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Belarus

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

Respect for religious freedom continued to be uneven during the period covered by this report, although some improvements occurred. The Government continued to restrict religious freedom in accordance with the provisions of a 2002 law on religion and a 2003 concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), 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 imprisoned a clergyman and a lay activist and harassed and fined members of certain religious groups, especially those that the authorities appeared to regard as bearers of foreign cultural influence or as having a political agenda. Protestants in particular attracted negative attention, presumably for their perceived links with the United States. A 2002 law requiring all religious groups to reregister continued to cause problems for some minority religious groups that the authorities refused to reregister. Nevertheless, the situation improved somewhat during the period covered by this report for a few minority religious groups, including Roman Catholics.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups and a widely held ethic of tolerance in society contributed to religious freedom; however, several acts of vandalism of religious sites and memorials occurred during the period covered by this report. Additionally, hostile or intolerant attitudes in some parts of the press encouraged negative attitudes toward some minority religious groups. However, the BOC took some steps to counter propaganda that discriminated against other religious groups.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights; however, officials turned down requests by U.S. government representatives to discuss religious issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 80,154 square miles and a population of 9,750,200.

The country historically has been an area of both interaction and conflict between Belarusian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, although relations between the two groups improved during the period covered by this report. According to polls, approximately 50 percent of Belarusians considered themselves religious. The Government claimed that of all persons who profess a religious faith, approximately 80 percent belonged to the BOC, 14 percent were either practicing Roman Catholics or identified themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, 4 percent were members of eastern religious groups, including Hare Krishnas, Muslims and Baha'i, and 2 percent were Protestant. Government census polling placed the Jewish community at 0.4 percent of the population (approximately forty thousand persons), but Jewish groups claimed that between fifty thousand and seventy thousand persons identified themselves as Jewish. There were also adherents of the Greek Catholic Church and of Orthodox religions other than the BOC. Minority religious groups included Hare Krishnas, Hindus, Baha'is, Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Calvinists, and Lutherans.

According to the Committee of Religious and Nationality Affairs (CRNA), as of January 1, 2006, there were 3,030 religious organizations, including 2,886 registered religious communities, 144 confessional organizations (monasteries, brotherhoods, missionaries, etc.), and 25 religious confessions and denominations. This included 1,349 Belarusian Orthodox parishes; 972 Protestant, 438 Roman Catholic, 45 Jewish, 24 Muslim, and 33 Old Believer, 13 Greek Catholic, 5 Hare Krishnas, and 5 Baha'i communities; and one Armenian Apostolic and one Latin Catholic Church. Exact numbers for registered evangelical Christian, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist communities were not available.

The country was designated an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989, creating the BOC under Patriarchal Exarch Metropolitan Filaret. The number of parishes throughout the country was approximately 1,349 at the end of the period covered by this report. Other Orthodox confessions also existed but suffered strong discrimination. Unable to register without the consent of the BOC, they were effectively banned. These included the Belarusian Autonomous Orthodox Church (BAOC), the Catacomb Orthodox Church, the True Orthodox Church, and

the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad.

There were 438 Roman Catholic parishes, and the Church's situation has improved in recent years. On February 8, 2005, President Aleksandr Lukashenko and Cardinal Swiatek met and committed themselves to improving the relationship between the Government and the Catholic Church. After a second meeting in December 2005, Lukashenko acknowledged the significant role of the Catholic Church in the country and vowed to support it.

There were approximately 120 thousand citizens who identified themselves as Jewish near the end of the Soviet period in 1989, compared to between 40 thousand and 70 thousand at the end of the period covered by this report. At least half of the present Jewish population was thought to live in or near Minsk. The vast majority of the Jewish population was not religiously active. Of those Jews who were religiously active, most were believed to be either Reform or Conservative. There were also small but active Chabad Lubavitch communities.

Protestant groups, while relatively few in number, continued to increase. Since 1990, the number of Protestant congregations, registered and unregistered, more than doubled. The two largest Protestant groups were registered under separate Pentecostal and Baptist unions.

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

The Belarusian Muslim Religious Association was the main organizational body of the estimated thirty thousand Muslims in the country. The Spiritual Board of Muslims, which split from the association in 2002, claimed an estimated 200 members. Some members of a community of approximately ten thousand ethnic Tatars, with roots dating back to the eleventh century, practiced Sunni Islam.

Foreign missionaries and clergy representing western and eastern religious groups operated in the country, but lack of standardized guidance for government officials on how to properly implement recent changes in the visa laws resulted in officials issuing visas based on their discretion, rather than on uniform regulations.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

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

In 2002, President Lukashenko signed a religion law, despite protests from human rights organizations, the European Union, and domestic religious groups. The law recognizes the "determining role of the Orthodox Church in the historical formation and development of spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people" as well as the historical importance of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism, groups commonly referred to as "traditional faiths" in society. However, key omissions indicate present interests influenced the list. The "traditional faiths" mentioned by the law do not include religious groups such as the Priestless Old Believers and Calvinist churches that have historical roots in the country dating to the seventeenth century.

