



## Belarus

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

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. Protestants in particular attracted negative attention. Authorities kept many religious communities waiting as long as several years for decisions about registration or property restitution. Authorities harassed and fined members of certain religious groups, especially those regarded as bearers of foreign cultural influence or as having a political agenda. Foreign missionaries, clergy, and humanitarian workers affiliated with churches faced many government-imposed obstacles, including deportation and visa refusal or cancellation. Restrictions on foreign clergy increased during the reporting period.

While some members of society took positive actions to promote religious freedom, instances of societal abuses and discrimination occurred, including numerous acts of vandalism and arson of religious sites, buildings, and memorials.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 80,154 square miles and a population of 9.7 million. Historically it 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. For instance, in June 2008 Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Bertone met with the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret and praised the churches' improved relations and increased cooperation.

January 2007 figures from the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) showed that approximately 50 percent of citizens consider themselves religious, of whom an estimated 80 percent belong to the BOC, 14 percent to the Catholic Church, 4 percent to eastern religious groups (including Muslims, Hare Krishnas, and Baha'is), and 2 percent to Protestant groups (including Seventh-day Adventists, Old Believers, Jehovah's Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, and Lutherans). Of those who identify as Belarusian Orthodox or Roman Catholic, only 18 and 50 percent, respectively, regularly attend church services. There are also adherents of the Greek Catholic Church and of Orthodox groups other than the BOC. Jewish groups stated that between 50,000 and 70,000 persons identify themselves as Jewish. Most Jews were not religiously active.

In January 2007 OPRRNA reported 3,103 religious organizations of 25 religious confessions and denominations in the country, including 2,953 registered religious communities and 150 national and confessional organizations (monasteries, brotherhoods, and missionary sites). This included 1,399 Belarusian Orthodox, 493 Evangelical Christian, 440 Roman Catholic, 267 Evangelical Christian Baptist, 74 Seventh-day Adventist, 54 Full Gospel Christians, 33 Old Believer, 29 Jewish, 27 Lutheran, 26 Jehovah's Witnesses, 24 Muslim, 21 New Apostolic Church, 17 Progressive Judaism, 13 Greek Catholic, 9 Apostolic Christians, 6 Hare Krishnas, 5 Baha'i, 5 Christ's Church, 4 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), 2 Messianic, 1 Reform Church, 1 Presbyterian, 1 Armenian Apostolic, 1 Latin Catholic, and 1 St. Jogan Church communities.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted this right in practice. Although the 1996 amended Constitution affirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law, it also contains restrictive language stipulating 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." OPRRNA regulates all religious matters.

Despite protests from human rights organizations, the European Union, and domestic religious groups, President Lukashenka signed a religion law in 2002 that recognizes the determining role of the Orthodox Church in the development of the 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." However, the traditional faiths mentioned in the law do not include religious groups such as the Priestless Old Believers and Calvinist churches, which have historical roots in the country dating to the 17th century.

Despite the law's guarantee of religious freedom, it contains restrictive elements that increase the Government's control. 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 clergy.

In addition, the law confines the activity of religious communities to areas where they are registered and establishes complex registration requirements that some communities, both "traditional" and "nontraditional," have difficulty fulfilling. The law also required all previously registered groups to reregister by 2004 and bans all religious activity by unregistered groups.

The religion law establishes three tiers of religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities, or local individual religious organizations, must include at least 20 persons over the age of 18 who live in neighboring areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious communities, 1 of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years, and may be constituted only by a national level religious association. National religious associations can be formed only when there are active religious communities in the majority of the country's six regions.

A religious community must submit a list of its founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures, along with copies of its founding statutes, minutes of its founding meeting, and permission from the regional authorities confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property indicated in its founding statutes. Regional executive committees (for groups outside of Minsk) or the Minsk City Executive Committee handle all registration applications. For a community practicing a religion not previously "known" to the Government, information about the faith must also be submitted. No previously "unknown" religious communities were registered during the reporting period.

A religious association 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. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions, invite foreigners to work with religious groups, and organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applications to establish associations and national associations must be submitted to OPRRNA. The Government registered five national religious organizations in 2007. Christian communities maintained that the law heavily restricts their activities, suppresses freedom of religion, and legalizes criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs.

