

Belarus (88)

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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Belarus**International Religious Freedom Report 2002**

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

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

The status of respect for religious freedom continued to be very poor during the period covered by this report. Head of State Alexander Lukashenko continued to pursue a policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox Church, the country's majority religion, and the authorities continued to harass other denominations and religions. The regime has repeatedly rejected the registration applications of some of these, including many Protestant denominations, the Belarusian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (BAOC), and some eastern religions. Without registration, many of these groups find it difficult, if not impossible, to rent or purchase property to conduct religious services. The authorities continued to enforce a 1995 Cabinet of Ministers decree that restricts the activities of religious workers in an attempt to protect Russian Orthodoxy and curtail the growth of other religions. During the period covered by this report, Protestant and other non-Russian Orthodox religious groups continued to come under attack in the government-run media. Despite continued harassment, some minority faiths have been able to function if they maintain a low profile. On June 27, the lower house of Parliament gave its final approval to a new law on religion which would impose further severe restrictions on religious freedom. Despite reported efforts by the executive branch to secure its quick passage, the upper house postponed further consideration until the fall of 2002.

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

The U.S. Government discussed with the regime the poor human rights situation in the country and raised problems of religious freedom during such discussions. U.S. Embassy officials also discussed specific cases with the Government, and in June 2002, the U.S. Embassy in Minsk publicly called upon the authorities to ensure that a proposed draft-law on religion ensure the right of all Belarusians to worship freely.

Section I. Religious Demography

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

Over the past two centuries, sustained repression of the once majority Greek Catholic population under the Russian and Soviet empires, persecution of the Roman Catholic Church during the same period, and Soviet repression of much of the Russian Orthodox clergy, altered the religious landscape significantly and turned the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate into the majority church in the country. Furthermore, seven decades of religious repression under the Soviet regime resulted in a culture that is largely secular in orientation. According to one 1998 opinion poll, less than half of the population believed in God. At the same time, approximately 60 percent identified for cultural or historical reasons with the Russian Orthodox Church. The state institution regulating religious matters, founded in 1997 as the State Committee on Religious and National Affairs and reconstituted in September, 2001, as the Committee of Religious and Nationalities Affairs of the Council of Ministers (CRNA), indicates that approximately 80 percent of all persons who profess a religious faith belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. Approximately 15 to 20 percent of all persons who profess a religious faith are estimated to be either practicing Roman Catholics or identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church (the second largest religious grouping). Between 50,000 and 90,000 persons identify themselves as Jews. There are a number of Protestants and adherents to the Greek Rite Catholic Church and the Belarus Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Other minority religious faiths include, but are not limited to, the following: Seventh-Day Adventist, Old Believer, Muslim (the Supreme Administration of Muslims, abolished in 1939, reestablished in early 1994), Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christian, Calvinist, and Lutheran. A small community of ethnic Tatars, with roots in the country dating back to the 11th century, practices Islam.

The country was designated an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989, thereby creating the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Patriarchal Exarch Filaret has served as head of the Orthodox community since 1978. Under Filaret's leadership, the number of Orthodox parishes throughout the country had grown to approximately 1,260 by the end of the period covered by this report.

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

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

It is estimated that approximately 120,000 citizens were considered to have Jewish "nationality" near the end of the Soviet period in 1989, compared to between 50,000 and 90,000 at the end of the period covered by this report. At least half of the present Jewish population is thought to live in or near Minsk. In April 2002, a Jewish Community Center, funded by the American Joint Distribution Committee, opened in Minsk. A majority of the country's Jews are not actively religious. Of those who are, most are believed to be either Reform or Conservative. There is also a small but active Lubavitch-run Orthodox synagogue in Minsk.