Despite the law's stated intention to guarantee religious freedom, it contains a number of restrictive elements that increase the Government's control of the activities of religious groups. The 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 their own clergy. In addition, the law confines the activity of religious communities to areas where they register and establishes complex registration requirements that some religious communities, both traditional and nontraditional, have difficulty fulfilling. The law also required all previously registered groups to reregister by November 17, 2004, and bans all religious activity by unregistered religious groups.

Domestic religious groups continued to call for revocation of at least part of the 2002 law. In 2004, Protestant groups sent petitions to President Lukashenko, the National Assembly, the council of ministers, and the constitutional court calling for revision of the most restrictive elements of the law. They declared that the law was inconsistent with the constitution and international standards. They criticized parts restricting activity to the area where a group was registered, the difficulty of obtaining permission to worship in a public place, and the preamble identifying the BOC as having a defining role and influence in the country. The authorities provided ambiguous replies to these petitions but did not revise the law.

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

The CRNA allowed reregistration of some religious associations that existed before the 2002 law was passed but that could not meet the twenty-year rule. To register, associations must provide a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and minutes from its founding congress. By law, associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions, invite foreigners to work with religious groups, and organize cloistered and monastic communities.

Previously registered religious communities were able to reregister with the former minimum requirement of ten members, instead of the twenty stipulated in the 2002 law. To register, a community must submit a list of founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, signatures, copies of its founding statutes, minutes of its founding meeting, and permission confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property indicated in its founding statutes. For those communities practicing religions not previously known to the Government, information about their faith must also be submitted. The regional executive committees (for those groups outside of Minsk) or the Minsk City Executive Committee handle all applications from religious communities.

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

On December 1, 2005, the president issued an edict exempting all registered religious groups from taxes on land allotted for buildings and property used for worship.

The 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 formulation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people." The concordat calls for the Government and the BOC to cooperate in implementing policy in various fields, including education, development and protection of cultural legacies, and security. Although it states that the agreement would not limit the religious freedoms 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." Despite a series of cooperation agreements signed over the past few years by the BOC and various government ministries, BOC involvement in state institutions was reportedly minimal. Nevertheless, in 2004 President Lukashenko emphasized the continued importance of the BOC: "I very much want the Orthodox Church to stay within the framework of our state. I want the Orthodox Church to be an institution of our state and one of its main supporters."

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

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

Western and Orthodox Easter and Christmas are all national holidays; however they do not appear to negatively impact any religious groups.

In 2004 the CRNA reported that of the 2,780 religious communities subject to the reregistration requirement, 2,676 had successfully reregistered. Of the 140 religious associations and republican religious associations required to reregister, 128 had done so. The CRNA stated that the twelve religious associations not reregistered self-liquidated for lack of members and activity. Of the 104 religious communities not reregistered, 83 self-liquidated. Several religious groups reported that the CRNA offered significant assistance throughout the process. The remaining twenty "did not manage to complete reregistration due to irregularities of critical importance," according to the CRNA. The twenty denied reregistration were all religious groups the Government considered "nontraditional."

Contrary to the expectations of many, the CRNA reported that regional executive committees and the Minsk executive committee reregistered 99.3 percent of those religious communities that did not self-liquidate, and the Government did not use reregistration for massive religious repression as had been expected. Even so, reregistration alone did not guarantee religious freedom, and the CRNA continued to deny reregistration to certain groups. The reasons for denial were based on the law, but its apparently arbitrary application resulted in the restriction of religious freedom.

On September 21, 2005, Minsk city court judge Alla Karpikova annulled the registration of the Belarusian Evangelical Church's only community in the country for lack of a legal address and for having less than the mandatory twenty members necessary for registration. Pastor Ernest Sabilo appealed the decision and refused to take steps to close the church, including paying the necessary legal fees for its closing. In addition on August 22, 2005, and June 27, 2006, the Minsk City Court deregistered the Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Union Church and Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church, respectively, for lack of legal addresses.

On November 9, 2005, authorities refused to register a Russian Orthodox Church Abroad village parish after its recent conflict with the local Moscow patriarchate diocese. Orthodox communities not based in Moscow can receive state registration only with the approval of the local Moscow patriarchate bishop, who told the village parish to worship instead at the local Moscow patriarchate church. The village parish refused and in 2005 was fined for conducting worship in private homes.

In 2004 the Jewish human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry (UCSJ) was denied reregistration for submitting some documents late. UCSJ appealed the denial to the Supreme Court, but for technical reasons the Court declined to take the case. This left UCSJ with no option but to close. However, government actions prevented UCSJ from being able to do so. Following the reregistration denial, the authorities blocked UCSJ's bank account, preventing the organization from paying its lease and taxes or providing severance pay to employees. In mid-June 2005 UCSJ was able to access its bank accounts and pay its rent and salaries. UCSJ did not reapply for registration following its closure and remained unregistered at the end of the period covered by this report.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Religious freedom was restricted both actively and passively by the Government. The Government passed laws that limit freedom of worship, speech, and assembly. The Government also failed to regularly condemn acts of religious insensitivity or intolerance. Some of the 2,886 registered religious communities were registered only on a local basis, which provided limited rights. With or without official registration, some religious groups encountered difficulty renting or purchasing property to establish places of worship, building churches (e.g., the Greek Catholics and Protestant groups), or openly training clergy.

