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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Belarus

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution affirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law; however, it contains language that restricts freedom of religion.

The Government continued to restrict religious freedom in accordance with the provisions of a 2002 law on religion and a 2003 concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the only officially recognized Orthodox denomination. Although there is no state religion, the concordat grants the BOC privileged status.

Authorities kept many religious communities waiting as long as several years for decisions about registration or property restitution. Authorities harassed and fined members of certain religious groups, especially those regarded as bearers of foreign cultural influence or as having a political agenda. Protestants in particular attracted negative attention. Foreign missionaries, clergy, and humanitarian workers affiliated with churches faced many government-imposed obstacles, including deportation and visa refusal or cancellation. Restrictions on foreign clergy increased during the reporting period.

While some members of society took positive actions to promote religious freedom, instances of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice occurred, including numerous acts of vandalism and arson of religious sites, buildings, and memorials.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 80,154 square miles and a population of 9.7 million. According to January 2009 data from the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA), approximately 60 percent of citizens consider themselves religious, of whom an estimated 80 percent belong to the BOC, 14 percent to the Roman Catholic Church, 4 percent to Eastern religious groups (including Muslims, Hare Krishnas, and Baha'is), and 2 percent to Protestant groups (including Seventh-day Adventists, Apostolic Christians, and Lutherans) as well as Old Believers and Jehovah's Witnesses. Of those who identify as Belarusian Orthodox or Roman Catholic, 18 and 50 percent, respectively, regularly attend church services. There are also adherents of the Greek Catholic Church and of Orthodox groups other than the BOC. Jewish groups stated that between 30,000 and 50,000 persons identify themselves as Jewish. Most

Jews are not religiously active.

In January 2009 OPRRNA reported 3,218 religious organizations of 25 religious confessions and denominations in the country, including 3,062 registered religious communities and 156 national and confessional organizations (monasteries, brotherhoods, and missionary sites). This included the following: 1,473 Belarusian Orthodox, 500 Evangelical Christian, 467 Roman Catholic, 269 Evangelical Christian Baptist, 72 Seventh-day Adventist, 54 Full Gospel Christians, 32 Old Believer, 29 Jewish, 27 Lutheran, 26 Jehovah's Witnesses, 25 Muslim, 21 New Apostolic Church, 17 Progressive Judaism, 14 Greek Catholic, nine Apostolic Christian, six Hare Krishna, five Baha'i, five Christ's Church, four Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), two Messianic, one Reform Church, one Presbyterian, one Armenian Apostolic, one Latin Catholic, and one St. Jogan Church.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution affirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law; however, it contains restrictive language stipulating that cooperation between the state and religious organizations "is regulated with regard for their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people." OPRRNA regulates all religious matters.

A 2002 religion law recognizes the determining role of the Orthodox Church in the development of the traditions of the Belarusian people, as well as the historical importance of groups commonly referred to as "traditional faiths": Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism. However, the traditional faiths mentioned in the law do not include religious groups such as the Priestless Old Believers and Calvinist Churches, which have historical roots in the country dating to the 17th century.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Christmas, Orthodox Easter and Catholic/Protestant (Western) Easter, Radonitsa (Great Tuesday or Easter of the Dead), Orthodox Remembrance of the Ancestors Day, and Catholic/Protestant (Western) Christmas.

Although the 2002 law guarantees religious freedom, it contains restrictive elements that increase the Government's control. It required all previously registered groups to reregister by 2004, and it bans all religious activity by unregistered groups. In addition, it confines the activity of religious communities to areas where they are registered and establishes complex registration requirements that some communities, both "traditional" and "nontraditional," have difficulty fulfilling.

The 2002 law requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute literature, prevents foreigners from leading religious organizations, and denies religious communities the right to establish schools to train clergy.

The 2002 law establishes three tiers of religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities, or local individual religious organizations, must include at least 20 persons over the age of 18 who live in neighboring areas. Religious associations must include at least ten 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 can be formed only when there are active religious communities in a majority of the country's six regions.

