

BELARUS 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants individuals freedom to profess and practice any religious belief but prohibits religious activities directed against the sovereignty of the state, its constitutional system, and “civic harmony.” The law recognizes the “determining role” of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC). A concordat grants the BOC rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, although the law also acknowledges the historical importance of the “traditional” faiths of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. By law, all registered religious groups must seek permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing activities, and must obtain prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups. The government continued to detain or fine individuals for proselytizing, including a Baptist couple in Lepel who were singing Christian songs and distributing Christian literature. Police also detained Jehovah’s Witnesses and a Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox priest for proselytizing in public. Minority religious groups continued to have difficulty registering. Some groups remained reluctant to apply for registration, reportedly due to fear of harassment and punishment. The government continued its surveillance of minority and unregistered religious groups. Human rights groups said that while BOC and some Roman Catholic clergy had access to prisoners of their faiths, Muslim and Protestant clergy and clergy from nontraditional faiths did not. Minority religious groups said they continued to have difficulties acquiring buildings to use as houses of worship. Roman Catholic groups reported the government denied visas and requests to extend the stay of some foreign missionaries.

Authorities convicted a number of individuals reportedly associated with neo-Nazi or skinhead movements for inciting ethnic and religious hatred against Jews and other religious minorities. On February 27, a court in the Vitsyebsk region sentenced a resident in Navapolatsk to three years in prison for posting videos on his social media featuring mass killings of Jews in the Holocaust and skinheads beating Muslims. In a similar case, authorities convicted an individual from the Baranavichy district for posting videos with anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim content and sentenced him to a year and a month in jail on April 18. Jewish community leaders continued to express concern about the BOC’s annual commemoration of a young child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690 as one of its saints and martyrs. Despite a government ban, anti-Semitic print and video material

continued to be imported from Russia and available locally. Interdenominational Christian groups worked together on charitable projects and programs. In a televised interview in November BOC Metropolitan Pavel said Baptists were “a sect,” focused on their “missionary activities,” and called them “annoying” and accused them of spreading “propaganda and not preaching.” The head of the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Leanid Mikhovich, called the Metropolitan’s remarks “unacceptable.”

In October U.S. embassy officials and a visiting U.S. delegation that included the Chair of the U.S. Commission on Protection of America’s Heritage Abroad and the Deputy Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with officials from the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs as well as prosecutors to discuss concerns related to preservation of Jewish heritage sites. The delegation also participated in the Foreign Ministry-sponsored international roundtable to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the destruction of the Minsk ghetto on October 22. Also in October the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs met with senior government officials for discussions that included religious freedom concerns. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with Jewish groups to discuss anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage. Embassy officials also met with Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other groups, as well as with civil society activists and lawyers for religious groups, to discuss government restrictions on registration and the activities of minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.5 million (July 2018 estimate). According to a January 2016 survey by the state Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration, approximately 53 percent of the adult population belongs to the BOC and 6 percent to the Roman Catholic Church. According to the state survey, 8 percent of the adult population is atheist, and 22 percent is “uncertain.” Smaller religious groups together constituting approximately 2 percent of the population include: Jews; Muslims; Greek Catholics (“Uniates”); Old Believers (priestist and priestless); members of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, and other Orthodox Christian groups, Lutherans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Presbyterians and other Protestant groups, Armenian Apostolics, Latin Catholics, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha’is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Buddhists. Jewish groups state there are

between 30,000 and 40,000 Jews. Ethnic Poles, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the population, tend to be Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess any religious beliefs and to participate in the performance of acts of worship not prohibited by law. It stipulates all faiths are equal before the law. The constitution states relations between the state and religious organizations 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.” It prohibits activities by religious groups that are directed against the country’s sovereignty, its constitutional system, and civic harmony; involve a violation of civil rights and liberties; “impede the execution of state, public, and family duties” by its citizens; or are detrimental to public health and morality. The constitution states the law shall determine the conditions for exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) regulates all religious matters.

The law recognizes the “determining role” of the BOC, an Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the development of the traditions of the people, as well as the historical importance of religious groups commonly referred to as “traditional” faiths: Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law does not consider as traditional faiths newer religious groups or older groups such as the priestless Old Believers, Greek Catholics (Uniates), and the Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century.

