned about the sources and use of his funding, despite the fact that he had been in the country for more than 5 years and had not been charged with visa violations or legal problems.

Since its revival in 1991, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced a severe shortage of qualified native clergy. The Church continued to have difficulty obtaining permission from authorities, particularly in the Grodno region, to bring in a sufficient number of foreign religious workers, primarily from Poland, to make up for the shortage.

Having a lease agreement is an indispensable condition to secure a legal address and subsequently apply for registration as a religious group or church.

Approval for visits by foreign clergy or religious workers often involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. Internal affairs agencies may expel foreign clergymen from the country by not extending their registration or by denying them temporary stay permits. These authorities may make decisions on expulsion on their own or based on recommendations from Religious Affairs Councils, regional executive committees, or the Religious Affairs Department of the Executive Committee of the city of Minsk.

As a result of the regulations governing the use of residential property for religious services, several Protestant churches and other nontraditional faiths have become caught in a closed loop. They are denied permission to convert their properties for religious uses because they are not registered religious groups, but without a legal address are unable to register. Religious groups that cannot register often are forced to meet illegally or in the homes of individual members.

According to Forum 18, in June 2005, authorities warned Russian Orthodox Church Abroad priest Fr Leonid Plyats that he would receive jail time or a massive fine if he conducted "illegal religious activity." Since the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad is not registered, any activity other than a small gathering in a home can be construed as "illegal religious activity."

While Protestants and Greek Catholics reported that they had been able to rent space in meeting halls for religious services more successfully than in previous years, local nontraditional religious groups continued to be denied space in meeting halls to conduct prayer services. In response to Protestant requests for permission to rent property, the CRNA claimed that only local authorities decide whether or not to grant such permission.

During the period covered by this report, many traditional and nontraditional religious groups continued to experience problems obtaining property or registering at property they already own, due to apparent government efforts to restrict the ability of these groups to establish houses of worship. In 2003, city authorities in Slonim pressured the director of a local meeting hall to cancel a rental contract he had made with the New Generation Full Gospel Church. At the end of the reporting period, the church remained unable to find a place to meet legally.

In 2003, local authorities rescinded an earlier decision to allocate property to a Pentecostal community in the town of Druzhnii, claiming that the group should first ascertain the public opinion of the town. Oblast authorities overruled the decision and local authorities then offered the community three plots of land from which to choose.

As of June 2005, the CRNA had yet to approve the request by the registered Full Gospel community in Borovlyani to renovate a home for use as a church. In 2002, Borovlyani local authorities refused to permit a registered Full Gospel community to renovate a privately built home into a church. Though the community had received all necessary permission from local authorities, the religious affairs office rejected the application. The CRNA office cited a letter it received from several Orthodox townspeople that accused members of the Full Gospel community of illegally entering homes to proselytize, stealing Orthodox crosses from those wearing them, and belonging to an unregistered "sect."

New Life Church in Minsk, a member of the Union of Full Gospel Churches, might be forcefully closed because authorities refuse to register the congregation at the cow barn it owns and wishes to use as a place of worship. New Life Church, known as the "cowshed church," bought the barn and its surrounding property three years ago. The church began to meet there after denied permission to rent anywhere else. Local authorities, however, refuse to allow New Life to convert the building, change how the cowshed is registered, or allow the church to meet in the building as is. Therefore, New Life Church has no place to worship and no place to register, making all church activities illegal. New Life's pastor and other leaders have received large fines for holding illegal services, technically for violating laws on assembly. At the same time, authorities permit a BOC community to meet without disturbance in a converted railcar less than a mile away.

The 1,000-member Minsk Community of Krishna Consciousness (the Hare Krishnas) is also facing closure for meeting and attempting to register at property it already owns. Local authorities refuse to register the Krishnas at a building it purchased in 1990 and has used as a place of worship since that time, claiming the building is only zoned for residential use and not for religious assembly. The Minsk City Executive Committee issued two warnings to the community, first in October 2004 and then in February 2005, for meeting at a building where it is not registered. The appeal by the Minsk Community of Krishna Consciousness to the UN Commission on Human Rights continued throughout the period covered by this report, hindering the Government's ability to close the community, because the appeal process was underway.

