

BELARUS

USCIRF continues to monitor the situation in Belarus, where the government tightly regulates religious communities through an extensive security and religious affairs bureaucracy, which has driven some groups underground. Officials are particularly hostile towards religious groups viewed as political opponents, such as Protestants. The government strictly controls foreign citizens who conduct religious activity, particularly Catholic priests. While close cooperation between the state and the majority Orthodox Church has led to reli-

gious freedom violations, citizens reportedly do not suffer religious discrimination in access to public services. There is no legal provision for conscientious objection to military service, and the religious rights of prisoners – even those on death row – are routinely denied.

in the city of Gomel, a city court fined four Baptists in January 2014; their fines were upheld one month later. Use of houses of worship and any public exercise of religion requires state permission, which is rarely granted for disfavored groups, particularly Protestants. Orthodox and Catholic communities are less affected, partly due to the state's more positive view of them, but also because they are more likely to occupy historic churches. The New Life Church, a 1,000-member Pentecostal congregation in Minsk, has struggled since 2002

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Government control

A government agency, headed by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, oversees an extensive bureaucracy to regulate religious groups; each of the country's six regions employs multiple religious affairs officials, as does Minsk city. Officials from local Ideology Departments and the Belarusian secret police (which retains the Soviet-era title of Committee for State Security (KGB)) are also involved in religious controls. The 2002 religion law, which includes compulsory state registration of all communities and geographical limits on religious activity, is central to a wide web of regulations which tethers all registered religious groups.

Religious meetings in private homes must not occur regularly or involve large numbers. After a late 2013 police raid on a Baptist Sunday worship meeting

to keep control of its private church property, a renovated cow barn that authorities claim cannot officially be used as a church.

Unregistered religious activity is usually treated as an administrative offense punishable by a fine. Since registration is compulsory, the religion law makes no provision for those which do not wish to register, such as the Council of Churches Baptists and a similar Pentecostal group. A religious group found to have violated the religion law must correct the alleged violation within six months and not repeat it for one year or face closure. There is no legal avenue for religious groups to challenge such warnings, as the Belarus Constitutional Court noted in April 2007. After that court's decision, Jehovah's Witnesses have often tried, but failed, to establish the legal right to challenge such rulings.

Actions against Foreign Religious Leaders

In his annual report released in January 2014, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, accused unnamed foreign Catholic priests working in Belarus of holding services outside regions of

official registration, failing to understand the state languages (Russian and Belarusian), and drunken driving. He also threatened not to prolong their visas, according

the U.S. government should publicly raise Belarusian religious freedom violations at appropriate international fora, such as the OSCE and the UN, particularly the need to reform the religion law.

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to Forum 18 News Service. The Belarusian Catholic community called these accusations “slanderous.” The number of foreign Catholic priests (who are mostly from Poland) declined from 126 to 113 between September 2014 and January 2015. Polish priest Fr. Roman Schulz’s permit to remain in his Mogilev parish was extended by six months, until June 2015, only after members of the parish protested. The government also has refused to allow a Baptist seminary to invite religious lecturers from the United States. A court warned two Jehovah’s Witnesses that as foreigners they had no right to speak publicly about their faith.

Fr. Vladislav Lazar of the Descent of the Holy Spirit Catholic parish in Minsk Region’s Borisov was arrested for espionage in May 2013. He was held six months almost incommunicado at the Minsk KGB secret police investigation prison before being transferred to house arrest in December 2013. During his imprisonment, Fr. Lazar was denied a Bible, prayer book, rosary, and family visits; he was finally allowed one visit from the Apostolic Nuncio to Belarus. The investigation against Fr. Lazar seems to have been dropped in June 2014 due to lack of evidence, but no official announcement was made; he has been allowed to return to work in his parish.

Recommendations

Since Ukraine was invaded by Russian forces in 2014, Belarus has hosted several high level international meetings on the crisis. These meetings have included State Department representatives, even though the United States has not had an ambassador in Belarus since 2008. With such increased U.S. government engagement with Belarus, USCIRF recommends the State Department raise concerns about religious freedom and related human rights with them. In addition,