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

There are a number of congregations of the Greek Rite Catholic Church, which was once the majority religion. The Greek Catholic Church was established in the 16th century and once had a membership of approximately three-quarters of the population. It was banned by the Russian Government in 1839 and severely persecuted in the 1860's and again in 1946. Following the 1991 reestablishment of Belarusian independence, the attempt to revive the Church, which maintains Orthodox rituals but is in communion with the Vatican, has had only limited success.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the regime restricts this right in practice. Although Article 16 of the 1996 amended Constitution—which resulted from an illegal referendum used by Lukashenko to broaden his powers—reaffirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law, it also contains restrictive language that stipulates that cooperation between the State and religious organizations "is regulated with regard for their influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and country traditions of the Belarusian people."

There is no State religion. Since his election as the country's President in 1994, Lukashenko, who has called himself an "Orthodox atheist," has pursued a policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox Church as the country's chief religion and harassing other non-Russian Orthodox denominations and religions. In a June 2001 meeting with Aleksiy II, Patriarch of Moscow, Lukashenko said that "fundamentally, Orthodoxy is the basis of our state."

The authorities generally view Russian Orthodoxy, as well as Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism as being "traditional" religions. They regard other religions as "nontraditional," and yet others, such as eastern religions, as "sects." Although considered to be nontraditional, Protestant groups sometimes also are considered to be sects. The authorities deny permission to register legally at the national level to some faiths considered to be nontraditional, and to all of those considered to be sects. The CRNA claims that 26 religious denominations are registered officially; however, the significance of this figure is uncertain. Some congregations are registered only on a local basis, which entails only limited rights. Only congregations registered nationally are allowed to invite foreign religious workers and open new churches. While all registered religious organizations enjoy tax-exempt status, government subsidies appear limited to the Russian Orthodox Church. Government employees are not required to take any kind of religious oath or practice elements of a particular faith.

Presidential Edict #516 of September 24, 2001, reconstituted the State Committee for Religious and Nationalities Affairs as the Committee of Religious and Nationalities Affairs of the Council of Ministers (CRNA).

Following Alexander Lukashenko's lead, the authorities have pursued a policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox Church as the country's chief religion and harassing other non-Russian Orthodox denominations and religions. During his May 2002 Easter address, Lukashenko said "The State has always stayed and will stay beside the church, which brings good to the people." Prime Minister Gennadi Novitsky said, "The State does what it can to assist with renovation and construction of churches" and added, "due to the continuous effort of the Church, [the Church's] authority in the country has grown significantly." The authorities encourage a greater role for the Russian Orthodox Church largely as part

of an overall strategy to strengthen "Slavic unity" in the region and promote greater political unification between Belarus and Russia. Lukashenko grants the Russian Orthodox Church special financial advantages that other denominations do not enjoy and has declared the preservation and development of Russian Orthodox Christianity a "moral necessity." In May 2002, the Government earmarked approximately \$570,000 (1 billion Rubles) towards the construction of an Orthodox Church in Mogilev. From March 18 to 20, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II paid his fifth visit to the country and opened the House of Mercy. The House of Mercy, funded by the Orthodox Church and international donations, is expected to provide assistance to the disabled and infirm, as well as the poor. While in Minsk, Alexei II awarded Lukashenko a prize for his efforts to unite Slavic peoples. Earlier, following a \$100,000 donation to the Russian Orthodox Church in January 2001, Alexei awarded Lukashenko the prize of the Unity of Slavic Peoples for his efforts in defense of Russian Orthodoxy.

Under regulations issued in March 2001, the regime allows representatives of foreign religious organizations to be invited to visit the country (a requirement for obtaining a visa) only upon agreement with the CRNA, even if their visit is for nonreligious purposes, such as charitable activities. The inviting organization must make a written request to invite foreign clergy, including the dates and reason for the visit. The CRNA has 20 days in which to respond and there is no provision for appeal of the CRNA's decision. In April 2001, the regime enacted changes to the civil code to restrict "subversive activities" by foreign organizations in the country. A new clause prohibits the establishment of offices of foreign organizations, "the activities of which are aimed at ... the inciting of national, religious and racial enmity, as well as activities which can have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people."

