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Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
October 2001

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

The status of respect for religious freedom continued to worsen during the period covered by this report. Head of State Alexander Lukashenka has pursued a policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox Church, currently the country's majority religion, and the authorities have increased harassment of other denominations and religions. Some of these, including many Protestant denominations, the Belarusian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (BOAC), and some eastern religions, repeatedly have been denied registration by the regime. Without registration, many of these groups find it difficult, if not impossible, to rent or purchase property to conduct religious services. The authorities continued to enforce a 1995 Cabinet of Ministers decree that restricts the activities of religious workers in an attempt to protect Russian Orthodoxy and curtail the growth of evangelical religions. Some Protestant denominations have been the subject of judicial action by the regime for allowing foreigners to preach in their churches. Despite continued harassment, some minority faiths have been able to function if they maintain a low profile.

There are, for the most part, amicable relations among registered, traditional religious communities; however, societal anti-Semitism persisted, and sentiment critical of minority faiths increased.

The U.S. Government discussed with the regime the poor human rights situation in the country and raised problems of religious freedom during such discussions. US Embassy officials also discussed specific cases with the Government.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 76,810 square miles, and its population is 9,990,000.

Sustained repression of the once majority Greek Catholic population under the Russian and Soviet empires, persecution of the Roman Catholic Church during the same period, and Soviet repression of much of the Russian Orthodox clergy have radically altered the natural religious landscape and turned the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate into the majority church in the country. Furthermore, seven decades of religious repression under the Soviet regime have resulted in a culture that is largely secular in orientation. According to one opinion poll taken during 1998, less than half of the population believes in God. At the same time, approximately 60 percent identify for cultural or historical reasons with the Russian Orthodox Church. The State Committee on Religious and National Affairs (SCRNA) indicates that approximately 80 percent of all persons who profess a religious faith belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. Approximately 15 to 20 percent of the population are estimated to be either practicing Roman Catholics or identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church (the second largest religious grouping). The current number of persons identifying themselves as Jews is between 60,000 and 80,000 persons. There are a number of Protestants and adherents to the Greek Rite Catholic Church. Other minority religious faiths include, but are not limited to, the following: Seventh-Day Adventist, Old Believer, Muslim (the Supreme Administration of Muslims, abolished in 1939, was reestablished in early 1994), Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christian, Calvinist, and Lutheran.

The country was designated an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989, thereby creating the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Patriarchal Exarch Filaret celebrated his 20th anniversary as head of the Orthodox community on October 24, 1998. Under Filaret's leadership, the number of Orthodox parishes throughout the country has grown to 1,172 as of January 1, 2001.

Situated between Poland and Russia, the country historically has been an area of interaction, as well as competition and conflict, between Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Cardinal Kazmierz Swiatek, Archbishop of the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese, heads the approximately 400 Roman Catholic parishes. The

Roman Catholic presence traditionally has been stronger in areas under Polish influence; however, the ethnic Polish community, currently numbering at least 400,000 persons, does not account for the total number of Roman Catholics. Although Roman Catholic parishes can be found throughout the country, most Roman Catholics reside in areas located in the west and north, near the border with Poland and Lithuania. This concentration is due in part to the more thorough suppression of the Roman Catholic Church in eastern oblasts in imperial and Soviet times. Sensitive to the dangers of the Roman Catholic Church being viewed as a "foreign" church or as a political threat, Cardinal Swiatek, who himself spent 10 years in a Soviet labor camp, has tried to keep the Church out of the country's internal political problems. Although the Cardinal has prohibited the display of Polish national symbols in churches and encouraged the use of Belarusian, rather than Polish, in church services, some priests continued to conduct services in Polish.

It is estimated that approximately 120,000 citizens were considered to have Jewish "nationality" near the end of the Soviet period in 1989, compared to between 60,000 and 80,000 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 the capital city of Minsk. A majority of the country's Jews are not actively religious. Of those who are, most are believed to be either Reform or Conservative. There is also a small but active Lubavitch-run Orthodox synagogue in Minsk.

Adherents of Protestant faiths, although representing a relatively small percentage of the population, are growing in number. Since 1990 the number of Protestant congregations, registered and unregistered, has more than doubled and now totals over 1,000, according to state and independent sources. Protestant faiths, although historically small in comparison with Orthodoxy, have been active in the country for hundreds of years. During the Soviet period, a number of Protestant faiths were placed forcibly under the administrative umbrella of a joint Pentecostal-Baptist organization. The two largest Protestant groups are registered under separate Pentecostal and Baptist unions. A significant number of Protestant churches, including charismatic and Pentecostal groups remain unregistered.

