



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2010 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [Europe and Eurasia](#) » [Belarus](#)

Belarus

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for the equality of religions and denominations but contains language stipulating 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." The law on religion provides for freedom of religion; however, the government restricted this right in practice.

The government continued to restrict religious freedom during the reporting period using provisions of the religion law to hinder or prevent activities of groups other than the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), which has special status by virtue of a concordat with the government. In particular, the law restricts the ability of religious organizations to provide religious education, requires governmental approval to import and distribute literature, and prohibits foreigners from leading religious organizations. 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. The government continued to deny registration to what it considered nontraditional faiths, mainly Protestant groups such as the New Life Church and the Belarusian Evangelical Church. Foreign missionaries, clergy, and humanitarian workers affiliated with Protestant churches faced many government-imposed obstacles, including deportation and visa refusal or cancellation. Restrictions on foreign clergy continued during the reporting period.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Many of these reports involved 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 9.5 million. According to July 2010 data from the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA), approximately 58.9 percent of citizens consider themselves religious, of whom an estimated 82.5 percent belong to the BOC, 12 percent to the Roman 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, Apostolic Christians, and Lutherans) as well as Old Believers and

Jehovah's Witnesses. Of those who identify as Belarusian Orthodox or Roman Catholic, 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 30,000 and 50,000 persons are Jewish. Most Jews are not religiously active.

In January 2009 OPRRNA reported 3,263 religious organizations of 25 religious confessions and denominations in the country, including 3,106 registered religious communities and 157 national and confessional organizations (monasteries, brotherhoods, and missionary sites). This included the following communities and religious organizations: 1,580 Belarusian Orthodox, 516 evangelical Christian, 496 Roman Catholic, 295 evangelical Christian Baptist, 75 Seventh-day Adventist, 58 Full Gospel Christians, 33 Old Believer, 34 Jewish, 29 Lutheran, 27 Jehovah's Witnesses, 28 Muslim, 22 New Apostolic Church, 17 Progressive Judaism, 14 Greek Catholic, nine Apostolic Christian, six Hare Krishna, six Baha'i, five Christ's Church, four Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), two Messianic, one Reform Church, one Presbyterian, one Armenian Apostolic, one Latin Catholic, and one St. Jogan Church.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution affirms the equality of religions and denominations before the law; however, it contains 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.

A 2002 religion law 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 groups commonly referred to as traditional faiths--Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism. 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.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Christmas, Orthodox Easter and Catholic/Protestant (Western) Easter, Radonitsa (Great Tuesday or Easter of the Dead), Orthodox Remembrance of the Ancestors Day, and Catholic/Protestant (Western) Christmas.

Although the 2002 law guarantees religious freedom, it contains restrictive elements that increase the government's control. It requires all previously registered groups to reregister by 2004, and it bans all religious activity by unregistered groups. The activities of unregistered religious groups are punishable in accordance with criminal code articles 193 (activities related to violence against individuals, infringement of their rights, freedoms, and interests, and preventing individuals from implementing their state, public or family duties), and 193.1 (organizing or participating on behalf of unregistered groups, including religious groups). Penalties range from heavy fines to three years in prison. In addition the 2002 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 2002 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.

The 2002 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, 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 can be formed only when there are active religious communities in a majority of the country's six regions.

A religious community must submit a list of its founders' names, their places of residence and 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 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 the 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 44 religious communities in 2009. Christian communities maintained that the law heavily restricts their activities, suppresses freedom of religion, and legalizes criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs.

A 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, 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 Saint Euphrosyne, the patron saint of the country, as its symbol.

At his meeting with the BOC leaders on April 22, 2010, President Lukashenka stated that it was no accident that the government signed the concordat with the BOC, stating "it was an excellent example of close cooperation that is unique in the Orthodox world." He also commended the BOC for reinforcing "concord" relations between secular and spiritual leaders.