During the reporting period, local religious leaders circulated a petition to pressure the Government to change the 2002 religion law. The petition asked authorities to abolish religious registration requirements, territorial boundaries for religious groups, and restrictions on foreign clergy, among other things. Signatories included not only religious believers but also those who did not consider themselves religious but were concerned by the law's implications for freedom of expression and assembly. Petitioners collected 50,000 signatures between April 22, 2007, and February 28, 2008, and submitted the petition to the Parliament and Presidential Administration. On May 8, 2007, the Belarusian Exarchate of the ROC urged believers not to sign the petition, claiming that the law helped maintain peace among religious communities and stability in the country.

Campaigners were subject to arrest and prosecution during the petitioning process. On July 2, 2007, fourteen campaigners were arrested in Budslaw, Myadzel district, Minsk region, while collecting signatures for the petition during a Roman Catholic festival. On July 4, 2007, police arrested six Protestant campaigners during a raid on a private apartment in Minsk. A witness said that the police seized Protestant books and five copies of a leaflet about the campaign. The New Life Church (NLC), a Minsk-based Protestant community, was also targeted for its leadership in the campaign; as of February 2008, all utilities had been cut off to the church's facility, and seven parishioners had been fired from their jobs, reportedly on orders from authorities. On March 25, 2008, the Minsk City Prosecutor's Office charged the pastor of NLC, Vyachaslaw Hancharenka, with an administrative offense regarding the organization of the signature-collection campaign, and a similar charge was brought against NLC lawyer Syarhey Lukanin on March 21. On April 22, 2008, Christian

Democracy Co-chair Pavel Sevyarynets was fined \$650 (1.4 million rubles) for his work with the signature-collection campaign.

On March 2, 2008, the Constitutional Court rejected the petition to amend the 2002 religion law, on the grounds that the constitutionality of laws can be questioned only by the head of state or other government officials. Parliamentary and presidential authorities also rejected the petition soon after receiving it, claiming there were no religious freedom violations in the country.

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 formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people." It 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 freedom 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." In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word "Orthodox" in its title and to use the image of the Cross of Euphrosyne, the patron saint of the country, as its symbol.

On July 11, 2007, the BOC signed the Program of Cooperation with the Ministry of Education for the years 2007 to 2010. According to Education Minister Radzkou, this document covers cooperation in the field of spiritual and moral education of children and youth. BOC Metropolitan Filaret said that education and religion are no longer viewed as separate, that young people should be educated in accordance with high spiritual ideals, and that it is the task of the Church, family, and school to provide such an education.

In 2006 the Government funded \$3 million (6.4 billion rubles) in BOC projects.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The Government restricted religious freedom both directly and indirectly. The Government enforced laws that limit freedom of worship, speech, and assembly, and state registration is compulsory before religious activity can take place. The Government was sometimes responsible for and regularly failed to condemn acts of religious insensitivity or intolerance. The Government frequently referred to groups it did not consider to be traditional as "nontraditional" and widely used the term "sect" when referring to such groups, although it is not an official designation. Foreign missionaries, clergy, and charity workers faced increased government obstacles, including deportation and visa refusal or revocation.

Many "traditional" and "nontraditional" religious groups continued to experience problems renting, purchasing, or registering properties to establish places of worship or to build churches, as well as difficulties reacquiring state-controlled religious properties. Groups also encountered difficulty legally converting residential property to religious use; the housing code permits the use of such property for nonresidential purposes only with the permission of local executive and administrative bodies. As a result, several Protestant churches and "nontraditional" groups were at an impasse: denied permission to convert their properties for religious use because they were not registered, but unable to register due to the lack of a legal address. Such groups often were obliged to meet in violation of these requirements or in the homes of individual members.

A government decree specifies measures to ensure public order and safety during general public gatherings. Some meeting hall officials cited the decree as a basis for canceling or refusing to extend agreements with religious groups for the use of their facilities. During the reporting period it remained difficult, particularly for unregistered groups, to rent a public facility. Protestant communities suffered most from this decree, since they were less likely to own their own property and needed to rent public space when their members were too numerous to meet in private homes.

The Government often restricted peaceful assembly for religious activities.

