



Analytical Report and Recommendations



IN CHAINS

Analysis of the Religious and Political
Situation in Belarus

Report by Religious Freedom Initiative of Mission Eurasia, USA
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The report reveals systematic violations of religious freedom and fundamental human rights in Belarus. Alexander Lukashenko's regime enforced a new repressive law to stifle religious communities and restrict their freedom to operate. As Belarus falls deeper into Russia's sphere of influence, its religious and political systems increasingly mirror Moscow's authoritarian model with the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Religious institutions, particularly those not aligned with the regime, face constant surveillance, harassment, and forced closure. Persecution of faith-based communities in Belarus has started to resemble Russia's religious policy on the occupied territories of Ukraine. The Mission Eurasia report includes recommendations for the international community to respond to the deterioration of the religious situation in Belarus.

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1. Introduction

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), notorious for its persecution of dissidents and people of faith, may have collapsed, but the legacy of its oppressive tactics persists in some authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet bloc. This report, *Faith in Chains*, provides a comprehensive analysis of the alarming state of religious freedom in Belarus — a nation that has become a bastion of authoritarian control under Alexander Lukashenko.

Situated on the border of the European Union, Belarus holds a crucial geopolitical position, acting as a “shield” for Russia. Thus, by following the “big brother example” and being tightly controlled by the Kremlin, Belarus finds its human rights and religious freedoms systematically repressed. In many ways, the oppressive conditions in Belarus now mirror, or even exceed, those of the former Soviet Union.

The “persecution technologies” employed in Belarus today bear a disturbing resemblance to those used by Soviet-era regimes. The KGB, the feared state security apparatus, continues to wield significant power, serving as the enforcer of the regime’s authoritarian policies. Much like the Communist Party leaders of the USSR, who utilized the KGB to suppress dissent and control the masses, Lukashenko’s regime relies on the same mechanisms to silence any independent thought, including religious dissent.

In the report *Faith in Chains*, my closest colleagues, Rev. Mykhailo Brytsyn and Dr. Maksym Vasin, who are deeply connected to a network of churches and organizations inside Belarus, offer key insights into the strategically important points highlighted throughout this research.

Religious Persecution as a Political Weapon: The Belarusian government enforces draconian laws to stifle religious communities and restrict their freedom to operate. Religious institutions, particularly those not aligned with the regime, face constant surveillance, harassment, and forced closure. By manipulating religion as a tool of political control, Lukashenko ensures loyalty to his authoritarian rule, effectively silencing any opposition rooted in faith.

Russia’s Influence on Belarusian Religious Policy: As Belarus falls deeper into Russia’s sphere of influence, its religious and political systems increasingly mirror Moscow’s authoritarian model. The Belarusian Orthodox Church, closely aligned with the Russian Orthodox Church, operates under Moscow’s influence, tightening governmental control over religious life. Meanwhile, other religious communities, particularly evangelical, and non-Orthodox Christian groups, are subjected to mounting pressure and restrictions.

The KGB as the Instrument of Suppression: The KGB, a remnant of the Soviet Union, remains the regime’s primary tool for stifling dissent and controlling religious communities. Religious leaders who express independent thought or criticize the government are often subject to intimidation, surveillance, and arrest. Alexander Lukashenko, having seized power decades ago, continues to use the same Soviet-style mechanisms of repression that have long oppressed Belarusian society.

The systematic violation of religious freedoms and basic human rights in Belarus demands an urgent international response. This report calls on global human rights organizations, governments, and religious bodies to increase pressure on Belarus to respect the rights of religious communities. Institutions like the United Nations, OSCE, the U.S. Department of State, USCIRF, and the Council of Europe must take decisive action to address these ongoing abuses and protect those suffering under this repressive regime.



Sergey Rakhuba
President
Mission Eurasia

2. About Mission Eurasia

Mission Eurasia is an educational charity organization registered in the USA as a 501(c)(3) non-profit. The immutable objective of Mission Eurasia is two-fold:

- 1) Provide effective assistance to religious organizations and communities in overcoming the repercussions of the communist era while responding to modern challenges in post-Soviet countries from the position of a Christian worldview.
- 2) Work toward the realization of new opportunities in the spiritual, social, and educational spheres.

The organization was founded in 1991, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by evangelical leaders, Peter and Anita Deyneka. At first, it operated under the name Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries. Today, under the leadership of Sergey Rakhuba, Mission Eurasia and its branches can be found in 14 Eurasian countries as well as Israel. The main objectives of the mission are training, equipping, and mobilizing the Next Generation of Christian leaders to transform their nations for Christ through strategic and holistic ministry.