During his official visit to Belarus September 25-28, 2009, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill called Belarus "part of the historic Holy Russia" and said that the relations between the Orthodox Church and the government were at "a very high level." Lukashenka told the Patriarch Kirill at their meeting on September 25, 2009, that the government "will always support the Orthodox Church," and that "the state cannot exist without the church." The president insisted that "the fate of the Orthodox Church is inseparable from the fate of Belarus."

On March 27, 2009, BOC Metropolitan Filaret called upon the government to effectively regulate the Internet and control access to its "dangerous resources." President Lukashenka pledged to continue his support for the BOC, praising its work in maintaining "peace and spirit of tolerance" among different congregations. A representative of the Minsk Orthodox Eparchial District echoed Filaret's remarks, saying on January 3, 2010, that "we are not talking about political censorship; we are talking about moral purification of the internet space."

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 sometimes was responsible for and regularly failed to condemn acts of religious insensitivity or intolerance. The government frequently referred to religious groups other than Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Judaism, and Islam, which are accorded special recognition in the law, as nontraditional and widely used the derogatory term "sect" when referring to such groups, although it is not an official designation.

On February 26, 2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied registration to the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union, stating that the registration application did not comply with the established requirements. Religious and nonreligious groups are by law not allowed to be registered at residential premises. Religious communities also are banned from holding services in private homes and frequently are denied renting space for worshiping.

The government often restricted peaceful assembly for religious activities. On February 11, 2010, riot police briefly detained Syarhey Lukanin and two associates for holding a public evangelical service in central Minsk. Police threatened Lukanin with criminal charges for illegal street preaching and dispersed the gathering but released the three without charge.

The government, in particular its ideology officers, targeted and harassed unregistered religious communities. Ideology officers are charged with promoting official state ideology and work at all levels of government and in all state enterprises and institutions.

In December 2009 Mahilyou region authorities called upon the public to inform local ideology officers about unregistered religious groups and their activities, including meetings, printed materials dissemination, missionary work, and private visits.

In Asipovichy ideology officers intervened to disrupt a Protestant celebration of Thanksgiving Day in November 2009 and fined the organizer of the event.

On October 25, 2009, a Chavusy town ideology officer and four police officers raided a private house where a Full Gospel Protestant church was holding Sunday worship. Officials interrogated each individual church member and confiscated Christian books and films.

On August 24, 2009, authorities broke into the private home of God's Church pastor Alyaksandr Vyalichka, dispersed a meeting of community members, and threatened them with repercussions.

On August 12, 2009, a Homyel district court fined a local Jehovah's Witness community leader \$385 (1 million rubles) for holding an unsanctioned gathering at a private home. Stsyapan Lugouski, the home owner, was fined \$260 (725,000 rubles) for using residential premises for illegal purposes. Police raided the house, which had been used for worship and confiscated sound equipment on July 21, 2009. Local authorities continuously refused to lease space for gatherings or allocate a land plot for the community to construct its own temple.

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

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.

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

Foreign missionaries, clergy, and charity workers faced increased government obstacles, including deportation and visa refusal or revocation. The government continued to enforce the increased restrictions on foreign clergy introduced in January 2008. 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 study 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 affected Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations the most, reducing the number of Roman Catholic clergy and limiting the humanitarian and charitable projects of western Protestant churches.

In December 2009 two Polish Catholic priests in the Hrodna region, Jan Bonkowski and Edward Smaga, were denied state permission to continue religious work despite having served in the country for many years. The bishop of Hrodna, Alyksandr Kashkevich, urged the government to grant the necessary permission; however, the requests were turned down, and no official reasons were given for the refusals. The Catholic Bishops' Conference has been renewing permission for foreign priests and nuns to conduct religious work once a year, except for the Hrodna region where such renewal of permission is required every six months, as per a government requirement.

Observers expressed concern that arbitrary application of government visa regulations affected the ability of missionaries to live and work in the country. As in previous reporting periods, approval for visits by foreign religious workers often involved a lengthy bureaucratic process. The law requires one-year, multiple-entry religious 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 30 days in which to respond, and there is no provision for appeal of its decision.