Many religious groups encountered problems converting residential property for religious use. According to the Government, the law permits residential property to be used for religious services only after it has been converted from residential use. The housing code permits the use of such property for nonresidential purposes with the permission of local executive and administrative bodies. As a result, several Protestant churches and other nontraditional groups were caught in a closed loop: denied permission to convert their properties for religious uses because they were not registered religious groups, but unable to register due to the lack of a legal address. Such groups often were forced to meet illegally or in the homes of individual members.

The New Life Church in Minsk, a member of the Union of Full Gospel Churches, faced closure because authorities refused to register the congregation at the cow barn it owned and wished to use for worship. Known as the "cowshed church," the New Life Church bought the barn and surrounding property four years ago. The church began to meet there after being denied permission to rent elsewhere. Local authorities, however, refused to allow New Life to convert the building, change how the cowshed was registered, or allow the church to meet in the building as is. Therefore, the church had no legal place to worship and no place to register, making all its activities illegal. The pastor and other leaders received large fines for holding illegal services, technically violating laws on assembly. At the same time, authorities permitted a BOC community to meet without hindrance in a converted railcar less than a mile away.

On August 30, 2005, authorities ordered the New Life Church to vacate the barn and sell it to the local government. New Life appealed the decision, but the courts rejected the appeal and issued the church two more official warnings. On November 17, 2005, New Life filed its third application for registration at the address of the former cow barn using a new "technical passport" (registration document) that it received from local authorities reclassifying the cow barn as a "building specializing in religious purposes." One week later, however, local authorities rejected New Life's application, annulled the new passport, and subsequently fired the employee who issued it to New Life "for issuing the passport illegally." On June 22, 2006, the New Life Church appealed the city authorities' case to force the sale of its cow barn. At the end of the period covered by this report, the case was pending.

The one thousand-member Minsk Community of Krishna Consciousness (the Hare Krishnas) also faced closure for meeting at, and attempting to register, a property it already owned. Local authorities refused to register the Hare Krishnas at a building they purchased in 1990 and had used as a place of worship since that time, claiming the

building was zoned only for residential use. Since 2004 the Hare Krishnas had received six warnings from local authorities for meeting at a building where it was not registered. The Minsk community appealed to the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), thus hindering the local government's ability to close the community. In August 2005 UNCHR recommended that the authorities "restore rights" to the community within ninety days. At the end of the period covered by this report, the authorities had not complied with UNCHR's recommendation.

Although the New Generation Church in Baranovichi managed to reregister, it experienced problems finding a place to worship, according to the Forum 18 online news source. In 1997 the church bought a warehouse to turn into a church, but the authorities refused to allow it to convert the building, change how the warehouse was registered, or give the church the rights to the land under the building.

During the period covered by this report, many traditional and nontraditional religious groups continued to experience problems obtaining property or registering property they already own, due to apparent government efforts to restrict the ability of these groups to establish houses of worship.

The Minsk Community of Krishna Consciousness found several legal addresses to rent, but the landlords rescinded their offers after they were pressured by authorities. The community found another legal address and submitted the registration documents, but the authorities denied registration.

The Protestant Light to the World Church, which reregistered in 2004, continued to experience difficulty finding a state-approved nonresidential place to worship. It had lost its premises four times since 2002. After its lease expired in October 2005, the church rented a room in another office building. A few days later the owner annulled the lease due to pressure from the authorities.

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

On March 31, 2006, the Minsk city administration refused to allow the local Hassidic Jewish community to hold its Passover celebration at the state-owned Palace for Children and Youth, according to Forum 18. The administration claimed that a religious event could not be allowed at a venue frequented by children. The community was forced to hold the celebration at its cafeteria, which could only accommodate approximately 10 percent of the invited guests.

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

During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of fines on Protestant groups for failure to pay taxes on the assistance provided to destitute families and individuals.

During the period covered by this report, the Government monitored peaceful minority religious groups, with particular attention to those that could be perceived as "foreign" or "cults." On June 27, 2005, the chairman of the Gomel regional CRNA informed the press that district authorities had formed commissions to monitor religious communities. The commissions, made up of local executive government, law enforcement, tax officials, and public representatives, were to enforce laws on religion, assist traditional denominations, and counter illegal missionary activity. The primary objective was to ensure that all denominations, including the BOC, followed the laws on religion.

According to online news source Interfax, the Iosif Volotski Orthodox Center had been gathering information for the past five years on various "sects" operating in the country. The center had a library of sect literature, recordings of sermons, a collection of films on sects, and a list of mass media that regularly disseminated sect literature.

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

In 2004 President Lukashenko made a statement that encouraged protection of the status quo against "foreign" religions: "Some members of the opposition, instigated by foreign minions, make provocative suggestions about narrowing the sphere of activities of traditional religions, primarily the Orthodox Church, for the benefit of various sects and religions that are nontraditional in this country."