A religious community must submit a list of its founders' names, their places of residence and 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 indicated in its founding statutes. Regional executive committees (for groups outside of Minsk) or the Minsk City Executive Committee handle all registration applications. For a community practicing a religion not previously "known" to the Government, information about the faith must also be submitted. No previously "unknown" religious communities were registered during the reporting period.

A religious association must provide a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and the minutes from its founding congress. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions, invite foreigners to work with religious groups, and organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applications to establish associations and national associations must be submitted to OPRRNA. The Government registered 85 religious communities in 2008. Christian communities maintained that the law heavily restricts their activities, suppresses freedom of religion, and legalizes criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs.

A 2003 concordat between the BOC and the Government guarantees the BOC 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." It calls for the Government and the BOC to cooperate in implementing policy in various fields, including education, development, protection of cultural legacies, and security. Although it states that the agreement would not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, the concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudoreligious structures that present a danger to individuals and society." In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word "Orthodox" in its title and to use the image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the patron saint of the country, as its symbol.

On March 27, 2009, BOC Metropolitan Filaret called upon the Government to effectively regulate the Internet and control access to its "dangerous resources." President Lukashenka praised the BOC's fine reputation and work in maintaining "peace and spirit of tolerance" among different congregations and pledged to continue supporting it.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government restricted religious freedom both directly and indirectly. The Government enforced laws that limit freedom of worship, speech, and assembly, and state registration is compulsory before religious activity can take place. The Government sometimes was responsible for and regularly failed to condemn acts of religious insensitivity or intolerance. The Government frequently referred to groups it did not consider to be traditional as "nontraditional" and widely used the term "sect" when referring to such groups, although it is not an official designation.

President Lukashenka made highly offensive remarks against Baptist communities during his meeting with Interior Ministry senior personnel on June 29, 2009. He pointed to the Ministry's "criminal negligence in human resources and ideological work," and he indicated that some law enforcement officers were "active" members of "ambiguous religious sects" and disclosed classified information to their Protestant "brothers" and associates. President Lukashenka further condemned attempts "to recruit to religious sects" Interior Ministry Academy students and faculty members.

On June 29, 2009, the Center for Spiritual Education and Social Services, under the BOC, held a discussion called "Sects in Contemporary Protestantism." The speakers, in particular an OPRRNA representative, maintained that Pentecostal communities were the largest "sect" operating in the country and called them "aggressive," "politicized," and exercising "negative influence" on believers. Protestant and human rights advocates expressed their grave concerns over public "derogatory" statements regarding Pentecostals, which could incite religious contention and hatred.

Many "traditional" and "nontraditional" religious groups continued to experience problems renting, purchasing, or registering properties to establish places of worship or to build churches, as well as difficulty reacquiring state-controlled religious properties. Groups also encountered difficulty legally converting residential property to religious use; the housing code permits the use of such property for nonresidential purposes only with the permission of local executive and administrative bodies. As a result, several Protestant churches and "nontraditional" groups were at an impasse: denied permission to convert their properties for religious use because they were not registered, but unable to register due to the lack of a legal address. Such groups often were obliged to meet in violation of these requirements or in the homes of individual members.

A government decree specifies measures to ensure public order and safety during general public gatherings. Some officials cited the decree as a basis for canceling or refusing to extend agreements with religious groups for the use of their facilities. During the reporting period, it remained difficult, particularly for unregistered groups, to rent a public facility. Protestant communities suffered most from this decree, since they were less likely to own property and needed to rent public space when their members were too numerous to meet in private homes.

The Government often restricted peaceful assembly for religious activities. On December 14, 2008, riot police briefly detained Syarhey Lukanin and two associates for holding a public evangelical service in central Minsk. Police threatened Lukanin with criminal charges for "unsanctioned religious activities" and dispersed the gathering, but they released the three without charge.

