

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	265
Land:	Belarus (Hviderusland)
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	Report on International Religious Freedom
Udgivet:	10. juni 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2. juli 2020

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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Belarus

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IN THIS SECTION

Executive Summary

The constitution grants individuals 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.” The law recognizes the “determining role” of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) in the “historic establishment and spiritual, cultural and state traditions’ development of the Belarusian nation.” A concordat grants the BOC rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, although the law also acknowledges the historical importance of the “traditional” faiths of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups. The government continued its surveillance of minority and unregistered religious groups. Many unregistered religious groups stated they maintained a low profile because of what they believed to be government hostility and their fear of prosecution. By law, all registered religious groups must seek permits to hold events outside of their premises,

including proselytizing activities, and must obtain prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. In July punishments for organizing, running, or participating in unregistered religious organizations were changed from possible prison terms under the criminal code to fines under a new provision of the administrative code. Under the new provision, however, individuals could be fined up to five weeks' average wage without a court hearing, which human rights advocates said was alarming. Jehovah's Witnesses reported during the year they held weekly religious services throughout the country without police disruption, but they continued to face difficulties in obtaining registration of their local religious communities. Other minority religious groups also continued to have difficulty registering. The government continued to detain or fine individuals for proselytizing. Roman Catholic groups again stated the government denied visas and requests to extend the stay of some foreign missionaries. Human rights groups reported increased access of Muslim and Protestant clergy to inmates in prison. Throughout the year, government authorities continued to commemorate victims of the Holocaust, support preservation of Jewish cemeteries, and memorialize sites where Jews were killed. At the March 28 unveiling of a monument to the 10,000 mostly Jewish Austrians killed in the Trastianets concentration camp in Minsk, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka called preservation of their memories "sacred."

Despite a government ban, anti-Semitic print and video material continued to be imported from Russia and was available locally. Interdenominational Christian groups worked together on charitable projects and programs. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, doctors continued to require believers to accept blood transfusions as part of their treatment, despite their explicit written rejection of transfusions.

Throughout the year, the Charge d'Affaires regularly engaged at the highest levels of government on issues related to religious freedom, registration of religious communities, and anti-Semitism. In June the Charge d'Affaires and other U.S. embassy officials met with the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) to discuss religious affairs and the preservation of Jewish heritage sites. In May embassy officials and the chair of the U.S. Commission on Protection of America's Heritage Abroad participated in a ceremony to rebury remains of Jewish ghetto victims in Brest. In July embassy

officials attended Holocaust commemorations and the dedication of a memorial in Navahrudak. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with Jewish groups to discuss anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage. Embassy officials also met with Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other groups, as well as with civil society activists and lawyers for religious groups, to discuss government restrictions on registration and the activities of minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to a January 2016 survey by the state Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration, 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, Greek Catholics (“Uniates”), Old Believers (priestist and priestless), members of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and other Orthodox Christian groups, Lutherans, 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. Ethnic Poles, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the population, tend to be Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess any religious beliefs and to participate in the performance of acts of worship 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. The constitution states the law shall determine the conditions for exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute.

OPRRNA regulates all religious matters. The office takes part in drafting and implementing state policies on religious affairs, enforces and protects religious rights and freedoms, monitors activities of religious organizations and compliance with their charters, regulates relations between the state and religious organizations, conducts liaison 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 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 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, Greek Catholics (Uniates), and the Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century.

A concordat between the government and the BOC provides the BOC 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 it states it does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, the concordat calls for the government 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. 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 patron saint.

The concordat also serves as the framework for agreements between the BOC and individual state agencies. There are at least a dozen such agreements, including with the Ministries of Defense, Healthcare, and Information, as well as an agreement with the Ministry of Education that covers cooperation on education through 2020 and 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 age 18 who live in one or several adjoining areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious communities, one of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years and may be constituted only by a national-level religious association. 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 government data as of January 1, there are 25 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,375 religious communities and 175 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,698 religious communities, 15 dioceses, seven schools, 35 monasteries, one mission, 15 brotherhoods, and 10 sisterhoods. The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, six schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 499 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 14 denominations have 1,037 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 53 communities, including 10 autonomous communities. In addition, 24 Muslim religious communities – 23 Sunni and one Shia – are registered.

