BELARUS

REligions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostics</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheists</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by article 31 of the constitution\(^1\), which allows individuals to manifest their religious views and gather for corporate worship so long as they do not do anything prohibited by law. Article 16 of the constitution declares the legal equality of all religions and faiths. It also prohibits religious activities which threaten morals or are directed against the state, its political system or the civil liberties of its citizens. The same article also states that the relationship between the state and particular religious organisations “shall be regulated by the law with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people.”

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations of 1992\(^2\) more specifically defines the legal framework for religions in Belarus. Article six establishes the equality of all religions before the law. As long as a religious organisation does not participate in the activities of “political parties and other public associations pursuing political aims” it is allowed to participate in public life and to use state media. Articles 14 and 15 differentiate between religious communities, which are organisations with at least 20 adult members living in one or more settlements in close proximity, and religious associations, consisting of at least 10 religious communities, of which at least one has been active in Belarus for more than 20 years. The latter have the right to establish monasteries, male and female religious orders, religious missions and educational facilities. The religious activities of both communities and associations are limited to the territory in which the given group operates. Article 25 additionally limits those activities to properties that belong to these organisations or its members. In the case of private homes, there are a number of safety regulations a religious organisation has to follow. Large-scale religious events may be held in public if they receive approval from local authorities.

Articles 16 through to 19 regulate the registration process for religious organisations. Registration is necessary for a religious organisation to be recognised as a legal entity. To register, it needs to provide a variety of information including details about its beliefs and its founders, among other requisites. As specified in article 21, an application for registration can be denied if the authorities deem the information unsatisfactory or the doctrines professed to be non-compliant with the law.\(^3\)
According to article 13, only Belarusian citizens can lead religious organisations.4

Article 29 limits the period to one year that a foreign missionary without Belarusian citizenship can be engaged in religious missionary activities, but this can be extended or reduced by the authorities.

The Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) of Moscow Patriarchate signed an agreement that establishes a special relationship between the two. While it is not explicitly directed against other religions, article 2 of the concordat speaks about cooperation “against pseudo-religious structures presenting a danger to personality and society”.5

In July 2016 the Law of the Republic of Belarus on Alternative Service came into force. This allows those who object to participating in military activities for religious reasons to take part in humanitarian activities instead. This development was welcomed by the Jehovah’s Witnesses among others.6

In July 2018, criminal punishments for unregistered religious activities, including worship meetings, ended, but were replaced by summary fines of up to five weeks’ average. were replaced by summary fines of up to five weeks’ average.7

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Related to Christians

In July 2018 in the Belarus capital, Minsk, the Pentecostal “Your Will Be Done” Church remained unable to gather for worship for fear of punishment, as officials found different reasons to reject their fourth registration application since 2017. One rejection claimed the Church’s faith was “unknown in Belarus”. A district official told the city authorities that new religious communities were not needed because the population was not asking for them.8

In October 2018 police stopped a Baptist man and wife from singing and offering Christian literature outside Lepel’s market. “We were detained like criminals and brought to the police station”, Andrei Fokin stated. A court fined the couple one month’s average wage each. Bailiffs are seeking to confiscate property and ban him from driving.9

During the year 2019, authorities continued to deny registration to several Protestant religious communities, including one within the Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches in Maladzechna.10

Minsk city authorities did not authorize the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists to hold its International Festival of Hope in the city, scheduled for May 3-5, 2019.11

Related to Catholics

Throughout the 2018-2020 reporting period, despite petitions from the local bishops, there were several cases of Catholic priests from Poland whose one-year visas were not renewed. A variety of pretexts were used including one where a priest’s visa was denied due to several traffic offences. In another case, the local Catholics protested to the authorities and they reversed their decision.12

Catholic leaders claimed that in fact the state is pursuing a deliberate policy of reducing the number of foreign Catholic priests serving in Belarus.13 A Russian Catholic priest’s activities were also curtailed; he was allowed to remain in Vitebsk to continue building a new church but was banned from celebrating Masses.14

Prison administrators, in 2018, continued to repeatedly deny access for Roman Catholic priests, Protestant pastors and Imams to visit inmates in prison.15

In the beginning of 2019, a Council of Ministers Decree stated that public events required fees to cover the costs of public services including police, health workers and cleaners. The Interior Ministry later said these fees would not apply to events at designated venues, such as churches and cemeteries. Nonetheless, Greek Catholic organisers had to cancel what would have been their 25th annual pilgrimage because of “unaffordable” police fees.16 The police wanted to charge the Greek Catholic community 3,825 roubles ($1,800) to conduct the annual pilgrimage.17