The Government, in particular its ideology officers, targeted and harassed unregistered religious communities (see Abuses).

On January 8, 2009, a court in Babruysk fined Baptist activist Alyaksandr Yermalitski \$62 for hosting an illegal prayer at his home on December 5, 2008.

On September 16, 2008, Barysau authorities cancelled a Christian music festival minutes before it was supposed to begin, despite having previously granted permission for the event. The authorities subsequently issued a letter stating the cancellation was due to "flaws" in the initial application to hold the event.

Foreign missionaries, clergy, and charity workers faced increased government obstacles, including deportation and visa refusal or revocation. The Government continued to enforce the increased restrictions on foreign clergy introduced in January 2008. Only registered national religious associations may apply to OPRRNA for permission to invite foreign clergy, and permission must be granted before foreign religious workers may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, participate in charitable work, or expand foreign contacts of religious groups. OPRRNA has the right to deny requests without explanation. The guidelines affected Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations the most, reducing the number of Roman Catholic clergy and limiting the humanitarian and charitable projects of western Protestant churches.

On December 19, 2008, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, head of the Belarusian Roman Catholic Church, expressed serious concern over arbitrary expulsions of Polish priests and the significant lack of priests due to their lengthy training at local schools. OPRRNA representative Maryna Tsvilik complained at a parliamentary meeting on December 9 that Catholic education took too long and that priests invited by the Catholic Church from abroad had a different mentality and culture from Belarusians and were unaware about political and social processes in the country. She opined that the Government successfully managed to stem uncontrolled arrival of foreign clergy and called the lack of Catholic priests "an outstanding issue."

In December 2008 three Roman Catholic priests from Poland – Jan Bronowski, Jan Skonczyny, and Andrzej Krayczik – were denied registration of their visas despite having ministered in Belarus for many years. OPRRNA stated that the denial was not a ban; rather, the priests allegedly failed to "master" the Belarusian language and therefore

were not qualified to minister to Belarusians. Also in December 2008 OPRRNA banned three Polish nuns and another priest from working in the Minsk-Mahilyou diocese as well as Polish priest Zbigniew Grigorczewicz from continuing religious work after his three-year service in Belarus. Authorities ignored a petition and 400 signatures collected by Grigorczewicz's parishioners in his support and refused to provide grounds for the denial.

On October 15, 2008, airport border services detained and then deported without explanation Benjamin Brukh, a Protestant bishop from Ukraine. Brukh was a founder of the Full Gospel Church of Jesus Christ in Minsk in 1991.

Observers expressed concern that lack of uniform government guidance on implementation of changes in 2006 to visa laws affected the ability of missionaries to live and work in the country. As in previous reporting periods, approval for visits by foreign religious workers often involved a lengthy bureaucratic process. The law requires one-year, multiple-entry "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries and clergy. An organization inviting foreign clergy must make a written request to OPRRNA, including the proposed dates and reason for the requested visit. Even if the visit is for nonreligious purposes (such as charitable activities), representatives must obtain a visa and permission from OPRRNA. OPRRNA has 20 days in which to respond, and there is no provision for appeal of its decision.

Authorities frequently questioned foreign missionaries and humanitarian workers, as well as the local citizens who worked with them, about the sources and uses of their funding. There were also credible reports that security personnel followed foreign workers.

On February 7, 2009, police deported two Danish businessmen and humanitarian aid workers and banned their entry for one year for proselytizing and conducting illegal religious practices. They were apprehended at a worship service at the Living Faith Church in the city of Homyel. On February 20, 2009, a Homyel district court denied their appeal to challenge the deportation orders.

Archbishop Jovan of the Holy Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (BAOC), a religious freedom activist, continued to be denied entry into the country; the Government does not recognize the BAO.

The Government does not permit foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity outside of their host institutions. Transferring between religious organizations, including parishes, requires prior state permission.

Internal affairs agencies may compel the departure of foreign clergy by denying registrations and stay permits. Authorities may act independently or based on recommendations from other government entities.

