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2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Belarus

Executive Summary

The constitution grants the freedom to profess and practice any religious belief but prohibits religious activities directed against the sovereignty of the state, its constitutional system, and “civic harmony.” A concordat grants the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, and the law recognizes the “determining role of the BOC” and historical importance of the “traditional faiths” of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law prohibits all religious activity by unregistered groups and requires all registered religious groups to obtain permits to proselytize or hold events outside of their premises, as well as prior approval from the authorities to import and distribute religious literature. Some minority religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to report difficulty registering. Authorities denied a Russian extradition request of a Jehovah’s Witness who had applied for political asylum. BOC Archbishop Artsemi of Hrodna, who retired in June, said authorities successfully requested his removal for criticizing the authoritarian regime headed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka and its crackdown on protesters that ensued following the 2020 presidential election that local and international civil society groups and governments stated was fraudulent. The authorities continued to repress peaceful protesters and supporters of the prodemocracy movement which emerged following the election, including clergy. Human rights groups said authorities restricted clergy access to prisons, denied pastoral visits to some political prisoners, and confiscated necklaces with crosses from some prisoners. According to observers, authorities continued surveillance of registered and unregistered religious groups. In February, the authorities evicted the New Life Church from its church building as part of a longstanding dispute over the ownership of the property.

There were antisemitic comments on social media and in the comment sections of local online news articles, but the origin of the comments was undetermined. Several religious groups reported instances of vandalism of their properties. In March, the Homyel Jewish community reported its building was painted with Nazi symbols, and the Orthodox Saint Maria Magdalena Church in Navalukaml was vandalized. In May, the Roman Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Minsk was vandalized. Interdenominational Christian groups continued to work together on education and charitable projects.

The Charge d’Affaires and other U.S. embassy officials engaged with the Lukashenka regime on religious freedom issues, including registration of religious communities, state pressure on clergy, freedom to express and practice religious beliefs, freedom of expression for clergy who participated in activities that the state considered political, and antisemitism. In December, the regime rejected a request by the Charge d’Affaires to further discuss these issues with its representative for religious affairs. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with Jewish groups to discuss antisemitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy representatives also engaged with Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other groups, as well as with civil society activists to learn about their religious activities and discuss the regime’s actions affecting the exercise of religious freedom. Embassy officials posted the Secretary of State’s speeches and other materials related to religious freedom on social media, affirming religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.4 million (midyear 2021). According to a 2016 survey by the state Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration (the latest such data available), approximately 53 percent of the adult population belongs to the BOC, and 6 percent to the Roman Catholic Church. According to the state survey, 8 percent of the adult population is atheist, and 22 percent is “uncertain.” Smaller religious groups together constituting approximately 2 percent of the population include Jews, Muslims (who number approximately 20,000), Greek Catholics (members of the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church, also known as “Uniates”), Old Believers (priest and priestless), members of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and other Orthodox Christian groups, Lutherans (approximately 1,500), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Presbyterians and other Protestant groups, Armenian Apostolics, Latin Catholics, members of the International

Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Buddhists. Jewish groups state there are between 30,000 and 40,000 Jews. Most ethnic Poles, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the population, are Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess or not to profess and spread any religious belief and to participate in acts of worship and religious rituals and rites that are not prohibited by law. It stipulates all faiths are equal before the law. The constitution states relations between the state and religious organizations shall be regulated by the law “with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people.” It prohibits activities by religious groups that are directed against the country’s sovereignty, its constitutional system, and civic harmony; involve a violation of civil rights and liberties; “impede the execution of state, public, and family duties” by its citizens; or are detrimental to public health and morality. It also prohibits the creation of political parties or other associations, or political activities that propagate religious hatred. The constitution states the law shall determine conditions for exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute. It stipulates the state may grant asylum to persons persecuted in other states for their religious beliefs.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA), subordinate to the Council of Ministers, regulates all religious matters. The office takes part in drafting and implementing state policies on religious affairs, enforces and protects religious rights and freedom, monitors activities of religious organizations and compliance with their charters, regulates relations between the state and religious organizations, liaises with state agencies and religious organizations upon their request, promotes tolerance and mutual understanding between religious organizations of various faiths and nationalities, and researches dynamics and trends in interdenominational relations to prevent “religious exclusiveness” and disrespectful treatment of religions and nationalities. The executive committees of the country’s six regions and Minsk city have departments for ideology and youth engagement that include coverage of religious issues. These departments are independent from OPRRNA but share information with it. The plenipotentiary representative heading OPRRNA is appointed by and may be dismissed by the President, based on a nomination from the Council of Ministers.

The law recognizes the “determining role” of the BOC, an exarchate (affiliate) of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the development of the traditions of the people, as well as the historical importance of four other religious groups commonly referred to as “traditional” faiths: Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law does not consider as traditional faiths newer religious groups or older groups such as the priestless Old Believers, Uniates, and the Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century.

A concordat between the authorities and the BOC provides the Church with autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and a special relationship with the state. The concordat recognizes the BOC’s “influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people.” Although the concordat states that it does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, it calls for the authorities and the BOC to combat unnamed “pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society.” The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives state subsidies pursuant to presidential orders. In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word “orthodox” in its title and to use as its symbol the double-barred image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the country’s Orthodox patron saint.