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

On June 27, 2002, the lower house of Parliament gave its final approval to a new law on religion. Despite reported efforts by the executive branch to secure its quick passage, the upper house postponed further consideration until the fall. The draft law contained a number of elements considered by many religious groups to be very restrictive and which could be used to hinder and possibly prevent the activities of evangelical Christian and other religious groups. The draft was introduced partly in response to appeals by the Russian Orthodox Church; in a public meeting with members of the Parliament's human rights committee in May 2001, Russian Orthodox Archbishop Maksim of Mogilev and Mstislavl publicly called for a new law on religion that would protect the "dominant" status of the Russian Orthodox Church in the country, introduce religious education in secondary schools, and ban the spread of nontraditional denominations. Valery Lipkin, chairman of the committee, asserted that the proposed new law would ban the spread of "destructive sects" in the country.

Before and during the June 2002 debate on the draft law on religion, several deputies in the lower house of the Parliament made statements that were xenophobic and anti-Semitic. Deputy Sergei Kastysyan reportedly charged that the adoption of the draft law was necessary to "put up a barrier against all these Western preachers who just creep into Belarus and discredit our Slavic values." During the June 26 debate in the lower house, at least one deputy argued that Jews should not be considered to be citizens of Belarus. Another deputy suggested that a "reservation" be established for religious minorities.

The authorities continued to deny permission to register legally at the national level to some faiths considered to be nontraditional, and to all considered to be sects. The authorities assert that they deny some groups permission to register as religious organizations because their activities "run counter to the Constitution." With or without official registration, some religious faiths have great difficulty renting or purchasing property in which to establish places of worship, in building churches (e.g., the Greek Catholics), or in openly training clergy.

The authorities continued to refuse to register the BAOC, and local courts continued to refuse to hear the BAOC's appeals. The Government claimed that Father Ian Spasyuk was offered the possibility of registration in Berestovitsky district in 2001 if he dropped the word "Orthodox" from the Church name, which he refused to do. Although Father Ian Spasyuk is not recognized as a priest by the Government or the Russian Orthodox Church, he serves as the priest in charge of BAOC parishes in Belarus of a BAOC faction that has close ties to the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. This faction met in June of 2002, in an Extraordinary Meeting of the General Convention of BAOC held outside the country, and elected Bishop Alexander as the new Metropolitan Primate of the BAOC. The BAOC is unable to train a sufficient number of priests to meet the growing needs of its parishioners in its 70 parishes because of its inability to register a seminary.

Since 1992 the authorities have refused to register the Hindu group "Light of Kaylasa."

According to the Government, the law permits residential property to be used for religious services once it has been converted from residential use. The Housing Code, adopted in 1999, permits the use of such property for non-residential purposes with the permission of local executive and administrative bodies. In 2000 local authorities began enforcing this statute, effectively requiring all religious organizations to reregister their properties. Although government figures indicate that 110 religious communities, including 34 Protestant denominations, had their property registered through this process, one Protestant group reported that over 50 percent of Protestant groups were denied registration by local authorities during the reregistration period. The authorities continue to deny permission to many Protestant churches, such as the Full Gospel Pentecostal Church, as well as other non-traditional faiths, to convert their properties to religious uses since these groups are not registered religious groups. However, in order to become a registered religious group, an organization must have a legal address. Religious groups that cannot register often are forced to meet illegally or in the homes of individual members. A number of nontraditional Protestant faiths have not attempted to register because they do not believe that their applications would be approved.

During the period covered by this report, many Protestant and non-traditional groups experienced problems obtaining property. The CRNA had not acted on a May, 2002 application by the Hare Krishna organization for permission to construct a center in Minsk. They also had not granted permission to the registered New Life Evangelical Church to build a church in Minsk.