There were credible reports that local authorities and teachers sought to identify which children attended Baptist Sunday school. According to the nongovernmental organization Forum 18, Baptist Pastor Gennady Brutskiy reported that children identified as having attended Baptist Sunday school were threatened by the head teacher. Similarly, Pastor Syarhey Yasku of the Vefil Evangelical Christian Church stated that State Ideology Officer Bobryk demanded that teachers find out whether their students attended Protestant Sunday school. If children attended such a school, the teachers had to "have a talk" with their parents.

During the reporting period, the Government monitored peaceful minority religious groups, especially those perceived as "foreign" or "cults." Credible sources reported that state security officers often attended Protestant services to conduct surveillance.

The Government placed more restrictions on foreign clergy than in previous reporting periods. On January 30, 2008, the Government introduced new guidelines for foreign clergy. Only registered national religious associations may apply to OPRRNA for permission to invite foreign clergy, and permission must be granted before foreign religious workers may serve in local congregations, teach or learn at local institutions, participate in charitable work, or expand foreign contacts of religious groups. OPRRNA has the right to deny requests without explanation.

The guidelines were expected to affect Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations the most, reducing the number of Roman Catholic clergy operating in the country and limiting the humanitarian and charitable projects of western Protestant churches. This new restriction on foreign clergy is more restrictive than the 2002 religion law, which allowed religious associations to invite foreigners for religious purposes.

As in previous reporting periods, approval for visits by foreign religious workers often involved a lengthy bureaucratic process. The law requires 1-year, multiple-entry "spiritual activities" visas for foreign missionaries and clergy. An organization inviting foreign clergy must make a written request to OPRRNA, including the proposed dates and reason for the requested visit. Even if the visit is for nonreligious purposes (such as charitable activities), representatives must obtain a visa and permission from OPRRNA. OPRRNA has 20 days in which to respond, and there is no provision for appeal of its decision.

Observers expressed concern that lack of uniform government guidance on implementation of February 2006 changes to visa laws affected the ability of missionaries to live and work in the country. Authorities frequently questioned foreign missionaries and humanitarian workers, as well as the local citizens who worked with them, about the sources and uses of their funding. There were also credible reports that these foreign workers were followed and surveilled by security personnel.

On December 23, 2007, Grzegorz Hudek, a Polish Catholic priest who had served in Rechitsa, Gomel region, for many years, left the country under an expulsion order. Mikhail Zhukevich, chairman of the Gomel Regional Executive Committee's Religious and National Affairs Council, stated that the expulsion had been prompted by the priest's remarks published in the Polish newspaper *Tygodnik wschodni*. More than 700 signatures were gathered to petition the Government to extend Hudek's registration, to no avail.

Archbishop Jovan, a primate of the Holy Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (BAOC) and religious freedom activist, continued to be denied entry into the country; the Government does not recognize the BAOCC.

The Government does not permit foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity outside of their host institutions. Transferring between religious organizations, including parishes, requires prior state permission.

Internal affairs agencies may compel the departure of foreign clergy by denying registrations and stay permits. Authorities may act independently or based on recommendations from other government entities.

Legislation prohibits "subversive activities" by foreign organizations and the establishment of offices by foreign organizations whose activities incite "national, religious, and racial enmity" or which could "have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people."

Foreign citizens officially in the country for nonreligious work can be reprimanded or expelled if they participate in religious activities.

On June 21, 2007, a Mogilyov judge overturned a case involving seven U.S. citizens, citing technical errors as a reason for a retrial. On February 13, the police charged the group with violating article 185 of the administrative code, "Violation of Rules of Foreign Citizens' Stay in Belarus" and fined them \$15 (32,000 rubles) each for engaging in activities incompatible with the terms of their visas. On February 16 the Government deported the seven and banned them from the country for 2 years for two separate counts of illegal teaching and illegal religious activities. According to the Government, the seven failed to obtain permission from the Education Ministry before they began teaching English at a house of worship in Mogilyov; a retrial, presumably in absentia, was pending at the end of the reporting period.

By law, citizens are not prohibited from proselytizing and may speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, in practice authorities often interfered with or punished some individuals who proselytized on behalf of registered or unregistered religious groups. Authorities regulated every aspect of proselytizing and literature distribution.