The concordat serves as the framework for at least a dozen cooperation agreements between the BOC and individual state agencies, including with the Ministries of Defense, Healthcare, and Information. There is also an agreement with the Ministry of Education through 2025 that provides for joint projects for the “spiritual and moral education” of students based on BOC traditions and history.

The law establishes three tiers of registered religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities must include at least 20 persons older than 18 who live in one or several adjoining areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious communities, and one of these communities must have been active in the country for at least 20 years. National-level religious associations have the ability to establish regional and local religious associations. National religious associations may be formed only when they comprise active religious communities in at least four of the country’s six regions.

According to OPRRNA data, as of January 1, there were 25 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,395 religious communities and 174 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,714 religious communities, 15 dioceses, six schools, 35 monasteries, one mission, 15 brotherhoods, and 10 sisterhoods. (The latter two are clergy-led lay organizations.) The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, six schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 499 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 13 denominations encompass 1,039 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions, and five schools. There are 34 registered religious communities of Old Believers. There are three Jewish religious associations – Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism – comprising 51 communities. There are 24 Muslim religious communities – 23 Sunni and one Shia – registered.

The national religious associations are the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Old Believers Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, Association of New Apostolic Churches, Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches, Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, Jewish Religious Union, Association of Jewish Religious Communities, Union of Reform Judaism Communities, Muslim Religious Association, Spiritual Board of Muslims, and the Religious Association of Baha’is.

To register, a religious community must submit an official application containing the following information: a list of its founders’ names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of its founding statutes; the minutes of its founding meeting; and confirmation from regional authorities of the community’s right to occupy or use any property referenced in its founding statutes. A religious community not previously registered by the authorities must also submit information about its beliefs. The law stipulates authorities may take up to six months to review a new registration application due to an additional evaluation of the religion by a state-appointed religious commission of experts. The commission evaluates the fundamental teachings of the religion, as well as its rituals, practices, history, and forms and methods of activities; welfare and charitable services; proselytizing and missionary activities; approaches toward marriage and family; educational activities; attitudes toward health care; and compliance with legal requirements. In addition, the community must submit any texts written by its founder or considered sacred by the followers of the religion, information about prohibitions on clergy or adherents, a list of countries where the religion is widely practiced, and a list of countries officially recognizing the religion. It also must submit information about countries that have refused to recognize the religion and information about court cases against followers of the religion in other countries.

Regional authorities, as well as Minsk city authorities or local municipal authorities (for groups outside of Minsk), review all registration applications. Permissible grounds for denial of registration include failure to comply with requirements for establishing a community, an inconsistent or fraudulent charter or other required document, violations of the procedures to establish religious organizations, and a negative evaluation by the state-appointed religious commission of experts. Communities may appeal refusals in court.

To register as a religious association or national religious association, a group must provide an official application with a copy of the founding statutes, a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and the minutes from its founding congress. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions and to organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applications to establish religious associations and national associations must be submitted to OPRRNA, which has 30 days to respond. Grounds for refusal are the same as for religious communities, except they also include failure to comply with requirements for establishing an association rather than a community. Refusals or a failure by OPRRNA to respond within the 30-day period may be appealed in court.

The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered. The law permits state agencies in charge of registration to issue written warnings to a registered religious group for violating any law or undertaking activities outside the scope of responsibilities in the group’s charter. The authorities may apply to a relevant court, depending upon jurisdiction, to shut down the group if it has not ceased the illegal activity outlined in the written warning within six months or if the activity is repeated within one year of the warning. The authorities may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court’s decision. The law does not contain a provision for appealing a warning or suspension.

The law prohibits all religious activity by unregistered groups. Under the administrative code as amended on January 6, individuals may be fined up to 870 Belarusian rubles (\$340) for organizing, running, or participating in unregistered religious organizations.

The housing code permits registered religious groups to hold services at residential premises if local authorities grant permission. Local authorities must certify that the premises comply with a number of regulations, including fire safety, sanitary, and health code requirements. The authorities do not grant such permission automatically, and the law prohibits religious groups from holding services in private residences without prior permission from local authorities.

By law, all religious groups must obtain permits to hold events outside of their premises, including when proselytizing.

The law penalizes organizing and participating in unauthorized gatherings, the announcement of an intention to hold a mass event before securing official authorization, training protesters, financing public demonstrations, or soliciting foreign assistance “to the detriment” of the country. Included in the definition of “mass event” are religious events held in places not especially intended for this purpose, whether in the open air or indoors. The law requires organizers to request permission from authorities to hold a mass event, including those involving religious groups, 15 days before the event. Some violations of the law prohibiting unauthorized mass events may be punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment. Authorities must inform organizers of a denial no later than five days before the event.

The authorities have a system of reimbursements for security, medical, and cleaning services required from organizers of mass events, including religious events held outside of religious premises and sites, rallies, competitions, cultural events, festivals, concerts, and similar occasions. Authorities cover costs associated with events that are officially sponsored at the local and national levels. A July 28 amendment requires organizers to sign contracts for services before applying for a permit to hold a mass event and reimburse all costs within 10 days.

