

BELARUS

The government of Belarus violates the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief through intrusive laws and policies. The government harasses, fines, and detains religious communities and individuals. Religious properties have been vandalized with impunity. Based on these concerns, USCIRF has placed Belarus on its Watch List since 2003.

Background

Political power in Belarus is concentrated in the hands of President Aleksandr Lukashenko, whose regime continues to perpetrate human rights abuses. The government views independent groups, including religious communities, as potential challenges to its rule. After the December 2010 presidential elections, widely viewed as rigged, security forces suppressed protests and imprisoned nine presidential candidates. Political prisoners, particularly those in pretrial detention, reportedly have been denied access to clergy.

The 2002 religion law bans unregistered religious activity. Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code punishes such religious activity with penalties ranging from a fine to imprisonment of up to two years. However, individuals engaged in unregistered activity recently have been fined under the administrative, not criminal, code. The government often denies registration to some religious groups, particularly Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, without stating reasons for doing so. Reportedly, a secret 2008 government ruling denied registration to 12 groups, including Ahmadis, officially deemed as "destructive sects."

The 2002 religion law gave privileged status to the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) by recognizing its "definitive role" in Belarusian traditions. The law also identifies Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism as "traditional faiths," but does not mention the Old Believer and Calvinist churches, both of which have existed in Belarus for hundreds of years. In June 2003, the government and the BOC signed a concordat setting out cooperation on education, development, cultural preservation, security, and a joint struggle against the public danger of "pseudo-religious structures." The government often denies registration to other Orthodox churches.

Even registered religious groups face restrictions, as the law does not allow them to function outside of their geographic area of registration; typically denies them permission to hold private worship services; and severely restricts and censors their religious literature and online activity. In addition, the government restricts registered groups' ability to own and use property for religious purposes and often rejects requests by Protestant churches and other "new" religious communities to register property. Religious organizations do not have legal priority in reclaiming property confiscated during Soviet rule if their buildings are now used for other purposes. Only nine of 92 synagogues have been returned to Jewish communities since 1991, and few historic Lutheran and Calvinist churches have been returned. Moreover, foreign religious workers must state in their visa application that they plan to participate in religious activities or face reprimands or expulsion, and authorities often interrogate foreign religious workers, humanitarian workers, and Belarusian citizens on their funding sources.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Abuses against Registered and Unregistered Religious Groups: Authorities raid, harass, and interfere with unregistered religious communities. In late 2011, police raided the worship meetings of three Jehovah's Witness communities due to disputes over their legal addresses. Council of Churches Baptist congregations, which refuse to register for doctrinal reasons, have long been targeted; in September 2011, Pastor Aleksei Abramovich was fined several weeks' average local wages.

In February 2012, police raided a Protestant discussion group and for several hours detained 34 attendees, all members of registered Protestant churches. In January 2012, the pastor of a registered Pentecostal church was threatened with court action and loss of registration for holding a service outside its legal address without prior official permission. Authorities warned three Pentecostal pastors in January 2012 about leading religious worship officially viewed as illegal. The New Life Pentecostal Church continues its refusal to pay a 2010 fine equivalent to \$81,745 for alleged "environmental damage."

Restrictions on Religious Literature: Religious materials may be published only by religious organizations with 10 registered communities, including at least one community dating back to the Soviet period in 1982 when policies on

religion were even more restrictive. The government regulates online content and usage, requires registration of internationally-hosted Web sites, and maintains an official list of blocked “offensive” local and international sites.

Anti-Semitism: Government officials, including President Lukashenko, and the state media have made anti-Semitic remarks. Also, the government has not investigated, identified, or punished those responsible for vandalism against Jewish memorials, cemeteries, or other property.

Challenges to the Religion Law: In 2008, human rights defenders were harassed after organizing the largest non-party political petition in Belarusian history calling for reform of the religion law. The petition garnered 50,000 signatures and was sent to Parliament, the Presidential Administration and the Constitutional Court, but was rejected in violation of Belarusian law. In early 2012, activists seeking religion law reform and an end to the ban on unregistered religious, political and social activity stepped up their campaign, and wrote to 10 state agencies, including both chambers of Parliament, the Presidential Administration and the Justice Ministry, and launched an internet petition.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

In 2004, President Bush signed the Belarus Democracy Act, which was reauthorized in 2007 and 2012. The U.S. imposed sanctions in 2006 and expanded them in 2007 and 2008, targeting government entities and officials responsible for human rights abuses. In response, Belarus asked that the U.S. ambassador be withdrawn; currently, neither country maintains an ambassador in the other country. U.S.-Belarusian relations were further strained by the repression after the December 2010 controversial presidential elections.

In light of the religious freedom concerns in the country, the U.S. government should:

- Urge Belarus to repeal the restrictive 2002 religious law; end the practice of denying registration to non-violent religious groups; grant the right to conduct religious education and distribute religious materials; and ensure that no religious community faces discrimination;
- Use public and private diplomacy to advance the protection of religious freedom in Belarus, including enhanced monitoring and public reporting by the U.S. Department of State, the Special Envoy on Anti-Semitism, and Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom;
- Coordinate with the EU on the imposition of financial sanctions and visa bans on high-ranking Belarusian officials, particularly those responsible for human rights abuses, and work to reinstate the position of UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus; and
- Ensure that activities to promote democracy that are authorized by the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act, and Belarus civil society programs of the National Endowment for Democracy, include the issue of freedom of religion or belief and promotion of religious tolerance.

Please see USCIRF’s 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Belarus.