Following a stampede that killed 53 people during an outdoor concert in Minsk in 1999, the Government issued a decree specifying measures to ensure public order and safety during public gatherings. Meeting hall officials have cited this decree as a basis for canceling or refusing to extend agreements with religious groups for the use of their facilities. Non-traditional groups, including the New Life Evangelical church, were unable to rent space in meeting halls to conduct prayer services. Although the Catholic Church opened a new church in Minsk in the first half of 2002, it cited difficulties in receiving permission from local authorities to build additional churches in Minsk.

Although it is registered officially, the Greek Catholic Church is in disfavor with the Lukashenko regime because of historical tensions between the Greek Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches and also because of its emphasis on the use of the Belarusian language. Along with some Protestant denominations, some Greek Catholic congregations also experienced difficulties renting venues for conducting services.

There were no reports of religious groups being evicted from property during the period covered by this report.

The state-run media continued to attack Protestant and especially evangelical Christian groups. In January 2002, the government-run newspaper Narodnaya Gazeta repeated a story originally printed in a local newspaper in the town of Staraie Dorogi asserting that the December 2000 death of a deacon of the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians was an act of church sacrifice. According to the article, the church denied the requests of the deacon's mother to provide medical assistance to her son who was dying of liver cirrhosis. Following his death, the mother accused the church of deliberately poisoning her son in order to sacrifice him. This story also had been covered during an April 2001 episode of a television program called "Human Rights: A Look at the World." The show's host, Yevgeny Novikov, interviewed the deacon's mother, who accused the church of "sacrificing" her son. In May 2001, the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians filed a slander suit against Novikov, the Belarusian Television and Radio Company, Narodnaya Gazeta, and the deacon's mother. The case still was pending at the end of the period covered by this report. The deacon's mother filed a suit against the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians and the pastor of the church in Staraie Dorogi for moral damages. Her case, which originally was thrown out by a Minsk court, was reinstated, but no verdict was reached during the period covered by this report.

In September 2001, another episode of the television series "Human Rights" accused nontraditional faiths of being destructive and undermining society. Following the broadcast of this program, which took place just before the Presidential elections, several evangelical Christian organizations reported a sharp increase in harassment and attacks against religious property (see Section III).

In the April 6, 2002 issue of Narodnaya Gazeta, State Procurator Stanislav Novikov, who oversees religious affairs in the country for the State Procurators' Administration, wrote that the expansion of non-Orthodox groups, particularly Roman Catholics and Protestants, into areas of the country where they had not practiced in the past, contributed to rising tensions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox citizens.

In March 2002, several articles published in the state-run media repeated attacks by government officials against Protestants and other "nontraditional" faiths. An article titled "The Noose of Charisma" that referred to evangelical Christianity as being among the "children of neo-cult trends" appeared in the Government-owned Sovetskaya Belarusiya newspaper. After receiving complaints from evangelical Christians, the editor of Sovetskaya Belarusiya issued a public apology. A March 13 news report quoted the Moscow District Territorial Center of Social Services in Minsk as claiming that many higher education students are victimized by religious sects, classifying the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Father Leonid Pliatt as being the "most dangerous." According to the press report, the center focuses on "preventive measures" such as distributing information on such groups, counseling, and "post-cult adaptation."

During a March 16, 2002 interview with the newspaper Seven Days, Alexander Titovets, a member of the Committee on Religious and Nationality Affairs in the Council of Ministers, called for a moratorium on nontraditional religions and cults operating in the country. In a March 20, 2002, interview with the Interfax news service, Valentina Bulovkina, a representative of the Minsk municipality branch of the CRNA, labeled both the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church as "destructive" and illegally operating within the country.

The Keston News Service reported that in its last issue of 2001, a newspaper owned by the local administration in Vitebsk published an article entitled "Curb Catholic Expansion!," which called for the banning of the Roman Catholic Church.