National religious associations include 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 permission from the regional authorities confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property referenced in its founding statutes. A religious group not previously registered by the government 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; rituals, practices, history, and forms and methods of activities; welfare and charitable services; proselytizing and missionary activities; approaches towards 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 government 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, or 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 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 government 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 government may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court's decision. The law contains no provision for appeal of the warning or suspension.

The housing code permits religious groups to hold services at residential premises if local authorities grant permission. The local authorities must certify the premises comply with a number of regulations, including fire safety, sanitary, and health code requirements. The government does not grant such permission automatically, and the law does not permit religious groups to hold 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 proselytizing.

The law requires organizers to notify authorities of a mass event, including those involving religious groups, planned at a designated location no later than 10 days

before the event. Authorities must inform organizers of a denial no later than five days before the event. Denials may be issued for one of two reasons: the event conflicts with one organized by a different individual or group; or the notification does not comply with regulations. Organizers of mass events outside designated locations must apply at least 15 days in advance, and authorities are required to respond no later than five days prior to the event. Authorities generally grant permits for annual events outside of religious groups' premises.

In January the government adopted 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. If an application is approved, organizers must sign contracts for such services two days in advance and must reimburse all costs within 10 days.

The law requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval 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 seized property being used for cultural or sports purposes.

The law permits associations and national associations to establish schools to train clergy; however, it 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. 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' 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. 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. 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 religious workers may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, or participate in charitable work. The government generally grants 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. There is no provision for appeals.

By law, the government permits 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 government permission. 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 government entities, such as the security service, may require foreign clergy to depart the country, a decision which cannot be appealed.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In May authorities released Christian convert Mehrdad Jamshidian from custody and cancelled his order of deportation to Iran to face murder charges “on humanitarian grounds,” and in June the government allowed him to apply for a new temporary residence permit after his previous residence permit was revoked over a fraud conviction and his Iranian passport expired. Jamshidian had lived in Belarus since 1993 and stated he converted to Christianity in 2002. A Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report said his lawyers and the UN Committee on Human Rights argued his Christianity would prevent him from receiving a fair trial in Iran and he could face the death penalty for apostasy. Jamshidian remained in the country at year’s end.

Human rights defenders criticized a provision in the July change in the punishments for organizing, running, or participating in unregistered religious organizations that authorized summary fines by police without any court hearing, calling it “particularly alarming.” The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus Anais Marin welcomed the abolition of the criminal punishment in the July announcement that shifted authority from the criminal to the administrative code for unauthorized religious organizations but said the changes were only “small steps.”

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 criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs. The government’s guidelines for evaluating registration applications remained sufficiently broad, they said, to continue to give authorities a pretext for denying applications from groups they considered unacceptable.

During the year, authorities in Lida, Barysau, and Vileika rejected applications from Jehovah's Witnesses communities. Authorities also continued to deny registration to several Protestant religious communities, including one within the Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches in Maladzechna. In July city authorities denied an independent Pentecostal community's application for registration in Minsk for the sixth time. As with previous denials since 2017, officials stated locations provided by the communities did not comply with regulations. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that attempts to register religious communities had been denied seven times by authorities in Vileika, Minsk Region, and eight times in Lida, Hrodna Region, since 2004 and 2000, respectively. Their community in Barysau, Minsk Region, had been repeatedly denied since 1998, most recently in July.

Independent religious experts continued to report minority religious groups remained reluctant to apply for registration because members continued to be unwilling to provide their names as part of the application process due to fear of harassment and punishment by authorities. Additionally, a number of them said they did not report registration denials because they believed that if they did not publicize them, they might still be able to negotiate their communities' registration with local authorities.

As of year's end, the government had taken no action on a November 2018 UN Human Rights Committee recommendation that the state repeal mandatory state registration of religious communities.