In August 2019, Minsk city authorities withdrew their original (2016) approval for a plot of land intended for the construction of a Catholic church after residents protested to the number of trees proposed for removal. The city authorities allocated another plot to the Catholic community.18 In the meantime another construction permit granted in 2015 for the construction of the John Paul II Minsk Theological Academy was still “pending” at the time of this writing.19

Related to Orthodox Christians

In spring 2018 two Orthodox priests from Russia, invited by Archbishop Dimitry (Drozdov) of Vitebsk to serve as parish priests in his diocese, were denied entry. Unofficially, the diocese was told the government wanted local people to be trained to serve as clergy.20 In November 2018,
Belarus

Authorities detained for 24 hours Fr. Vikentsy, a priest of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which is not officially registered, for preaching and seeking donations in an apartment block in Minsk. On November 30, a Minsk district court found Fr. Vikentsy not guilty and closed the case.21

Related to Jews

On 26th May 2019, Homiel authorities reported they had identified the individual who painted in December 2014 a swastika and the slogans “Kill the Jews” and “Holocaust” on a building in a local Jewish community. The individual, who reportedly admitted his guilt, belonged to a neo-Nazi group.

On 9th October 2019, construction workers caused damage to the site of a former Jewish cemetery in a central Minsk park. Jewish communities continued to petition the government to protect the site from any digging or construction work. The city prosecutor’s office said that the planned work, maintenance of the sewage system, did not violate any regulations.22

Related to other religions

According to their own sources, Jehovah’s Witnesses are continuously dismissed from registration procedures - even though they are officially allowed to exist in Belarus - which forces this group to pursue activities at considerable risk. In some communities, where they have been present for decades, they are denied the right to gather in private houses,23 and face fines or detention for distributing literature in public places.24 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Borisov, in the Minsk Region, had 16 registration demands rejected in 20 years. Jehovah’s Witnesses allege that each time a new official takes charge locally, the community has to find a way to continue to exercise their right to religious freedom.25

The government continued to require students to use textbooks that representatives of non-traditional religious groups said promoted intolerance towards them, citing chapters in the books that labelled such groups as “sects”. The textbooks described non-traditional religious groups as “striving for the exclusiveness of their role, doctrine, and principles”, being isolationist, and claiming to be God-chosen, among other things.26

Post-electoral conflict related to religious communities

The year 2020 was a turbulent and dramatic time in Belarus. Presidential elections were held on 9th August, and according to its results Alexander Lukashenko allegedly received 80 percent of the vote for a sixth-straight presidential term, compared to just ten percent for the opposition candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

The official outcome was widely disputed and sparked protests across the entire country. Religious communities played an important role throughout the opposition protests. The Belarusian Catholic Church expressed its support to the demonstrators and in the period following the election the Catholic Archbishop of Minsk and Mohilev, Tadeusz Konradusiewicz, called on the Belarusian authorities to end the violence, saying that the bloodshed in the streets of Belarusian cities was a “heavy sin on the conscience of those who give criminal orders and commit violence.”27

On 19th August, Archbishop Konradusiewicz prayed outside the prison where the detained demonstrators were said to be undergoing torture. When he expressed his wish to visit prisoners, the authorities refused him admission.28 Without prior announcement, on 23rd August, the state-controlled Radio Belarus stopped the traditional broadcast of Catholic Masses.29

The Belarus Orthodox Church (BOC) of the Moscow Patriarchate did not present a uniform response. While the Church leadership maintains close ties to Russia and thus recognized the election results, it preferred to stay “neutral” during the demonstrations.30 Some other bishops and many priests, however, were vocal about their anti-government position and supported the demonstrators.31 Due to further pressure from Belarusian faithful, and likely from within its own clergy, the BOC shifted position. On 15th August, the synod of the BOC strongly condemned both the harsh reaction of state forces and some incidents of provocation on the part of demonstrators.32 BOC Metropolitan Pavol of Minsk and Zaslavl, criticized the government brutality and visited some of the wounded in hospital. The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church removed him on 26th August and replaced him with Bishop Veniamin of Borisov and Maryinogorsk.33