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 security personnel followed foreign workers and monitored services led or attended by foreign workers.

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

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

According to the Forum18, Dinas Linkus, the deputy head of a Minsk district police department said in November 2009 that "we have Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims, and these are the religions. All others are sects." The police department interrogated members of a local evangelical family over their religious activities with the New Generation Church.

The government continued to use textbooks that promote 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 labeling groups such as Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Maria, White Brotherhood, and Jehovah's Witnesses as

sects. The Ministry of Education continued to use the textbook *Man, Society, and State*, which labels Protestants and Hare Krishnas as sects, despite protests by religious groups. The government made no changes to these books despite the Protestant communities' requests.

Anti-Semitism is tolerated by the state, although the situation continued to improve during the reporting period. Anti-Semitic acts declined in the period covered by this report, but authorities only sporadically or ineffectively investigated these acts. Neo-Nazi activity, which authorities typically characterized as hooliganism, also occurred (see section III).

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 difficulty 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. The plenipotentiary representative for religious and nationality affairs, Leanid Hulyaka, stated on January 14, 2010 that the government had a constructive dialogue with the registered Protestant communities. Nevertheless, he stressed that the communities continue to violate laws, in particular, holding unsanctioned religious services and distributing illegal literature.

A government decree specifies measures to ensure public order and safety during general public gatherings. Some 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 property and needed to rent public space when their members were too numerous to meet in private homes.

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, sports, 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 for the return of synagogues, which were in use as theaters, museums, sports complexes, and a beer hall, were refused.

Local and international Jewish leaders appealed to President Lukashenka to preserve a 19th-century wooden synagogue in Lyuban after local authorities demolished a similar synagogue in April 2009, allegedly due to its poor condition and "lack of historical or cultural value." Heritage preservation activists also protested the destruction and urged the government to erect a memorial sign at the site. Although the synagogue was not destroyed, no memorial was erected to commemorate the synagogue destroyed in April 2009.

No decision about the future of a former Bernardine monastery complex in downtown Minsk was reached by the end of the reporting period. At his April 6, 2010, meeting with President Lukashenka, Metropolitan Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz raised the issue about the complex and mulled possibilities of land plots allocation for building Catholic churches in Minsk's remote residential areas, having previously pushed for Catholic community involvement in the decision-making process.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The government continued to violate the religious rights 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 29, 2010, a Kobryn district court fined Pentecostal Pastor Viktor Novik a total of \$700 (2.1 million rubles) on three separate counts of allegedly holding a demonstration or other mass events. Novik was charged with illegally leading a team of six church members who sang and shared Christian leaflets in the village of Grushava on May 31, and June 7, and 14, 2010.

On May 23, 2010, police and two ideology officials detained members of the Baptist Council of Churches Andrey Plaksin, Syarhey Shubich, and Nina Vasyuk in the town of Drahichyn. They were operating a Christian street library. Plaksin and Shubich were charged with violating regulations for holding demonstrations.

On May 14, 2010, a court in Navahrudak fined Uladzimir Kachagur, the pastor of the New Generation church, \$230 (700,000 rubles) for holding services without permission from the local authorities. Kachagur's neighbor complained to the police that the pastor purportedly organized night religious Masses and assembled believers to listen to religious music. In addition Kachagur's wife was denied a job at a local mail office on April 20, 2010, without any explanation. Kachagur linked the refusal with his family's religious and civil activities.

On March 26, 2010, a court in Babruisk found local Jehovah's Witness leader Vasil Paluyanau guilty of illegal religious activities and fined him \$60 (175,000 rubles) for holding a Jehovah's Witness community meeting in a private home. The Mahilyou Regional Court upheld Paluyanau's appeal of the fine, arguing that the original investigation that claimed to prove his guilt was incomplete and subjective, according to the Forum 18, a Norwegian NGO that reports on religious freedom in post-Communist states.