There were no reports of religious groups being evicted from property during the period covered by this report; however, authorities continued to break up unsanctioned religious gatherings in apartments.

A government decree specifies measures to ensure public order and safety during general public gatherings. Some meeting hall officials have cited the decree as a basis for canceling or refusing to extend agreements with religious groups for the use of their facilities. During the period covered by this report, it was practically impossible for a religious group to rent and meet in a public facility.

According to the Forum 18 News Service, in March 2004, Minsk city authorities rejected a request by the Calvinist Reformed Church to conduct an international conference devoted to the 450th anniversary of the Church's founding in the country. The Church was reportedly informed by Minsk city authorities that the Church had no right to conduct an international conference since the organization was not registered as a republican religious association, despite the fact that the religion law enables religious organizations to invite foreigners to participate in meetings, pilgrimages, and other activities.

Despite having tax-exempt status, some Protestant groups reported that tax authorities repeatedly fined them for their failure to pay taxes on assistance provided to destitute families and individuals.

While there were no reported publications of anti-Protestant articles in state-owned periodicals, state-owned periodicals continued to attack other nontraditional faiths. An article in an April 2004 issue of Znamya Novosti printed an article labeling the Unification Church, the "Church of Christ," and the Church of Scientology among the most dangerous of "sects" in the country.

A March 2004 article in the state-owned newspaper Minski Kurier printed information critical of adherents to the Unification Church and Hare Krishnas. The article claimed that in 1997, Hare Krishnas were designated as a "destructive totalitarian sect." According to a representative of the Hare Krishna community, the authorities never made such a designation. After being confronted by the Hare Krishnas, the journalist of the article admitted that this false information was provided by the State Committee for Security (BKGB), something later confirmed by the BKGB.

The Ministry of Education continued to use the textbook "Man, Society, and State," which labels Protestants and Hare Krishnas as "sects," even after the protests of religious groups. After conducting an examination of the book, the CRNA and the Ministry of Education determined that the use of the word "sect" was a "scientific" word, and did not label Hare Krishnas or Protestants as antisocial. The Ministry of Education has committed to revising paragraphs using this language in future editions of the textbook.

Leaders of Protestant communities also protested the language in the textbook "Basics on Home and Personal Security" as deliberately discriminatory against Protestants, particularly the chapter titled "Beware of the Sects." The chapter includes a paragraph informing students of such "sects" as Seventh-day

Adventists, the Church of Maria, White Brotherhood, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. In January 2005, Protestant leaders sent a letter of protest to the President, National Assembly leaders, the CRNA, and the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education promised to review the matter. The CRNA already reviewed the request and declared the section did not infringe upon the rights of Protestants.

While there were no reported publications of anti-Protestant literature or articles in the state press during the period covered by this report, the sale and distribution of anti-Semitic literature through state press distributors, government agencies, and at stores affiliated with the BOC continued. As in previous years, anti-Semitic literature continued to be sold at the National Academy of Sciences.

In past years, anti-Semitic literature was openly sold during several Orthodox book fairs in Minsk, and at the House of Mercy, a BOC-established hospice in Minsk. The Roman Catholic Church reported that anti-Catholic literature is also sold at places linked to the BOC. Anti-Semitic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers and literature continued to be sold at Pravoslavnaia Kniga (Orthodox Bookstore), a store that sells Orthodox literature and religious paraphernalia. Pravoslavnaia Kniga is part of the company Pravoslavnaia Initsiativa, whose general director often writes xenophobic articles. Although the BOC has stated that it has no ties to Pravoslavnaia Kniga, employees of the store maintained that Pravoslavnaia Kniga is the official bookstore of the BOC. The BOC denial of ties seems more unlikely considering that the BOC received exclusive rights to the word "Pravoslavnaia" in 2004.