Legislation prohibits "subversive activities" by foreign organizations and the establishment of offices by foreign organizations whose activities incite "national, religious, and racial enmity" or that could "have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people."

Foreign citizens officially in the country for nonreligious work can be reprimanded or expelled if they participate in religious activities. On June 26, 2009, police deported Simon Milongo, a Nigerian preacher, after his participation in a World of Hope Church service in Babruysk on June 23. Milongo held a Russian permanent residence permit and was charged with illegally crossing the Belarus border.

By law citizens are not prohibited from proselytizing and may speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, in practice authorities often interfered with or punished some individuals who proselytized on behalf of registered or unregistered religious groups. Authorities regulated every aspect of proselytizing and literature distribution.

During the reporting period, the Government monitored peaceful minority religious groups, especially those perceived as "foreign" or "cults." Credible sources reported that state security officers often attended Protestant services to conduct surveillance. On April 15, 2009, an OPRRNA official stated that authorities not only closely observed and restricted "illegal" religious activities of such groups as the Baptist Council of Churches and the Unification Church but also confiscated information materials from the latter for assessment to prevent their "violating human rights and freedoms" and "putting individuals' psychological and physical wellbeing at risk."

The Government continued to use textbooks that promote religious intolerance, especially toward "nontraditional" religious groups. Leaders of Protestant communities criticized language in the textbook *Basics of Home and Personal Security* as discriminatory against Protestants, particularly the chapter entitled "Beware of Sects." The chapter includes a paragraph informing students of such "sects" as Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Maria, White Brotherhood, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Ministry of Education continued to use the textbook *Man, Society, and State*, which labels Protestants and Hare Krishnas as "sects," despite protests by religious groups. Neither book was republished by the end of the period covered by this report.

Anti-Semitism is tolerated by the state, although the situation improved during the reporting period. Anti-Semitic acts declined in the period covered by this report but were only sporadically or ineffectively investigated. Neo-Nazi activity, which authorities typically characterized as hooliganism, also occurred (see Section III).

In February 2009 the Masty Regional Committee denied permission for local civil society activists to unveil a memorial plaque at the site of the former Jewish ghetto in the nearby town of Luna. The activists wanted to put up a plaque in the Belarusian and Hebrew languages along with the existing one in Russian and Hebrew. They also noted that the latter was located away from the ghetto site.

Limited restitution of religious property occurred. The Mahilyou Chabad-Lubavitch Jewish community reported that in May 2009 President Lukashenka decreed a return to the community of an old synagogue pending a decision of the local authorities. There is no legal basis for restitution of property seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, and the law restricts the restitution of property being used for cultural, sports, or educational purposes. The Government did not return buildings if it had nowhere to move the current occupants. For example, most of the Jewish community's requests for the return of synagogues, which were in use as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and a beer hall, were refused.

Local and international Jewish leaders appealed to President Lukashenka to preserve a 19th-century wooden synagogue in Lyuban after local authorities demolished a similar synagogue in April 2009, allegedly due to its poor condition and "lack of historical or cultural value." Heritage preservation activists also protested the destruction and urged the Government to erect a memorial sign at the site.

No decision about the future of a former Bernardine monastery complex in downtown Minsk was reached by the end of the reporting period. On September 10, 2008, an OPRRNA official again publicly committed to return the complex to the community; however, the official noted that moving the state archives from the property to a different venue would take a long time.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government continued to abuse the religious freedom of members of several religious groups. As in the past, the most common charge against religious leaders was organizing or hosting an unauthorized meeting, a charge that arises from a law circumscribing freedom of assembly. The law allows persons to gather to pray in private homes; however, it imposes restrictions on holding rituals, rites, or ceremonies in such locations and requires prior permission from local authorities. Protestant and non-BOC Orthodox congregations were frequently fined or warned for operating illegally during

the reporting period.