The law requires all religious groups receive prior approval from the authorities to import and distribute religious literature. The approval process includes official examination of the documents by state-appointed religious studies experts.

Although there is no law providing for a systematic restitution process for property, including religious property, seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, groups may apply for restitution to local authorities. The law on religion specifically bans the restitution of, or compensation for, seized property that is being used for cultural or sports purposes.

The law permits associations and national associations to establish schools to train clergy but does not permit religious communities to do so.

The law permits only registered religious groups that are members of national religious associations to organize extracurricular religious activities at educational institutions. The law states the national religious association must first conclude an agreement on cooperation with the Ministry of Education; the BOC is the only religious group to have such an agreement. Even with such an agreement in place, students who wish to participate in voluntary “moral, civic, and patriotic education” in collaboration with religious groups must either provide a written statement expressing their desire to participate or secure their legal guardians’ approval. According to the law, “Such education shall raise awareness among the youth against any religious groups whose activities are aimed at undermining Belarus’s sovereignty, civic accord, and constitutional system or at violating human rights and freedoms.”

The law prohibits religious groups from conducting activities in any school without identifying themselves, regardless of whether there is an agreement with the Ministry of Education. It also prohibits visits from representatives of foreign religious groups; missionary activities; collections of donations or fees from students for religious groups or any charity; distribution of religious literature, audio, video, and other religious materials; holding prayer services, religious rituals, rites, or ceremonies; and placing religious symbols or paraphernalia at educational institutions.

The law does not allow private religious elementary, junior, or senior high schools or homeschooling for religious reasons.

The law establishes penalties ranging from fines to five years in prison for failure to fulfill mandatory military service, with an exemption for conscientious objectors for religious reasons. The law allows alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. Military service typically lasts from six to eighteen months; alternative service can last up to 36 months. By law, individuals who evade alternative civilian service may face up to five years in prison.

Only registered religious associations may apply to OPRRNA for permission to invite foreign clergy to the country. OPRRNA must grant permission before foreign clergy may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, or participate in charitable work. The authorities generally grant such permission for a period of one year, which may be reduced or extended. OPRRNA has 30 days to respond to requests for foreign clergy permits (religious visas) and may deny requests without explanation. If OPRRNA does not respond, permission is not granted. There is no provision for appeals.

By law, the authorities permit foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity only in the territorial area where their religious association is registered. Transfers of foreign clergy within a religious association, including from one parish to another, require prior permission from the authorities. By law, foreigners may not lead religious groups. Authorities may reprimand or expel foreign citizens who officially are present in the country for nonreligious work if they lead any religious activities. Law enforcement agencies on their own initiative or in response to recommendations from other state agencies, such as the security service, may require foreign clergy to depart the country – a decision which may not be appealed.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Throughout the year, in response to peaceful protests following a 2020 presidential election that local and international civil society groups and governments stated was fraudulent, authorities responded with what most observers described as a brutal crackdown on what the regime stated were “unauthorized mass events.” The prodemocracy movement continued to peacefully call for an end to violent action by state security services, the unconditional release of all political prisoners, a facilitated national dialogue with civil society and the democratic forces, and new free and fair elections under international observation. The authorities punished clergy, along with others, who supported the prodemocracy movement. For example, on July 6, Roman Catholic priest Vyachaslau Barok, based in the town of Rassony in the Vitsebsk region, wrote on social media that he had left the country after police threatened to search his office and confiscate computer equipment in follow-up to an earlier July 1 search at his home. Police reportedly charged Barok with repeatedly violating the law pertaining to mass events, under which they could have arrested him for up to 30 days and had summoned him for interrogation several times during the year for criticizing the Lukashenka regime’s response to protests.

According to the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18, which focuses on religious freedom, on August 27, a Rechytsa district court fined Council of Churches member Andrei Tryfan, a Baptist, 580 rubles (\$230) for holding an unauthorized baptism of his son in a lake on August 1 that was attended by 25 associates and family members. Reportedly, a person driving by took a photo and reported it to the police. In October, the Homiel Regional Court dismissed Tryfan’s appeal.

On October 20, the Prosecutor General’s Office refused a request from Russia to extradite Jehovah’s Witness and Russian citizen Oleg Lonshakov. Authorities detained Lonshakov in Brest in late September and told him Russia had requested his extradition for “organizing an extremist organization” and that he had been placed on the countries’ interstate wanted lists. Authorities released Lonshakov, who had requested political asylum in the country, following the prosecutor’s ruling. Information as to whether he was granted asylum was unavailable.

The authorities continued to harass individuals, including clergy, who expressed disagreement with the Lukashenka regime or criticized violence by agencies under its control. After sustained harassment and threat of punishment by the regime, many religious leaders and clergy reportedly chose to refrain from commenting on regime actions. The authorities stated remarks by religious leaders constituted interference in what they deemed to be political affairs.