In 2014, Mission Eurasia formed the Religious Freedom Initiative to monitor the status of religious freedom, coordinate the actions of Mission Eurasia teams in different countries, and develop recommendations for their ministry.¹

In 2022, with the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Mission Eurasia directed its efforts toward alleviating the resulting humanitarian crisis and meeting the critical needs of the residents of frontline regions and internally displaced persons. In tandem with this, Mission Eurasia continues to monitor and analyze the status of religious freedom in the Ukrainian territories temporarily occupied by Russia, with the goal of responding to the persecution of religious minorities and providing them with timely assistance.

As of today, the main directions of the Religious Freedom Initiative's work in the regions of activity of Mission Eurasia are the following:

- ▶ Monitoring the religious freedom situation, collecting data on violations of the rights of believers and religious communities, and carrying out analytical activity.
- ▶ Assisting church ministers in occupied and liberated territories heavily impacted by military action.
- ▶ Protecting the interests of religious communities and church ministers at the international and national levels.
- ▶ Fostering the spiritual and psychological rehabilitation of church ministers.
- ▶ Providing help and advice to religious communities that suffered from military action aimed at revitalizing their activities, dealing with management adjustments, and retrieving lost or confiscated documents.
- ▶ Supporting domestic and international dialogue with the participation of government officials and religious figures to ensure religious freedom and favorable conditions for religious activity of all denominations.

¹ Reports and other work of the Religious Freedom Initiative can be found on the Mission Eurasia website: <https://missioneurasia.org/religious-freedom/>

3. Background: The 2020-2021 protests in Belarus and Russia's influence

Belarus has never been known for its broad democratic freedoms, but until recently, churches and other faith-based communities could operate under relatively predictable rules. Religious liberty seriously deteriorated after the controversial presidential elections in 2020.

At that time, civil society was outraged by the widespread falsifications and violations that secured the formal victory of Alexander Lukashenko, who usurped the power in Belarus and has held on to the presidency at all costs. Political observers call Lukashenko's government an anti-Belarusian and occupation regime that is not supported by the majority of the population.² In 2020-2021, mass anti-government protests erupted across the country and became the largest in the history of Belarus since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Lukashenko regime responded with brutal attacks, vast arbitrary arrests, and imprisonment of protesters, increased subsequent repression of political opposition, harsher penalties for dissent, and even greater restrictions on rights and freedoms, including religious liberty. Security forces violently dispersed demonstrators, leading to at least five deaths, hundreds of injuries, and around 3,000 arrests in Minsk alone. Due to targeted repression, some protesters fled the country, while others remained imprisoned.

Due to its increasing political and economic dependence on Russia, the Lukashenko regime mirrored in Belarus the increasing totalitarian control over public and private life, the elimination of free media and civil society, and the implementation of repressive religious policies, similar to Putin's regime in Russia. Recently, reports about the life of faith-based communities in Belarus have started to resemble news from the Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine.³ Persecution for religious beliefs, suppression of freedom of conscience, and arbitrary accusations of extremism against dissenters are becoming routine. The trends toward restricting civil rights and liberties in both regions lead to bleak predictions for the future due to the significant influence of Russia.

² <https://espreso.tv/lukashenko-zradnik-biloruskogo-narodu-portnikov>

³ <https://missioneurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023.12.15-Mission-Eurasia-report-on-Ukraine-ENG-web-version.pdf>

4. Legislative initiatives in Belarus and repressive measures in response to anti-Lukashenko protests

Restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly

The Belarusian authorities were so alarmed by the anti-Lukashenko protests that they amended the law on mass gatherings to introduce more severe restrictions on the public display of dissenting views. Lukashenko signed the law on May 24, 2021. Under the new law, organizers of public events are now required not only to notify local authorities about their events but also to obtain permission from them.

Violations of the legal requirements of organizing or holding mass gatherings are punishable by administrative fines of up to 5,800 Belarusian rubles (about 1,773 US Dollars) or administrative arrest for 15 to 30 days.⁴ Besides, the Criminal Code of Belarus introduces criminal punishment for repeated violations, including calls to hold mass gatherings without a permit, in the form of arrest, restriction of freedom for up to three years, or imprisonment for the same period. Criminal liability is imposed on those persons who have previously been subjected to administrative penalties for illegal mass gatherings twice within a year and then committed a third violation within a year after the second.⁵

Criminal convictions *in absentia*

In July 2022, the Prosecutor's Office in Belarus has succeeded in passing a law allowing for trials *in absentia*. This law puts pressure on Belarusian citizens who have left the country and are not deported or extradited by their host countries due to concerns about political or religious persecution.