Many unregistered religious groups stated they continued to maintain a low profile because of what they believed to be government hostility and a fear of prosecution. According to independent religious experts, many registered religious communities also remained reluctant to report abuses and restrictions because they feared retribution. According to the international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18, members of a range of unregistered religious communities told the organization, "As long as we keep our profile low, the authorities do not come to us."

Nontraditional religious groups continued to state the procedure for registering and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and

arbitrary. In September authorities in the town of Zhodzina did not extend permission for a local Jehovah's Witnesses community to hold religious services at a private home after years of granted approvals. The community continued to negotiate with officials at year's end.

Human rights groups reported increased access of Muslim and Protestant clergy to inmates in prison. Authorities continued to grant BOC, and in some cases Catholic clergy, permission to visit believers in prison on a regular basis, and many prisons maintained designated Orthodox religious facilities.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported Minsk city officials approved a request from the national association for a convention to take place in the city on July 26-28. Approximately 8,000 members attended the convention without hindrance, compared with approximately 9,000 the previous year.

Bishop of the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists Leanid Mikhovich told the press Minsk city authorities did not authorize the Union to hold its International Festival of Hope in the city, scheduled for May 3-5. Mikhovich said OPRRNA officials told him the BOC had spoken out against the event, to which the Union had invited a prominent U.S. evangelist and his organization to serve as cosponsors. OPRRNA separately refused to allow one of those evangelists to preach at the conference and before Baptist communities.

According to various observers, the government continued surveillance of various Protestant denominations. The sources stated that government "ideology officers" (officials in charge of implementing political and social government policies) continued to monitor the activities of members of unregistered religious groups in their workplaces, although there were no reports of prosecutions. Government officials reportedly had 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. The Roman Catholic Church expressed concerns that in some regions of the country local ideology officers requested the Church provide them with Sunday school programs and lists of children attending them.

Religious groups, especially Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to what they said was the general atmosphere of intimidation and fear of punishment. In their annual report, the Jehovah's Witnesses stated they held weekly religious services throughout the country in Kingdom Halls they owned without police disruptions. The report stated, however, that it was necessary for local authorities to first provide approval before they could meet legally for worship outside the Kingdom Halls, whether in private homes or rented premises, and approval was unpredictable. The report stated that no meetings were disrupted.

Orthodox literature remained available countrywide. According to media accounts, the BOC was free to proselytize without restrictions in television and print media, as well as in public spaces. Unlike other religious groups, the BOC continued to participate in government-sponsored public events such as rallies without the need to seek prior approval from authorities.

While the national government approved the importation of Jehovah's Witnesses' requested literature during the year, at least two of the 18 magazines were not approved.

Religious groups chose not to pursue many purchases or rentals of properties as places of worship during the year while they engaged with the government and the legal system to resolve difficulties they had encountered in the past. They reported that they did not face impediments to such purchases or rentals they were pursuing. Converting residential property to religious use remained difficult. Protestant groups stated they continued to be more severely affected than other groups in this regard because they were less likely to own religious facilities and they could not apply for permission to conduct religious activities in private homes because these residences were too small to accommodate their numbers.

In August Minsk city authorities withdrew their original approval of a plot of land for the use of the Roman Catholic Saint Peter, Paul, and Eugenio de Mazenod community after residents protested the removal of trees at a park where the community was supposed to build a church, and allocated a new plot of land for the community. Permission to build on the original plot was issued in 2016.

On May 15, the interior ministry announced that religious communities would not be charged fees for holding events at designated religious venues outside their usual premises, such as cemeteries, pilgrimages, and other sites approved by local authorities. Despite the announcement and a preapproval by local authorities, police charged the Greek Catholic community in Vitsebsk 3,825 rubles (\$1,800) to conduct its annual July 9-13 pilgrimage. The community canceled the event. Father Zmitser Grishan of Vitsebsk's Resurrection of Christ Greek Catholic parish told the press that the annual pilgrimage, first organized in 1995, traditionally involved up to 100 community members walking from Vitsebsk to Polatsk to commemorate the killing of five Basilian monks in the 17th century. Representatives of the Roman Catholic, BOC, and Protestant communities said authorities did not charge them fees for their religious events; however, in some cases community leaders had to take personal responsibility for maintaining order and safety at such events.

