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BELARUS

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Introduction

1. ADF International is a faith-based legal advocacy organization that protects fundamental freedoms and promotes the inherent dignity of all people.
2. This report draws attention to the deteriorating situation of freedom of religion or belief in Belarus.

(a) Freedom of Religion or Belief

Background

3. The Republic of Belarus has a population of over 9 million¹, approximately 78% of whom are Christians. Of these, 60% belong to the Orthodox Church (subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate), and 11% are Catholic. Religious minorities include Jews (0.1%) and Muslims (0.26%).² A further 22% of the population identifies as non-religious.³
4. A steady increase in religious freedom violations has been observed since the 2020 presidential elections. These include, inter alia, the imposition of arbitrary obstacles on the activities of registered and non-registered religious communities, restrictions on the locations for religious events, barriers preventing religious communities from using or reclaiming their places of worship, including bans on in person worship, state censorship of religious materials. Furthermore, there have been numerous cases of detention of members of clergy in relation to perceived political activities, including in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, as well as violations of political prisoners' freedom of religion or belief.

Legal Framework

5. The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus formally guarantees freedom of religion or belief in Article 31, stating the following:

'Everyone has the right to independently determine their attitude toward religion, to profess any religion or not to profess any religion, individually or together with others, to express and disseminate beliefs related to their attitude toward religion, to participate in the performance of religious cults, rituals, and ceremonies not prohibited by law.'⁴

6. The Constitution, however, significantly limits freedom of religion or belief by prohibiting religious organisations, their bodies, and representatives from carrying out any activity that is directed against the sovereignty of Belarus, its constitutional order and civil harmony, or is associated with the violation of citizens' rights and freedoms, as well as hinders the performance by citizens of their state, social, family duties or harm their health and morality.⁵

¹ World Meter, Belarus (2025) <<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/belarus-population/>>.

² The Association of Religion Data Archives, Belarus (2020) <<https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=21c>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Belarus (1994) art 31 <<https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution>>.

⁵ Ibid, art 16.

7. On 22 January 2022, amendments to the Criminal Code of Belarus came into force, recriminalizing inter alia the ‘organisation of or participation in activity by an unregistered political party, foundation, civil or religious organisation’ with the punishment of a fine or imprisonment for up to two years.⁶
8. Law No. 203-Z on Countering Extremism prohibits any activity, including religious activity, identified as ‘extremist’.⁷ Under the said law, ‘extremism’ is defined very broadly as any activity that threatens the country’s ‘independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and foundations of the constitutional order’.⁸
9. On 5 January 2023, President Lukashenko signed Law No.242-3, amending the Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Belarus.⁹ The law allows for the revocation of Belarusian citizenship, even if acquired by birth, if a person is convicted of participation in extremist activities or causing ‘grievous harm to the interest of the Republic of Belarus’ if located outside of Belarus.¹⁰ This law, unlike the Law on Countering Extremism, expands the definition of ‘extremism’ to include the commission of crimes listed in 55 articles of the Criminal Code.¹¹
10. Lastly, on 30 December 2023, Belarus adopted the ‘Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations’, through an amendment titled ‘Law on Amending Laws on the Issues of Activities of Religious Organisations’. The new law introduced stricter requirements for the registration of religious organizations and established a mandatory re-registration process. Additionally, it declared all unregistered religious activities illegal.¹²

Misuse of Extremism Laws

11. In recent years, authorities have arrested, fined, and detained Christian religious leaders for distributing allegedly ‘extremist’ materials.¹³
12. Between August and September 2023, Belarusian courts declared the social media pages of Christian Vision, a Christian group that provides commentary on religious

⁶ Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus (adopted on 2 June 1999, as amended in 2023) art 193-1. <<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=hk9900275>>; World Organisation Against Torture ‘Belarus: New amendment to the Criminal Code leaves no room for legal human rights activities’ (31 January 2022) <<https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/belarus-new-amendment-to-the-criminal-code-leaves-no-room-for-legal-human-rights-activities>>.

⁷ The Law of the Republic of Belarus On Countering Extremism (adopted on 21 July 2008, as amended on 14 May 2021), art 1 <<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=h10700203>>.