The law allows for trial *in absentia* under articles on an act of terrorism, genocide, mercenaries, treason, sabotage, or creation of an extremist organization or participation in it, as well as articles on mass riots and calls for sanctions against Belarus. With *in absentia* trials, the Lukashenko regime can now confiscate property from Belarusians who fled abroad, impose various prison sentences, and even sentence them to death.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists emphasizes that the politically motivated nature of the *in absentia* trials remains evident to date. The 2024 report also highlighted the tendency to expand the circle of accused persons, which now includes not only well-known opposition members.⁶ In recent months, the Investigative Committee of Belarus has opened dozens of criminal cases *in absentia*, including against citizens who have been living outside the country for decades. Among the accused are human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, bloggers, and participants of the 2020-2021 protests who are not even known publicly.⁷

Death penalty for treason in Belarus

Belarus is the last country in Europe and the former Soviet Union to apply the death penalty to its citizens. The death penalty is carried out by firing squad. The body of the executed person

4 Article 24.23: https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=hk2100091&q_id=226562

5 Article 342-2: https://etalonline.by/document/?regnum=hk9900275&q_id=118

6 <https://baj.media/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/specialnoe-proizvodstvo.pdf>

7 <https://www.dw.com/ru/zaocnye-ugolovnye-dela-v-belarusi-postavili-na-potok/a-68748956>

is not given to the family. More than 15 articles of the Criminal Code of Belarus provide for the death penalty, although none of them defines it as the only possible punishment. During the period of 2022-2023, the list of articles has expanded.⁸ For example, now the death penalty is possible for treason.

Although the Investigative Committee proposed abolishing the death penalty before the mass protests in 2020, the use of executions in Belarus has resumed in recent years. Three death sentences were handed down in 2020, and one each in 2023 and 2024.

Government authority to revoke Belarusian citizenship

On August 5, 2021, Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree detailing the procedure for revoking citizenship for various “extremist manifestations.” A significant change was introduced in the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and foreign service body, allowing it to revoke Belarusian citizenship even for those residing abroad. The government agencies decision is based on documents “confirming the citizen’s participation in extremist activities or the infliction of grave harm to the interests of the Republic of Belarus.”⁹

Politically motivated convictions in Belarus

According to the “Viasna” Human Rights Center, during three and a half years since the beginning of the 2020 election campaign, repressions have not stopped in Belarus. On the contrary, the situation with politically motivated persecution has critically worsened. Arbitrary detentions continue every day throughout the country. Searches, phone checks, ill-treatment after detention, horrible conditions in detention centers, beatings, and torture have become a daily reality for Belarusians.¹⁰

According to the data of the Investigative Committee for Minsk, more than 7,400 criminal cases related to “extremism” have been initiated in Minsk alone since 2020.¹¹ Belarus now ranks sixth globally for the number of political prisoners. Human rights organizations report that 1,430 individuals in Belarus were sentenced on political charges. As of early 2024, at least 152 art workers, 32 media workers, 16 doctors, six lawyers, and six human rights defenders were among political prisoners.¹²

On July 2, 2024, Belarusian ruler Alexander Lukashenko signed the law on amnesty. According to the official announcement, the amnesty will affect 7,850 convicts, of whom 2,090 will be released. The remainder of the suspended sentences of 800 people will be forgiven, and the administrative arrests of 40 people will be canceled. Parole-like sentences will replace the prison sentences of 260 people, while 4,550 convicts will have their terms cut by one year.