According to Christian Vision, an independent Belarus-focused monitoring group, in January, the BOC dismissed Archpriest Siarhei Tsimashenkau, who headed the Synodal Missionary department, due to “alleged workload and other circumstances,” as well as the department’s member priest, Alyksandr Kukhta. Father Kukhta spoke against the 2020 presidential election and ensuing postelection violence and provided religious services to hundreds of persons in Minsk detained for participating in the peaceful prodemocracy movement. Tsimashenkau criticized BOC Metropolitan Veniamin’s engagement with the Lukashenka regime.

In a televised interview on May 20, Metropolitan Veniamin urged clergy “to stay out of politics” and “set an example for other people,” and he also said, “While every person has a right to their own opinion, they also have the right to make a mistake.” Independent observers interpreted the comments to mean clergy should avoid political activity opposing the Lukashenka regime, as expressing antiregime opinions would be a mistake. He stated the BOC issued new guidelines to prohibit its clergy from engaging in what it deemed political events and expressing support for political groups. Speaking at an Easter event on May 2, Lukashenka lauded the BOC for its “courage and endurance,” and he called on the BOC to “continue to stand with the people”; independent political analysts said Lukashenka meant to imply the BOC stands with him.

According to independent media reports in June, the KGB handed the BOC a list of approximately 100 priests who purportedly engaged in political activity surrounding the prodemocracy movement in the country. The list included religious leaders or clergy who condemned human rights abuses by the authorities and supported fundamental freedoms and who were removed from office, demoted, or forced to retire, according to independent media reports. For example, on June 9, the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod in Moscow accepted a request from the BOC to retire the 69-year-old Archbishop Artsemi of Hrodna due to what the BOC said was his “health.” The Archbishop told Radio Free Europe on July 13 that the BOC’s request for his removal was an order from the authorities because “[the authorities] considered it necessary to deal with me.” In his sermons, Archbishop Artsemi had repeatedly condemned what he said was the falsification of the presidential election and the Lukashenka regime’s violence against protesters. He also did not take action against priests in his diocese who participated in unauthorized protests or other events not authorized by the regime.

According to Archbishop Artsemi, authorities accused him of “dividing society,” citing as an example a photo of the Archbishop next to a boy holding an Easter egg painted with a symbol associated with the opposition and prodemocracy movement. The Archbishop dismissed the complaint as “laughable” and said the authorities were “purging” the church of perceived dissenters. The Archbishop also said authorities had accused him of permitting the singing of Mahutny Bozha (“God Almighty”), a hymn that protesters adopted as a rallying song, in his parish.

According to Forum 18, in April, consistently proregime video bloggers harshly criticized Archbishop Artsemi for commissioning icons depicting 10 Orthodox bishops whom the Russian Orthodox Church had canonized after they were executed by Soviet secret police. The bloggers criticized the icons as “emanating hatred.”

After Archbishop Artsemi’s retirement and the appointment of his replacement, the Diocese of Hrodna removed or transferred several priests who had participated in protests or had helped protesters injured by police. One of these priests was Father Heorhi Roy, of Hrodna’s Orthodox Pakrouski Cathedral, who had expressed grief on the internet and from the cathedral’s pulpit regarding the authorities’ violence. The cathedral had also held regular prayers for an end to violence and for peace in the country. On July 20, the BOC sent Father Roy to serve in a small locality in the Hrodna region, which religious activists said was a punishment. On the same day, the BOC removed Archpriest Anatol Nenartovich from his position as Hrodna Diocese secretary. On July 22, the BOC removed Father Mikalay Haiduk from his post as the priest of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker Church of the Bishop’s Courtyard in Hrodna and later transferred him to a small town in the Hrodna region.

According to Christian Vision, the administration of the Minsk-based Theological Seminary dismissed teacher of philosophy and priest Father Uladzilau Bahamolnikau on August 30. Bahamolnikau publicly joined a hunger strike in solidarity with political prisoner Ihar Losik on January 19. Separately, the BOC dismissed Alena Ziankevich, head of the BOC’s Association of Charity Sisterhoods, on September 7. Ziankevich was reportedly associated with the prodemocracy movement following the August 2020 elections.

Protestant groups say they remained concerned about the authorities’ ability to prosecute unregistered religious organizations, although there were no reports authorities did so during the year.

Christian groups continued to state the registration requirements for religious groups remained complex and difficult to fulfill, which, they said, restricted their activities, suppressed freedom of religion, and legalized administrative penalties such as fines against individuals for their religious beliefs while the groups were unregistered. The authorities’ guidelines for evaluating registration applications remained sufficiently broad and their application arbitrary, they said, to give authorities a pretext for denying applications from disfavored groups.

Nontraditional religious groups continued to state the procedure for registering communities and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and arbitrary. In March and August, authorities in Lida rejected a registration application and an appeal from a local community of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Some minority religious groups stated that they did not apply for registration because their members feared harassment by authorities and did not want to submit their names, as required by the application process. Other minority religious groups preferred to negotiate registration and other concerns with local authorities, but few registration attempts were made during the year. Some communities said they decided to postpone their registrations until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic due to health concerns related to gatherings.

