

**Belarus UPR submission, April 2025**

*Forum 18, established in 2003, provides truthful, original, detailed, and accurate monitoring and analysis of violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Central Asia, Russia, Russian-occupied Ukraine, government-held Ukraine, Belarus, and the South Caucasus.*

1. Freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) and related human rights issues in Belarus include but are not limited to a web of “legal” restrictions on more or less every aspect of FoRB, including which communities can meet, where, who they are led by, and what literature they may use. These restrictions continue to make the exercise of FoRB and interlinked human rights<sup>1</sup> such as the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly dependent on state permission. Violations have worsened since fraudulent presidential elections in August 2020, and the regime's support for Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

2. This UPR submission outlines some - but by no means all - FoRB issues documented by Forum 18.

**Repressive new Religion Law ignores Special Rapporteurs and Human Rights Committee**

3. Aleksandr Lukashenko announced in a 30 December 2022 Decree that the regime was going to pass a new Religion Law. This was set to replace and harshen the highly restrictive 2002 Religion Law. Multiple civil society and Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant attempts after 2002 to change this Law, including a petition signed by over 50,000 people, were rejected by the regime and the organisers punished.

4. In Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak's justification of the alleged need for the new Law, published on 2 June 2023 alongside the draft, he stated that the regime wants, among other things, to: prevent officials from using their official position to influence people over their religious views; to ban religious communities from using any symbols apart from religious symbols; to ban the use of texts and images inciting religious discord and hatred; and ban “the activity of religious communities directed against the sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, its constitutional system and civic accord”.

5. On 28 August 2023, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs - Anaïs Marin (on the situation of human rights in Belarus), Clément Nyaletsossi Voule (on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association), and Nazila Ghanea (on freedom of religion or belief) - wrote to the regime (BLR 7/2023)<sup>2</sup> expressing concerns that provisions in the proposed new Law “would fail to meet Belarus' obligations under international human rights law”.

6. They express concerns about: mandatory state registration; compulsory re-registration; tighter registration restrictions and conditions; increased monitoring and surveillance of religious organisations; restrictions on religious literature and items; monitoring and inspection of religious organisations; expansion of legal grounds allowing state authorities to dissolve religious organisations; and new restrictions on religious charitable activity.

7. The three Special Rapporteurs urged the regime to “review and reconsider certain key aspects of the law to ensure that it complies with Belarus' international human rights law obligations.” As of 7 April 2025, the regime had not replied to the Special Rapporteurs.

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8. Yet where Plenipotentiary Rumak's justification talked about “compliance of the draft with international treaties and other international legal acts,” it falsely claimed that “the subject matter of the Draft Law does not affect the international treaties of the Republic of Belarus and international legal acts, in particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, etc.” The man who answered Plenipotentiary Rumak's phone on 13 June 2023 – who refused to give his name – also refused to explain to Forum 18 why Rumak made his demonstrably false claim.

9. The Religion Law came into force on 5 July 2024. Among numerous restrictions<sup>3</sup>, it:

- continues to require all religious communities to gain state registration before they are allowed to exist;
- continues to ban the activity of unregistered religious organisations;
- imposes compulsory re-registration within one year on all registered religious organisations, paralleling earlier demands on political parties and other public associations;
- imposes even tighter registration restrictions and conditions;
- makes extensive and arbitrary use of the undefined terms “extremism,” “terrorism,” and “the ideology of the Belarusian state” to justify restricting the exercise of freedom of religion or belief and related fundamental freedoms;
- continues powers for the regime to inspect and monitor religious communities;
- gives greater “legal” possibilities for the regime to forcibly close religious communities;
- continues and increases censorship and restrictions on religious literature and items;
- imposes new restrictions on religious education by religious communities, including requiring teaching to be in Belarusian or Russian;
- aims to separate religious communities from involvement with wider society;
- and imposes new restrictions on religious charitable activity, allowing no religious organisations except monasteries from running children's homes.

10. Some parts of the new Religion Law parallel the 2023 Political Parties and other Public Associations Law, which made it significantly harder to form such groups<sup>4</sup>, especially nationwide. Religious communities are the second group after political parties to be forced to undergo compulsory state registration in order for the regime to allow them to exist. The new Religion Law is also hostile to any connection between exercising freedom of religion or belief and potentially opposition political activity.

11. After the Religion Law passed into law, on 20 February 2024 the three Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights in Belarus, on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, and on freedom of religion or belief stated: “We are concerned that the vague terms contained in the law are likely to encourage arbitrary decision-making and create a climate of intimidation for religious leaders, communities or activities deemed to be unwelcome by governing authorities.” They went on to note that “the law appears to be aimed at further strengthening the overarching control of the State over all aspects of the existence of religious communities.”<sup>5</sup>

12. Many people did not want to express publicly their concerns about the impact of the proposed new Religion Law. “We don't speak out with criticism publicly,” one individual told Forum 18 after the text of the draft Law was published, “as you could end up facing criminal responsibility.”