However, Lukashenko’s decree says that “the amnesty will not be applied to persons involved in extremist and terrorist activities.”¹³ Moreover, in August 2024, the “Viasna” Human Rights Center reported that political prisoner Piotr Zinevich, who had previously been released under amnesty, was sentenced to two and a half years in a penal colony. Although Zinevich had previously been granted amnesty with his criminal record expunged, he was now given a year more in prison than the others convicted.¹⁴

8 <https://belhelcom.org/ru/topic-material/smertnaya-kazn-kolichestvo-smertnyh-prigovorov-v-belarusi>

9 <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P32100302&p1=1>

10 <https://spring96.org/ru/news/113810>

11 <https://euroradio.fm/ru/v-minske-sledovатели-vozbudili-bolee-7400-ekstremistskikh-ugolovnykh-del>

12 <https://spring96.org/ru/news/113810>

13 <https://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenka-signs-decree-mass-amnesrty/33020170.html>

14 <https://spring96.org/ru/news/116007>

5. Restrictions on religious activity in Belarus

Faith-based communities have been particularly affected by the new version of the Belarusian law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” introduced by law #334-Z, passed and signed in December 2023.¹⁵ These are the most comprehensive changes to religious legislation in Belarus since 1992. The authorities preemptively set forth restrictions that now allow for legal penalties against believers for any manifestation of dissent. The government seeks to increasingly control the religious sphere, fearing the condemnation of the regime’s illegal actions from churches due to the Christian moral virtues of serving society and standing up for the oppressed.

The law in the new version restricts churches from using any symbols other than religious ones, tightens penalties for “extremism” with a vague definition of such activities, and allows for punishment of religious organizations for “insulting the authorities” and “discrediting Belarus.” The rules governing missionary activities have also been tightened, with an expanded list of restrictions that could lead to the dissolution of congregations and the confiscation of religious buildings and property.

The law highlighted a unique role for the Belarusian Orthodox Church, a canonical subdivision of the Russian Orthodox Church with the status of an exarchate on the territory of Belarus. Additionally, the law emphasizes the historical role of the Catholic Church in Belarus and mentions that the religious organizations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Judaism, and Islam are part of the shared history of the people of Belarus. This gradation of the denominations often serves as a guideline for national and local authorities. In fact, the Belarusian Orthodox Church enjoys rights and privileges not granted to other religious organizations, while religious minorities not mentioned in the law, including Baptist and Pentecostal churches, are subjected to brutal persecution, up to confiscation and destruction of places of worship.

Law #334-Z obliges all religious organizations registered before the entry into force of the new version of the Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” within one year to re-register to bring their statutes into compliance with the new law or to decide on their liquidation. If a religious organization fails to submit the documents for re-registration within the deadline, the law gives government agencies the right to initiate judicial liquidation of such religious organizations. At the same time, restrictions are imposed on the registration of religious associations, one condition for which is the presence of a congregation that has been registered in Belarus for at least 30 years.

The mere requirement of mandatory re-registration of all religious organizations under threat of liquidation is a clear violation of international standards on religious freedom. The UN experts noted that the new law also prohibits the activities of unregistered religious organizations following the amendments to the Criminal Code of Belarus in 2022, which criminalize the organization and participation in unregistered public associations, religious organizations, or foundations.¹⁶

Besides, according to a religious leader from Belarus:¹⁷

“The adoption of the new version of the Law ‘On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations’ is driven by the government’s desire to make all

¹⁵ <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300334>

¹⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/ru/press-releases/2024/02/belarus-un-experts-concerned-about-new-law-freedom-conscience-and-religious>

¹⁷ The name of the interviewee is not disclosed for security reasons.

churches controllable and loyal, meaning fully subordinate to state ideology. Through re-registration under the new law, the authorities plan to eliminate all unregistered churches and hinder the activities of churches that do not conform to the imposed ideology. Persecution or repression does not threaten any Christian in Belarus as long as they remain silent or agree with the government on everything.”

For example, Article 10 of the Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” introduces the following requirement:

“The content of religious education curriculums implemented in Sunday religious schools and adult religious education groups must not contradict the ideology of the generally recognized traditional values of the Belarusian people and the ideology of the Belarusian state. These curriculums must not include propaganda of war, social, national, religious, and racial hatred, or other extremist activities.”¹⁸

Significant restrictions are also applied on spreading faith among representatives of other religions or non-believers (missionary activities) and the publication of religious literature because all religious activity and media content “must not contradict the ideology of the Belarusian state.” However, such harmony between the Lukashenko regime and all churches is impossible to achieve, meaning that Christians and adherents of other religions in Belarus will certainly face persecution. For example, Archbishop **Artemy (Kishchenko)** of Grodno criticized the state youth organization Belarusian Republican Youth Union, a successor to the former communist organization Komsomol, for the communists’ anti-church activities, falsifications during the elections, and spreading state propaganda.¹⁹ This criticism was considered as an “extremist activity,” after which the government threatened the Belarusian Orthodox Church with liquidation of the legal entity.²⁰