A concordat between the government and the BOC provides the BOC with 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.” Although it states it does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, the concordat calls for the government and the BOC to combat unnamed “pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society.” The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives state subsidies. In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word

“orthodox” in its title and to use as its symbol the double-barred image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the country’s patron saint.

The concordat also serves as the framework for agreements between the BOC and individual state agencies. There are at least a dozen such agreements, including an agreement with the Ministry of Education covering cooperation on education through 2020 and providing for joint projects for the “spiritual and moral education” of students based on BOC traditions and history.

The law establishes three tiers of registered religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities must include at least 20 persons over the age of 18 who live in one or several adjoining areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious communities, one 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 may be formed only when they comprise active religious communities in at least four of the country’s six regions.

According to government data as of January 1, 2017, (the most recent data available), there are 25 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,350 religious communities and 174 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,681 religious communities, 15 dioceses, seven schools, 35 monasteries, 15 brotherhoods, and 10 sisterhoods. The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, five schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 496 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 14 denominations have 1,033 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions, and five schools. There are 33 registered religious communities of Old Believers. There are three Jewish religious associations – Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism – comprising 52 communities, including 10 autonomous communities. In addition, 24 Muslim religious communities – 23 Sunni and one Shia – are registered.

National religious associations include the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Old Believers Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, Association of New Apostolic Churches, Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches, Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, Jewish Religious Union, Association of Jewish Religious Communities, Union of Reform Judaism Communities, Muslim Religious Association, Spiritual Board of Muslims, and the Religious Association of Baha’is.

To register, a religious community must submit an official application with the following information: a list of its founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of its founding statutes; the minutes of its founding meeting; and permission from the regional authorities confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property referenced in its founding statutes. A religious group not previously registered by the government must also submit information about its beliefs. The law stipulates authorities may take up to six months to review a new registration application due to an additional evaluation of the religion by a state-appointed religious commission of experts. The commission evaluates the fundamental teachings of the religion; rituals, practices, history, and forms and methods of activities; welfare and charitable services; proselytizing and missionary activities; approaches towards marriage and family; educational activities; attitudes toward health care; and compliance with legal requirements. In addition, the community must submit any texts written by its founder or considered sacred by the followers of the religion, information about prohibitions on clergy or adherents, a list of countries where the religion is widely practiced, and a list of countries officially recognizing the religion. It also must submit information about countries that have refused to recognize the religion and information about court cases against followers of the religion in other countries.

Regional government authorities, as well as Minsk city authorities or local municipal authorities (for groups outside of Minsk), review all registration applications. Permissible grounds for denial of registration are broad and include failure to comply with requirements for establishing a community, an inconsistent or fraudulent charter or other required document, violations of the procedures to establish religious organizations, or a negative evaluation by the state-appointed religious commission of experts. Communities may appeal refusals in court.

In order to register as a religious association or national religious association, a group must provide an official application with a copy of the founding statutes, a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and the minutes from its founding congress. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions and organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applications to establish religious associations and national associations must be submitted to OPRRNA, which has 30 days to respond. Grounds for refusal are the same as for religious communities except they also include failure to comply with requirements for establishing an association rather

than a community. Refusals or a failure by OPRRNA to respond within the 30-day period may be appealed in court.

The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered. The law permits state agencies in charge of registration to issue written warnings to a registered religious group for violating any law or undertaking activities outside the scope of responsibilities in the group's charter. The government may apply to a relevant court, depending upon jurisdiction, to shut down the group if it has not ceased the illegal activity outlined in the written warning within six months or if the activity is repeated within one year of the warning. The government may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court's decision. The law contains no provision for appeal of the warning or suspension.

The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups and subjects group members to penalties ranging from unspecified fines to two years in prison.

The housing code permits religious groups to hold services at residential premises if local authorities grant permission. The local authorities must certify the premises comply with a number of regulations, including fire safety, sanitary, and health code requirements. The government does not grant such permission automatically, and the law does not permit religious groups to hold services in private residences without prior permission from local authorities.