On March 15, 2010, a Hrodna District Court fined Yury Pyatrevich, leader of the Breakthrough Protestant Church, \$50 (140,000 rubles) for illegal religious activities. Security, police, and ideology officers filmed and raided his congregation's Sunday worship service on February 21, 2010. In a separate incident on March 31, 2010, Pyatrevich was again fined \$230 (700,000 rubles) for violating procedures of organizing mass events.

On February 12, 2010, the Mahilyou military prosecutor's office summoned Protestant pastor Pyotr Malanachkin from Horki. Malanachkin was questioned regarding some anonymous claims that he bribed a military officer to allegedly free his son from compulsory military draft. Malanachkin dismissed all the charges as "far-fetched." Also, the court rejected Malanachkin's appeal on July 17, 2009, to challenge an earlier fine. On June 17, 2009, Horki town authorities fined Malanachkin \$65 (175,000 rubles) for distributing religious and other printed materials. They also dismantled a book stand in front of his house that carried copies of the Bible, the Human Rights Declaration, and similar publications.

On December 18, 2009, a court in Kastsyukovichy fined three local Jehovah's Witnesses \$50 (140,000 rubles) each for establishing a religious group without state registration. The fines followed a July 26, 2009, raid by local authorities on their meeting in Ilnitsky's home where those who gathered prayed and studied the Bible. Officials also confiscated religious literature during the raid. The three activists unsuccessfully appealed their fines to the Mahilyou Regional Court on February 2, 2010.

On November 16, 2009, the Supreme Court upheld a May 12, 2009, Mahilyou district court fine against Lyudmila Batsyuk, the coordinator for the Belarusian Christian social organization Cliff House. Batsyuk was charged for organizing an illegal religious group and engaging individuals in illegal religious activities and was fined \$50 (140,000 rubles). The charges stemmed from Batsyuk's unsanctioned "Christian techniques" in running a rehabilitation program for alcoholics and drug addicts.

On October 29, 2009, the Brest Regional Court dismissed an appeal filed by Alena Aktysyuk to challenge her September 1, 2009, \$60 (180,000 rubles) fine for allowing her private home to be used for worship by the unregistered congregation of the Baptist Council of Churches. Police charged Aktysyuk with leading a worship service, while she argued that the fine was unjust because women cannot lead Baptist Council of Churches congregations.

On October 25, 2009, 10 members of the unregistered church, Full Gospel Christian community God's Embassy, in the village of Harbavichy, were charged with holding illegal services; however, local authorities reportedly took no further action to penalize the community.

On October 17, 2009, the Supreme Court dismissed an appeal filed by the Full Gospel New Generation Church in Baranavichy to challenge the July 14, 2009, \$120 (350,000 rubles) fine. The church was charged with holding illegal activities such as "lifting curses" and "evil spells" that were not outlined in the church's statute.

On September 8, 2009, a Hrodna district court fined Pentecostal activist Yauheni Bakun \$245 (700,000 rubles) for holding an unsanctioned mass event. Bakun was also fined \$50 (140,000 rubles) on August 17, 2009, for holding Sunday morning service of the Salvation Pentecostal congregation on his property without state authorization.

On August 1, 2009, police detained six Baptist Council of Churches members to prevent them from singing hymns and distributing Christian literature on the streets in the town of Malaryta. Police charged them with illegal religious activities; however, the court closed the case and dismissed all the charges on August 7, 2009.

In August 2009 Navapolatsk authorities revoked for the third time a land permit issued earlier to the local Protestant Grace Church for building a temple although the community had invested approximately \$31,000 (86 million rubles) in a project design and had other relevant documents approved by the authorities. In their statement on October 19, 2009, Navapolatsk authorities claimed that their earlier permit was issued in violation of city planning regulations. Bishops of the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians appealed to President Lukashenka for assistance, urging him to provide a land plot to the church in Navapolatsk.