In April, 2001, the official newspaper of the armed forces published an article that listed 74 "destructive sects," including many eastern religions, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses, and urged all military personnel to avoid such organizations.

In 2000 a series of state television documentaries entitled "Expansion" targeted Protestants, especially Pentecostals and Catholics as destructive groups that engage in fanatical rituals and pose a threat to society. In March and April 2001, another series shown on state television accused Protestant churches of engaging in human sacrifices, poisoning children, and other "destructive rituals." In the series, CRNA officials claimed that Protestant groups were undermining the authority of the regime, were agents of the West, and needed to be banned from the country. The CRNA and the courts rejected efforts by Catholic and Protestant groups to halt these broadcasts.

Citizens theoretically are not prohibited from proselytizing; however, while individuals may speak freely about their religious beliefs, the authorities often intervene to prevent, interfere with, or punish individuals who proselytize on behalf of an unregistered religion. The regime continued to enforce a 1995 Council of Ministers decree that regulates the activities of religious workers. A 1997 Council of Ministers directive permits the teaching of religion at youth camps for registered religious groups.

Foreigners generally were prohibited from preaching or heading churches that the authorities view as nontraditional faiths or sects, which include all Protestant groups. Foreign missionaries were not permitted to engage in religious activities outside of the institutions that invited them. The law requires 1-year validity, multiple-entry, "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries. Such visas can be difficult to obtain, even for faiths that are registered with the authorities and have a long history in the country. In the past, foreign clergy or religious workers who did not register with the authorities or who tried to preach without government approval or without an invitation from, and the permission of, a registered religious organization, have been expelled from the country; however, there were no reports of such expulsions during the period covered by this report. Approval for visits by foreign clergy or religious workers often involves a lengthy bureaucratic process. In 2000 a pastor of a Protestant church in Brest was warned and later fined by city authorities for allowing a foreigner to preach at a church conference. Internal affairs agencies may expel foreign clergymen from the country by not extending their registration 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 from the Religious Affairs Department of the Executive Committee of the city of Minsk. There were no reported instances of the use of this power during the period covered by this report; however, in April 2001, relying on these regulations, Minsk city authorities refused to extend the registration of the foreign pastor of a Pentecostal church.

As a result of its revival since 1991, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced a shortage of qualified native clergy. At times the Church has had difficulty getting permission from the authorities to bring in a sufficient number of foreign religious workers, mostly from Poland, to make up for the shortage. After a long delay, the Lukashenko regime gave permission to the Catholic Church to open a seminary in Grodno in 1989. A second seminary was opened in Pinsk in September 2001. The regime indicated that in light of these new seminaries foreign priests no longer would be allowed to work in the country. However, this change was not always enforced at the local level, and at least some foreign priests still were allowed to work in the country. Bishops must receive permission from the CRNA before transferring a foreign priest to another parish.

Restitution of religious property remained limited during the period covered by this report. There is no legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet and Nazi occupations, and the law restricts the restitution of property that is being used for cultural or educational purposes. Many former synagogues in Minsk are used as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and even a German-owned beer hall; most of the Jewish community's requests to have these synagogues returned have been refused. The few returns of property to religious communities have been on an individual and inconsistent basis, and local government authorities in general are reluctant to cooperate. Over the past several years, the Jewish community has lobbied the authorities successfully to return several properties in Minsk and other cities; however, most properties have not been returned. According to the Government, three synagogues were returned to the Jewish community in 2001; however, one Jewish group contends that only one was returned. Although the Catholic Church has been somewhat successful in obtaining former Church property, the Catholic Church also has encountered difficulty in lobbying for the return of property. At the end of the period covered by this report the Catholic Church reported that it had been unable to secure the return of 21 former Catholic churches. The Greek Catholic Church has indicated that only one of the many houses of worship taken from it when the region was annexed to the Russian Empire had been returned to it. The Russian Orthodox Church appears to have had the most success on the issue of property restitution; however, a number of restitution claims by the Russian Orthodox Church remained unresolved at the end of the period covered by this report.

