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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS
FOR THE 50TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

www.ECLJ.org
4, quai Koch
67000 Strasbourg, France
Phone: +33 (0)3.88.24.94.40

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Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Belarus (Belarus) for the 50th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Background

2. Belarus is a country located in eastern Europe and has a population of approximately 9.1 million people.¹ Belarus is predominantly Christian, with approximately 77.8% of the population identifying as Christian and 21.8% as nonreligious.² Additionally, Bahai's, Buddhists, Ethnic religionists, Jews, and Muslims make up less than 1% of the population.³ In its 2025 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Belarus as the 77th worst country for Christians to live in.⁴ This ranking stems from the fact that the government continues to take action to restrict religious freedom.⁵

3. Belarus's last review was held on November 2, 2020.⁶ As a result of the review, Belarus received 266 recommendations, 137 of which it supported.⁷ It was recommended by the Holy See, and supported by Belarus, that the government "[e]nsure that no restrictions are imposed on the right to freedom of religion and belief."⁸ In our previous UPR on Belarus, we expressed concern over how the government has used its laws to restrict religious freedom, particularly for those belonging to non-registered churches.

Legal Framework

4. Article 31 of the Constitution of Belarus states:

Everyone shall have the right independently to determine one's attitude towards religion, to profess any religion individually or jointly with others, or to profess none at all, to express and spread beliefs connected with one's

¹ *Belarus Summary*, BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Belarus> (last visited Mar. 27, 2025).

² *Belarus: Major World Religions (1900-2050) (World Religion Database, 2020)*, THE ASS'N OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES, <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=21c> (last visited Mar. 27, 2025).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Belarus: Persecution Dynamics*, OPEN DOORS 5 (2025), <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2025-Belarus-Persecution-Dynamics>.

⁵ *Id.* at 7.

⁶ *Universal Periodic Review – Belarus*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/by-index> (last visited Mar. 27, 2025).

⁷ *Belarus – Infographic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/BY/infographic-BELARUS.pdf> (last visited Mar. 27, 2025).

⁸ OHCHR, UPR of Belarus (3rd Cycle – 36th Session), https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/BY/UPR36_Belarus_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.docx.

attitude towards religion, and to participate in the performance of acts of worship and religious rituals and rites, which are not prohibited by the law.⁹

5. Despite Constitutional protections, on July 5, 2024, a new law adding to the restrictions on religion was enacted in Belarus. Article 15 of this new law states, “[r]eligious activity in Belarus without the creation of religious organisations and their state registration is banned.”¹⁰ Article 4 of this law also required that all religious communities re-register with the government within one year.¹¹ Religious communities that failed to re-register with the government by July 5, 2025, would be prevented from carrying out any activity.¹² Article 22 of this new law grants the Plenipotentiary the ability to commission an expert analysis of religious literature and items for the purpose of “preventing the distribution of religious literature or other materials containing information inciting social, ethnic, religious or racial hatred and other extremist manifestations.”¹³ Further, provisions in this new law also prohibits missionary activity, religious literature, audio and visual materials, and the religious education of adults and children, that is seen as “contradicting the law and the ideology of the Belarusian state.”¹⁴

6. Belarus is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹⁵ Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.¹⁶

7. Additionally, Belarus has a responsibility to uphold the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 18 of the UDHR enshrined the right to freedom religion with similar language found in the ICCPR. Under Article 18 of the UDHR:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.¹⁷

⁹ CONSTITUTION OF BELARUS art. 31, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Belarus_2004.

¹⁰ Felix Corley & Olga Glace, *BELARUS: Repressive New Religion Law Imposes Compulsory Re-Registration*, FORUM 18 (Jan. 11, 2024), https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2884.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Ratification Status for Belarus*, OHCHR, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=16&Lang=EN (last visited Mar. 27, 2025).

¹⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> [hereinafter ICCPR].

¹⁷ G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18 (Dec. 10, 1948).

Religious Persecution

8. President Lukashenko has been in power since 1994.¹⁸ Throughout his time as president he has used state agents, such as the police and local authorities, to maintain strict control over the country.¹⁹ Through controlling religion, the government has been able to curtail free speech and shut down dissenting opinions.²⁰ To restrict religious freedom, the government has largely relied on creating legal barriers for churches to register and then prohibits all activity by churches that are not registered.²¹

9. President Lukashenko's contentious re-election in 2020 triggered massive protests across the country.²² To stop the protests, many protestors were beaten by the police and, since the election, police have detained more than 35,000 people.²³ While the country is predominantly Orthodox Christian, it is the minority Catholic and Protestant groups that have been targeted by the government for supporting and protecting the protestors.²⁴ In fact, from 2021 through 2023, more than seventy-three members of the clergy have been arrested, fined, and deported if they were from other countries.²⁵ Additionally, one Catholic organization that tracks religious persecution found that Belarus is the second largest imprisoner of Catholic priests in the world.²⁶ Because of this, priests have been asked by their bishops to stop posting on social media so that the government cannot use it to arrest priests and deny parishes legal status.²⁷

10. In order for the government to continue to exert control over religion in the country, the government passed a new law regulating religion in the country, as stated above. This new law requires all churches to re-register with government within one year and prohibits religious activity from being carried out by non-registered churches.²⁸ Placing these restrictions on religious groups infringes on the ability of Belarusians to practice their faith. Additionally, by granting and denying registration, the government can control which groups are able to practice their religion. Furthermore, this new law was passed despite the fact that during its last UPR Belarus supported a recommendation to "[e]nsure that no restrictions are imposed on the right to freedom of religion and belief."²⁹

11. However, just because a church is registered with the government does not mean that is free from persecution. Churches and religious leaders must constantly be aware that any activity by the church or its leaders that contradicts the "ideology of the Belarusian state" can

¹⁸ OPEN DOORS, *supra* note 4, at 9.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Zmister Yaneka, *Religions in Belarus: No Conscience, No Freedom*, INDEX ON CENSORSHIP (Mar. 6, 2013), <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/03/religion-in-belarus-no-conscience-no-freedom/>.