Forum 18 reported that on May 19, 2006, authorities pressured Pentecostal pastor Oksana Gavrilenko to resign from her job as a school teacher after she complained about a lecture given to students by an Orthodox priest on the dangers of "sects," including Baptists and Pentecostals. According to the report, authorities did not reinstate Gavrilenko but asked the priest to refrain from slandering Protestant churches.

During the period covered by this report, the Government took steps to advise the public on new religious groups that might be perceived as "foreign" or "cults" and discouraged their growth. On November 9, 2005, CRNA chairman Stanislav Buko announced that authorities would not register destructive religious sects banned by law. He affirmed there were no such sects operating in the country during the period covered by this report, but persons who were participating in activities possessing characteristics of such sects were closely monitored. This announcement followed a November 3, 2005, meeting between the BOC, the Ministry of Education, and the CRNA to discuss safeguarding youth against the influence of "those destructive pseudo-religions." In March 2005 Vladimir Makarov, chief of the Defense Ministry's Information Directorate, called on Belarusian Orthodox clergy to fight the spread of "destructive sects" and to spread Orthodoxy.

On May 20, 2005, authorities claimed that the number of sects and separatists was decreasing as citizens lost interest in nontraditional faiths. Authorities, including law enforcement bodies, took measures to prevent the spread of the many "destructive cults" that began work in the country from 1992 to 1996. The Ministry of Justice outlawed twenty-four religious organizations operating under the status of public associations, but groups such as the Moon Church and Scientologists were still functioning in the country. Authorities claimed these groups, especially the Scientologists, spread religious propaganda via workshops and lectures, used manipulative methods similar to those employed by psychotherapists and psychiatrists, and were to be regarded as "commercial" cults or profit-driven marketing systems.

Citizens theoretically are not prohibited from proselytizing and may speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, authorities often interfered with or punished individuals who proselytized on behalf of some registered and unregistered religious groups. Authorities regulated every aspect of proselytizing and literature distribution: who may participate, what may be done, when groups may participate, and where groups may be active. The Government continued to enforce a 1995 Council of Ministers decree that regulates the activities of religious workers, as well as a 1997 council of ministers directive that permits the teaching of religion at youth camps held by registered religious groups.

Authorities previously harassed, fined, and detained Hare Krishnas for illegally distributing religious literature. Since Minsk city authorities repeatedly denied requests by Hare Krishnas for permission to distribute religious materials in the city, the group decided to stop distribution during the period covered by this report. On November 15, 2005, authorities seized religious literature, including copies of the New Testament, from a street library run by unregistered Council of Churches Baptists in Bobruisk.

Foreign missionaries are not permitted to engage in religious activities outside of the institutions that invited them. The law requires one-year, multiple-entry "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries. Religious workers continued to experience difficulties in obtaining visas, even those that had a long history in the country. Often, even missionaries operating legitimately with a missionary visa experienced harassment from authorities, particularly if they came from the West. Observers expressed concern that lack of standardized government guidance for officials on how to properly implement recent changes to visa laws could affect the ability of these missionaries to be present and work in the country.

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

Approval for visits by foreign religious workers often involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. Internal affairs agencies may compel the departure of foreign clergymen by not extending their registrations or by denying them temporary stay permits. These authorities may make decisions on expulsion on their own or based on recommendations from religious affairs councils, regional executive committees, or the religious affairs department of the executive committee of the city of Minsk.

On December 22, 2005, authorities refused to renew the visas of two Catholic priests from Poland and demanded that they leave the country. Father Robert Krzywicki, who had worked in Borisov for more than ten years, was expelled for participation in "nonreligious" activities. Appeals to CRNA resulted in a statement from the agency head that the Catholic Church assigns priests to parishes and the "state does not interfere in the activity of religious organizations."

An article in a 2004 issue of Znamya Novosti stated that the Unification Church, the "Church of Christ," and the Church of Scientology were among the most dangerous "sects" in the country. A 2004 article in the state-owned newspaper Minski Kurie criticized adherents of the Unification Church and Hare Krishnas. The article claimed that in 1997 Hare Krishnas were designated a "destructive totalitarian sect." According to a representative of the Hare Krishna community, authorities never made such a designation. After being confronted by the Hare Krishnas, the journalist responsible for the article admitted that this false information was provided by the State Committee for Security (BKGB), which the BKGB later confirmed.

The Ministry of Education continued to use the textbook Man, Society, and State, which labels Protestants and Hare Krishnas as "sects," even after the protests of religious groups. After conducting an examination of the book, the CRNA and the Ministry of Education stated that the word "sect" was a "scientific" word and did not label Hare Krishnas or Protestants as antisocial.

Leaders of Protestant communities criticized language in the textbook Basics on Home and Personal Security as deliberately discriminatory against Protestants, particularly the chapter entitled "Beware of the Sects." The chapter includes a paragraph informing students of such "sects" as Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Maria, White Brotherhood, and the Jehovah's Witnesses. In January 2005 Protestant leaders sent a letter of protest to the president, national assembly leaders, the CRNA, and the Ministry of Education. The CRNA reviewed the request and declared the section did not infringe upon the rights of Protestants.