Regime officials took a number of actions that indicated a lack of sensitivity toward the Jewish community. In December 2001 the Jewish community appealed an earlier court decision affirming the right of a State-owned publishing company, the Orthodox Initiative, to publish an anti-Semitic book, "The War According to Mean Laws," which, among other anti-Semitic writings, included the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and blamed Jews for societal and economic problems in the country. This appeal was denied. The judge in the original case had declared that the book contained "scientific information" and therefore was not within the jurisdiction of the court. In addition, in April 2002 Sergei Katsyan, who distributed the book during the opening session of the Parliament in November 2000, was named head of a Government-run publishing house, with Yevgeny Novikov as his deputy. Finally, the authorities made no discernible effort to find those responsible for the fire bombing of a Minsk synagogue in December 2001 (see Section III).

On January 6, 2002, the State-owned radio company suddenly cancelled live radio transmission of a Catholic Mass in Minsk, which had been broadcast on Sundays for 8 years. Broadcasting officials

insisted that the cancellation was an ordinary change in schedule lineup, however, some observers connected it with other manifestations of hostility toward the Catholic Church. Subsequently, representatives of the Catholic Church indicated that the cancellation was a mistake. The broadcasts had resumed by the end of the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of discrimination against religious adherents in the military services. Those who object to serving in armed units work in either construction or engineering battalions. Service in such units is twice as long as service in the regular army.

On May 16, 2002, the CRNA filed a complaint with the Ministry of Information against the Belarusian Association of Full Gospel Christians for distributing their newsletter "The Good News" near the main Orthodox church in Minsk on May 5. The CRNA cited complaints by Orthodox worshippers, who were offended by the distribution of Protestant literature near the Orthodox Church.

There were no reports of restrictions on the importation of religious literature.

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Throughout the period covered by this report, police disrupted some services or religious meetings which were being conducted peacefully in private homes when held by religious groups that have not been able to register or that were considered to be nontraditional. Protestant, Hindu, and Hare Krishna groups all reported police disruption of religious gatherings. According to one evangelical Christian group, police regularly broke-up prayer meetings and brought charges against worshippers who belonged to unregistered religious groups. For example, in October 2001, local authorities in Minsk detained the pastor of an unregistered Protestant church for holding an unsanctioned religious ceremony. This church reported that there had been no incidents of this sort since April 2002.

Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of the detention of members of Protestant religious groups for distributing unregistered religious materials; however, on June 6, 2002, a court fined three Baptists approximately \$113 (200,000 rubles) each for singing religious songs in a public place in the town of Lepel, in the Vitebsk region. Six other individuals were given official warnings, and two were acquitted. These Baptists, who belong to a group that refuses to register with the authorities in any of the post-Soviet republics where they are active, were charged officially with participating in an unsanctioned demonstration, a provision of the law usually directed against political groups but occasionally is used in religious cases.

Beginning in May 2002, local authorities in Grodno Oblast harassed workers who were constructing a building on the property of BAOC leader Ian Spasyuk. They ordered him to suspend construction on June 10, despite the fact that they had granted him permission in July 2001 to construct the building. The local authorities claimed that Spasyuk was building a church on the property for which he had received permission to build a dwelling. At the end of the period covered by this report, authorities were reported to be making plans to revoke the original permit. In July 2000, security forces twice raided the BAOC in the village of Pogranichny, near Grodno, for conducting religious services without registration. Also in July 2000, security forces arrested BAOC priest Ian Spasyuk on charges of conducting services without a permit. He later was sentenced to 5 days' imprisonment for allegedly resisting arrest. On May 21, 2001, authorities again arrested Spasyuk while he was attempting to hold a service in the village of Radaulyany (Berestavitsky district). Authorities then summoned Spasyuk and his wife to a local court where, in a closed hearing and without the ability to call witnesses or obtain legal assistance, Spasyuk was detained and then fined for petty hooliganism.