By law, all religious groups must obtain permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing.

The law requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The approval process includes official examination of the documents by state-appointed religious studies experts.

Although there is no law providing for a systematic restitution process for property, including religious property, seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, groups may apply for the restitution of property to local authorities. The law on religion specifically bans the restitution of seized property currently used for cultural or sports purposes.

The law permits associations and national associations to establish schools to train clergy; however, it does not permit religious communities to do so.

The law permits only registered religious groups that are members of national religious associations to organize extracurricular religious activities at educational institutions. The law states the national religious association must first conclude an agreement on cooperation with the Ministry of Education; the BOC is currently the only religious group to have such an agreement. Students who wish to participate in voluntary “moral, civic, and patriotic education” in collaboration with religious groups must either provide a written statement expressing their desire to participate or secure their legal guardians’ approval. According to the law, “such education shall raise awareness among the youth against any religious groups whose activities are aimed at undermining Belarus’ sovereignty, civic accord, and constitutional system or at violating human rights and freedoms.”

The law prohibits religious groups from conducting activities in any school without identifying themselves. It also prohibits visits from representatives of foreign religious groups; missionary activities; collections of donations or fees from students for religious groups or any charity; distribution of religious literature, audio, video, and other religious materials; holding prayer services, religious rituals, rites, or ceremonies; and placing religious symbols or paraphernalia at educational institutions.

The law does not allow private religious elementary, junior, or senior high schools or homeschooling for religious reasons.

The law establishes penalties ranging from fines to five years in prison for failure to fulfill mandatory military service, with an exemption for conscientious objectors for religious reasons. The law allows alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. By law, individuals who evade alternative civilian service may face up to five years in prison.

Only registered religious associations may apply to OPRR for permission to invite foreign clergy to the country. OPRR must grant permission before foreign religious workers may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, or participate in charitable work. The government generally grants such permission for a period of one year, which may be reduced or extended. OPRR has 30 days to respond to requests for foreign clergy permits (religious visas) and may deny requests without explanation. There is no provision for appeals.

By law, the government permits foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity only in the territorial area where their religious association is registered. Transfers

of foreign clergy within a religious association, including from one parish to another, require prior government permission. By law, foreigners may not lead religious groups. The authorities may reprimand or expel foreign citizens who officially are present in the country for nonreligious work if they lead any religious activities. Law enforcement agencies on their own initiative or in response to recommendations from other government entities, such as the security service, may require foreign clergy to depart the country.

The law does not restrict religious groups from raising donations in public.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported that on October 27, police in Lepel in the Vitsyebsk Region detained Baptist husband and wife Andrei and Tatsyana Fokin, who were singing Christian songs and distributing Christian literature. Authorities charged both with violating procedures for organizing a mass event or demonstration and fined the husband 661.5 rubles (\$310) and the wife 539 rubles (\$250). Andrei Fokin said he and his wife were still in debt from 2017 fines levied following their detention in 2017 for similar activities.

According to Forum 18 and the Jehovah's Witnesses, authorities in Rahachou in Homyel Region detained Jehovah's Witnesses Tamara Vitkouskaya and Volha Hrapava on March 24 as they were distributing religious literature, charging them with illegal picketing. On May 16, the Rahachou District Court fined the two Witnesses 49 rubles (\$23) each, and the Homyel Regional Court dismissed their subsequent appeals in June.

Forum 18 also reported that on November 26, authorities detained for 24 hours Father 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. Forum 18 stated that on November 30, a Minsk district court found Vikentsy not guilty and closed the case.

The government continued surveillance on minority religious groups of various Protestant denominations. According to various observers, government "ideology officers" (officials in charge of implementing political and social government policies) continued to monitor the activities of members of unregistered religious

groups in their workplaces, although there were no reports of prosecutions. Government officials reportedly had occasional “informal” talks with members of religious groups to learn about their activities. According to religious leaders, state security officers also continued to attend religious services of registered Protestant communities to conduct surveillance, which group members described as intimidation and harassment. The Roman Catholic Church expressed concerns that in some regions of the country local ideology officers requested the church provide them with Sunday school programs and lists of children attending them. According to the independent Belarusian Christian news portal krynica.info, local authorities in some regions summoned Catholic priests for questioning after they held services to honor the anniversary of the 1918 establishment of the Belarusian National Republic on March 25.