13. Human rights defender and Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Shramko – who now lives in



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Lithuania – regarded the new Law as part of the continuing regime crackdown on society. “It adopts new laws, corrects old ones - everything in order to somehow extinguish any pockets of not only possible resistance, but also any uncontrolled life,” he wrote on the Christian Vision website on 13 June 2023<sup>6</sup>. He described the authorities as “playing on the formal appearance of legality”.

14. The Law imposes a deadline of 5 July 2025 for all of Belarus' more than 3,500 registered religious communities to re-register. Any community that has not submitted a re-registration application by the deadline is to be liquidated through the courts.

15. Officials granted re-registration as a national religious association in September 2024 with little apparent difficulty to the Belarusian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate. The Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, overseeing the re-registration process, refused to give Forum 18 any information about how it is going. Tatiana Shevchik, the Head of the Ideology and Religious Affairs Department of Minsk Executive Committee, claimed to Forum 18 on 27 November 2024 that “the re-registration of religious organisations is proceeding in accordance with the law within the established time frame in an amiable atmosphere”. She refused to say how many religious organisations have obtained re-registration and how many have applications in process.

16. Many religious community leaders were very cautious in discussing the re-registration process, declining to tell Forum 18 how far they have been able to get. Others did not wish to discuss the problems of re-registration for fear of reprisals.

17. The new Religion Law requires that religious teaching of children and adults, sharing faith and publishing religious literature, does not contradict the – unexplained - “ideology of the Belarusian state”. A Protestant Pastor noted that the regime has not identified what “state ideology” is, except for saying that religious communities must support the government's domestic and foreign policies. “This gives the government leeway on how to apply it.” He added that religious communities “will have to place the state above God. When we lodge re-registration applications, it will look like we support the government in this. If I sign, I have to agree. Or we'll have to lie to the government when we sign applications.”

18. Under the new Religion Law, national religious associations require 15 religious communities operating in all seven Regions. The Religious Board of Muslims in Belarus, currently a registered religious association, will have to be liquidated as it does not meet the new legal requirements, a Muslim who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18.

19. The new Law requires religious communities to have at least 20 locally-resident adult members. Those in small settlements are therefore not able to apply for re-registration, forcing them to close. A Protestant Pastor, who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that “our experience of registration in the past is that central and local authorities pressure people who are founders not to sign an application”. He observed that “when people live in a small town or village, with only one place of work – such as a state farm – officials can fire you if you don't agree with them.”

## Punishments for exercising freedom of religion or belief

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20. Any exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission is illegal and subject to punishment. Criminal Code Article 193-1 punishes "organisation of or participation in activity by an unregistered political party, foundation, civil or religious organisation" with a fine or up to two years' imprisonment.

21. Individuals holding public events without state permission can also be punished under restrictive laws on unapproved meetings. On 2 June 2023, a judge fined Vladimir Burshtyn – who is in his 70s – over a month's average pension for an outdoor meeting in Drogichin with fellow Baptists to share their faith. At least 10 more individuals are known to have been punished in 2023 under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration") for exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission. One was jailed for ten days, the rest fined.

22. On 6 November 2024, Malorita District Court again fined Burshtyn more than a month's average pension for baptising nine church members two months earlier in a lake.

### Obstructing use of places of worship

23. The regime repeatedly refused to change the legal designation of the building of Minsk's New Life Full Gospel Church – a former cowshed – into a place of worship. The Church staged several hunger strikes to defend its place of worship. The authorities eventually seized the building in February 2021 and bulldozed it in June 2023. In August 2023 a court jailed the pastor (for 10 days) and a youth pastor (for 5 days). The same month, two Minsk courts banned as "extremist" the Church's website, social media accounts and several YouTube videos featuring the Church's pastor. A court then liquidated the Church.

24. Following a suspicious minor fire in a side room in September 2022, officials closed Minsk's Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) for worship or any other activity. As of April 2025 it remains closed, despite parishioners' appeals for it to be reopened.

### Repression of belief-based protests against election fraud and invasion of Ukraine

25. Amid a continuing crackdown on civil society, Lukashenko's regime pressures religious communities to support it. The regime has also sought to ban prayers for political prisoners.

26. Since August 2020, the Belarusian Orthodox Church – the largest religious community - has removed senior bishops and lower clergy seen as disloyal to the regime. The Church has also given the regime lists of priests who supported protests against the regime, human rights defenders told Forum 18. The Orthodox Church removed Archbishop Artemy of Grodno in June 2021. "This happened on the orders of the state," the Archbishop told Radio Free Europe, adding that "they considered it necessary to deal with me," commenting that "not all church figures support the existing regime".