Syarhey Lukanin, a legal expert with NLC, has complained to President Lukashenka about what Lukanin calls "government

interference in the activities of registered religious groups." Lukanin cited a report that in May 2008, Vasily Marchanko, head of the Brest Regional Executive Committee's religious and ethnic affairs department, sent out letters to the Committee's departments and the National Center for Health Improvement and Health Resort Treatment, warning them to be "more vigilant in contacting representatives of religious organizations who conduct missionary activities under the guise of charity." Marchanko was referring to a charity concert staged by NLC on May 17 at the National Cancer Center for Children, which is located in the village of Barawlyany near Minsk. According to Marchanko, the children who attended the event were given gifts and Bibles and told a story about God's miraculous healing of a Minsk girl with advanced cancer. In his complaint, Lukanin noted that the concert was not a missionary activity because no prayers or religious exercises were performed before, during, or after it. This case "showed once again that the religious regulations currently in force, which restrict the area in which churches may operate and ban unauthorized acts of worship, do not meet the modern realities and the needs of the public," Lukanin said.

The Government continued to harass and fine Hare Krishnas for illegally distributing religious literature.

The Government continued to use textbooks that promoted religious intolerance, especially toward "nontraditional" religious groups. Leaders of Protestant communities criticized language in the textbook *Basics of Home and Personal Security* as discriminatory against Protestants, particularly the chapter entitled "Beware of Sects." The chapter includes a paragraph informing students of such "sects" as Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Maria, White Brotherhood, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Ministry of Education continued to use the textbook *Man, Society, and State*, which labels Protestants and Hare Krishnas as "sects," even after protests by religious groups. The authorities promised to change the language in the next edition of the books; neither book was republished by the end of the period covered by this report.

Limited restitution of religious property occurred. There is no legal basis for restitution of property seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, and the law restricts the restitution of property being used for cultural or educational purposes. The Government did not return buildings if it had nowhere to move the current occupants. For example, most of the Jewish community's requests in previous reporting periods for the return of Minsk synagogues, which were in use as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and a beer hall, were refused. During the reporting period, Jewish communities did not request the return of additional buildings or other real estate.

In August 2007 authorities temporarily suspended the conversion of a former Bernardine monastery complex in downtown Minsk. At the end of the previous reporting period, the St. Joseph Catholic community in Minsk campaigned for the Government to return the former church and monastery buildings, which currently house the state archives and are slated to be converted into a hotel and entertainment center. The community has held regular prayer services at the site since first learning of reconstruction plans in 2004, but in March 2007 the Government announced new conversion plans, after which the community launched a petition drive. Between March 2007 and March 2008, thousands of signatures were collected on a petition calling on President Lukashenka to order the return of the complex. No decision about the future of the monastery had been reached by the end of the reporting period.

In November 2006 local authorities in Volozhyn threatened to rescind the Jewish community's right to possess a restituted yeshiva building due to lack of renovation work. The Jewish community had started renovations on the yeshiva, which had been returned to the community in the 1990s, but ran out of funds before completing them. The authorities ultimately did not confiscate the 200-year-old building after a U.S.-based committee pledged in May 2007 to raise funds to finance the renovation. No further information was available at the end of the reporting period.

### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

The Government continued to abuse the religious freedom of members of several religious groups. As in the past, 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. 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. Protestant and non-BOC Orthodox congregations were frequently fined or warned for operating illegally during the reporting period.

On June 23, 2008, Baptist minister Vladimir Burshtyn was fined \$330 (700,000 rubles) for organizing choral singing and conducting a conversation on religious topics outside of an Ushachi public market.

On April 29, 2008, three persons who were supporting the petition drive to amend the 2002 religion law were fined the equivalent of 2 months' average wages.

On April 19, 2008, a commemorative service was held in Drazhna village, Stariye Dorogi district, in which a cross was unveiled to honor the victims of a massacre by pro-Soviet partisans in 1943. On April 23, the cross was removed from the site by authorities, and civil society leader Vyacheslav Sivchik was sentenced to 15 days in jail because of his participation

in the ceremony. The author of a book about the 1943 incident was sentenced to a period of administrative arrest in May. On June 17, Leonid Okolovich, the Orthodox priest who consecrated the cross, was fined \$495 (1 million rubles).

On March 31, 2008, Denis Sadovskiy, secretary of the Belarusian Christian Democracy organizing committee, criticized the persecution of 20 members, including 1 member who was fired from Mazyr State Teachers' Training University, where he worked as an electrician. Other party activists were arrested by police during a demonstration in Minsk on March 25.