Observers stated that the system of reimbursements for security, medical, and cleaning services for organizers of mass events adopted in January was not intended to prohibit regular worship, nor was it doing so in practice.

In July the BOC signed an agreement with the Minsk regional executive committee providing for ongoing cooperation in the areas of education, social welfare, and culture.

The government continued to require students to use textbooks that representatives of nontraditional religious groups said promoted intolerance towards them, citing chapters in the books that labeled such groups as "sects." The textbooks described nontraditional religious groups as "striving for the exclusiveness of their role, doctrine, and principles," being isolationist and claiming to be God-chosen, among other things. While the textbooks did not define "nontraditional," it was generally understood to mean religions other than Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Lutheranism.

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 government. School administrators continued to invite BOC priests to lecture to

students, organize tours of BOC facilities, and participate in BOC festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects.

On January 29, President Lukashenka signed an edict allocating 905,400 rubles (\$430,000) from his reserve fund to cover salaries of professors and employees, as well as stipends for students, of the BOC seminaries. Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church said their schools did not receive any financial support from the government.

As of year's end, Minsk city authorities still had not provided a land plot for the construction of the Catholic John Paul II Minsk Theological Academy it approved in 2015.

Religious groups said the government continued to apply visa regulations inconsistently, affecting the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country. On January 24, the Episcopal Conference of Belarus, representing the Catholic Church, reported the government extended permission to Polish priest Sobieslaw Tomala for another six months to serve at the Saint Francis parish in the town of Salihorsk. While his permit was due to expire January 31, OPRRNA had refused to extend it but changed its decision after approximately 300 residents endorsed a petition to renew it. In a similar case in Vitsyebsk, however, OPRRNA rejected all appeals, including a petition endorsed by 600 residents on February 4, to allow Polish priest Pawel Knurek to return to resume his ministry at the Merciful Jesus parish after having served there for 15 years. OPRRNA gave no explanation in either case, but representatives of the communities said that unofficially the government wanted local religious communities to train local citizens as clergy rather than relying on foreigners.

According to Forum 18, the government 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 was banned from serving or leading masses.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church reported in September that it opened a new center for a healthy lifestyle jointly with international private and state donors and

local authorities in Brest. The center was available to any resident and accessible to persons with disabilities.

According to Catholic Archbishop of Minsk Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, foreign priests faced multiple challenges, including the following: newly arrived priests were required to undergo a lengthy approval process before obtaining permission to celebrate Mass; the government often issued them visas for only three to six months; and they often encountered administrative difficulties when trying to renew visas. On February 11, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz also said the law made it “almost impossible for foreign priests to serve in the country.”

There were no developments regarding the longstanding freeze placed on the assets of New Life Church in 2005. The Church continued to use the space for religious purposes. Church leadership’s discussions with Minsk city authorities on the status and operations of the church continued at year’s end.

The authorities continued to permit the BOC to collect charitable donations in public 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. Groups said they faced government harassment if they tried to raise donations at other locations.

On May 26, Homyel authorities reported they had identified the individual who painted in December 2014 a swastika and the slogans “Kill the Jews” and “Holocaust” on a building in a local Jewish community. The individual, who reportedly admitted his guilt, belonged to a neo-Nazi group and since 2017 had been serving a seven-and-one-half-year sentence for attempted murder in the killing of a foreign student in Homyel.

During the year, the Jewish community and foreign donors worked with local authorities to erect at least nine privately funded monuments in the villages of Ushachy, Bytsen, and Sirotsina; the towns of Zhytkavichy and Ivatsevichy; and in other locations that commemorated Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

On January 25, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei released a statement commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day, saying “We stand united to commemorate the victims and to prevent such tragedies from happening again.” He added, “New generations should be taught appropriately to resist military aggression and nationalistic hatred.”

On March 28, President Lukashenka and his Austrian counterpart unveiled a monument to 10,000 Austrian victims of the Holocaust killed in the Trastianets concentration camp in Minsk. Lukashenka said, “Preserving their memories is sacred,” and “They were slaughtered simply due to their ethnic descent, [and for] following a different faith and adhering to a different ideology.”