⁸ Ibid; Human Constanta, Access Now, Article 19, and World Organisation Against Torture ‘Submission on implications of legislation and measures in the areas of countering terrorism on the enjoyment of human rights’ (5 June 2023) <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SR-Input-Anti-extremism-Belarus_HC_A19_AN_OMCT.pdf>

⁹ Law ‘On Citizenship of the Republic of Belarus’ (as amended on 5 January 2023) <http://world_of_law.pravo.by/text.asp?RN=H10200136>.

¹⁰ Ibid; see also an explanatory note of the President: <https://perma.cc/TM6X-GCPL>.

¹¹ Supra note 11 at art 19.

¹² Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations (Adopted on 17 December 1992, as amended in 2023) <<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=V19202054>>; President of the Republic of Belarus ‘Belarus has amended laws on the activities of religious organisations’ (3 January 2024) <<https://president.gov.by/ru/events/v-belarusi-skorrektirovany-zakony-o-devatelnosti-religioznyh-organizaciy>>.

¹³ Open Doors ‘Belarus: Persecution Dynamics’ (February 2025) <<https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2025-Belarus-Persecution-Dynamics>>.

freedom in Belarus and documents human rights violations against Belarusian religious leaders, laypersons, and religious communities, as ‘extremist’.¹⁴

13. In August 2023, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus declared Viasna Human Rights Center, a national human rights organisation reporting on human rights violations, to be an ‘extremist formation’ and included websites, accounts, materials, and information tied to Viasna on the country’s list of ‘extremist materials’.¹⁵
14. On 14 December 2022, the website of the Belarusian Greek Catholic newspaper Tsarkva, along with its social media accounts on Facebook and V Kontakte, were also identified by the Leninsky District Court in Brest as extremist materials.¹⁶

Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief of Political Prisoners and Their Families

15. Political prisoners in Belarus reportedly experience violations of their freedom of religion or belief, such as denial of pastoral visits.
16. Prison administrations single out political prisoners and deny them various religious rights. There are at least 30 known cases of infringement of the rights of believers to meet with clergy of their religious communities between 2020 and 2022.¹⁷
17. For instance, Yelena Movshuk, a 45-year-old Orthodox Christian, repeatedly requested pastoral visits from a priest from the time of her arrest in August 2020. She hoped to meet with an Orthodox priest who held a service in the prison in Zarechye in Gomel Region in August 2021, but prison officials prevented her from attending.¹⁸
18. Mikita Yemialyanau, a Roman Catholic, serving a four-year prison sentence, now extended by a year¹⁹, was finally granted a pastoral visit on 3 November 2021 after a three-week hunger strike protesting the denial of a religious visit since his transfer to Mogilev prison in 2020.²⁰

Cases of Church Closures and Raids

19. The 2020 election-related protests in Belarus strained the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Belarusian government, as the government viewed the local Catholic clergy as actively supporting the opposition.²¹

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ World Organisation Against Torture ‘Belarus: Viasna Human Rights Center was declared an “extremist formation” (28 August 2023) <<https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/belarus-viasna-human-rights-center-was-declared-as-an-extremist-formation>>.

¹⁶ Forum 18 ‘Belarus: Greek Catholic website among religious works banned as “extremist” (6 January 2023) <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2801>.

¹⁷ International Centre for Civic Initiatives ‘Updated monitoring of repression against priests and believers’ (2020-2022) <<https://nash-dom.info/110665>>.

¹⁸ Religion Unplugged ‘Belarus Denies Christian Prisoners Pastoral Visits And Worship, Issues Fines for Baptism’ (19 November 2021) <<https://religionunplugged.com/news/2021/11/16/belarus-denies-christian-prisoners-pastoral-visits-and-worship-issues-fines-for-baptism>>.

¹⁹ Viasna ‘Political Prisoner Mikita Yemilyanau, who was scheduled for release this year, has had his sentence extended by a year’ (26 March 2025) <<https://spring96.org/en/news/117679>>.

²⁰ Forum 18 ‘Belarus: “We, political prisoners, were not allowed to attend clubs, the church..” (12 November 2021) <https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2696>.

²¹ AP News ‘Belarus cracks down on clergy who supported protests of its authoritarian leader’ (13 February 2024) <<https://apnews.com/article/belarus-lukashenko-clergy-protests-priests-crackdown-786b4befc88857a32fc265e30508d24b>>.