Despite a 2003 order by the Prosecutor General and the Ministry of Information to remove the anti-Semitic and xenophobic newspaper *Russkiy Vestnik*, distribution of the newspaper continued. Pravoslavnaia Kniga employees informed Embassy staff that they are only selling off their stock and not new copies. The staff also found the book "The Enemies of Russia and the Slavic World Who are against Belarus and President Lukashenko." This ultranationalist xenophobic book includes a chapter by Vladimir Chertovich, General Director of Pravoslavnaia Initsiativa, a Minsk-based publishing company known for publishing hate literature directed at Jews, Muslims, and other minorities. It was published in Russia but is distributed in the country at a bookstore affiliated with the BOC.

In response to an appeal by a Jewish group to punish Pravoslavnaia Kniga, in 2004 the Procurator General launched an investigation into the incident to determine whether or not Pravoslavnaia Kniga had illegally distributed literature that promoted intolerance. The General Prosecutor's office then transferred the case to the Minsk city prosecutor's office. In October 2004, the Minsk city prosecutor's office declared there was no basis for a criminal case.

Despite the assurances of various government officials that the sale of such literature was illegal, the government took no visible steps to stop the sale of xenophobic literature at Pravoslavnaia Kniga or other locations. The CRNA asserts the publication of such literature in the country was illegal but that nothing could be done regarding literature published in Russia.

In April 2004, BOC clergy reportedly made several anti-Catholic statements during a nationally televised religious ceremony marking Orthodox Easter. The Roman Catholic Church has also expressed concern about the sale of anti-Catholic literature at events and stores linked with the BOC.

Restitution of religious property did not occur during the period covered by this report. There was no legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the law restricts the restitution of property that is being used for cultural or educational purposes. Furthermore, the Government does not return buildings if it had nowhere to move the current occupants. Many former synagogues in Minsk were used as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and even a beer hall; most of the Jewish community's requests to have these synagogues returned were refused. During the period covered by this report, Jewish communities did not request the return of buildings or other real estate. Some Jewish leaders acknowledged that because of the Holocaust and mass emigration, the Jewish population was so small it cannot use all its former property. However, Jewish communities were seeking the return of Jewish cultural artifacts, books, and particularly Torahs from museums. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had not yet officially responded, though some officials privately expressed to Jewish leaders that they shared their concern and support the initiative.

A Catholic community in Minsk requested the return of a centuries-old church and monastery in central Minsk. The building currently houses the Belarusian State Archives. The Government expressed its willingness to return the church, but only after a suitable new place and the funds for moving the archives were found; neither was expected in the near future.

Return of property to religious communities in past years occurred on an irregular basis. Over the past several years, religious groups have lobbied the authorities successfully to return several properties in Minsk and other cities. According to the CRNA, religious organizations had the advantageous right to have religious property returned to them, except in cases when they were being used for cultural or sporting purposes. Official statistics indicate that from 1988 to 2003, the government returned more than 1,120 buildings that belonged to various religious groups, including 709 to the BOC, 292 to the Roman Catholic community, 29 to the Old-Rite Believers, 12 to the Jewish community, 7 to the Protestant community, 3 to

the Muslim community, and 1 to the Greek Catholic community. However, there were no reports that the Government returned any former religious property to their previous owners during the past two years.

Despite a 2003 statement by President Lukashenko that the Government should not inhibit activities of the Jewish community, government officials continued to take actions that indicated a lack of sensitivity toward the Jewish community. Excavation and reconstruction work finished at the site of a 1950s sports stadium in Grodno built on the site of a former Jewish cemetery. During the course of excavation, workers at the site found human remains, which authorities promised to remove from the site for future reburial. Instead, photographs taken by the Jewish community revealed human remains mixed with earth in dump trucks and also being used to resurface a road. An April 2004 visit by Embassy staff found skulls and other bones scattered around the area.