27. The regime repeatedly criticised and warned the Catholic Church, the second largest religious community. Between August and December 2020 the regime denied Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, then-head of the Catholic Church in Belarus, re-entry to his own country.

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28. The regime has also punished Catholic priests who supported the protests, for example bringing charges against Fr Vyacheslav Barok under Administrative Code Article 24.23 (“Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration”) for his opposition to election fraud and regime violence. In July 2021 he fled to neighbouring Poland.

29. Prosecutor Aleksandr Kazakevich claimed to Forum 18 in July 2021 that Fr Barok was not given a copy of the official warning read to him as: “The law specifies that such documents are not to be handed over.” Prosecutor Kazakevich added that he had followed Fr Barok's account of the case against him which he had posted on social media, as well as other sermons and messages he had posted online. He refused to comment on what he had thought of Fr Barok's messages against state violence.

30. The regime also tries to stop individuals and religious communities singing the hymn *Mighty God* (*Mahutny Bozha* in Belarusian). Since August 2020 it has often been sung by protestors against the regime's election falsification and violence. On 2 July 2021, Lukashenko threatened that “our media are writing more and more that in [Catholic] churches they want to pray (tomorrow, not today) under 'Mighty God'. Let's see, they'll get what for.”

31. From February 2022 the regime's main focus of its freedom of religion and belief and related human rights violations has been monitoring, threatening, and punishing religious leaders and people opposing Russia's renewed war against Ukraine and the Belarusian regime's role in this. This is a shift from targeting those criticising regime violence after the August 2020 falsified presidential election.

32. Religious leaders who are targeted if they oppose the regime and Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine include Catholics, Protestants, and priests of the regime-supporting Moscow Patriarchate Belarusian Orthodox Church. Fr Andrei Nozdrin led St Spyridon of Trimythion parish in Grodno. In April 2022, local police summoned Fr Nozdrin for a “preventive conversation” after complaints from two informers who were not happy with his anti-war position and singing the hymn *Mighty God* - both the regime and the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Veniamin, have banned the hymn. On 25 April 2022, police wrote to Fr Nozdrin warning him against alleged “extremist violations and crimes”. Fr Nozdrin told Forum 18 out that everyone knew that in his sermons and elsewhere he always insisted that “a Christian cannot say that what's going on in Ukraine is good, and should understand that killing is a sin”. He said he will continue to teach these “Christian principles”.

33. On 18 May 2022 Archbishop Antony (Doronin) of Grodno dismissed Fr Nozdrin from all his diocesan roles, and transferred him from Grodno to a small village. The regime sent police to attend Fr Nozdrin's farewell service, “but the people showed them out because they did not pray,” Fr Nozdrin said. Neither the police nor Grodno Diocese spokesperson Fr Igor Danilchik would discuss the case with Forum 18.

### Prisoners' freedom of religion or belief

34. Among other FoRB violations documented by Forum 18<sup>7</sup>, prisoners the regime categorises as “low status” are not allowed to attend the limited religious services held by the Orthodox and

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Catholic Churches in prisons. Former political prisoner and Orthodox Christian Vadim Yermashuk<sup>8</sup> was held in Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk in Mogilev Region from March 2022 to June 2024. "Not once in all that time was I allowed to attend services in church," he told Forum 18. "When my brother died I was not even allowed to go to light a candle for him."

35. Similarly, political prisoners who are not "low status" have been prevented from attending the limited meetings for worship allowed in prisons, prevented from meeting priests or other religious leaders, and denied access to religious literature of their choice. "Catholic priests visit prisons, but can't visit political prisoners," a Catholic priest who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 on 14 January 2025. "Prison administrations tell the priest that the prisoners don't want a visit, while the prison administrations tell the prisoners the priest hasn't visited," the priest added. "All this is done verbally with nothing in writing."

36. Political prisoners held in Investigation Prisons, as well as those serving restricted freedom sentences in their homes, are also banned from attending places of worship. (END)

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<sup>1</sup> See the reports of human rights violations provided by eg. Christian Vision <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/category/other/en/>, Humana Constanta <https://humanconstantia.org/en/news-en/>, and Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/belarus>.  
<sup>2</sup> <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28342>  
<sup>3</sup> [https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2884](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2884)  
<sup>4</sup> <https://csometer.info/updates/belarus-draft-amendments-laws-public-associations-and-political-parties-published>  
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/belarus-un-experts-concerned-about-new-law-freedom-conscience-and-religious>  
<sup>6</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/zakon-o-svobode-sovesti-cto-novogo/>  
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=16>  
<sup>8</sup> <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/vadzim-ermaszuk>