On June 22, 2009, the Minsk city prosecutor's office opened a criminal case against Yauheni Volkau, a Unification Church of Moon activist, on charges that he acted on behalf of an unregistered religious organization. The case, the first of its kind, was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

On June 17, 2009, Horki town authorities fined local Protestant activist Pyotr Malanachkin \$60 for distributing religious and other printed materials. They also dismantled a book stand in front of his house that carried copies of the Bible, Human Rights Declaration, and similar publications.

On May 28, 2009, Baptist pastor Mikalay Palyashchuk reportedly was fined \$745 and his associate Yauheni Yahorau received a warning for violating mass events regulations. On March 20, 2009, a Babruysk ideology official threatened Palyashchuk with prosecution if his community, which had been denied state registration on numerous occasions, continued to meet for worship at a private residence. On March 4, 2009, Palyashchuk was warned and ordered to destroy religious literature seized on January 11, 2009, from a Christian street library in Asipovichy that Palyashchuk and his associates were operating. The Supreme Court reportedly overturned the orders at a later date and ruled to expropriate rather than destroy the printed religious materials.

On May 12, 2009, a Mahilyou district court fined Lyudmila Batsyuk, the coordinator for the Belarusian Christian social organization Cliff House, \$50 for organizing an illegal religious group and engaging individuals in illegal religious activities. The charges stemmed from Batsyuk's unsanctioned "Christian techniques" in running a rehabilitation program for alcoholics and drug addicts.

On March 20, 2009, police detained for two hours six Baptists who were singing hymns and distributing Christian books in Shchuchyn. All the printed materials were confiscated "for examination."

On March 2, 2009, the Supreme Court upheld registration requirements for religious communities and denied Pentecostal pastor Valyantsin Baravik's appeal to challenge his June 2008 fine for leading an illegal religious service and unregistered organization at his home in Masty.

On February 20, 2009, a Lelchytsy regional court fined local Roman Catholic priest Vital Mysonau \$37 for installing a cross in the town suburbs in 2008.

On January 22, 2009, a Lyuban regional court sentenced Mikhail Mikhaliienya, a Muslim, to three months in jail for evading military service and failing to pay an associated fine. In 2007 Mikhaliienya was fined \$735 for evading army enlistment due to his religious beliefs, claiming there were no possibilities for Muslims to observe their religious rites in the army.

On January 6, 2009, authorities issued a warning to 15 Baptists after police detained them and confiscated religious literature from their street library in Kobryn on December 20, 2008.

On November 10, 2008, the Belarusian Committee for State Security (BKGB) extensively questioned New Life Church (NLC) member Syarhey Vashkevich about his previous engagement in charity and in connection with the July 4, 2008, bombings in Minsk. Vashkevich refused to be fingerprinted or sign any interrogation protocols.

On August 5, 2008, BKGB officers searched the residence of Protestant pastor Ernest Sabila and confiscated his computer.

On July 30, 2008, Svislach town authorities dismissed numerous appeals to lift their June 2008 ban on the Grace Pentecostal Church holding an open-air baptism service in a lake.

Authorities alleged in their refusal that the rite of baptism conducted by the Grace community "would arouse mixed reactions" among the mainly Orthodox and Catholic town population.

On July 25, 2008, a Hrodna district court fined Baptist pastor Yuri Krauchuk \$250 for leading a Sunday home worship without state approval.

On July 23, 2008, the head of the Ruzhany Village Committee and local BKGB officers closely observed and unsuccessfully attempted to interrupt a funeral service led by BAOB Father Ioann Grudnitskiy.

On July 18 and 19, 2008, police apprehended Belarusian Christian Democracy Party activists Mikalaiy Dzmidzenka and Kastus Shytal at a Catholic youth meeting in Ivyanets and confiscated their religious materials. Police released both without charge; however, Dzmidzenka was detained overnight.