On March 10, 2008, NLC pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko was fined \$165 (350,000 rubles) for refusing to allow fire inspectors to access the church's building. Goncharenko stated that he was determined to deny access to officials until the Supreme Economic Court addresses the forced sale of NLC property, a case that was indefinitely adjourned in March 2007. NLC faced closure because authorities refused to register it at the cow barn it owned and wished to use for worship; its unregistered status made all its activities illegal. To protest a July 2006 order by the Minsk City Economic Court to sell the church building to the city at a price far below market value and to vacate the premises by October 8, 2006, NLC members and sympathizers began a 23-day hunger strike, which prompted the authorities to review their decision.

On March 10, 2008, a pastor of a Zhodino-based Protestant community called Holy Trinity Church appealed an \$82 (175,000 rubles) fine that the Zhodino City Court imposed on him on March 6 for staging an "unauthorized mass event" after his church held a concert and worship service in a local movie theater on January 24. The service, which drew an estimated 300 persons, was interrupted when ideology officials entered the hall and ordered accompanying police officers to disperse the gathering.

On February 29, 2008, authorities in Mozyr, Gomel region, warned the Jesus Christ Church (JCC) against using its prayer house for other than its intended purpose. They accused the community of carrying out "political agitation" on the premises.

On January 30, 2008, New Generation, a Protestant community in Baranovichi district, was fined \$330 (700,000 rubles) for conducting worship on a rented plot in breach of the rental contract.

A Baptist congregation in Grodno, led by Pastor Yuriy Kravchuk, was visited by police during its Harvest Festival service on October 28, 2007, and fined \$64 (140,000 rubles) on December 21 for conducting "unregistered religious activity."

On December 18, 2007, authorities issued a warning to the Protestant God's Church in Minsk. The community applied to the Minsk city government for a plot to construct a church building, and, as a result, the authorities conducted an inspection of the community's activities. They cited violations of rules for filing documents and the absence of a plaque with the community's name on the building where its legal address was registered. By the end of the reporting period, the Church was not given the plot but continued to hold services. Pastor Gennadiy Kernazhitskiy linked the decision to the community's strong support for NLC, which was locked in a land dispute with city authorities.

On December 14, 2007, three Baptist Council of Churches members in the western town of Baranovichi received fines totaling \$386 (840,000 rubles), equivalent to 2 months' average wages. Pastor Dmitriy Osiko was fined for leading an unregistered religious organization in a private home. The two homeowners, Stepan Paripa and Nikolay Pestak, were each fined more than 1 month's average wages. The congregation refused to seek state registration and officials arrived at the service to declare it illegal.

On October 26, 2007, the pastor of the Osipovichi Council of Churches congregation in the eastern Mogilyov region, Gennadiy Ryzhkov, was fined \$115 (248,000 rubles) for leading a Harvest Festival service in a private yard.

On October 12, 2007, President Lukashenka made crude, anti-Semitic remarks to Russian provincial reporters, insisting that Jewish residents had turned Babruysk, a city of 226,000 residents in the Mahilyow region, into a "pigsty." "If you were in Babruysk, you saw in what condition the city was," he said. "Entering it was a fearful experience! It was a sty! This was mainly a Jewish city. Well, you know how Jews treat the place where they're living. Look at Israel, I've been there," he said. He also called for Jews "with money" to return to live in the city.

On October 10, 2007, Pastor Dmitriy Padlobka of the 100-member Living Word Church was given an official warning by Minsk's Sovyetskiy District Public Prosecutor in Gomel for leading Sunday worship on private property without state registration, in violation of the housing code; the official stated Padlobka may face prosecution if he commits a repeat offense.

On September 30, 2007, the leader of the Charismatic Church in Gomel was warned to stop "illegal activities" after church members worshipped on private premises.

On September 23, 2007, officials entered the premises of the Evangelical Christians Holy Trinity Church in Zhodzina. Local authorities had refused permission to hold services in the building. Officials came to inspect during a service and were accused of making offensive comments, trying to photograph and record people praying, and threatening to take action against the community.

On August 24, 2007, a state official defended a fine of \$330 (700,000 rubles) imposed on Baptist Viktor Arekhau for organizing a church summer camp, which he claimed violated a law prohibiting the creation or leadership of a religious organization without state registration. Baptists in the southwestern Brest region were denied permission to rent leisure facilities they had used in previous years. When they set up a camp on private land in June, police raided the camp to question the children and threatened to close it by force.