While the Government took no visible steps to stop the sale of xenophobic literature at Pravoslavnaya Kniga or other locations, it condemned an independent newspaper for reprinting cartoons depicting the prophet of Islam that originally appeared in a Danish newspaper in 2005. The Government used this incident as grounds on which to close the opposition newspaper and to launch criminal charges against its editor.

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

Limited restitution of religious property occurred during the period covered by this report. There was no legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the law restricts the restitution of property being used for cultural or educational purposes. Furthermore, the Government did not return buildings if it had nowhere to move the current occupants. Many former synagogues in Minsk were used as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and a beer hall; most of the Jewish community's requests to have these synagogues returned were refused. During the period covered by this report, Jewish communities did not request the return of buildings or other real estate. Jewish communities sought the return of Jewish cultural artifacts, books, and particularly Torahs from museums but did not receive any items. Some officials privately expressed to Jewish leaders that they shared their concern and supported the initiative.

A Catholic community requested the return of a centuries-old church and monastery in central Minsk. The building housed the state archives. The Government expressed its willingness to return the church and monastery, but only after a suitable new place and funds for moving the archives were found; according to independent news source Belapan, CRNA chairman Leonid Gulyako told the church members in February 2006 that since the Government did not have funds to construct new buildings to house the archives, the church and monastery could not be handed back to its members. In Grodno, authorities returned fourteen monastery buildings to the Roman Catholic Church.

In 2004, by order of the Ministry of Education, Belarusian State University (BSU) closed the International Humanities Institute, which had been an independent educational entity affiliated with BSU and the only higher educational organization offering Judaica studies. The Judaica program continued to exist as an autonomous institute in BSU's curriculum until it was absorbed by the International Relations Department in September 2005.

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

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

Some abuses of freedom of religion arose from broader laws that circumscribe basic freedoms. The CRNA defended the Government's past measures against religious groups in its response to the U.S. State Department's 2005 International Religious Freedom Report: "Sanctions against representatives of religious associations are applied for breaching the law and are not aimed at limiting religious freedom."

The most common charge against religious leaders was organizing or hosting an unauthorized meeting, a charge that

arises from a law circumscribing freedom of assembly. According to Forum 18, however, for the first time in twenty years, authorities imprisoned a person for holding religious worship. On March 3, 2006, a Minsk district judge sentenced the pastor of Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church Gregory Vyazorsky to ten days in jail for having held unsanctioned services on February 5, 2006. On November 25, 2005, authorities had issued a warning to him for allegedly conducting illegal worship in a private Minsk residence. In addition the church received three warnings for failing to register a "legal address." Pentecostal bishop Sergei Tsvor faced similar charges, but according to the pastor, the charges were dropped due to technical errors made by the police when filing them.

On March 24, 2006, authorities sentenced human rights lawyer Sergey Shavtsov to ten days in prison for conducting an unsanctioned interdenominational seminar in a private café. On the last day of the three-day seminar, police stormed the café and detained him because the event allegedly violated the law.

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

Protestant and non-BOC Orthodox religious communities were fined for illegally conducting and hosting religious services and carrying out unsanctioned religious activities. According to the CRNA, convictions for such offenses were based on charges of either disturbing public order or illegally gathering without prior permission. The law allows 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.

Forum 18 reported that on June 1, 2006, authorities warned three evangelical Christians for participating in a twenty-four-hour vigil of silently reading a Bible in Brest's central square to express solidarity with victims of political repression in the country. According to the authorities, the three protesters needed prior permission from the authorities for organizing and conducting religious events outside of designated worship areas.

On May 19, 2006, local authorities fined Protestant pastor Illya Radkevich \$70 (150 thousand Belarusian rubles) for failing to register his Full Gospel Christian community and leading an unsanctioned religious service.

On April 6, 2006, authorities fined political opposition activist Boris Khamaida \$2,600 (5.6 million Belarusian rubles) for demonstrating with a sign that contained the Gospel of Matthew quotation, "The one who endures to the end will be saved." Police had detained Khamaida for three hours on March 20, 2006, for displaying the sign and accused him of breaking demonstration laws.

According to Forum 18, authorities repeatedly fined members of a Baptist family for conducting unsanctioned religious meetings in their home. On November 21, 2005, a Bobruisk court fined pastor Yermalitsky \$67 (145 thousand Belarusian rubles) for holding an unlawful religious service in his home. On November 25, 2005, however, the case was dismissed. Authorities repeatedly inspected the Yermalitsky home or summoned Yermalitsky to the local executive committee offices and reportedly warned him of serious consequences if he and his group did not stop holding such meetings. On December 12, 2005, Yermalitsky was fined \$13 (28 thousand Belarusian rubles) for remodeling his home to be used as a place of worship without prior government approval. On December 27, 2005, authorities fined Yermalitsky's wife \$270 (580 thousand Belarusian rubles) for hosting an unsanctioned religious gathering.