After intense international pressure, Grodno Regional Governor Vladimir Savchenko signed an agreement with a national Jewish leader in 2003 for an immediate cessation of excavation activity but with continued construction work at the site. In 2003, Savchenko signed a second agreement with another national Jewish leader that called for the removal of remains that were mixed in with earth used to resurface a nearby road and, again, the immediate cessation of excavation activity at the cemetery. During the period covered by this report, the local Jewish community reached an agreement with local authorities to have the uncovered remains reburied in a different Jewish cemetery and declared itself satisfied with the government's efforts. They would like to put up a plaque noting that the stadium sits on a former Jewish cemetery, but although they received permission from authorities, they lack the funds to do so. Local Jewish leaders feel the situation reflected insensitivity more than anti-Semitism. The authorities were known to have dug up portions of a veteran's cemetery and an Orthodox cemetery during other construction projects in the recent past.

In February 2004, by order of the Ministry of Education, Belarusian State University (BSU) closed the International Humanities Institute, which was an independent educational entity affiliated with BSU that was the only higher educational entity offering Judaica studies. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Judaica program continued to exist as part of BSU's curriculum but no longer as an autonomous institute.

In contrast to previous reporting periods, government officials did not make public anti-Semitic statements. In a 2003 Associated Press article, Sergei Kostyan, Deputy Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the lower house of parliament, rejected criticism of the installation of a gas pipeline near the site of a former Jewish cemetery in Mozyr, accusing Jewish persons of sowing "ethnic discord." During a 2003 press conference, Information Minister Vladimir Rusakevich was quoted saying that the country needs to live with Russia like brothers but to bargain with Russia "like a Yid."

The CRNA reported that it regularly responded to all public expressions of xenophobia by notifying the relevant government agencies responsible for pursuing legal action against the perpetrators; however, no prosecutions or convictions were observed during the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, the Government frequently abused religious freedom of several religious groups.

Protestant, non-BOC Orthodox, and Eastern religious communities were fined for illegally conducting and hosting religious services and carrying out unsanctioned religious activities. According to the CRNA, convictions for such offenses were based on charges of either disturbing public order or illegally gathering without prior permission. The law allows people to gather to pray in private homes; however, it imposes restrictions on holding rituals, rites, or ceremonies in such locations and requires prior permission from local authorities.

In October 2004, the courts fined the pastor of the registered Light to the World Full Gospel Church \$174 (345,000 Belarusian rubles, about a month's salary) for allegedly holding an unauthorized religious meeting in his home.

On December 28, 2004, for its meetings in the cowshed, the court fined New Life Church administrator Vasily Yurevich \$1,500 (3,200,000 Belarusian rubles) for allegedly organizing an unauthorized meeting. Based on this conviction, the Minsk City Executive Committee issued New Life Church a warning of potential closure on December 30, 2004. On March 22, 2005, the court fined church pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko \$334 (714,000 Belarusian rubles), also for allegedly hosting an unsanctioned gathering. This led to the Minsk Executive Committee's second warning to the church on April 1, 2005. The law requires only two warnings before a church can be closed.

In February 2004, a pastor with the International Union of Baptist Churches (IUBC) was warned for conducting religious services in the town of Soligorsk. The same group was warned to cease all illegal

religious activity by March 1, 2004. In April 2004, a court in Mozyr fined three members of the IUBC \$176 (380,000 Belarusian rubles) each after they had congratulated patients at a local hospital during Easter. The IUBC is not registered in Belarus, thereby rendering all of its activities illegal.

In 2003, Yuri Denischik, a missionary of the Novogrudok Association of Baptists, was fined approximately \$15 (33,000 Belarusian rubles) for illegally leading a prayer service in a private home registered to the Association.

The Government continued to harass the BAOC, who have given up attempting to register. On November 2, 2004, the Minsk regional prosecutor instituted a criminal case against the BAOC for continuing its effort to reconstruct a former Orthodox church in the town of Semkov Gorodok. Authorities claim they will rebuild the church and restore it to its rightful owners, the BOC. The BOC reportedly plans to relocate the BOC community that presently meets in a converted railcar. In addition, on August 26, 2004, the court fined BAOC head Leonid Akalovich \$9 (19,000 Belarusian rubles) for unauthorized construction. On November 25, 2004, the court also fined him \$11 (24,000 Belarusian rubles) for leading an unregistered religious organization.

Authorities continued to harass, fine, and detain Hare Krishnas, reportedly briefly, for illegally distributing religious literature.