On July 11, 2007, the Jesus Christ Church (JCC) community and its Pastor Barys Charnaglaz successfully prevented closure of the community's annual family summer camp in the Valozhyn district. On July 10, Volozhin ideology officer Igor Bobryk attempted to close the camp, demanding that tents be removed and asking for a list of the names of the more than 150 community members attending the camp. Bobryk presented an official letter requiring that the camp be closed, citing lack of required documents for its operation. Charnaglaz appealed to the Minsk region authorities and was able to prove that the community obtained legal permission and collected all the necessary papers to set up the camp. JCC members had been camping at the site for 11 years and had never before had problems with the authorities.

On July 5, 2007, police reportedly detained 19 persons seeking signatures for the petition to amend the 2002 law on religion; 14 more petitioners were detained in Budslaw, Myadzel district, Minsk region, on July 2.

Unlike in previous reporting periods, state-owned periodicals did not attack Jewish religious groups; however, the sale and distribution of anti-Semitic literature through state press distributors, government agencies, and stores affiliated with the BOC continued. Anti-Semitic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers and literature, digital video disks, and videocassettes continued to be sold at Pravoslavnaya Kniga (Orthodox Bookstore), which sells BOC literature and religious paraphernalia. The store was part of the Khristianskaya Initsiativa Company, whose general director often wrote xenophobic articles. Several other anti-Semitic titles were available at Pravoslavnaya Kniga, including Oleg Platonov's *Myths and Truth about Pogroms* and *The Mystery of the Zion Protocols: A Conspiracy Against Russia*, which claim that Judaism is hostile to Russian civilization and Christianity, that early 20th century pogroms were a Zionist provocation, and that Jews murdered Russia's leadership and unleashed terror in Soviet times.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in 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.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some positive developments in respect for religious freedom during the reporting period.

On April 29, 2008, human remains from an old Jewish cemetery discovered during excavation work near a stadium in Gomel were reburied at another local Jewish cemetery. A rabbi traveled from Israel to conduct the ceremony. Local government officials attended and facilitated the reburial.

On April 28-30, 2008, an international conference on Belarusian-Jewish dialogue took place in Minsk. Experts from Belarus, Israel, Russia, and Ukraine participated in the conference, which was organized by the Belarusian State University with the assistance of the Israeli Embassy and several Jewish organizations.

On October 5, 2007, a new prayer house of the Seventh-day Adventist Church opened in Gomel. The community did not have any conflicts with the authorities or local residents, but it took more than 6 months to settle all legal and technical issues with government agencies.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Bertone visited Minsk June 18-22, 2008. Bertone had meetings with President Lukashenka, the Metropolitan Filaret, Foreign Minister Martynov, and Leonid Gulyak, the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs. Bertone visited Pinsk and Grodno; in Minsk, he held services at St. Simon and St. Helena Church and led a Mass in the Cathedral Church of the Most Holy Virgin Mary. The cardinal consecrated the cornerstone of the St. John the Baptist Church, the first Catholic Church to be built in the city since 1910.

In June 2008, the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church (the Uniate Church) opened a religious center in Minsk. The St. Joseph Greek Catholic Center's three-story building includes a chapel, library, and other facilities. The center also reportedly offers Sunday school classes and movie screenings, as well as care for the needy.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

While some members of society tried to promote religious freedom, societal abuses and discrimination based on religious beliefs occurred, and anti-Semitism and negative attitudes toward minority religious groups persisted. Anti-Semitism is tolerated by the state, and anti-Semitic acts were only sporadically or ineffectively investigated. Neo-Nazi activity also occurred, although authorities typically characterized it as hooliganism.

On May 27, 2008, the editor of an opposition newspaper in Vitebsk received written threats from members of the neo-Nazi group Russian National Union (RNU).

On May 1, 2008, offensive inscriptions and signs were painted on the building of the New Generation Church in Baranovichi. According to the church's pastor, it was the third act of vandalism in several months. Ideology Department representatives visited the church but refused to address the case.

On April 27, 2008, the night of Orthodox Easter, 37 graves were damaged at a closed cemetery in Rogachyov, Gomel region. Sixteen crosses and 3 memorial stones were damaged; 18 other crosses were knocked down and scattered. The police instituted criminal proceedings in connection with the incident.