Many unregistered religious groups stated they continued to maintain a low profile because of fear of prosecution and perceived regime hostility. Some registered religious communities said they were reluctant to report restrictions on their activities because they feared drawing attention to themselves.

From July to November, authorities across the country shut down approximately 300 NGOs, including some faith-based groups and those groups whose activities were widely supported by Protestant and other religious activists and volunteers. For example, in July, authorities in Orsha shut down the AIDS Care Education Training, an independent educational center supported by local Baptist and Pentecostal communities. Also in July, Mahilyou authorities shut down a private educational organization associated with the local community of members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, “Vedanta Veda,” alleging that its leader conducted illegal business activities.

According to Forum 18, in June, OPRRNA sent a letter instructing the BOC, the Roman Catholic Church, and Muslim and Jewish communities to hold an “all-Belarus prayer” in the format of a morning service, with the widest possible attendance, including public servants, and representatives of civil society, culture, and art in the framework of the “2021 Year of National Unity” on July 3, Independence Day. The opposition used the social media platform Telegram to publish leaked letters from various ministries, including Transport and Communications and Emergency Situations, ahead of the July 3 prayer, calling upon organizations subordinate to ministries and their officials to attend those services “in accordance with their religious affiliations” across the country. On July 3, the Ministry for Emergency Situations posted a video of approximately 50 uniformed officers attending a service at the BOC’s Assumption Church, in Vitsebsk. The Roman Catholic Church urged its parishes through a message on its official website on June 16 to “add prayers for unity and peace in our country if the opportunity arises” and “to sing the Mahutny Bozha, in which we ask Almighty God to save us and our land from all evil.”

According to human rights activists, authorities arbitrarily restricted access to prisons by clergy from October 2020 through June 30 to protect against COVID-19 infections. Former detainees reported, however, that authorities did not implement other basic pandemic protective measures within detention centers. For example, authorities deliberately placed prisoners with infected individuals as punishment, and withheld medical aid. Even after restrictions were lifted, prison administrators reportedly selectively denied clergy visits for certain detainees, including political prisoners. Officials continued to state these denials were related to COVID-19.

Opposition activist Paval Sevyarynets, recognized by human rights groups as a political prisoner, requested a pastoral visit by an Orthodox priest in writing at least five times between June 2020 and April 2021. His wife also requested a visit three times on his behalf. The authorities denied all requests while he was in pretrial detention. After he was sentenced to a seven-year jail term in May, authorities allowed a priest to speak to him only over the phone, separated by a glass panel, which barred him from communion or the privacy needed for a confession.

According to her family, Volha Zalatar, recognized by human rights groups as a political prisoner, repeatedly requested a pastoral visit by a Catholic priest after her detention in March. Catholic representatives also appealed on her behalf. The Investigative Committee, a law enforcement agency, refused all requests. Authorities also prevented Zalatar’s mother from giving her a prayer book. On June 2, the authorities permitted Vatican Nuncio Archbishop Ante Jozic to visit Zalatar due to his status as a diplomat.

According to Forum 18, prison authorities arbitrarily and forcibly confiscated necklaces with crosses from some detainees upon their arrest. Christian Vision reported that Vitsebsk resident Dzmitry Karneyenka said that while he was serving several days of detention in January and February for allegedly violating the law on mass events, the prison administration took away his cross.

Many prisons maintained designated Orthodox religious facilities that BOC clergy were allowed to visit through the year, and some prison administrations selectively allowed different Protestant denominations to hold religious meetings for inmates.

The authorities strove to censor the pan-Christian hymn “Mahutny Bozha,” and they harassed and punished religious leaders, clergy, event organizers, and laypeople who sang or allowed or supported the singing of the hymn. The hymn became linked to the country’s post-Soviet national revival in the early 1990s, when it was proposed (unsuccessfully) as the national anthem, and it had been sung routinely by both religious communities and pro-opposition individuals since then. After the 2020 presidential election, civil society and the prodemocracy movement adopted it as an unofficial anthem and prayer, including during protests. According to Roman Catholic activists, believers did not sing the hymn during public masses or the annual pilgrimage to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Basilica in Budslau on July 3, because authorities reportedly told organizers they would face reprisals if they did.

On July 7, Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Minsk-Mahilyou Yuri Kasabutski reported that on July 4, police visited the Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Minsk to notify clergy they had purportedly violated laws by singing “Mahutny Bozha.” Kasabutski told the press police could not cite any legal statutes prohibiting the hymn and had issued no formal warnings. He linked the visit, however, with Lukashenka’s July 2 and 3 remarks that the Roman Catholic Church would face reprisals if it allowed the continued singing of “Mahutny Bozha” in churches. Lukashenka stated the hymn was associated with Nazi collaborators and was used “to destroy the sacred statehood” and “reverse history by justifying [the collaboration of] their grandfathers.”

On August 30, independent media reported that local authorities canceled the biannual Christian music festival called “Mahutny Bozha,” which was scheduled to have been held in August. While authorities cited the COVID-19 pandemic as the reason, independent media commentators and local observers connected the denial with Lukashenka’s July 2 and 3 remarks.

