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U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Belarus

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BELARUS

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in practice. Although Article 16 of the 1996 amended Constitution, which resulted from an illegal referendum used by President Alexandr 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."

Since his election as the country's first president in July 1994, President Lukashenko has pursued a deliberate policy of favoring the Orthodox Church as the country's chief religion. The Government and the President encourage a greater role for the 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. The President grants the Orthodox Church special financial advantages that other denominations do not enjoy and has declared the preservation and development of Orthodox Christianity a "moral necessity." During a visit by Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Aleksei II in September 1998, Lukashenko pledged state assistance for the construction of Orthodox churches. According to an independent Russian press report, Lukashenko stressed to the Patriarch that Orthodoxy would remain the country's "main religion," and that Christian values should become "the state ideology of Belarus."

The Government's State Committee on Religious and National Affairs (SCRNA), which was established in January 1997, appears to categorize religions and denominations. Some are viewed as "traditional," including Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam (as practiced by a small community of ethnic Tatars with roots in the country dating back to the 11th century); some are viewed as "nontraditional," including some Protestant and other faiths; and some are viewed as "sects," including Eastern religions and other faiths. The authorities deny permission to register legally at the national level to some faiths considered to be nontraditional, and to all considered to be sects. Without legal registration, it is extremely difficult to rent or purchase property in order to hold religious services.

While all registered religious organizations enjoy tax-exempt status, any government

subsidies appear limited principally to the Orthodox Church.

Seven decades of religious repression under the Soviet regime have resulted in a culture that is secular in orientation. According to one opinion poll taken during 1998, fewer than half of the population believe in God. Nonetheless, between 60 and 80 percent identify for cultural or historical reasons with the Russian Orthodox Church. The SCRNA indicates that about 80 percent of all believers belong to this Church.

Belarus was designated an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989, thereby creating the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Patriarchal Exarch Filaret celebrated his 20th anniversary as head of the Orthodox community on October 24, 1998. Under Filaret's leadership, the number of Orthodox parishes scattered throughout the country has grown from approximately 787 to 1,081 during the last 5 years.

During a religious conference held in Minsk on April 22, 1999, Filaret stated that the Orthodox Church does not seek the role of interconfessional leader or to become a state-run church. However, he stressed that the Orthodox Church would cooperate only with religious faiths that have "historical roots" in the country. Filaret also remarked that he was against the "invasion of those foreign religions that corrupt souls."

Situated between Poland and Russia, Belarus historically has been an area of interaction, as well as competition and conflict, between Russian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Between 8 and 20 percent of the country's population (the second largest religious grouping) are estimated to be either practicing Roman Catholics or to identify themselves with the Roman Catholic Church. Cardinal Kazmierz Swiatek, Archbishop of the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese, heads the approximately 400 Roman Catholic parishes.

As a result of its revival during the post-Soviet period, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced a shortage of qualified native clergy. The Church reportedly has had difficulty sometimes getting permission from government authorities to bring in a sufficient number of foreign religious workers, mostly from Poland, to make up for the shortage. According to the independent media, the Lukashenko government has allowed the Catholic Church to open a seminary and indicated that, in light of this development, foreign priests no longer would be allowed to work in the country; however, this change may not be enforced at the local level, and at least some priests still are allowed to work in the country. Bishops must receive permission from the SCRNA before transferring a foreign priest to another parish.

Roman Catholics traditionally have been associated with the country's ethnic Polish community, which currently numbers at least 400,000 persons. Although Roman Catholic parishes can be found throughout the country, most Roman Catholics reside in areas located in the west, near the border with Poland. Sensitive to the dangers of its being viewed as a "foreign" church or some kind of political threat, Cardinal Swiatek, who himself spent 10 years in a Soviet labor camp, has tried to keep the Roman Catholic Church out of the country's internal political problems. The Cardinal has prohibited the display of Polish national symbols in churches and encouraged the use of Belarusian, rather than Polish, in church services.

It is estimated that approximately 120,000 citizens were considered as ethnic Jews near the end of the Soviet period in 1989. The current Jewish population numbers between 60,000 and 80,000. At least half of the present Jewish population are estimated to live in or near the capital city of 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.

Although growing in number, adherents of Protestant faiths probably number in the tens-of-thousands, a relatively small percentage of the population. Since 1990 the number of Protestant congregations has increased by more than twofold to over 600, according to the SCRNA. Protestant faiths, although historically small in comparison with Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, have been active for hundreds of years. During the Soviet period, a number of Protestant faiths were placed under the

administrative roof of a joint Pentecostal-Baptist organization. At present the two largest Protestant groups fall under what are now separate Pentecostal and Baptist Unions. Protestant congregations are located throughout the country.