Several Jewish religious sites were vandalized during the reporting period.

On May 23, 2008, anti-Semitic graffiti were found on a synagogue and Jewish community center building in the town of Borisov, approximately 35 miles south of Minsk. There were no suspects at the end of the reporting period.

On April 21, 2008, a Holocaust memorial in Slutsk, Minsk region, was damaged in a vandal attack. Unknown persons splattered brown paint over the fence around the memorial, daubed 15 swastikas on the memorial using a stencil, and painted the (incorrect) birth date of Adolf Hitler. Vandals reportedly targeted the office of the Jewish community the previous year, daubing swastikas and anti-Semitic graffiti on the building.

On February 29, 2008, a young man caught spray painting swastikas on a cash machine, fence, and building stood trial. He was found guilty and received a suspended jail sentence.

On February 11, 2008, vandals set fire to wreaths and flowers laid at the memorial to Holocaust victims in Brest. The memorial has been vandalized many times since it was erected in 1992. On May 9, 2007, vandals set fire to flowers laid at the monument. Police opened a criminal case but did not identify any suspects. In February 2007 vandals desecrated the monument, but no suspects were identified. In November 2006 an explosion occurred at the same monument, which police attributed to petty hooliganism.

On January 19, 2008, the ONT television channel reported that thieves robbed the 16th-century St. Mikhail's Church in the village of Synkavichi near Slonim, Hrodna region. The thieves reportedly broke a door near the iconostasis and stole churchgoers' donations and adornments from the Mother of God icon.

In December 2007 the four members of the satanic group Bloody Moon under investigation at the end of the prior reporting period stood trial for setting fire to two churches--the successful arson attack on the St. George Orthodox Christian church in December 2006 and the attempted arson of an 18th-century Roman Catholic church in Mozyr in March 2007. Satanic graffiti were drawn on the exterior of both churches.

On October 23, 2007, vandals painted several gravestones with swastikas or black paint at a cemetery in Orsha.

On October 12, 2007, the same day President Lukashenka made highly offensive anti-Semitic remarks on national radio regarding Bobruysk, vandals smashed 15 tombstones and left human excrement at a Jewish cemetery in the city.

On August 15, 2007, four Conservative Christian Party members received threatening letters signed by a local chapter of the Russian National Union (RNU), Russia's ultranationalist group, which still existed despite being officially dissolved in 2000. Authorities refused to institute criminal proceedings. One member's son was beaten up on a Vitsyebk street in November 2007; RNU activists were suspected.

The Jewish community continued to express concern over the concept of a "greater Slavic union" popular among ultranationalist organizations active in the country, including the RNU. Jewish leaders petitioned the authorities to investigate neo-Nazi activities, citing continued vandalism, anti-Semitic graffiti, and threats to civil society and religious congregations. There was limited progress compared to previous reporting periods.

According to the Gomel KGB press section, one of the leaders of the Gomel RNU branch, Mikhail Yakovchuk, was charged in July 2007 with acting on behalf of an unregistered organization and sentenced to 6 months of detention. The case was initiated in 2006 when Yakovchuk received an official warning but failed to stop his activities, continuing to produce and disseminate campaign materials and attempting to build membership for his organization. Another member of the RNU was also charged but escaped and went into hiding.

The official BOC website honors Gavril Belostokskiy, a young child allegedly murdered by Jews near Grodno in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. A memorial prayer to be said on the anniversary of his death alleges the "martyred and courageous" Gavril "exposed Jewish dishonesty."

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Embassy staff maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups and met with resident and visiting U.S. citizens of various affiliations to discuss religious freedom issues in the country. Embassy officials attended several events hosted by religious groups, including the unveiling of religious monuments, and attended a seminar on amending the 2002 religion law. The Embassy demonstrated support for religious freedom by attending trials of persons persecuted for religious reasons. The U.S. Government denounced incidents of anti-Semitism and took action to help prevent future acts, including following up on reports of desecrated Jewish memorial sites and cemeteries. The Embassy monitored the continuing sale of anti-Semitic and xenophobic literature in stores and at events linked with the BOC and state media distributors. Embassy officials regularly included stops at religious sites during regional travel.

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with representatives of other foreign diplomatic missions to demonstrate solidarity in their support for religious freedom.

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