According to observers, authorities continued surveillance of registered and unregistered religious groups. The sources stated that “ideology officers” and other representatives of the Lukashenka regime continued to monitor the activities of members of unregistered religious groups, including in their workplaces, although there were no reports of prosecutions. For example, prosecutors and ideology officers inspected Roman Catholic churches across the country after authorities opened a criminal case against several leaders of the nonregistered Union of Poles on March 25. Officials reportedly inquired about plans, operations, and activities of parishes and communities.

Authorities, including the security forces, reportedly continued to hold occasional “informal” talks with members of religious groups to learn about their activities. According to religious leaders, state security officers also continued to attend religious services of registered Protestant communities to conduct surveillance, which group members described as intimidation and harassment. According to these religious leaders, security officials monitored religious groups for activities or speech perceived as indicating support for the opposition or dissatisfaction with the authorities.

Religious groups, especially Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to their perceptions that they could face intimidation or punishment.

According to media accounts, the BOC was free to proselytize without restrictions on television and in print media as well as in public spaces.

The Mahilyou prison reportedly refused to allow political prisoners to subscribe to the monthly newspaper of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Vitsebsk, among other independent publications, from July to December, according to Christian Vision. Some families of political prisoners reportedly said that as of September 23, inmates were informed they would no longer be allowed to choose which newspapers and magazines to subscribe to, as internal prison regulations had been changed to give to prison administrators what had been an exclusive right of the inmates.

State radio station Belarus One aired a Sunday Mass at the Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Minsk on April 11 and resumed broadcasts of the cathedral’s weekly Sunday masses on November 28 after discontinuing them in August 2020.

Authorities continued to deny the Catholic station Radio Mariya permission to broadcast via radio but did not interfere with the station’s internet broadcasts.

According to several local Protestant groups, communities chose not to pursue many new purchases or rentals of properties as places of worship during the year, partially due to the political situation and the COVID-19 pandemic. Many communities reported, however, that they did not face impediments to purchases or rentals of nonsanctioned places of worship. Some religious communities with outstanding property cases, such as the Roman Catholic “Red Church” and the evangelical New Life Church in Minsk, continued to engage with the authorities and the legal system to resolve them. Converting residential property for religious use remained difficult. Protestant groups stated they continued to be more severely affected than other groups because they were less likely to own religious facilities, and that they could not apply for permission to conduct religious activities in private homes because residences were too small to accommodate their numbers.

The Saint Simon and Helena Roman Catholic parish continued to use its existing church building (the “Red Church”). The building was expropriated during the Soviet period and the authorities retained title to it despite continued efforts by churchgoers to return ownership of the property to the church. Given the property’s disputed status, the parish continued to refuse to pay rent, utilities, or land and property taxes or for 2018-19 renovation work

for which Minsk city authorities billed it in 2020. By May, according to authorities, the parish was in arrears exceeding 400,000 rubles (\$157,000), and the city continued to bill the parish more than 12,000 rubles (\$4,700) monthly. In June, St. Simon and Helena Church community members collected more than 20,000 signatures on a petition for the authorities to return title to the building to the church. At year’s end, the authorities had not responded to the petition.

On February 17, police, authorities forced open the doors of the New Life Church (NLC) during prayer services and evicted its congregation from its building. Authorities allowed the community to remove its property but barred the community from any further access to the church. Authorities also fined NLC Senior Pastor Vyachaslau Hancharenka for not allowing bailiffs to enter the church on January 5. Hancharenka said Minsk and national authorities made it clear in a series of meetings that they would not return the church building to NLC, and that alternative rental facilities offered by the city were either too small or too expensive. Authorities also said they would not approve NLC’s purchase of land on which to build a new church until the community paid land taxes, which totaled approximately 450,000 rubles (\$177,000) as of July. Although religious groups are exempt from land taxes, the building used by the church was owned by district housing authorities, who argued the NLC had to pay the land taxes per a 2009 court ruling that transferred ownership of the building to the city and denied the NLC’s appeal of an earlier eviction order. The church’s building was the subject of a longstanding property dispute with city authorities. The NLC bought the building in 2002. Local authorities, however, had refused to allow the NLC to officially convert the building into a church, starting a series of legal appeals. In addition, authorities said they would not pay NLC for the costs it incurred in converting the vacated building from a cow barn into a church.

The NLC began holding weekly Sunday services in the parking lot outside its former building immediately following its eviction. On July 23, however, Minsk police told participants they could be held liable for holding an unauthorized mass event. The city repeated the warning to Hancharenka on August 5, saying he could be held criminally liable. At year’s end, the community continued to hold services in the parking lot, and authorities had not pressed charges against Hancharenka or NLC members.

According to media reports, school administrators continued to cooperate only with the BOC among registered religious groups, based on the BOC’s concordat with the regime. School administrators continued to invite BOC priests to lecture to students, organize tours of Church facilities, and participate in BOC festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects.

On January 11, Lukashenka signed a decree allocating 1.43 million rubles (\$562,000) from reserve funds to cover salaries of professors and employees, as well as stipends for students, of the BOC’s seminaries. As in previous years, Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church said their schools did not receive any financial support from the authorities.