Christian groups continued to state the registration requirements for religious groups remained complex and difficult to fulfill, which they said restricted their activities, suppressed freedom of religion, and legalized criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs. The government’s guidelines for evaluating registration applications remained sufficiently broad, they said, to continue to give authorities a pretext for denying applications from groups they considered unacceptable.

During the year, authorities in Barysau, Slonim and Vileika rejected applications from Jehovah’s Witnesses communities. Authorities also continued to deny registration to several Protestant religious communities, including a community within the Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches in Maladzechna. On July 6 and then on August 30, city authorities denied an independent Pentecostal community’s applications for registration in two separate locations in Minsk. In both cases, officials stated that locations provided by the community did not comply with regulations, but did not explain their refusals in detail. The community filed an appeal on October 18, which was denied in December.

Independent religious experts continued to report minority religious groups remained reluctant to apply for registration because members continued to be unwilling to provide their names as part of the application process due to fear of harassment and punishment by the authorities. Additionally, a number of them said they did not report registration denials because they believed that if they did not publicize the denials, they might still be able to negotiate their communities’ registration with local authorities.

In November the UN Human Rights Committee recommended the state repeal the requirement of mandatory state registration of religious communities, but the state had taken no action as of the end of the year.

Many unregistered religious groups stated they continued to maintain a low profile because of what they believed to be government hostility and due to fear of criminal prosecution. According to independent religious experts, many registered religious communities also remained reluctant to report abuses and restrictions because of fear of punishment.

Nontraditional religious groups continued to state the procedure for registering and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and arbitrary. Authorities continued to deny permission for a registered Jehovah's Witness community in Homyel to hold religious services at a private home, but continued to allow it to hold services at rented premises. In October the local government in the city of Mahilyou allowed a local Jehovah's Witness community to hold religious services at rented premises. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, in August the Mahilyou Regional Executive Committee issued a warning notice to the local community for engaging in illegal religious activity and meeting in places that were not designated for worship and without authorization from the local authorities.

Human rights groups reported prison administrators continued to deny Muslim and Protestant clergy, and in some cases Roman Catholic clergy, as well as clergy from nontraditional faiths (any faiths not among the four recognized as "traditional"), permission to visit inmates in prison. At the same time, they said, authorities continued to grant BOC, and in some cases Catholic clergy, permission to visit believers in prison on a regular basis, and many prisons had designated Orthodox religious facilities.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported Minsk city officials approved a request from the national association for a convention to take place in the city July 27 to 29. Approximately 9,000 members attended the convention without hindrance, compared with approximately 7,300 the previous year. In November, however, authorities in a Minsk district denied a Jehovah's Witnesses community group's application to hold a convention for its Minsk city community of approximately 1,000 members at a local cultural center on November 24-25. In Vitsyebsk, authorities denied a request from the Jehovah's Witnesses to hold a local convention in November. In each case, authorities did not give a reason for the denial.

Authorities in the town of Radashkovichi allowed the Full Gospel Christian Church's "Youth With A Mission" group to hold its Christian youth conference at a local facility April 27-May 1.

Religious groups, especially Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to what they said was the general atmosphere of intimidation and fear of punishment. In contrast, Orthodox literature remained available countrywide. The BOC remained able to proselytize freely and, unlike other religious groups, continued to participate in government-sponsored public events such as rallies without the need to seek prior approval from authorities. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, on March 30, the Brest Regional Executive Committee issued a notice to the Brest Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses, warning the community it had distributed printed religious material at unauthorized locations. The Jehovah's Witnesses stated the warning did not refer to any specific incidents.

While the national government approved the import of the Jehovah's Witnesses' requested literature during the year, local governments in Brest and Mahilyou issued written warnings to communities against proselytizing. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, adherents generally had to wait three months before receiving permission to import new religious periodicals.