There are a number of congregations of the Greek Rite Catholic Church, which was once the majority religion. The Greek Catholic Church was established in the 16th century and once had a membership of approximately three-quarters of the population, until it was banned by the Russian Government in 1839 and severely persecuted in the 1860's and again in 1946. Following the 1991 reestablishment of Belarusian independence, the attempt to revive the Church, which maintains Orthodox rituals but is in the communion with the Vatican, has met with only limited success. The Lukashenka regime treats the Greek Catholic Church with disfavor because of its emphasis on the use of the Belarusian language as well as historical tensions between the Greek Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the regime restricts this right in practice. Although Article 16 of the 1996 amended Constitution—which resulted from an illegal referendum used by Lukashenka to broaden his powers—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 country traditions of the Belarusian people."

Since his election as the country's President in July 1994, Lukashenka, who has called himself an "Orthodox atheist," has pursued a policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox Church as the country's chief religion and harassing other non-Russian Orthodox denominations and religions. In December 1999, Lukashenka asserted that politicians and the head of state bear responsibility for preserving Christian values, for maintaining religious peace in society, and for harmonious cooperation between the state and the Church. Lukashenka also called for the church to be more active in promoting the unity of Slavic nations because Slavic integration is in the interests of both the State and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The State Committee on Religious and National Affairs (SCRNA), which was established in January 1997, categorizes religions and denominations. Some are viewed as "traditional," including Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam (as practiced by a small community of ethnic Tatars with roots in the country dating back to the 11th century); some are viewed as "nontraditional," including some Protestant and other faiths; and some are viewed as "sects," including eastern religions and other faiths. The authorities deny permission to register legally at the national level to some faiths considered to be "nontraditional," and to all considered to be "sects." The SCRNA claims that 26 religious denominations are registered officially; however, the significance of this figure is uncertain. Some congregations are registered only on a local basis, which entails only limited rights. Only congregations registered nationally are allowed to invite foreign religious workers and open new churches. While all registered religious organizations enjoy tax-exempt status, government subsidies appear limited to the Russian Orthodox Church. Government employees are not required to take any kind of religious oath or practice elements of a particular faith.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Since his election as the country's President in July 1994, Lukashenka, who has called himself an "Orthodox atheist," has pursued a policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox Church as the country's chief religion and harassing other non-Russian Orthodox denominations and religions. The authorities encourage a greater role for the Russian Orthodox Church, largely as part of an overall strategy to strengthen "Slavic unity" in the region and promote greater political unification between Belarus and Russia. Lukashenka grants the Russian Orthodox Church special financial advantages that other denominations do not enjoy and has declared the preservation and development of Russian Orthodox Christianity a "moral necessity." On April 30, 2000, Lukashenka said on state radio that "nobody will disturb our Orthodoxy" and pledged that the State "will do everything for the Church to be a pillar of support for our state in the future." In 1998 Lukashenka pledged state assistance to the Russian Orthodox Church and stressed that Orthodoxy would remain the "main religion." Following a \$100,000 donation to the Russian Orthodox Church in January 2001, Lukashenka was awarded the prize of the Unity of Slavic Peoples by Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Aleksiy II, for his efforts to defend Russian Orthodoxy. In a public meeting with members of the Parliament's human rights committee in May 2001, Russian Orthodox Archbishop of Mogilev and Mstislavl Maksim publicly called for a new law on religion that would protect the "dominant" status of the Russian Orthodox Church in the country, introduce religious education in secondary schools, and ban the spread of "non-traditional" denominations. Valery Lipkin, chairman of the committee, asserted the new law would ban the spread of "destructive sects" in the country.

The authorities deny permission to register legally at the national level to some faiths considered to be "nontraditional," and to all considered to be "sects." The authorities assert that they deny some groups permission to register as religious organizations because their activities "run counter to the Constitution." With or without official registration, some religious faiths have great difficulty renting or purchasing property in which to establish places of worship, in building churches (e.g., the Greek Catholics, sometimes disparaged as "Uniates") or in openly training clergy. Police have disrupted some services or religious meetings, which were being conducted peacefully in private homes when held by religious groups that have not been able to register.

The authorities continued to refuse to register the Belarusian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (BOAC). Local courts have refused to hear appeals made by the BOAC, to overturn the authorities' decision not to register their churches. The BOAC is unable to train a sufficient number of priests to meet the growing needs of its parishioners in its 70 parishes because of ongoing registration problems, including the inability to register a seminary.