On August 23, the Council of Ministers issued an order approving voluntary weekly classes on “Spiritual and Moral Culture and Patriotism” for middle school students. According to the order, the purpose of the classes was “to shape the spiritual and moral ethics and patriotism of students based on Christian traditions and values of the Belarusian people.” The material the courses covered focused on Russian Orthodox Church history and traditions and did not mention other religious groups, according to publicly available syllabi of the courses.

BOC dioceses signed several agreements with regime institutions in their respective regions of the country. For example, on October 21, Polatsk State University and the BOC Diocese of Polatsk signed a cooperation agreement allowing BOC clergy to lead or participate in classes. The authorities also encouraged student participation in BOC events. On October 12, Hrodna Medical University and the BOC Diocese of Hrodna signed a similar cooperation agreement covering 2021-2025.

On May 21, the BOC signed a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Internal Affairs that was intended to prevent drug use and drug trafficking among youth. At the signing ceremony, BOC Metropolitan Venyamin said the agreement would be implemented jointly by the Healthcare and Education ministries, as well as with state media outlets and public associations.

Unlike other religious groups, the BOC continued to participate in the majority of state-sponsored public events, such as rallies or celebrations, without the need to seek prior approval from authorities. For example, on July 2, BOC Metropolitan Venyamin participated in the annual Independence Day commemoration, along with Lukashenka, military veterans, public officials, soldiers, civil society representatives, and residents of Brest. In addition, regional authorities and state-run companies often included BOC representatives in their events. On March 12, for example, BOC Metropolitan Venyamin held a prayer service and blessed three airplanes owned by national airline Belavia, marking the company’s 25th anniversary. On August 9, the Metropolitan held a service at a church located at a riot police detachment near Minsk and met with officers. Human rights organizations and local prodemocracy activists criticized such public engagements with riot police due to what they said were the police forces’ widespread abuses against peaceful demonstrators following the 2020 presidential election. On September 1, the Metropolitan and Healthcare Minister Dzmitry Pinevich participated in a ceremony launching the academic year at Minsk Medical University.

Authorities continued to permit the BOC to collect charitable donations in public venues as well as on its religious property. While the law does not restrict other religious groups from raising donations in public, representatives of these groups said authorities continued to limit their fundraising activities to their own places of worship or other properties. The groups said they faced harassment and possible detention if they tried to raise donations at other locations.

On July 19, the BOC signed a cooperation agreement with the Ministry for Emergency Situations under which the two organizations would streamline activities that would reinforce “spirituality and traditional moral values among officers” and also improve “interethnic communication” and their “quality and efficiency” at work.

On March 25, the BOC and the National Academy of Sciences signed a 2021-2025 plan of joint activities that included plans for scientific conferences, seminars, roundtables, exhibitions, and research work.

In public remarks on July 6, regarding the need to investigate and raise awareness of Nazi war crimes, Lukashenka said the country should follow the example of “the Jews,” who got “the whole world to bow before them” and “to be afraid to point a finger at them.”

On September 7 the state-owned newspaper *Minskaya Pravda* published a caricature on its front page showing Roman Catholic priests wearing pectoral crosses that progressively changed shape into a swastika and singing “Mahutny Bozha” while holding a flag associated with the opposition. Senior Roman Catholic Church leaders, including Bishop Yuri Kasabutski and Spokesperson of the Roman Catholic Church Yuri Sanko, condemned the article and said it insulted “millions of Catholics” in the country. On September 9, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei met with Apostolic Nuncio Jozic, who said afterwards that the authorities did “not support any actions to incite religious hatred.” Independent observers viewed Makei’s meeting as an attempt to defuse the situation. In September, Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs Alyaksandr Rumak wrote to Bishop of Vitsebsk Aleh Butkevich, the head of the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference, that the caricature did not reflect official state policy, but he urged the Church to “follow the law” and cooperate with authorities in order to preserve interfaith peace and harmony in the country. On October 15, the Minsk regional police department said it had determined *Minskaya Pravda* had not violated any laws. The Ministry of Information did not cite the newspaper for hate speech and recommended only that the outlet take “measures to avoid similar publications in the future.”

Religious groups said the regime continued to apply visa regulations inconsistently, which affected the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country. Authorities maintained a burdensome visa application process but, contrary to past years, did not cancel visas for clergy. Authorities refused to extend the six-month religious permit of a Full Gospel pastor, which was required to allow him to continue serving in a leadership position of a parish. The pastor, a Russian citizen, held a permanent residence permit in the country and was allowed to remain in Belarus. In general, Russian citizens do not need visas to enter Belarus but are required to obtain residence permits to live and work in the country long-term. In addition, all foreign clergy working in Belarus are required to obtain religious permits to serve in leadership positions at religious institutions and conduct religious duties.

Roman Catholic bishops continued to state that foreign priests faced multiple challenges, including a lengthy approval process before obtaining permission to celebrate Mass; and visas often issued for only three to six months. In December, however, local bishops reported that contrary to prior years, authorities renewed all requested visa applications that had previously been submitted or were pending review.