²¹ Gary Bauer, *Religious Freedom Under Assault in "Europe's Last Dictatorship"*, THE HILL (Oct. 2, 2020), <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/religious-rights/519393-religious-freedom-under-assault-in-europes-last/>.

²² OPEN DOORS, *supra* note 4, at 7.

²³ Yuras Karmanau, *Belarus Cracks Down on Clergy Who Supported Protests of its Authoritarian Leader*, AP, <https://apnews.com/article/belarus-lukashenko-clergy-protests-priests-crackdown-786b4bfc88857a32fc265e30508d24b> (Feb. 23, 2024, 5:09 AM).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Catholic Priests Face Pressure in Belarus*, THE CATH. REG. (Nov. 27, 2024), <https://www.catholicregister.org/item/1419-catholic-priests-face-pressure-in-belarus>.

²⁸ FORUM 18, *supra* note 10.

²⁹ OHCHR, UPR of Belarus (3rd Cycle – 36th Session), *supra* note 8.

lead to the church losing its legal status.³⁰ This phrase is not defined and has been weaponized by the government to go after clergy for simply praying for those who have been wrongfully imprisoned and praying for Ukraine.³¹ One Catholic priest who served from 2007-2022 in Belarus shared that there is always surveillance and that his phone was listened to by authorities.³²

12. Below, we have highlighted just a few examples of how the government is targeting and persecuting Christians.

13. In May 2024, two Catholic priests were placed under fifteen and ten-day detention orders, respectively.³³ The reasons for their arrests were not given and other people were not permitted to attend the hearing.³⁴

14. In February 2024, an Evangelical pastor was put under administrative arrest for fifteen days for distributing “extremist” materials and simply calling for his congregation to pray for Ukraine.³⁵

15. On October 17, 2023, the Minsk City Court ordered that the New Life Full Gospel Church be liquidated for allegedly having “extremist” material and carrying out activity not stated in the church’s statute.³⁶ The “extremist” material that was posted involved posts condemning the government’s violence against protestors as a result of the 2020 presidential election.³⁷

16. On May 27, 2023, authorities prevented a group of Christians from sharing their faith in Drogichin.³⁸ On June 2, 2023, one of the Christians, Vladimir Burshtyn, was fined one month’s wages for organizing an “illegal” event.³⁹ Burshtyn is a member of the Baptist Council of Churches, which is not registered with the government.⁴⁰

17. Also in June 2023, seven Christians were fined an average of two months’ wages for talking to others about Easter on a public street.⁴¹

18. On December 27, 2022, a Pentecostal leader in Smorgon was fined for leading meetings in his home as part of an unregistered church.⁴²

³⁰ *Increasing Repression Against Christians in Belarus*, VOICE OF THE MARTYRS (Apr. 18, 2024), <https://vom.com.au/stories/increasing-repression-against-christians-in-belarus/>.

³¹ *Id.*

³² Olga Glace & John Kinahan, *BELARUS: Religious Freedom Survey, January 2023*, FORUM 18 (Jan. 26, 2023), https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806.

³³ Jonathan Luxmore, *New Clergy Arrests Spark Consternation in Belarus*, UCA NEWS (May 22, 2024), <https://www.ucanews.com/news/new-clergy-arrests-spark-consternation-in-belarus/105174>.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ OPEN DOORS, *supra* note 4, at 7.

³⁶ Felix Corley & Olga Glace, *BELARUS: New Life Church Appeals Against Liquidation*, FORUM 18 (Nov. 14, 2023), https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2874.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ Olga Glace & Felix Corley, *BELARUS: Detained, Fined for Sharing Faith on Streets*, FORUM 18 (June 12, 2023), https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2838.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Olga Glace & Felix Corley, *BELARUS: Seven Fined for Talking About Easter in Street*, FORUM 18 (May 11, 2023), https://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2831.

⁴² *Id.*

19. In August 2022, a Christian pastor was sentenced to prison for carrying out baptisms in his backyard pool without government permission.⁴³

20. Belarus's laws and practices clearly violate numerous fundamental human rights documents such as the UDHR and the ICCPR, not to mention Belarus's own constitution. Targeting Christians and forbidding religious activity for non-registered churches infringe on the ability of Belarusians to freely and peacefully practice their faith. Again, the UDHR provides for everyone's right to "either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." It is clear that Belarus has no desire to protect religious freedom as shown by its actions since its last UPR.

Recommendations

21. In our last UPR on Belarus, we asked that Belarus reform its laws and regulations to ensure that all its citizens are able to peacefully practice their faith. Clearly, as illustrated above, not only has Belarus failed to uphold protections for religious freedom, they are actively taking steps to further restrict religious freedom.

22. We ask that Belarus take immediate measures to reform its laws and practices in order to protect the right to religious freedom for all its citizens. Christians should be able to peacefully and freely practice their faith without threat of reprisal from the government. The government must stop targeting Christians simply because the government does not approve of the church's message. We also urge Belarus to release all Christians who have been arbitrarily detained.

⁴³ *Lukashenko Puts Belarusian Christians Under Pressure*, CHRISTIAN NETWORK EUR. (Jan. 7, 2023), <https://cne.news/article/3304-lukashenko-puts-belarusian-christians-under-pressure>.