In a trial on July 16, 2009, the Vitsyebk Regional Court found local human rights advocate Leanid Svetsik guilty of inciting religious and ethnic discord and fined him \$10,890 (31 million rubles). In 2006 and 2007 Svetsik provided legal counsel to local democratic activists who received letters with threats from the unregistered profascist Russian National Unity group and unsuccessfully appealed to the prosecutors. The court declared that Svetsik had written and disseminated the letters himself.

On July 7, 2009, a court in Baranavichy fined two members of a local Baptist Council of Churches congregation, Stsyapan Parypa and Mikalay Pyastak, \$250 (700,000 rubles) each for meeting in a private home to worship. Church members said that the government pressured the congregation to apply for registration, which the Council denied, citing that it would bring state interference in the internal life of the congregation and restrictions on its activity.

On July 2, 2009, police briefly detained Paval Sevyarynets, co-chair of the unregistered Belarusian Christian Democracy party, and three other activists, during a Catholic festival in Budslau. Officers confiscated 30 copies of the party's newsletter and interrogated the activists. No charges were brought against them.

On June 22, 2009, the Minsk city prosecutor's office opened a criminal case against Yauheni Volkau, a Unification Church activist, on charges that he acted on behalf of an unregistered religious organization under article 193.1 of the criminal code. The case, the first of its kind, was closed on August 18, 2009, reopened on November 30, 2009, and closed again on December 30, 2009. The Minsk city prosecutor's office informed Volkau that printed materials and other documents seized from him during the investigation were destroyed because "they contained harmful information that incites distrust

and disrespect toward Christian and Muslim faiths." On April 15 and July 1, 2009, a state-owned national television station broadcast programs about the Unification Church, calling it a sect and alleging that the church employs destructive methods and activities.

During the reporting period the government took a number of steps to force the Charismatic New Life Church (NLC) out of its premises in Minsk after the community defied the Supreme Economic Court eviction orders and decided to ban any officials from their property. On June 9, 2010, the chief of the Minsk city environmental protection department notified the NLC that the community was charged with destroying more than 32,000 square feet of topsoil on its premises. The NLC was accused of building a parking lot and a road to its building without permission as well as contaminating the area with petroleum products. On May 6, 2010, the same official threatened NLC Pastor Vyachaslau Hancharenka with imprisonment for alleged heavy land damage. The official denied any bias against the NLC, claiming that it was not the only organization charged with environmental damage. On March 26, 2010, the Minsk City Court dismissed the NLC's appeal challenging a \$3,000 (8.75 million ruble) environmental penalty and subsequent \$91,000 (263 million ruble) fine in environmental damages. On February 26, 2010, a Minsk district court fined the NLC \$3,000 (8.75 million rubles) for pollution and ordered it to pay \$91,000 (263 million rubles) in environmental damages. In early December 2009 city environmental officials took samples of soil from the dirt road leading to the NLC and charged the community with contaminating the area with petroleum products. Separately, on December 8, 2009, an appellate panel of the Supreme Economic Court rejected an appeal by the NLC against the October 7, 2009 Minsk City Economic Court's ruling that upheld an eviction order of the community. On September 30, 2009, a Minsk district court fined Hancharenka \$150 (420,000 rubles) for denying government officials access to the premises of the NLC. A district deputy prosecutor charged Hancharenka on September 9, 2009, with preventing authorities from inspecting the church building for compliance with fire safety regulations in August 2009.

On March 1, 2010, Pastor Hancharenka called upon President Lukashenka to establish a commission to look into the dispute between the NLC and Minsk city authorities. On September 9, 2009, the NLC sent a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee. On August 24, 2009, the community began an open-ended prayer vigil on its premises to prevent Minsk city administration from taking control of the building. On August 20, 2009, leaders of 50 Protestant communities petitioned Lukashenka to cancel the Minsk city government's orders for the NLC to vacate its premises. In their statement, the religious leaders noted that the government continued to persecute Protestant believers.

At his press conference on July 15, 2009, Plenipotentiary Representative Hulyaka expressed his extensive support to the Minsk city authorities in their dispute with the NLC. He claimed that the NLC building was not suited for religious services and that the community conducted renovations without permission from the government.