According to sources in the Roman Catholic community, authorities continued to refuse Klemens Werth, a Catholic priest from Russia, permission to engage in religious work. He was allowed to remain in Vitsebsk to continue building a new church, but since he was a foreigner, he was banned from celebrating Mass or otherwise serving in church.

The Jewish community and foreign donors worked with local authorities to erect seven privately funded monuments and five plaques that commemorated victims of the Holocaust at sites of mass killings in the villages of Yasen and Telekhany, the towns of Klets, Motal, and Ivanava, and other locations in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Antisemitic comments appeared on social media and in the comment sections of local online news articles, although it was unclear whether the comments were posted by persons in the country. For example, online communities on the Russian social media platform VKontakte posted images and videos featuring neo-Nazi themes and calling for violence against Jews and others.

Various religious communities reported instances of vandalism. For example, on March 4, the Homel Jewish community reported a communal multiuse building on its premises was painted with swastikas and other Nazi symbols. Police launched an investigation into the vandalism but did not provide further information.

In March, individuals broke into and vandalized the BOC Saint Maria Magdalena Church in Navalukaml. The next day, police arrested two men who had allegedly also vandalized residential buildings in Navalukaml. A local court convicted them on charges of hooliganism and gave them suspended sentences of one and a half years as well as a fine of 1,450 rubles (\$570) and 80 hours of community service, according to a September report by the General Prosecutor’s office.

In May, unidentified persons vandalized the Roman Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Minsk, damaging flower beds, streetlamps, a door, and the vehicle of one of the priests. Police announced an investigation but by year’s end had not announced the results.

Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, former Archbishop of Minsk-Mahilyou and one of the senior Roman Catholic prelates in the country, retired on January 3 at the age of 75, the standard retirement age for Catholic bishops. The Lukashenka regime had frequently targeted the Archbishop for criticism and barred his return to the country between August and December 2020. On September 14, the Vatican announced as his replacement Bishop Iosef Staneuski, general secretary of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in the country.

The BOC continued its annual commemoration in honor of Hauryl Belastoksky (Gabriel of Bialystok), a child allegedly killed by Jews in Bialystok in 1690. The Russian Orthodox Church considers him one of its saints and martyrs, and the BOC falls under the authority of the Russian Church on traditional practices such as this. The traditional memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky’s death on May 3 states the “martyred and courageous Hauryl exposed Jewish dishonesty,” although a trial after the boy’s death acquitted the Jew who was charged with the crime. Some antisemitic references about Belastoksky remained on the BOC’s official website, though in recent years the BOC’s online materials focused more on his role as a regional patron saint of children. While Jewish community leaders said they prioritized other concerns, prayers for the commemoration reportedly continued to include antisemitic references.

An interreligious working group comprising the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, and Jewish religious communities organized seminars and educational events, some of which were virtual due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. For example, in July, representatives of the working group held a forum marking the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Minsk ghetto. The participants highlighted the importance of preserving shared historic memories.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with representatives of the Lukashenka regime, including the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs in February, to discuss religious issues. The Charge d’Affaires engaged with the authorities on issues related to religious freedom, including the registration of religious communities, the freedom to express and practice religious beliefs, state pressure on clergy for exercising their religious beliefs and participating in political life in their personal capacities, and antisemitism. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Makei, denied the Charge d’Affaires’ request to meet with Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and National Affairs Alyaksandr Rumak in December on the grounds that the previous Charge d’Affaires had already met with the Plenipotentiary in February and the situation with regard to religious freedom in the country had not changed since the previous encounter.

On October 25, the Charge d’Affaires participated in an event commemorating the liquidation of Minsk’s Jewish ghetto in 1943. The embassy shared on social media photos from the event in memory of the thousands of Jewish victims and those who strove to save Jews.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Protestants, and minority religious groups, as well as with civil society activists and lawyers for religious groups to learn about religious activities and discuss the regime’s actions that affected religious freedom. The regime’s political restrictions on public gatherings limited the embassy’s ability to hold events and public engagements with representatives from religious communities. Embassy officials discussed antisemitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish religious groups, as well as the regime’s restrictions on registration and operations with Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant groups. Embassy officials continued to hold regular discussions about restrictions on religious freedom with religious freedom activists and religious leaders. Embassy officials also discussed the status of the Roman Catholic community and the state’s relationship with the Church with diplomatic colleagues at the Apostolic Nunciature.

Following the eviction of New Life Church from its property in February, the Charge d’Affaires visited the church’s new outdoor gathering place and discussed the situation with its leadership. The embassy expressed concern publicly regarding the eviction and urged authorities to abide by their commitments to uphold religious freedom as a member state of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The U.S. Special Envoy for Belarus also expressed support for religious freedom following the investiture of Roman Catholic Archbishop Staneuski as the new Archbishop of Minsk-Mahilyou. The Special Envoy posted on social media a video message to the Jewish community before Passover and a video message to the Muslim community during Ramadan. Embassy officials posted the Secretary of State’s speeches and other materials related to religious freedom on social media, including the Secretary of State’s comments on May 16 affirming religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

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