20. In September 2022, government officials closed Minsk's Roman Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (the Red Church) after an unexplained fire broke out in a small annex. Since then, the church has remained closed for government-ordered repairs, despite eyewitness reports of minimal damage limited to the sacristy. No timetable has been provided for its reopening.²²
21. It is believed that the indefinite closure is linked to the church's role during the 2020 protests, when it provided protection to protesters fleeing from police violence.²³
22. Since the closure, law enforcement agencies have sometimes prohibited religious activities at or near the Red Church since its closure, citing the prohibition on mass events. In October 2022, police reportedly harassed the parish's priest and a group of parishioners praying the rosary outside of the church.²⁴
23. In April 2023, officials rejected the parish's request to hold Easter services in the parish rectory²⁵, and in May 2023, the parish announced it would not participate²⁶ in the Minsk Corpus Christi procession for undisclosed reasons.
24. Forum 18 reports that in July 2023 police raided the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Minsk, physically assaulting priests who refused to allow them to search their phones for incriminating materials.²⁷ The raid followed the arrest of a catechist affiliated with the church, who was then jailed in unclear circumstances.²⁸ Two of the church's priests, Yury Reshetko and Valery Dovgil, reportedly fled Belarus after the raid.²⁹

Detention of Religious Leaders

25. According to Christian Vision, 60 religious leaders from the Belarusian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and various Protestant churches have been detained, forced into exile, fined or removed from their positions since 2020, often due to perceived political activities.³⁰
26. In 2022, courts used Administrative Code Article 24.23 ('Violation of the procedure for organizing or conducting a mass event or demonstration') to bar four Protestant pastors in Gomel from conducting outdoor baptisms and two Protestant pastors in

²² Forum 18 'Belarus: Mass banned at Minsk's iconic Red Church' (13 October 2022)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2781>.

²³ La Croix International 'Closure of "Red Church" in Belarus' capital angers Catholics' (12 October 2022)

<<https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/closure-of-red-church-in-belarus-capital-angers-catholics/16731>>.

²⁴ Supra note 22.

²⁵ Radio Liberty 'Minsk authorities have banned Easter service near the closed Red Church' (8 April 2023)

<<https://www.svaboda.org/a/32355265.html>>.

²⁶ Forum 18 'Belarus: Detained, fined for sharing faith on streets' (12 June 2023)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2838>.

²⁷ Forum 18 'Belarus: Pastor jailed – to stop him attending "extremist materials" hearing?' (16 August 2023)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ OSV News 'Three Years After Disputed Election Belarus Church is Urged to Speak up for the Persecuted' (2024) <<https://www.osvnews.com/three-years-after-disputed-election-belarus-church-is-urged-to-speak-up-for-the-persecuted/>>.

³⁰ Supra note 22.

Minsk for leading worship in the car park of the confiscated New Life Pentecostal Church.³¹

27. In January 2023, police detained Belarusian Orthodox priest Dionisy Korostelev for praying at a New Year service in a Minsk church on 1 January for the defenders of Ukraine.³²
28. In April 2023, the Centralny District Court of Minsk sentenced Andrei Mamoika, an elder at the New Earth Baptist Church, and his wife Vera to two-and-a-half years of home confinement for publishing photos of the 2020 election-related protests online.³³
29. The Pentecostal New Life Church in Belarus has also reportedly faced significant challenges following the 2020 election due to its support for protesters.³⁴ In February 2021, police forcibly evicted New Life Church from its building during religious services.³⁵ In September 2022, authorities detained New Life Church Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and fined him for holding religious services in the parking lot beside the closed church.³⁶ Authorities also detained and fined Pastor Antoni Bokun, a Baptist pastor from another church who participated in the service. Both pastors were charged with organizing an unauthorized mass event.³⁷
30. In June 2023, authorities bulldozed³⁸ New Life Church and, the following month, blocked the group's website for a period of six months, accusing it of publishing allegedly extremist information and threatening national security.³⁹ In August 2023, 20 armed police officers reportedly searched Pastor Goncharenko's home, detaining him and his son-in-law and New Life Church's youth pastor, Ilya Budai. A court sentenced Goncharenko and Budai to administrative detention for disobeying police and disorderly conduct, respectively. New Life Church's website, social media pages, and the materials posted on those pages, including prayers that condemned Belarusian officials involved in human rights violations, were later declared as 'extremist'.⁴⁰ In September 2023, the Minsk City Executive Committee initiated proceedings to

³¹ Forum 18 'Belarus: Fines, car park worship ban for New Life Church' (3 October 2022)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777>.