After a long delay, on November 19, 2008, the Supreme Economic Court resumed hearing a case, previously adjourned in 2007, regarding the forced sale of NLC property that the authorities had refused to register as a place for worship. On January 13, 2009, it released its decision to uphold the initial judgment to remove the property from NLC ownership. On March 5, 2009, the court decision was upheld on appeal. On March 16, 2009, the city administration offered a one-acre plot at a different location; the original size of the NLC property is four acres. In an interview to the state television on March 9, 2009, OPRRNA accused the NLC of violating children's rights to education by refusing to vacate their premises, on which a day-care center or a school was planned to be built. Hancharenka announced on May 8, 2009, that the NLC community unanimously voted to reject the city administration's offer. On May 14, 2009, the NLC received and defied eviction orders from the local district housing maintenance agency to vacate the building by June 1, 2009. In a June 9, 2009, letter to the NLC, Minsk city authorities echoed OPRRNA's March 9 statements and urged the group to reconsider an offer of a land plot. At the end of the reporting period, the NLC had not vacated the premises.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Despite lengthy bureaucratic procedures, the Government took positive steps to reconstitute property, assign land plots, and authorize construction of new Roman Catholic churches. On May 18, 2009, the Galshany Village Committee returned part of a building from a former Franciscan monastery to the Hrodna Roman Catholic diocese. The St. Anthony community in Mahilyou received permission to build a church on July 8, 2008, after four years of seeking permits and official authorization. The Mother of God of the Rosary community in Minsk received permission for constructing a church in 2008. According to the OPRRNA June 2009 report, the Government returned six religious and other buildings to the BOC and one facility to the Judaic community during the reporting period.

At his April 15, 2009, meeting with Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, President Lukashenko reiterated his support to the Roman Catholic Church, stating that the Government "highly values the mission of the Catholic Church."

Dokshytsy town authorities reinstalled a memorial stone at a local Jewish cemetery after it was reported missing on April 5, 2009. Authorities pledged to take additional measures to prevent vandal attacks and secure the memorial.

The Government registered six of seven communities of the International Society for

Hare Krishna Consciousness in December 2008.

On December 19, 2008, a Minsk district court banned 13 religious books and other printed materials published and distributed by the Minsk-based Christian Initiative Company as "extremist" and "anti-Semitic" for urging "ethnic and religious hatred and violence." The Prosecutor General's Office recalled the company's publishing license and seized 50,000 copies of the materials.

On October 20, 2008, President Lukashenka attended a ceremony to mark the 65th anniversary of the Minsk ghetto annihilation in central Minsk. The President paid tribute to the contribution of Jews to the victory in the World War II and commemorated the Jewish victims. He also committed to countering any signs of Nazism and religious intolerance. The Jewish communities praised the Government's support in organizing and observing the anniversary.

In October 2008 the Mahilyou Jewish community erected a monument in commemoration of the Holocaust victims after local authorities approved their fourth petition.

On September 15, 2008, and again on April 29, 2008, human remains from an old Jewish cemetery discovered during excavation work near a stadium in Homiel were reburied at another local Jewish cemetery. A rabbi traveled from Israel to conduct the ceremony. Local government officials attended and facilitated the reburial.

On August 5, 2008, the Government adopted a law banning any advertisement of the "occultism" services in printed and electronic media, a step welcomed by the Christian community.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

While some members of society tried to promote religious freedom, societal abuses and discrimination based on religious beliefs occurred, and anti-Semitism and negative attitudes toward minority religious groups persisted. Neo-Nazis were widely believed to be behind numerous vandal attacks, particularly in targeting Jewish sites, and engaged in activities promoting religious intolerance and ethnic discord. Local human rights advocates continued to voice serious concerns about the Russian National Union's activities in Navapolatsk during the reporting period, including vandalism and painting swastikas on buildings. The city prosecutor's office denied two appeals to investigate such incidents in 2009, citing that no offenders were identified during preliminary checks.

On May 11, 2009, police charged a young man with theft in Navapolatsk for attempting to steal a bell from an Orthodox Church during a Christian fair.