On July 4, 2001, the Keston News Service reported that charges were dropped against 20 members of a messianic Jewish group who had been detained for several days in Minsk in April and May for attempting to distribute religious literature. Charges were also dropped against the editor of the newspaper Slovo, in which the religious literature had been included as a supplement. In May 2001, the organization had attempted to hang posters in central Minsk congratulating veterans of World War II on victory day. While attempting to hang posters, police under orders from the city department of the CRNA, briefly detained members of the group. The CRNA informed the group that "it would be offensive for veterans to receive congratulations from the Jews." Several members of the group had some of their property confiscated.

The Keston News Service reported that in July 2001, after several years without difficulties, Pastor Veniamin Brukh, a Ukrainian pastor of the 1000-member Church of Jesus Christ in Minsk, was charged with "carrying out religious activity without permission." The Church of Jesus Christ is affiliated with the Union of Full Gospel Churches. Pastor Brukh was charged in the presence of a member of the Minsk city council and a representative of the CRNA, which in April 2001 had refused to renew his permission, as a foreigner, to engage in religious activity. He subsequently left the country.

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

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

There have been some instances of vandalism that appeared related to societal anti-Semitism. In January 2002, the authorities in Brest arrested a 17-year-old for desecrating a Holocaust memorial. After being held for a month, the youth was released and failed to report to his trial. Local authorities did not pursue the case further. In March 2001, unknown vandals destroyed nine tombstones in a Jewish Cemetery in Vitebsk. In December 2001, unidentified assailants threw firebombs at a synagogue in Minsk. A security guard was able to extinguish the fire before serious damage occurred. No progress was reported on the investigation of the incident by the end of the period covered by this report.

According to the Anti-Defamation League and the World Jewish Congress, there are a number of small ultra-nationalist organizations on the fringes of society, and a number of newspapers regularly print anti-Semitic material. One of these newspapers, *Slavianskaia Gazeta*, although distributed locally, reportedly was published in Moscow. Anti-Semitic material from Russia also circulates widely.

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

In the months before the September 2001 presidential elections, several Protestant groups reported an increase in harassment, including the desecration of churches throughout the country. According to one evangelical Christian group, arsonists destroyed at least three evangelical churches. Many Protestant and evangelical Christian groups reported that harassment continued, although at a significantly decreased level following the presidential elections. In January 2002, one evangelical Christian group reported that vandals attacked a guard at one of their churches and tied him up. An eyewitness reported that they painted pentagrams on church walls and that a dead cat was found "sacrificed" in the church. One Baptist organization reported that unknown individuals smashed the windows of several Baptist churches.

The country's small Muslim community, with roots dating to the Middle Ages, does not report significant societal prejudice. There were no reports that they experienced vandalism during the period covered by this report.

There is no indication that the Russian Orthodox Church has changed its view that it would cooperate only with religious faiths that have "historical roots" in the country. In a May 2001 speech to the All Belarusian People's Congress, Minsk Patriarchal Exarch Filaret called for the authorities to cooperate with the Russian Orthodox Church to protect the "spiritual security" of the people and to limit the presence of "destructive and pseudo-Christian societies that destroy the spiritual, social, and cultural unity of the people." Despite regime and Russian Orthodox statements that Jewish, Muslim, and Roman Catholic groups support the draft law on religion, many non-Russian Orthodox leaders, including Jewish and Roman Catholic leaders, have either criticized or opposed it (see Section II).

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy raised problems of religious freedom with the authorities in the context of frequent discussions on the poor human rights situation in the country. In June 2002, the Embassy released a public statement calling on the authorities to take the necessary measures to ensure that the proposed draft law on religion provides all citizens with freedom of religion. Embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom issues with representatives of registered and unregistered religious groups. The Embassy has worked with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as well as the embassies of several other countries to promote religious freedom in the country.

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

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