Religious groups continued to report problems purchasing properties as places of worship. They continued to say that converting residential property to religious use also remained difficult. Renting a public facility to hold religious services remained difficult as well. For example, some Protestant communities continued to report they were able to conclude only short-term lease agreements with the owners of the facilities the communities rented, which allowed authorities to pressure owners to terminate or not renew lease agreements as a means of preventing religious activities. Protestant groups stated they continued to be more severely affected than other groups in this regard because they were less likely to own religious facilities and they could not apply for permission to conduct religious activities in private homes because these residences were too small to accommodate their numbers.

The government continued to require students to use textbooks that representatives of nontraditional religious groups said promoted intolerance towards them, citing chapters in the books that labeled such groups as "sects." The textbooks described

nontraditional religious groups as “striving for the exclusiveness of their role, doctrine, and principles,” being isolationist, and claiming to be God-chosen, among other things.

According to media reports, school administrators continued to cooperate only with the BOC among registered religious groups, based on the BOC’s concordat with the government. School administrators continued to invite BOC priests to lecture to students, organize tours of BOC facilities, and participate in BOC festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects.

On August 28, the Catholic Diocese of Hrodna received a certificate granting registration to Saint Kazimir’s College of Theology in Hrodna. The college became the fifth Roman Catholic institute of higher education in the country.

Religious groups said the government continued to apply visa regulations in ways restricting the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country. Forum 18 reported OPRRNA rejected applications in the spring from the BOC’s Vitsyebsk Diocese for two Orthodox priests from Russia.

Local human rights portals stated that on April 30, the government expelled Polish Catholic priest Krzysztof Poswiata, who ministered in the town of Hatava near Minsk, after authorities refused to extend his permission to serve. Poswiata reportedly received three speeding tickets in 2018, which authorities told Forum 18 was the reason for his expulsion. Forum 18 reported that on June 4, OPRRNA rejected the application of the Catholic Diocese of Vitsyebsk for Polish priest Karol Prandzioch to serve at a parish in Shumilina, replacing another Polish priest who was leaving voluntarily. Father Uladzimir Razanovich, secretary of the Vitsyebsk Diocesan administration, told Forum 18 that unofficially, the government wanted local religious communities to train local citizens as clergy rather than having foreigners.

According to Catholic Archbishop of Minsk Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, foreign priests faced multiple challenges, including: newly arrived priests had to undergo a lengthy approval process before obtaining permission to celebrate Mass; the government often issued them visas for only three to six months; and they often encountered administrative difficulties when trying to renew visas.

A representative of the Polish community in Hrodna told the press on July 26 that local authorities denied Polish priest Ryszard Umanski entrance into the country,

saying he did not have a religious visa. In applying for the visa, he reportedly said the visit would be private and not related to any religious activity.

There were no developments regarding the longstanding freeze placed on the assets of New Life Church in 2005. Minsk authorities did not renew their attempts to evict the church from its premises, a process that began in 2007 and continued through 2012 after the authorities refused to register the church at its location. While the church continued to use the space for religious purposes, it remained unable to obtain proof of ownership from the authorities and had no access to electricity. Church leadership's discussions with Minsk city authorities on the status and operations of the church were continuing at year's end.

The authorities continued to permit the BOC to collect charitable donations in public as well as on its religious property. While the law does not restrict other religious groups from raising donations in public, representatives of these groups said authorities continued to limit their fundraising activities to their own places of worship or other properties. Groups said they faced government harassment if they tried to raise donations at other locations.

During the year, the Jewish community worked with local authorities to erect at least eight new privately funded monuments in the villages of Svislach, Klimavichy, and Petrykau and other locations that specifically commemorated Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

The government supported commemorative events and an international conference dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the destruction of the Minsk ghetto on October 21-23. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs held an international roundtable on October 22 to discuss remembrance and lessons of the Minsk ghetto, which included former ghetto prisoners, local historians, international and local officials, and representatives of the diplomatic and Jewish communities. Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey condemned "hatred and bigotry, which could lead to killings of masses of people based on their religious or ethnic attributes." He also noted increasing xenophobia, discrimination, anti-Semitism and hate crimes, and warned against the revival of Nazism and ideas of racial superiority.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, authorities convicted a number of offenders who reportedly associated themselves with neo-Nazis or skinhead movements for inciting ethnic and religious hatred against Jews, among others. On February 27, a court in the