A number of Protestant faiths are refused registration because they do not have a legal address; however, they are refused property that could qualify as a legal address because they are not registered. The Full Gospel Pentecostal churches regularly are refused registration in this way. According to independent estimates, as many as 70 percent of Protestant churches have been denied registration, have lost their registration in a recent government-imposed reregistration exercise, or have not attempted to register. Article 272 of the Civil Code states that property may only be used for religious services once it has been converted from residential use; however, the authorities decline to issue permits for such conversions to unregistered religions. Religious groups that cannot register often are forced to meet illegally or in the homes of individual members. Several charismatic and Pentecostal churches have been evicted from property they were renting because they were not registered as religious organizations. A number of "nontraditional" Protestant and other faiths have not attempted to register because they do not believe that their applications will be approved.

In 1998 SCRNA official Vyacheslav Savitskiy asserted that "11 destructive religious organizations, which have been denied registration after expert examination are confirmed as functioning in the country. In April 1999, a conference organized by the Russian Orthodox Church and Lukashenka's National Assembly discussed the need to introduce legislation to combat "destructive sects" that operate illegally. On April 12, 2001, the official newspaper of the armed forces, Vo Slavu Rodinu, published an article that listed 74 "destructive sects," including many eastern religions, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses, and urged all military personnel to avoid such organizations.

On June 16, 2000, Minsk city authorities banned an annual Catholic procession in the center of Minsk commemorating the feast of Corpus Christi. The march, which regularly attracted up to 5,000 participants, had been held annually since 1991. A second appeal by the organizers also was denied. The denial of the march was considered by many human rights observers to be part of a larger crackdown on non-Orthodox religious groups.

Citizens theoretically are not prohibited from proselytizing; however, while individuals may speak freely about their religious beliefs, the authorities have intervened to prevent, interfere with, or punish individuals who proselytize on behalf of an unregistered religion. For example, the regime continued to enforce a July 1995 Council of Ministers decree that regulates the activities of religious workers in an attempt to protect Russian Orthodoxy and prevent the growth of evangelical religions. A 1997 Council of Ministers directive prohibits teaching religion at youth camps. In February 1999, the Council of Ministers passed Decree No. 280, which expanded upon these earlier regulations. The decree appears to stipulate, among other things, that among foreign religious workers, only male clergy may engage in religious work upon invitation from a religious

organization already officially registered, a provision that could be invoked to prohibit female religious clergy, such as Roman Catholic nuns, from engaging in religious activity. However, this provision has not been tested in the courts.

Foreigners generally are prohibited from preaching or heading churches that the authorities view as "nontraditional faiths" or "sects," which include Protestant groups. Foreign missionaries may not engage in religious activities outside the institutions that invited them. One-year validity, multiple-entry "spiritual activities" visas, which are required officially of foreign missionaries, can be difficult to obtain, even for faiths that are registered with the authorities and have a long history in the country. Foreign clergy or religious workers who do not register with the authorities or who have tried to preach without government approval or without an invitation from, and the permission of, a registered religious organization, have been expelled from the country. Approval often involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. In November 2000, a pastor of a Protestant church in Brest was warned and later fined by city authorities for allowing a foreigner to preach at a church conference.

In April 2000, the Council of Ministers changed the regulations to allow internal affairs agencies to expel foreign clergymen from the country by not extending their registration or by denying them temporary stay permits. Under the new regulations, these authorities are allowed to make decisions on expulsion on their own or based on recommendations from Religious Affairs Councils, regional executive committees, or from the Religious Affairs Department of the Executive Committee of the city of Minsk. There is no provision for appeal to judicial bodies. In April 2001, relying on these new regulations, Minsk city authorities refused to extend the registration of the foreign pastor of a Pentecostal church.

The regime increased its efforts to curb the role of foreign clergymen during the period covered by this report. In March 2001, the regime approved additional changes to the regulations governing invitations to foreign clergy and the activities of foreign clergy in the country. Under the new regulations, representatives of foreign religious organizations can only be invited upon agreement with the SCRNA, even if their visit is for nonreligious purposes, such as charitable activities. The inviting organization must make a written request to invite foreign clergy, including the dates and reason for the visit. The SCRNA has 20 days in which to respond and there is no provision for appeal of the SCRNA's decision. In April 2001, the regime enacted changes to the civil code to restrict "subversive activities" by foreign organizations in the country. A new clause prohibits the establishment of offices of foreign organizations, "the activities of which are aimed at ... the inciting of national, religious and racial enmity, as well as activities which can have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people." Most human rights monitors believe that the current regime could interpret the clause to restrict further, or deny altogether, activities of foreign religious organizations or their Belarusian associates.