Between December 2004 and the end of the reporting period, authorities charged New Life Church administrator Vasily Yurevich with holding unsanctioned religious services three times and fined him a total of approximately \$5,800 (12.5 million Belarusian rubles). On March 22, 2005, the court fined New Life Church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, \$334 (714 thousand Belarusian rubles), also for allegedly hosting an unsanctioned gathering. In 2005 the Minsk executive committee issued five warnings to the church. The law requires only two warnings before a church may be closed. In addition, on June 5, 2006, authorities filed a protocol against Goncharenko for holding unsanctioned religious services in a building they deemed unsuitable for worship.

On June 9, 2005, authorities fined Council of Churches Baptist pastor Valery Ryzhuk \$24 (fifty-one thousand Belarusian rubles) for leading an unlawful religious service. When he refused to pay, two court executors seized an oil heater from his house worth twice the amount of the fine.

In the first half of 2005, authorities fined leaders of a village parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in the Brest region for organizing unsanctioned religious meetings and events in their homes. Father Ioann Grudnitsky, the head of the unregistered parish, received two fines totaling \$1,835 (4.8 million Belarusian rubles). According to Forum 18, a Brest CRNA representative justified the local authorities "lawful measures to curtail the unsanctioned activities" of Grudnitsky's parish and encouraged his parishioners to attend the Moscow Patriarchate church instead where "normal conditions have been created for the performance of religious rites by all who wish." Local administrative authorities fined parishioner Liliya Yukhnovskaya \$32 (seventy-two thousand Belarusian rubles) for "making her home available for an unsanctioned religious event." The Government harassed the BAOC, which has given up attempting to register.

In 2005 authorities confiscated the former Orthodox church in the town of Semkov Gorodok that the local community had repaired for the BAOB on the grounds that the reconstruction had not been authorized. Authorities stated that they intended to rebuild the church and restore it to the BOC, which they claimed was its rightful owner. The BOC reportedly planned to relocate the BOC community that had been meeting in a converted railcar. BAOB head Leonid Akalovich, who had been fined by the court for unauthorized construction as well as for leading an unregistered religious organization, was fired in the fall of 2005 under the pretext of "redundancies."

In early December 2005 police in Vitebsk raided the homes of local Muslims on the pretext of looking for suspects connected to two September bombings, even though authorities had previously arrested two brothers, who had no known connection to Islam, for the bombings. Police detained several of the Muslims for questioning and seized religious literature.

In 2004 the courts fined the pastor of the registered Light to the World Full Gospel Church for allegedly holding an unauthorized religious meeting in his home. They also fined three members of the unregistered International Union of Baptist Churches (IUBC) for an unauthorized hospital visit during a religious holiday. Earlier that year, an IUBC pastor was warned against conducting religious services in the town of Soligorsk, and his group was warned to cease all illegal religious activity.

Following government pressure and harassment of their respective religious organizations, BAOB priest Yan Spasyuk and the Light of Kaylasa leaders Sergei Akadanav and Tatyana Akadanava left the country in 2003. Several other Light of Kaylasa members also left following continued government pressure, and the group remained inactive during the reporting period.

In 2003 Yuri Denischik, a missionary of the Novogrudok Association of Baptists, was fined for illegally leading a prayer service in a private home registered to the association.

Forced Religious Conversion

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

Anti-Semitism

While individual instances of anti-Semitism occurred during the period covered by this report, anti-Semitism was not officially encouraged by the state.

State-owned periodicals continued to attack nontraditional and Jewish religious groups. In January 2006 Mogilev newspapers wrote a series of anti-Semitic articles after a new type of kosher bread was produced in the city. The state-owned Mogilev Register claimed that the blood of sacrificed animals was used in kosher rituals and warned Orthodox believers to "keep away from kosher products in the same way they keep away from idol sacrifice." The Evening Mogilev reported that the act of making something kosher is "sacrilegious and anti-Christian."

The sale and distribution of anti-Semitic literature through state press distributors, government agencies, and stores affiliated with the BOC continued. In past years anti-Semitic literature was openly sold during several Orthodox book fairs in Minsk and at the House of Mercy, a BOC-established hospice in the capital. The Roman Catholic Church reported that anti-Catholic literature was also sold at locations linked to the BOC.

Anti-Semitic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers and literature continued to be sold at Pravoslavnyaya Kniga (Orthodox Bookstore), which sells Orthodox literature and religious paraphernalia. The store was part of the company Pravoslavnyaya Initsiativa, whose general director often wrote xenophobic articles. During the period covered by this report, anti-Semitic videocassettes and DVDs were available for purchase at Pravoslavnyaya Kniga. In addition, the store gave away pamphlets alleging that sacrificial blood was used in the production of kosher food. Despite a 2003 order by the prosecutor general and the Ministry of Information to remove the anti-Semitic and xenophobic newspaper Russkiy Vestnik, distribution continued. Pravoslavnyaya Kniga employees stated that they were only selling off current stock and not new copies. The book, The Enemies of Russia and the Slavic World Who are against Belarus and President Lukashenko, was also for sale. This ultranationalist and xenophobic book includes a chapter by Vladimir Chertovich, general director of Pravoslavnyaya Initsiativa, the Minsk-based company known for publishing hate literature directed at Jews, Muslims, and other minorities. It was published in Russia but was distributed in the country at Pravoslavnyaya Kniga. According to Evangelical Bishop Ivan Pashkevich, Pravoslavnyaya Initsiativa published the anti-Semitic book entitled, A Verdict to Those Killing Russia, aimed at inciting racial and ethnic hatred and discrimination based on religion.