Vitsyebsk Region sentenced a resident in Navapolatsk to three years in prison for posting videos on his social media featuring mass killings of Jews in the Holocaust and skinheads beating Muslims. In another case, authorities convicted an individual from the Baranavichy District of Brest Region for posting videos with anti-Semitic content and calls for violence against natives of the Caucasus (the majority of whom are Muslim). A court sentenced the man to a year and a month in jail on April 18.

In March a Mahilyou District court convicted two local residents detained in November 2017 for stealing parts of metal fencing from graves at a local Jewish cemetery.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, doctors continued to force their believers to accept blood transfusions as part of their treatment, despite their explicit written refusal of blood transfusions.

The BOC, in particular the Minsk-based parish of the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, continued its annual commemoration honoring Hauryl Belastoksky, a child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. Jewish community leaders again expressed concern over the memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky's death on May 3, the text of which included a passage stating the "martyred and courageous Hauryl exposed Jewish dishonesty."

In a televised interview on November 24, Metropolitan of the BOC Pavel said Baptists were "a sect," focused on their "missionary activities," and called them "annoying" and said they were spreading "propaganda and not preaching." He added, "You cannot talk to them about anything and if you do, they turn into gypsies" and "start soliciting until they rob you." On November 27, head of the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists Leanid Mikhovich called the Metropolitan's remarks "unacceptable" and blessed "all Baptists in the country, especially representatives of the Roma who are believers of [our] faith."

While the government had previously banned various literature and printed materials it classified as "extremist" and they were no longer widely sold in mainstream bookstores, anti-Semitic and xenophobic newspapers, literature, digital video discs, and videotapes, frequently imported from Russia, continued to be available.

The Bible Society, an interdenominational Christian fellowship center, continued to print and distribute copies of the Bible and other religious literature, including donating Bibles to children's and nursing homes, temporary shelters, rehabilitation centers, and hospitals during the year. The society also distributed copies of the Bible and other religious literature to foster and underprivileged families in towns and villages across the country. In addition, the society extensively promoted the distribution of the Bible translated into the Belarusian language. Founded by the BOC, Roman and Greek Catholic Churches, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, and Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, the Bible Society also engaged in educational and charitable projects targeting vulnerable populations. These projects included Bible studies, summer schools and camps, and literacy courses for children.

An interreligious working group comprised of the BOC, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, and Jewish religious communities organized quarterly meetings, seminars on theological themes, trips around the country, and a trip to Dachau and Flossenburg, Germany, that focused on interfaith dialogue. The group visited sites of former concentration camps and participated in commemorations of the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom in Munich.

On January 20, BOC, Roman and Greek Catholic, Protestant, and Lutheran churches held ecumenical services marking the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at parishes across the country. Clergy stressed the importance of cooperation and understanding among Christians.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October embassy officials and a visiting U.S. delegation that included the Chair of the U.S. Commission on Protection of America's Heritage Abroad and the Deputy Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues met with officials from the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs as well as prosecutors to discuss concerns related to the preservation of Jewish heritage sites. The delegation also participated in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-sponsored international roundtable to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the destruction of the Minsk ghetto on October 22. Also in October the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs met with senior government officials for discussions that included religious freedom concerns. The Charge d'Affaires regularly raised religious freedom concerns at the highest levels of government throughout the year.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with representatives of the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, and minority religious groups. They discussed anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish religious groups, and discussed government restrictions on registration and operations with the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant groups. Embassy officials also continued to hold regular discussions about restrictions on religious freedom with religious freedom activists, religious leaders, lawyers for religious groups, and representatives of the For Freedom of Religion initiative, a group of civil society activists promoting religious tolerance. In October a Protestant pastor from Hrodna participated in the Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Freedom multi-regional program sponsored by the Department of State. On social media, embassy officials posted the Secretary of State’s speeches and other materials related to religious freedom.