The NLC also expressed its objections to an interview on a state-run national television channel broadcasted on May 24, 2010, in which German Lutheran pastor Thomas Gandow appeared to describe the NLC as a sect. The NLC lawyer, Syarhey Lukanin, said that Gandow denied describing the church as a sect. The state-run channel did not show an interview with Lukanin on this issue that was recorded on May 24, 2010.

The government continued to deny religious youth their right to alternative civilian military service as guaranteed by article 57 of the constitution.

On February 1, 2010, a court in Minsk sentenced Ivan Mikhaylau, a member of the Messianic Jewish community New Covenant, to three months in jail for allegedly avoiding compulsory draft. Mikhaylau had been in pretrial detention since his arrest on December 15, 2009, after he refused to appear at a conscription office. Amnesty International recognized Mikhaylau as a prisoner of conscience. The Minsk Regional Court revoked Mikhaylau's three-month imprisonment sentence on March 9, 2010, and he was released the next day. On May 4, 2010, a Minsk district court cleared him of draft evasion charges. The prosecutor's appeal against the acquittal was rejected on June 15, 2010.

On November 6, 2009, a court in Homyel fined Zmitser Smyk, a member of the local Jehovah's Witness church, \$1,285 (3.58 million rubles) for alleged draft evasion. Smyk sought civilian service, citing his religious beliefs. On May 31, 2010, Smyk was acquitted of draft dodging charges after his multiple appeals.

Campaigners from the For Religious Freedom initiative and the Legal Transformation Center human rights advocates were denied permission to rent a conference center in Minsk for a roundtable meeting on October 27, 2009, to discuss their alternative religion law with religious communities, civil society, and other interested parties.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The government introduced administrative penalties for Nazi propaganda effective February 23, 2010. Promotion, public demonstration, production, and dissemination of any Nazi symbols or paraphernalia are punishable by significant fines and a short-term arrest. An individual may be fined \$120 (350,000 rubles) and a legal entity up to \$2,400 (7 million rubles). Tougher penalties were introduced for producing, disseminating, and keeping extremist materials, in particular fines up to \$600 (1.75 million rubles) or a short-term arrest for individuals, and fines up to \$6,000 (17.5 million rubles) for legal entities. Previously, the use of Nazi symbols by anti-Semitic vandals had been dismissed as hooliganism.

Human rights advocates and religious activists cautiously welcomed amendments to the administrative code that came into effect on February 23, 2010. Following the amendments, on March 11, 2010, a judge ordered that the case against Jehovah's Witness Maksim Pyrachkin be dropped and the books confiscated during a raid on an unsanctioned religious meeting of six persons in a private home on February 6, 2010, be returned to Pyrachkin.

In November 2009 a court in Slutsk sentenced two residents to four years' probation and restricted freedom for stealing a bronze plaque and other property from an Orthodox parish. The damage was reportedly estimated at approximately \$3,100 (9 million rubles).

On September 2, 2009, a Hrodna district court fined a local resident \$500 (1.4 million rubles) on criminal charges of stealing icons from the Holy Savior Cathedral.

On July 1, 2009, Minsk city authorities unveiled a renovated memorial plaque to three anti-Nazi resistance fighters at the site of their public execution after numerous appeals from the Jewish community. The updated plaque reflects the name of Masha Bruskina, whose participation in and significant contribution to the resistance movement had not been publicly recognized during the Soviet times due to her Jewish background.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal abuses and discrimination based on religious beliefs occurred, and anti-Semitism and negative attitudes toward minority religious groups persisted. Neo-Nazis were widely believed to be behind numerous attacks by vandals, particularly in targeting Jewish sites, and engaged in activities promoting religious intolerance and ethnic discord.

On June 28, 2010, a statue of Pope John Paul II at the Merciful Jesus Church was damaged in Vitsyebsk. Vandals broke the scepter and chipped some other pieces off the sculpture.