Between April 28 and May 9, 2009, vandals damaged 39 tombstones at a cemetery in Minsk. Police detained two Minsk residents on May 26 and charged them with hooliganism.

On July 27, 2008, an arsonist attempted to set fire to a house of Protestant Word for Life pastor Viktor Masharousky in Mahilyou. This was the fourth arson attack on his house. By the end of the reporting period, the investigation reportedly was completed and the arsonist sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

On July 1, 2008, the Hrodna Greek Catholic Mother of God of Fatima community released a statement dismissing "myths and Soviet ideological clichés" about the role of the Greek Catholic Church in Belarus after the state First National Channel broadcast a historic documentary claiming that the Church was "hostile" to the Belarusian population.

Several Jewish religious sites were vandalized during the reporting period. On June 2, 2009, vandals damaged 13 gravestones at an old Jewish cemetery in Barysau. Police opened a criminal case, and the local Jewish community urged local authorities to

commence patrolling the cemetery.

On May 12, 2009, vandals sprayed paint and drew swastikas on four memorial stones in Minsk commemorating the German Jews assassinated in Belarus. The investigation was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

On May 9, 2009, during Victory Day celebrations, vandals set fire to wreaths and flowers laid at the memorial to Holocaust victims in Brest. The investigation was ongoing at the end of the reporting period. The memorial has been vandalized many times since it was erected in 1992.

On April 22, 2009, anti-Semitic graffiti and swastikas were painted on walls of a synagogue in Vitsyebk. The Jewish community filed a criminal case with the police. No vandals were convicted for previous attacks on the synagogue.

The Jewish community continued to express concern over the concept of a "greater Slavic union" popular among ultranationalist organizations active in the country, including the Russian National Union. Jewish leaders petitioned the authorities to investigate neo-Nazi activities, citing continued vandalism, anti-Semitic graffiti, and threats to civil society and religious congregations. There was limited progress compared to previous reporting periods.

Chauvinistic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers and literature, digital video disks, and videocassettes continued to be sold at Pravoslavnaya Kniga (Orthodox Bookstore), which sells religious literature and paraphernalia but is not associated with the Belarusian Orthodox Church. The store is part of the Khristianskaya Initsiativa Company, whose general director often writes xenophobic articles. Several anti-Semitic titles were regularly available at the bookstore, including Oleg Platonov's *Myths and Truth about Pogroms* and *The Mystery of the Zion Protocols: A Conspiracy Against Russia*, which claim that Judaism is hostile to Russian civilization and Christianity, that early 20th-century pogroms were a Zionist provocation, and that Jews murdered Russia's leadership and unleashed terror in Soviet times.

The official BOC website continued to honor Hauriy Belastoksky, a young child allegedly murdered by Jews near Grodno in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. A memorial prayer to be said on the anniversary of his death alleges the "martyred and courageous Hauriy exposed Jewish dishonesty."

Historically the country has been an area of both interaction and conflict between Belarusian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, although relations between the two groups improved during the reporting period. During his meeting with President Lukashenko in the Vatican on April 27, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI reportedly praised constructive ties and peaceful coexistence between the Catholic and Orthodox churches in Belarus.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

U.S. embassy staff maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups and met with resident and visiting U.S. citizens of various affiliations to discuss religious freedom issues in the country. Embassy officials attended several events hosted by religious groups, including the unveiling of religious monuments, and attended seminars on religious freedoms and their violations. The Embassy demonstrated support for religious freedom by attending trials of persons persecuted for religious reasons. The U.S. Government denounced incidents of anti-Semitism and took action to help prevent future acts, including following up on reports of desecrated Jewish memorial sites and cemeteries. The Embassy monitored the continuing sale of anti-Semitic and xenophobic literature in stores and state media distributors. Embassy officials regularly included

stops at religious sites during regional travel.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with representatives of other foreign diplomatic missions to demonstrate solidarity in their support for religious freedom.