As a result of its revival since 1991, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced a shortage of qualified native clergy. At times the Church has had difficulty getting permission from government authorities to bring in a sufficient number of foreign religious workers, mostly from Poland, to make up for the shortage. After a long delay, the Lukashenka regime has given permission to the Catholic Church to open a seminary in Pinsk in September 2001. The regime indicated that, in light of this development, foreign priests no longer would be allowed to work in the country. However, this change may not be enforced at the local level, and at least some foreign priests still are allowed to work in the country. Bishops must receive permission from the SCRNA before transferring a foreign priest to another parish.

Restitution of religious property remained limited during the period covered by this report. There is no legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and legislation restricts the restitution of property that is currently being used for cultural or educational purposes. Many former synagogues in Minsk are used as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and even a German-owned beer hall; the Jewish community's requests to have these synagogues returned has been refused. The few returns of property to religious communities have been on an individual and inconsistent basis, and local government authorities in general are reluctant to cooperate. Over the past several years, the Jewish community has lobbied the authorities successfully to return several properties in Minsk and other cities; however, most properties have not been returned. The Russian Orthodox Church appears to have had the most success on the issue of property restitution.

Regime officials took a number of actions that indicated hostility or insensitivity toward the Jewish community. The authorities have done little to counter the spread of anti-Semitic literature. For example, in March 2000, a Minsk court dismissed a complaint filed by Jewish organizations against the Orthodox Initiative (a state owned publishing company) for publishing an anti-Semitic book, "The War According to Mean Laws, which, among other anti-Semitic writings, included the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and blamed Jews for societal and economic problems in the country. The judge in the case declared that the book contained "scientific information" and, therefore, was not within the jurisdiction of the court. In May 2000, a Minsk city court refused to hear the Jewish organizations appeal and the book remains on sale at the main Orthodox Church bookstore and other state-run bookstores. In December 2001, a Minsk synagogue was fire bombed; and no discernible effort has been made by the authorities to find those responsible for the incident (see Section III). As in previous years, authorities attempted to prohibit the distribution of matzoh for Passover among members of the Jewish community. In April 2001, local Jewish charity organizations also had difficulty distributing matzoh for Passover. The Committee on Humanitarian Aid stated that the matzoh could not be considered humanitarian aid, but their decision was overturned at the last minute and Jewish

charity organizations were able to distribute a limited amount of matzoh in time for Passover.

Officially sanctioned state newspaper and state television attacks on minority faiths increased in frequency during the period covered by this report. For example, on August 5, 2000, Narodnaya Gazeta, a state-owned and published newspaper, carried an article with the headline "The Prospect Looms for Belarus to become a Protestant republic." Among other allegations, the article stated that Protestant groups engage in "fanatical rituals," including the ritual use of human blood and human sacrifice. The article claimed that these groups threaten Russian Orthodox priests with physical violence and present a threat to the country, its psychological health, and its security. The article also called on the authorities to take steps to protect Russian Orthodoxy. Appeals to the SCRNA by Protestant leaders to halt distribution of the article were unsuccessful. The author, Nina Yanovich, as well as Narodnaya Gazeta journalists Nina Chaika and Mikhail Shimansky, who also authored articles hostile to other minority faiths, later were given honorary awards by Orthodox Church Metropolitan Filaret for their articles defending the Russian Orthodox Church. A series of state television documentaries, entitled "Expansion," targeted Protestants, especially Pentecostals, and Catholics as destructive groups that engage in fanatical rituals and pose a threat to society. In March and April 2001, another series shown on state television accused Protestant churches of engaging in human sacrifices, poisoning children, and other "destructive rituals." In the series, SCRNA officials claimed that Protestant groups were undermining the authority of the regime, were agents of the West, and needed to be banned from the country. Efforts by Catholic and Protestant groups to halt these broadcasts were rejected by SCRNA authorities and the courts.

There were no reports of restrictions on the importation of religious literature. However, there were repeated instances of authorities preventing the distribution of religious literature, through holding or seizures of the materials.