³² Forum 18 'Belarus: Greek Catholic website among religious works banned as "extremist"' (6 January 2023)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2801>.

³³ Viasna Human Rights Centre 'Andrei Mamokia: Baptist Church elder, musician, developer, sentenced to 2 ½ years of restricted freedom' <<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/jauhen-mamoika>>; Viasna Human Rights Centre 'Vera Mamoika: Christian musician, sentenced to 2 ½ years of restricted freedom'

<<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/vera-mamoika>>.

³⁴ Evangelical Focus 'Belarusian evangelicals support church harassed by authorities' (23 February 2021)

<<https://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/10345/belarusian-evangelicals-support-church-harassed-by-the-authorities>>.

³⁵ Forum 18 'Belarus: Bailiffs, police evict Church' (19 February 2021)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639>.

³⁶ Forum 18 'Fines, car park worship ban for New Life Church' (3 October 2022)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777>.

³⁷ Eurasia Review 'Belarus: Pastor Jailed to Stop Him Attending 'Extremist Materials' Hearing?' (17 August 2023)

<<https://www.eurasiareview.com/17082023-belarus-pastor-jailed-to-stop-him-attending-extremist-materials-hearing/>>.

³⁸ Radio Liberty 'In Minsk, authorities have begun demolishing the building of the Protestant church "New Life"' (22 June 2023) <<https://www.svaboda.org/a/32467237.html>>.

³⁹ Forum 18 'Belarus: Pastor jailed – to stop him attending "extremist materials" hearing?' (16 August 2023)

<https://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851>.

⁴⁰ Telegraph, Christian Vision 'It has become known why the materials of the New Life Church are to be declared extremist' (23 August 2023) <<https://telegra.ph/Stalo-izvestno-za-cto-materialy-cerkvi-Novaya-zhizn-hotyat-priznat-ehkstremistskimi-08-23>>.

liquidate New Life Church for violating the country's law on religion on account of its alleged 'extremist' activities.⁴¹ The church was formally liquidated in October 2023.⁴²

31. Religious leaders from other Protestant denominations have also been subjected to punishments for unauthorized religious activities. In July 2022, Pastor Dmitry Podlobko was fined for performing outdoor baptisms on his family's privately owned property.⁴³ In April 2023, seven members of various Protestant denominations—the majority from New Life Church—were detained and subsequently fined by the Central District Court in Minsk for discussing their religious beliefs with passers-by.⁴⁴ In May 2023, several members of the Baptist Council of Churches were detained for talking about their faith and distributing religious literature in the city's main square, with one of them eventually fined by a judge.⁴⁵

(b) Recommendations

32. In light of the aforementioned, ADF International suggests the following recommendations be made to Belarus:

- a. Review and amend all national legislation relevant to freedom of religion or belief to ensure their full conformity with relevant international human rights law;
- b. Review Law No. 203-Z on Countering Extremism and cease its use to target persons legitimately exercising their fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief and expression.
- c. Repeal or revise Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code to bring it in alignment with international human rights law.
- d. Streamline, facilitate and increase the transparency of the registration process for religious organizations, including eliminating the obligation for religious groups to seek prior authorization to gather, and removing limitations on the printing, import and distribution of religious materials;
- e. Unconditionally release those imprisoned for their religious or other conscientiously held beliefs, and protect the rights of all individuals to peacefully manifest them;
- f. Enable clergy and missionaries to carry out religious activities in the country without restrictions;

⁴¹ Forum 18 'Belarus: Religious freedom survey, January 2023' (26 January 2023)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806>.

⁴² CNE News 'Belarusian judge confirms the liquidation of New Life Church in Minsk' (17 October 2023)

<<https://cne.news/article/3762-belarusian-judge-confirms-the-liquidation-of-the-new-life-church-in-minsk>>.

⁴³ Forum 18 'Belarus: Officials threaten to liquidate Mink's New Life Church' (7 September 2022)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2771>.

⁴⁴ Forum 18 'Belarus: Seven fined for talking about Easter in street' (11 May 2023)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2831>.

⁴⁵ Forum 18 'Belarus: Threatened by criminal persecution for sharing faith in public' (25 August 2023)

<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2854>.



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