In response to an appeal by a Jewish group to prosecute Pravoslavnyaya Kniga, in 2004 the prosecutor general launched an investigation into the incident to determine whether or not Pravoslavnyaya Kniga had illegally distributed literature that promoted intolerance. The general prosecutor's office then transferred the case to the Minsk city prosecutor's office. The latter declared there was no basis for a criminal case. The CRNA asserted that the publication of such literature in the country was illegal, but that nothing could be done regarding privately imported Russian

publications.

On April 17, 2006, authorities issued an official warning to preschool teacher Lyudmila Izakson-Bolotovskaya for the "intentional inculcation of religious doctrines in small children." Izakson-Bolotovskaya and her children's Jewish musical group were shown on local television celebrating a Jewish holiday. Authorities claimed that she violated the law by holding a religious celebration in a government building and illegally propagated Judaism via the television coverage of the event. The authorities forced Izakson-Bolotovskaya to remove Jewish symbols from the classroom and threatened her with future prosecution if she continued these activities.

During the period covered by this report, excavation and reconstruction work was finished at the site of a 1950s sports stadium in Grodno built on the site of a former Jewish cemetery. The excavation uncovered human remains, which authorities promised to remove from the site for future reburial. Instead, photographs taken by the Jewish community revealed human remains mixed with earth in dump trucks being used to resurface a road. A 2004 visit by U.S. embassy staff found skulls and other bones scattered around the area.

After intense international pressure, regional authorities signed an agreement in 2003 with a national Jewish leader to cease excavation during construction and to rebury the uncovered remains in a different Jewish cemetery. In 2006 the Jewish community received permission from authorities to put up a plaque noting that the stadium sits on a former Jewish cemetery. Local Jewish leaders believed the situation reflected insensitivity more than anti-Semitism. The authorities were also known to have dug up portions of a veterans cemetery and an Orthodox cemetery during other construction projects.

In contrast to previous reporting periods, officials did not make public anti-Semitic statements. In December 2005 author Eduard Skobelev, who edited the presidential administration's bulletin, released his book entitled Stalin's Will with a note that the book was published with support of the presidential administration. The book contained a number of anti-Semitic statements and far-fetched accusations. In a 2003 Associated Press article, Sergei Kostyan, deputy chairman of the international affairs committee of the lower house of parliament, rejected criticism of the installation of a gas pipeline near the site of a former Jewish cemetery in Mozyr, accusing Jews of sowing "ethnic discord." During a 2003 press conference Information Minister Vladimir Rusakevich was quoted as stating that the country needed to live with Russia like brothers but to bargain with Russia "like a Yid."

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

Several Jewish religious sites, however, were vandalized during the period covered by this report. In November 2005 a Jewish cemetery in the Gomel region was vandalized and a number of gravestones broken. On August 17, 2005, vandals defaced the "Yama" memorial to Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust, burning plastic flowers and scattering gravestones. Authorities did not apprehend those who were responsible in either case. In 2004, vandals set fire to wreaths, scattered flowers, and damaged the Star of David at a Holocaust memorial in central Brest. The memorial had been vandalized five times since it was unveiled. Police have not fined or jailed anyone for the crimes. On April 26, 2005, vandals again damaged a memorial erected in Lida to commemorate Jews who perished there during World War II. The Jewish community did not report the act to the police, since the Lida memorial had been vandalized every spring and no one had ever been arrested. At the beginning of May 2005, unidentified vandals smashed twenty gravestones in the town of Mikashevich. Local Jews criticized police for failing to respond to the crime or arrest any suspects, pointing out that the cemetery was located just a few meters from a police station.

The Jewish community was concerned by the concept of a "greater Slavic union" popular among nationalist organizations active in the country, including the Russian National Union (RNU), which still existed despite officially dissolving in 2000, and the National Bolshevik Party, another pro-Russian Belarusian extremist organization. In 2004 RNU members in Gomel distributed anti-Semitic literature on city buses, and Jewish community centers in Gomel and Polotsk were vandalized with RNU graffiti. Investigations into these acts of vandalism did not result in the arrest of those responsible.

While the website of the Jewish Orthodox Skinheads (JOSH), an organization supposedly made up of Jewish youths to combat anti-Semitism and xenophobia, could still be accessed during the period covered by this report, it did not appear to have been updated. Despite the "organization's" stated goals, the website called upon Jews to commit provocative acts against the Government to support their cause and included language defaming non-Jewish citizens and prominent local Jewish leaders. Several Jewish leaders, all of whom considered the website to be offensive and provocative, denounced the website and expressed their concerns to authorities. The website included a link to another website purported to be run by Hare Krishna skinheads.