On May 22, Brest city authorities held a ceremony with the local Jewish community, local residents, and representatives of foreign states to rebury the remains of 1,214 Holocaust victims of the Brest ghetto that were discovered in January at a construction site in the city center. The chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America’s Heritage Abroad spoke at the ceremony, and Brest Mayor Alyaksandr Rahachuk committed to preserving the victims’ memory and to memorializing the mass grave site and other Jewish-related sites around the city.

On June 5, Mahilyou authorities recognized a local Jewish cemetery established in the early 1800s as a memorial and historic burial site, the first time such status was awarded to a historic Jewish cemetery in the country. The cemetery features unique gravestones that have survived wars, vandalism, and Soviet-era destruction. Local activists repaired and catalogued most of the gravestones. The new status prohibits any new burials at the site and the destruction of gravestones.

On October 9, construction workers unearthed remains and gravestones at the site of a former Jewish cemetery in a central Minsk park. Although the Jewish community reburied some of the unearthed remains and investigators were reportedly studying the rest, city authorities declined to recognize the park as a site of Jewish historic and cultural value. Jewish communities and heritage NGOs continued to petition the government to protect the site from any digging or construction work. The city prosecutor’s office said that work on the sewage system did not violate any regulations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, doctors continued to require believers to accept blood transfusions as part of their treatment, despite their explicit written rejection of transfusions.

The BOC, as represented by the Minsk-based parish of the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, continued its annual commemoration honoring Hauryl Belastoksky, a child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. Jewish community leaders again expressed concern over the memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky's death on May 3, the text of which included a passage stating the "martyred and courageous Hauryl exposed Jewish dishonesty."

On March 23, two memorial stones, including one honoring Jewish victims of Soviet repression, were vandalized with anti-Semitic and other smears at the memorial site of Kurapaty, where Soviets killed tens of thousands of victims of various nationalities, many of whom were Jews, between 1937 and 1941. Investigators launched a criminal case into the vandalism, but no results were reported.

Anti-Semitic newspapers, literature, and digital video discs, frequently imported from Russia, continued to be available, despite a government ban. Anti-Semitism continued to exist online. For example, one blog post decried Jewish intellectuals and said, "Why should Jews decide what's good and bad for Belarusians."

In the cities of Vorsha and Salihorsk, residents collected petitions to oppose the opening of new BOC churches, saying there were already more than sufficient BOC churches in those cities.

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 on developing and promoting a culture of preserving the memory of the Holocaust and protecting genocide memorial sites, with a primary focus on the Trastianets concentration camp in Minsk. The group

visited Holocaust sites around the country, organized roundtables on engaging youth and young historians engaged in Holocaust research, and conducted discussions on how remembrance of Trastianets history was connected to the values of democracy and the contributions of religious communities to reconciliation between the peoples of Belarus and Germany. The group also held a number of joint prayers, including at the Kurapaty site of Stalin-era mass killings in Minsk.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In June the Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with OPRRNA representatives to discuss religious affairs and to raise concerns related to the preservation of Jewish heritage sites. The Charge d’Affaires regularly engaged on issues related to religious freedom, registration of religious communities, and anti-Semitism at the highest levels of government throughout the year.

In May embassy officials and the chair of the U.S. Commission on Protection of America’s Heritage Abroad participated in a ceremony to rebury the remains of victims of the Jewish ghetto in Brest. The chairman also visited the construction site where the remains had been unearthed to ensure full compliance with removal procedures that accorded with Jewish tradition.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with representatives of the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, and minority religious groups. They discussed anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish religious groups, as well as government restrictions on registration and operations, with the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant groups. Embassy officials also continued to hold regular discussions about restrictions on religious freedom with religious freedom activists, religious leaders, lawyers for religious groups, and representatives of the For Freedom of Religion initiative, a group of civil society activists promoting religious tolerance. Embassy officials posted the Secretary of State’s speeches and other materials related to religious freedom on social media.

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