Following direct government pressure and harassment of their respective religious organizations, BAOC priest Yan Spasyuk and the Light of Kaylasa leaders Sergei Akadanav and Tatyana Akadanava left the country in 2003. In addition to the Akadanavs, several other members of the group left following continued government pressure. As a result of the departure of the group's members, and of continued fear of government harassment, the Light of Kaylasa remained inactive during the period of this report. Previously, members of this group had been fined, harassed, and fired from their jobs for their affiliations with the group.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, the Roman Catholic Church's situation in Belarus improved. On February 8, 2005 President Lukashenko and Cardinal Swiatek met and committed themselves to improving the relationship between the Government and the Roman Catholic Church. For example, President Lukashenko offered state assistance for fresco restoration in a cathedral in central Minsk. The Cardinal, for his part, thanked the Belarusian state for allowing the Catholic Church to both exist and to operate freely.

In 2003 and again in 2004, authorities lowered land taxes for all religious organizations. Religious associations with buildings designated as sites of historical and/or architectural significance pay no land tax. In February 2004, the reconstruction of a mosque razed during Soviet times commenced in downtown Minsk and was ongoing during the reporting period. The Minsk City Executive Committee granted the Muslim Religious Union the land for "permanent use." They did not have to purchase the land nor do they pay rent. The Muslim community must only pay the monthly land tax. The Roman Catholic Church is building a cathedral in Minsk with the same benefits.

In 2004, the government and BOC worked together to accommodate Orthodox citizens who reportedly objected, on religious grounds, to the numbering system of new passports.

During the period covered by this report, the Seventh-day Adventist Church experienced a number of improvements in its situation. In February 2005, the Adventist Theological Institute in Minsk officially received its certificate of certification. In April 2005, the Church released its first edition of a church magazine, considered a breakthrough for a Protestant denomination in the country.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions and a widespread ethic of tolerance in society contributed to religious freedom; however, anti-Semitism and negative attitudes toward minority faiths persisted. In April 2005, NOVAK, an independent polling organization, conducted a poll including the question, "How much do you trust the state and social institutions and organizations?" According to the poll, the BOC is the most trusted institution in the country with 77.5 percent of respondents expressing trust. (The Army ranked second at 71.3 percent, the National Bank third at 60.1 percent and President Lukashenko fourth at 53.8 percent.) 45.2 percent of respondents trust the Catholic Church and only 15.4 percent trust Protestant churches. It is important to note, however, that lack of trust is not necessarily matched by high distrust. While 36 percent of respondents distrust Protestant churches, 48.6 said they simply did not know. Only 19.9 percent distrusted the Catholic Church, while 34.9 percent responded with "do not know."

Jewish organizations continued to criticize the Government for failing to censure anti-Semitic statements by government officials, stop the sale of anti-Semitic literature, and protect cemeteries and Holocaust memorials. In 2003, two deputies in the lower house of Parliament visited a firebombed synagogue in Minsk and condemned the attack. The Government also failed to censure attacks on Orthodox cemeteries and churches and Protestant memorials during the reporting period.

On November 5, 2004, vandals set fire to wreaths, scattered flowers, and damaged the Star of David at a Holocaust memorial in central Brest. The memorial has been vandalized five times since it was unveiled. Police have never fined or jailed anyone for the crimes. On April 26, 2005, vandals again damaged a memorial erected in Lida to commemorate the Jews who perished there during World War II. The Jewish community did not report the act to the police since the Lida memorial is vandalized every spring and no one has ever been caught. Unidentified vandals smashed 20 gravestones in the town of Mikashevich at the beginning of May 2005. Local Jews criticized police for failing to respond to the crime or arrest any suspects, pointing out that the cemetery is located just a few meters from a police station.

During the period covered by this report, there were no developments in the vandalism cases of Jewish cemeteries in Bobruisk and Cherven and the Holocaust memorial complex in Timkovichi.