There are a few congregations of the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church, which was once the majority religion. The Uniate Church was established in the 16th century and once had a membership of approximately three-quarters of the population, until it was banned by the Russian Government in 1839. An attempt following Belarusian independence to revive the Church, which maintains Orthodox rituals but recognizes the Pope as its spiritual leader, so far has met with mixed success. Its emphasis on the use of the Belarusian language, the promotion of which is associated with the opposition Belarusian Popular Front, as well as historical tensions between the Uniate and Orthodox churches, reportedly has caused the Uniate Church to be viewed with suspicion by the Lukashenko Government.

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, was reestablished in early 1994); Jehovah's Witnesses; Apostolic Christian; Calvinist; and Lutheran.

The SCRNA claims that 26 religious confessions are registered officially. In practice, however, not all of these appear to be registered nationally as religions, a status that would permit them to open churches and freely conduct religious services.

There was some deterioration in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Although their full effect remains as yet unclear, restrictive regulations governing the activities of foreign clergy and religious workers were passed by the Council of Ministers in February 1999. There also appeared to be a general tightening in the implementation of existing regulations on this subject.

The Government denies some minority religious faiths permission to register officially and treats them as sects. For example, authorities have denied the repeated registration attempts of a branch of the Belarus Orthodox Autocephalous Church. During a seminar held in Minsk in late 1998, SCRNA official Vyacheslav Savitskiy announced that "11 destructive religious organizations, which have been denied registration after expert examination, illegally function in the country." He indicated that the 11 sects, estimated to have approximately 1,500 members, had tried to go underground by registering as "charitable organizations." A conference organized by the Orthodox Church and President Lukashenko's National Assembly in April 1999 discussed such topics as the need to introduce appropriate legislation to combat "destructive sects" that operate illegally in the country.

The Government states that it denies such groups permission to register as religious organizations because their activities "run counter to the Constitution." Without official registration, religious faiths have great difficulty renting or purchasing property in which to establish places of worship, or in openly training clergy. Some religious groups that have not been able to register have had services or religious meetings, which were being conducted peacefully in private homes, disrupted by police. A number of nontraditional Protestant and other faiths have not attempted to register because they do not believe that their applications would be approved. The publication of religious literature for nonregistered religions would in practice likely be restricted, especially at state-controlled publishing houses. Moreover, practice of a faith not viewed to be traditional, especially one not permitted to register, could disadvantage possible advancement within the bureaucracy or state sector. However, government employees are not required to take any kind of religious oath or practice elements of a particular faith.

On December 4, 1998, the Minsk City Court Presidium reinstated a 3-year sentence for "malicious hooliganism" handed down in August to Petro Hushcha, the head of a branch of the Belarusian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (BOAC). The sentence had been suspended on October 13 after a judge found it to be excessively severe. Hushcha was arrested in March 1998 originally on charges of alleged lewd behavior in front of minors.

Some have alleged that these charges, as well as earlier convictions dating from the Soviet period, really were motivated by Hushcha's involvement in antigovernment political activities. Rather than return to prison, Hushcha went into hiding in December.

Citizens are not prohibited from proselytizing; however, the Government enforces a July 1995 Council of Ministers decree that controls religious workers in an attempt to protect Orthodoxy and prevent the growth of evangelical religions. A 1997 Council of Ministers directive prohibits teaching religion at youth camps. In February 1999, the Council of Ministers passed Decree No. 280 which expanded upon these earlier regulations. The Decree appears to stipulate, among other things, that only foreign clergymen (not female religious workers) may engage in religious work upon invitation from a religious organization already officially registered. However, it is not yet clear whether this new decree actually has gone into effect or to what extent the authorities may enforce it in the future.

Foreigners generally are prohibited from preaching or heading churches, at least with respect to what the Government views as nontraditional faiths or sects, which include Protestant groups. Foreign missionaries may not engage in religious activities outside the institutions that invited them. One-year validity, multiple-entry, "spiritual activities" visas, which are required officially of foreign missionaries, can be difficult to get, even for faiths that registered with the Government and have a long history in the country. Foreign clergy or religious workers who do not register with the authorities or who have 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. Approval often involves a difficult bureaucratic process. In September 1997, a Belarusian Baptist pastor was arrested for allowing a foreigner to lead a prayer group under the pastor's auspices. The pastor subsequently was released.