Many Protestant Christians joined the demonstrations or supported them, and some have been arrested and sentenced. On 14th August, Pentecostals and Charismatics officially appealed to the authorities to call a halt to the violence, to release all detainees and to engage in a peaceful dialogue with the people. Members of a Minsk-based congregation launched an initiative, “From Kurapaty to Akreścina, Never again”, bringing thousands of protesters...
onto the street, many holding copies of the Bible, Crosses, and Belarusian national flags in their hands.\textsuperscript{34}

During a protest on 26th August, police forces blocked the entrance to the Church of Saints Symon and Alena in Minsk, commonly called the Red Church, as demonstrators and journalists sought shelter inside. Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, called the incident “unacceptable and unlawful”.\textsuperscript{35}

On 31st August, Belarus border security officers blocked the re-entry of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz returning from Poland. Although the Archbishop is a Belarusian citizen, the authorities declared the Archbishop’s passport invalid. He was forced to stay in Poland, much to the shock of Belarusian citizens, who expressed their solidarity with the Archbishop regardless of religious affiliation. On 1st September, President Alexander Lukashenka stated that the Archbishop was banned from re-entry because he “receives orders from Poland and mixes Church and politics.”\textsuperscript{36}

The forced exile of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz was also condemned by the international community. Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevičs issued a statement as did the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, condemning the Archbishop’s entry ban.\textsuperscript{37}

In an atmosphere of solidarity, on 5th September a massively attended Holy Mass took place in the Red Church in Minsk, celebrated by Bishop Jury Kasabucki of Minsk-Mogilev. Bishop Kasabucki urged Catholics to stay united, insisting the Archbishop’s “actions and statements” had conformed to Catholic teaching and Belarusian law. “It’s obvious they’re trying to pressure the Church, which indeed means the Church is being persecuted ... although no one says this openly, nor did they when persecution was severe during the Soviet era. The facts show the situation is now similar.”\textsuperscript{38} The bishop has since been officially admonished by the Belarusian Prosecutor General’s Office.

Incidents against priests started occurring soon after Archbishop Kondrusiewicz’s re-entry ban. On 4th September, Fr. Jerzy Wilk from Poland received a letter from the Plenipotentiary for Religion and Nationality of the Belarusian Council of Ministers, Leanid Hulaka, informing that authorities “cancelled his invitation to serve in the Vitebsk diocese.”\textsuperscript{39}

On 8th December, two Jesuit priests Fr. Viktar Zhuk and Greek Catholic Fr. Alyaksei Varanko, both from Vitebsk, were arrested and confined to house arrest a day later. Both faced charges of participating in unauthorized events. In November, the BOC Press Secretary, Fr. Sergei Lepin, was forced to resign after denouncing the “satanic trampling of flags and icons” by police during one of the crackdowns in Minsk.\textsuperscript{40}

Belarus’s opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, exiled in Lithuania since August, sent a letter to Pope Francis in early December warning that clergy and laypeople from all denominations faced “persecution by the authorities.”\textsuperscript{41}

Finally, on 24th December, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz was allowed to return to Belarus after 16 weeks of exile. He led two Christmas Masses in Minsk the following day. The return was the result of mediation by the new Apostolic Nuncio in Belarus, and the Vatican. According to Belarusian Foreign Minister, Vladimir Makei, after receiving a personal letter from Pope Francis, President Alexander Lukashenko decided that the upcoming Christmas festivity was the reason to make this decision “despite a number of negative things about this person.”\textsuperscript{42} In an interview given earlier to the Polish media, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz assured that he worked for the Gospel and for reconciliation in the country, and did not plot against the authorities of the Belarusian state.\textsuperscript{43}

**PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION**

Belarus has witnessed several months of political upheaval and public demonstrations in which most human rights are endangered, including religious freedom. The trend is towards ever-increasing authoritarian control with the risk of severe consequences for the country’s religious organizations.\textsuperscript{44} The rule of law regarding religious freedom is applied unevenly and remains dependent on the whim of the authorities in charge, which often results in often chaotic and arbitrary actions against various religious communities, including the Orthodox.

Belarus is caught between popular demands for Western-style democracy, and national and international interests in the regional status quo. Both these foreign and domestic players seek to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church and stir up historical tensions between religious communities (i.e.: between Orthodox and Catholic) to cause rifts within the demonstrators - the most serious threat to the state apparatus today.\textsuperscript{45} In this climate, the prospects for human rights, including religious freedom, remain negative.
BELARUS

SOURCES / ENDNOTES


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