The Jewish community is concerned by the concept of a "greater Slavic union" that is popular among nationalist organizations active in the country, including the Russian National Union (RNU), which still exists despite officially dissolving in 2000, and the National Bolshevik Party, another Russian extremist organization. In January 2004, RNU members in Gomel distributed anti-Semitic literature on city buses. This incident occurred the same month Jewish community centers in Gomel and Polotsk were vandalized with RNU graffiti. Authorities have launched investigations into these acts of vandalism. During the period covered by this report, a website was created, purporting to be the website of the Jewish Orthodox Skinheads (JOSH), an organization supposedly made up of Jewish youths to combat anti-Semitism and xenophobia. Despite the "organization's" stated goals, the website calls upon Jews to commit provocative acts against the Government to support their cause, and includes language defaming non-Jewish citizens and prominent local Jewish leaders. Several Jewish leaders, all of whom consider the website to be offensive and provocative, have denounced the website, and have expressed their concerns to government authorities. The website includes a link to another website purported to be run by Hare Krishna skinheads. Defamatory websites of the so-called Jewish Orthodox Skinheads and Hare Krishna Skinheads continued to operate during the reporting period, despite being denounced by Jewish leaders and others.

The official local Orthodox prayer calendar, printed in Minsk, continues to mark May 20 as the anniversary of the 1690 death of Gavriil Belostoksky, a young child who is alleged to have been murdered by Jews near Grodno. The May 20 prayer for Belostoksky makes reference to Jewish persons as "real beasts" who allegedly kidnapped and murdered Belostoksky for religious purposes.

Leaders in the Jewish community believe fewer cases of vandalism occur now than just a few years ago, partly due to international pressure as well as to stepped up efforts by local authorities to protect religious sites. In addition, local authorities and citizens often restore damaged memorials and graves at personal expense. According to the CRNA, regional authorities nationwide continued to take measures to prevent vandalism, including erecting fences around cemeteries, conducting regular police patrols of cemeteries, and collecting and reporting of incidents of vandalism.

As in previous years, unknown vandals continued to destroy crosses, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, erected at Kurapaty, an area used by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) to murder more than 300,000 people in the 1930s. However, a plaque commemorating the loss of Muslim and Jewish lives there remained undisturbed. The authorities made no visible attempts to find those responsible for the cross destruction.

On October 23, 2004, thieves stole 12 icons and a bronze cross from a BOC church in the Brest region. Police opened an investigation. Earlier in October 2004, Brest regional police and Minsk city police captured two icon thieves and recovered two of three icons they stole in 2001. The two recovered were worth more than \$75,000.

In April 2004, local authorities in Brest oblast refused to initiate a criminal investigation into the burglary of an evangelical Christian church in the town of Khotislav burglarized in March 2004. Since 2000, the church had reportedly been vandalized six times prior to the latest incident. In 2004, the BAOC claimed that BOC clergy, accompanied by Minsk Oblast officials, visited several towns in Minsk oblast and called upon local villagers not to participate in BAOC religious services.

There is no indication that the BOC has changed its view that it will cooperate only with religious faiths that have "historical roots" in the country.

In January 2004, the Civil Initiative for Religious Freedom published the second installment of the White Book, a collection of documents that detailed the Government's many abuses of religious freedom, information about the religion law, and copies of various reports about the religious freedom situation in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy staff maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups and government officials responsible for religious affairs, and met with resident and visiting U.S. citizens of various religious faiths to discuss religious freedom issues in the country.

During meetings with various government officials and ministers, Embassy staff raised such issues as the 2002 religion law, the continued sale of intolerant literature at locations affiliated with the Government and the BOC, and registration denials of certain religious communities. Embassy staff also raised the issue of Government passivity in the face of intolerant acts and attempts to preserve the religious status quo through discriminatory action.

The Embassy monitored the continued sale of anti-Semitic and xenophobic literature at stores and events linked with the BOC and state media distributors. Throughout the period covered by this report, Embassy staff also visited the site of the Jewish cemetery in Grodno on several occasions and met with local officials and community leaders to discuss the situation. Embassy staff, including the Ambassador, attended several events hosted by various religious groups. The Embassy also discussed religious issues with representatives of foreign diplomatic missions in the country.

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