Senior government officials, including the President and the state media, sometimes have used anti-Semitic language in their attacks on perceived opponents. During a television interview given in Moscow in December 1998, in which he criticized Russian financier and then-Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Boris Berezovskiy, President Lukashenko stated that Berezovskiy's activities, "might result in Jewish pogroms in Russia." Lukashenko also remarked that "the main anti-Semites in Russia are representatives of the Jewish population." According to the Anti-Defamation League and the World Jewish Congress, in March 1998 material from The Protocols of the Elders of Zion was included in a government-controlled religious broadcast. In spite of protests from the Jewish community, the program was rebroadcast in May and again in July. At the time of former National Bank Chairwoman Tamara Vinnikova's arrest in 1997 for alleged malfeasance, the state media made insinuations about a previous trip to Israel.

However, government authorities in general appear to try to maintain good relations with leaders of the Jewish community. Following an arson attack on April 11, 1999 at the main synagogue in Minsk (see Section II), police reportedly responded quickly. On April 16, the SCRNA agreed to a four-point plan with the head of the Union of Jewish Religious Organizations of Belarus to combat anti-Semitism. It remains unclear to what extent SCRNA may implement this plan.

The Government does not require religious instruction in public schools. While individuals may speak freely about their religious beliefs, the authorities would be likely to prevent, interfere with, or punish individuals who proselytize on behalf of a nonregistered religion.

Restitution of religious property remained limited during the period covered by this report. A key obstacle is the lack of a legal basis for restitution of property that was seized during the Soviet era and the Nazi occupation. 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 on the issue. Over the past several years, the Jewish community has lobbied the Government successfully to return several properties in Minsk and other cities. However, most properties have not been

returned. In August 1998, following extensive restoration, the Catholic community reconsecrated a church in Pruzhany that had been shut down by Soviet authorities following World War II. The consecration ceremony was led by the church's former priest who had spent 10 years in prison in Siberia during the Soviet period. The Orthodox Church appears to have had the most success on the issue of property restitution.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

There are, for the most part, amicable relations among registered, so-called traditional, religious communities. In late January 1998, at the invitation of the Orthodox Church, the chairman of the Union of Bishop and Catholic Conferences of European Countries led a delegation to Belarus to discuss the possibility of increasing dialog and cooperation between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

Societal anti-Semitism exists but usually is not manifested openly. However, there have been some instances of vandalism that appeared related to anti-Semitism. Senior government officials, including the President, and the state media sometimes have used anti-Semitic language in their attacks on perceived opponents (See Section I). 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. The State Committee on the Press issued an official warning in June 1999 to the local newspaper *Lichnost* for anti-Semitic articles. Anti-Semitic material from Russia also circulates widely. In April 1999 there was an arson attempt on the synagogue in Minsk (see Section I), during which a door to the structure sustained minor damage and the graffiti, "kill Yids, save Russia," was spray painted on a wall. In February 1998, vandals smashed 35 tombs and monuments in a Jewish cemetery in the town of Rechitsa in the Gomel region. Local officials reportedly have failed to come up with any leads in this case or in a similar incident, in which over 50 tombs were vandalized in the same cemetery in 1997. According to the Anti-Defamation League and the World Jewish Congress, desecration of Jewish cemeteries also took place in Borisov and Orsha in April 1998, in Gomel and Berezino in July 1998, and in Brest in August 1998, where a memorial to Holocaust victims was desecrated.

Many persons in the Jewish community remain concerned that the Lukashenko Government'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" are well received and supported by anti-Semitic, neo-Fascist organizations in Russia. For example, the organization, Russian National Unity, has an active local branch. Its literature is distributed in public places in Minsk. The concept of a "Greater Slavic Union," the leadership of which Lukashenko seeks, is a source of concern to the Jewish community given the nature of support that it engenders.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

Representatives of the U.S. Embassy have had frequent contacts with leaders and members of religious communities throughout the period covered by this report. There are several areas of pressing human rights concerns related to increasing political repression. Most local human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) do not focus significant resources on the issue of religious freedom. However, the Embassy was in contact a number of times during 1998 with the Belarusian Interconfessional Association, a small human rights NGO located in Minsk that has looked into some topics related to religious freedom.

The Embassy has raised problems of religious freedom with the Government in the context of frequent demarches on the overall poor human rights situation in the country. Opinions differ between and within local religious groups as to how best to try to address problems encountered with government authorities. Given continued political repression, many groups, especially minority religious faiths, prefer to try to maintain a low profile.

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[Table of Contents](#) | [Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) | [Department of State](#)