A practitioner of a "nontraditional" faith, especially one not permitted to register, could be at a disadvantage in regard to advancement within the government bureaucracy or the state-owned sector of the economy.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In July 2000, security forces twice raided the Parish of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (BOAC) in the village of Pogranichniki, near Grodno, for conducting religious services without registration. On July 27, 2000, security forces arrested BOAC priest Ivan Spasyuk on charges of conducting services without a permit. He later was sentenced to 5 days' imprisonment for allegedly resisting arrest. On May 21, 2001, authorities again arrested Spasyuk while he was attempting to hold a service in the village of Radaulyany (Berestavitsky district). Authorities then summoned Spasyuk and his wife to a local court where, in a closed hearing and without the ability to call witnesses or obtain legal assistance, Spasyuk was detained and then fined for petty hooliganism.

In May 2001, 20 members of a messianic Jewish group were detained in Minsk while they were attempting to distribute religious literature. Also, in May 2001, the organization attempted to hang posters in central Minsk congratulating veterans of World War II on victory day. While attempting to hang posters, police under orders from the city department of the SCRNA, detained members of the group. The SCRNA informed the group that "it would be offensive for veterans to receive congratulations from the Jews." The group was detained for several hours and then released. Several members of the group had some of their property confiscated.

There were other reports of the detention of members of Protestant religious groups, usually for several hours, for distribution of unregistered religious materials.

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 Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There are, for the most part, amicable relations among the registered, traditional, religious communities; however, societal anti-Semitism persisted and sentiment critical of minority faiths rose during the period covered by this report.

There have been some instances of vandalism that appeared related to societal anti-Semitism. There was a noticeable lack of government action in response to them. For example, on December 27, 2000, unidentified assailants threw firebombs at a synagogue in Minsk. A security guard was able to extinguish the fire before serious damage occurred. No progress was reported on the investigation of the incident by the end of the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of arrests in the April 1999 or December 2000 arson attacks on local Minsk

synagogues or in a number of cases of desecration of Jewish cemeteries from previous years. According to the Anti-Defamation League and the World Jewish Congress, there are a number of small ultra-nationalist organizations on the fringes of society, and a number of newspapers regularly print anti-Semitic material. One of these newspapers Slavianskaia Gazeta, although distributed locally, reportedly was published in Moscow. The State Committee on the Press issued an official warning in June 1999 to the local newspaper Lichnost for anti-Semitic articles. Anti-Semitic material from Russia also circulates widely.

Many in the Jewish community remain concerned that the Lukashenka regime's plans to promote greater unity with Russia may be accompanied by political appeals to groups in Russia that tolerate or promote anti-Semitism. Lukashenka's calls for "Slavic solidarity" were well received and supported by anti-Semitic, neo-Fascist organizations in Russia. For example, the organization Russian National Unity (a neo-fascist, antiforeign, antiminority faith group) has an active local branch and its literature is distributed in public places in Minsk. The concept of a "greater Slavic union," the leadership of which Lukashenka seeks, is a source of concern to the Jewish community given the nature of support that it engenders.

There have been constant attacks on Protestant groups during this reporting period.

The country's small Muslim community, with roots dating to the Middle Ages, does not report significant societal prejudice. While in the past there was at least one report of vandalism of a mosque, there were no such reports during the period covered by this report.

On April 22, 1999, during a religious conference held in Minsk Patriarchal Exarch Filaret stated that the Orthodox Church does not seek the role of interconfessional leader or to become a state-run church. However, he stressed that the Orthodox Church would cooperate only with religious faiths that have "historical roots" in the country. Filaret also remarked that he was against the "invasion of those foreign religions that corrupt souls." In a May 2001 speech to the All Belarusian People's Congress, Filaret called for the authorities to cooperate with the Russian Orthodox Church to protect the "spiritual security" of the people, and to limit the presence of "destructive and pseudo-Christian societies that destroy the spiritual, social, and cultural unity of the people."

Most local human rights nongovernmental organizations do not focus significant resources on religious freedom concerns.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy has raised problems of religious freedom with the authorities in the context of frequent demarches on the poor human rights situation in the country. In July 2000, following the arrest of BOAC priest Spasyuk, representatives of the Embassy met with government officials to press for his release and to urge authorities to respect the rights of BOAC parishioners to gather and worship. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy have had frequent contacts with leaders and members of religious communities throughout the period covered by this report, and have worked with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) representatives to promote religious freedom.

Officials of the U.S. Department of State met on a number of occasions with representatives of the Government of Belarus in Washington, D.C. to support respect for religious freedom and to address other human rights concerns.

[End]

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