On November 12, 2009, a Mahilyou district police officer said upon completion of a criminal investigation that the man who stabbed Orthodox Bishops Sophronius of Mahilyou and Mstsislavl during a service on August 23, 2009, was diagnosed

with paranoid schizophrenia and was ordered to undergo psychiatric treatment. Bishop Sophronius was severely injured, underwent surgery, and returned to his duties in September 2009.

On November 9, 2009, the Israeli ambassador to Belarus Eduard Shapira urged the government to restore Jewish synagogues amidst a "disastrous" shortage of prayer houses for Jewish communities. He also expressed concerns about the government's unwillingness to investigate incidents that promote national hatred. Shapira called upon local authorities to ensure that any unearthened human remains at the sites of former Jewish cemeteries could be reburied properly, according to Jewish traditions.

Various sources reported that the director of the state-run film studio Belarusfilm, Uladzimir Zamyatalin, maintained, in the fall of 2009, that the notion of the Holocaust should not be monopolized. He referred to his earlier remarks that the tragedy of the Belarusian people in the Second World War could also be called a Holocaust.

In October 2009 authorities in Vaukavysk unearthed human remains at the site of the former Jewish cemetery during excavation works to install a pipe at a nearby parking lot. Local activists said that the workers leveled the ground and did not inform Jewish communities about the incident or seek their assistance in reburying the remains.

On August 30, 2009, Mazyr city authorities dismissed reports that ground work was done at the site of a former Jewish cemetery to replace a heat pipe in May-July 2009. They claimed that excavation work took place beyond the site and no human remains were unearthed. However, workers reported that they saw human bones and a grave plate.

In July 2009 a Jewish community in Pinsk repeatedly voiced concerns about the destruction of the Karalin historic Jewish neighborhood in the city center. Karalin was a sacred place where Hasidic Judaism originated. Despite numerous appeals to the Ministry of Culture, authorities demolished the majority of the buildings in Karalin for construction of the facilities for a local university.

In July 2009 editors of the opposition Web site Charter97 received an anti-Semitic letter with threats of physical violence after they posted an article about the Russian National Unity activities in Belarus.

Several Jewish religious sites were vandalized during the reporting period. On May 9, 2010, during Victory Day celebrations, 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, in particular, three consecutive years since 2008. Previous investigations failed, and no perpetrators were held accountable for vandalism.

In their September 8, 2009 response to the Jewish community, the State Security Committee stated that it refused to open criminal cases to investigate incidents of anti-Semitic graffiti and study their connection to neo-Nazi activities. A deputy chair of the committee linked the incidents with hooliganism.

In July 2009 anti-Semitic graffiti and swastikas were reportedly painted on a historic building in the outskirts of Minsk and on a residential building in the center of Minsk. In Slutsk, vandals painted a swastika and anti-Semitic slogans on a memorial to Jews murdered by the Nazis in 1943. It was the third time the memorial had been vandalized since it was erected in 2007, and police failed to apprehend any suspects.

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 Russian National Union. 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.

The official BOC Website continued to honor Hauriyil Belastoksky, a young child allegedly murdered by Jews near Hrodna 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 Hauriyil exposed Jewish dishonesty."

Historically, the country has been an area of both interaction and conflict between Belarusian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, although relations between the two groups improved during the reporting period.

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.

U.S. 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. The embassy officers visited the New Life church in 2009 and 2010 to follow up on reports of continued harassment and pressure on the Protestant community. 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. In August 2009 the charge d'affaires discussed issues of anti-Semitism and religious rights monitoring with U.S. and local Union of Councils for Soviet Jews representatives. The embassy monitored the continuing sale of anti-Semitic and xenophobic literature in stores and state media distributors. Political officers discussed religious violations with religious freedom campaigners, religious lawyers, and activists who coordinate the For Freedom of Religion initiative. The For Freedom of Religion initiative is an unregistered group of Belarusian civil society activists who promote religious tolerance and religious freedom.

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

[Back to Top](#)