The official BOC prayer calendar, printed in Minsk, continued to mark May 20 as the anniversary of the 1690 death of Gavriil Belostoksky, a young child who was alleged to have been murdered by Jews near Grodno. The May 20 prayer for Belostoksky made reference to Jewish persons as "real beasts" who allegedly kidnapped and murdered

Belostoksky for religious purposes. Additionally, a link on the BOC website listed Belostoksky as one of its saints and martyrs.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On December 1, 2005, the president issued an edict exempting all registered religious groups from taxes on land allotted for buildings and property used for worship.

During the reporting period, the Government funded renovations of an Orthodox monastery in Slonim and the Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Minsk. It also provided \$14 thousand (30 million Belarusian rubles) and \$258 thousand (554 million Belarusian rubles) to restore frescoes in an Orthodox church in Polotsk and in the Catholic arch-cathedral in Minsk, respectively. In May 2006, the president ruled to return a former cathedral and its property to a Roman Catholic parish in Minsk.

In December 2005 the president acknowledged the important role the Roman Catholic Church played in the country and vowed to support it.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups and a widespread ethic of tolerance in society contributed to religious freedom; however, anti-Semitism and negative attitudes toward minority religious groups persisted. In April 2006 NOVAK, an independent polling organization, conducted a poll, which included the question, "How much do you trust the state and social institutions and organizations?" According to the poll, the BOC was the most trusted institution in the country, with 70 percent of respondents expressing trust, while 45.2 percent trusted the Roman Catholic Church and 15.4 percent trusted Protestant churches. The level of distrust of Protestant churches jumped from 36 percent of respondents in 2005 to 58.5 percent, and the level of distrust of the Roman Catholic Church increased from 20 percent in 2005 to 35 percent in 2006.

As in previous years, unknown vandals destroyed crosses, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, erected at Kurapaty, an area used by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) to murder more than 300,000 persons in the 1930s. During the week of November 27, 2005, approximately twelve crosses at Kurapaty were damaged. Vandals also carved a swastika into the face of an icon on a cross near the entrance. Witnesses reported that a memorial plaque disappeared and a number of photographs of victims were destroyed. Police denied vandalism had occurred and blamed the damage on the weather. On the weekend of December 3, 2005, other memorials, including the Jewish memorial stone and a Russian Orthodox icon, had red swastikas and Nazi SS symbols painted on them. In response, authorities agreed to provide round the clock surveillance for the memorial site. It was not known if the authorities did so, but the graffiti was removed.

On January 9, 2006, independent Internet news source BelaPan reported that several dozen skinheads marched through Grodno shouting obscenities and Nazi slogans and attacking pedestrians. One victim told reporters that thirty skinheads marched through the city's central square and beat him up after he tried to stop them. The marchers dispersed when police arrived. According to witnesses it was the first skinhead march Grodno had seen in five years. The authorities claimed they were not aware of any such march.

On March 15, 2005, the head of the BOC announced that it withdrew its shares from the Minsk-based publishing company, Pravoslavnyaya Initsiativa, which is notorious for selling anti-Semitic literature. The church head accused the company of disseminating ideas aimed at causing rifts in society, which is inconsistent with Orthodox values. The head of the church stated that further cooperation with the publisher violated Orthodox canons and ordered all Orthodox parishes to shun its books and to refrain from interacting with the company. In addition, on June 27, 2006, the BOC informed Pravoslavnyaya Initsiativa (currently "Khristianskaya Initsiativa" - Christian Initiative) that it could no longer use Orthodox symbols and language.

There was no indication that the BOC had changed its view that it would cooperate only with religious groups that had "historical roots" in the country. On September 12, 2005, the head of the BOC praised the increased cooperation between the BOC and the Roman Catholic Church and proposed that "Roman Catholics could help Orthodox Christians deal with new Western-style secularism."

On April 5, 2006, the BOC decided that political documentaries by Belarusian State Television Radio Company deputy head Yuri Azaryonok should not be shown at the BOC's Easter festival. The original exhibition schedule included a meeting with Azaryonok, who is a notorious state propagandist, as well as a screening of his politicized documentaries, "The Spiritual War." However, the BOC decided that the program should be changed after it received a letter of protest from young believers who opposed showing the films because they might discredit the BOC and its leadership.

In 2004 thieves stole twelve icons and a bronze cross from a BOC church in the Brest region. Police opened an investigation. Earlier, Brest regional police and Minsk city police captured two icon thieves and recovered two of three

icons they had stolen in 2001.

On September 12, 2005, police charged a man with hooliganism after he smashed two statues at the Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Minsk.

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

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

During meetings with government officials and ministers in the fall of 2005, embassy staff raised such concerns as the 2002 religion law and registration denials of certain religious communities. In 2006 embassy officials attempted to discuss subsequent religious freedom matters with the new CRNA head, Leonid Gulyako, but requests for meetings were not granted. Embassy staff also requested a separate meeting to discuss the case of imprisoned Protestant pastor Georgy Vyazorsky, although the Government twice denied the request.

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

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