Moreover, the law restricted the typical activities of evangelical churches related to the spread of the gospel, as well as Jehovah’s Witnesses and other active preaching religious teachings. Religious literature, audio and video, and other informational materials published by religious organizations may no longer be distributed outside of church buildings, designated places of worship, or authorized book fairs:

“The distribution of religious literature, other printed, audio and video materials with religious content is prohibited... by handing it out in multi-apartment residential buildings and dormitories, single-family and semi-detached houses, summer cottages, in public transport and at its infrastructure facilities, etc.”²¹

International organizations, religious freedom experts, and human rights advocates have already expressed their concerns about the new law adopted in Belarus.²² However, the full extent of the threat to religious liberty becomes apparent when analyzing the tightening of legislation in conjunction with the actions of Belarusian authorities against political opposition and dissidents.

18 <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300334>

19 <https://t.me/christianvision/1023>

20 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/belorusskaya-pravoslavnyaya-cerkov-poluchila-preduprezhdenie-ot-upolnomochennogo-po-delam-religii/>

21 Ibid.

22 For example, look at: <https://ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/belarus-un-experts-concerned-about-new-law-freedom-conscience-and-religious>; https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2884; <https://by.usembassy.gov/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom-belarus/>.

6. Government oppression of churches for opposing violence and lawlessness in Belarus

Belarusian regime propagandists are trying to convince international observers that Belarusian churches have become political opponents of Lukashenko amid the protest movement. Some supporters of the current regime even speculate about a supposed “conspiracy against Belarusian statehood,” allegedly orchestrated by “Western circles” through the country’s religious institutions.²³ In reality, this “conspiracy” is a normal reaction of believers to the lawlessness committed by the Belarusian government. People who hold Christian moral principles as their highest naturally respond this way.

Public calls for the rule of law, freedom, and justice have come from representatives of all faiths. Regardless of religious affiliation, the Belarusian authorities immediately reacted to any criticism and manifestations of dissent. These are some examples of politically motivated persecution of religious leaders who dared to raise their voices in defense of truth and justice and stand up for oppressed fellow citizens.



On August 11, 2020, Archbishop **Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz**, Metropolitan of Minsk and Mogilev and Chairman of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Belarus, made a statement against violence and the need for dialogue during the political crisis in Belarus.²⁴ On August 31, after his trip to Poland, the border guards did not let him back into Belarus, although Archbishop Kondrusiewicz is a citizen of Belarus. The border service argued that his passport was allegedly invalid, but such a ban on entry to Belarus was illegal. On September 1, Belarusian ruler Lukashenko, commenting on the situation with Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, openly accused both him and the whole Catholic Church in Belarus of anti-state activities.



On August 27, 2020, evangelical believers gathered in solidarity and support of religious liberty near the Catholic cathedral in Minsk, blocked the day before by special police. Pastor of Trinity Evangelical Church, **Taras Telkovskiy**, read psalms and prayed for Belarus and the release of political prisoners. Immediately after that, the group was surrounded by special police, and the men from the group were detained and taken to the police department. They got administrative protocols for violating the order to hold mass gatherings. Pastor Taras Telkovskiy was fined 810 Belarusian rubles (about 250 USD). Later, he was forced to flee Belarus and became a political refugee in Poland. Evangelical believer **Uladzimir Maiorau** was sentenced to eight days of arrest. **Zmitser Khvedaruk**, a student of the Evangelical Reformed Seminary, was arrested for seven days.

23 <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/729161>

24 <https://catholic.by/3/news/belarus/11991-zvarot-artsyb-skupa-tadevusha-kandrusev-cha-suvyaz-sa-skladanaj-gramadska-pal-tychnaj-s-tuatsyayaj-u-belarus>



In November 2020, the Religious Affairs Commissioner issued a warning to the Belarusian Orthodox Church after Archbishop **Artemy (Kishchenko)** of Grodno spoke out against falsifications and violence several times, both in sermons and public statements.²⁵ A media campaign of discredit was launched against the archbishop. The Belarusian Orthodox Church Synod asked Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to “retire” the archbishop, allegedly because of his health condition. On June 9, 2021, the Russian Orthodox Church Synod considered this petition at an emergency online meeting and decided to retire Archbishop Artemy. This was a violent removal of a diocesan bishop, motivated by a knowingly false reason. Archbishop Artemy claims that this was done “at the government pressure.”²⁶



On September 18, 2020, Archpriest **Vladimir Drobyshevsky** was sentenced to 10 days in jail for “disorderly conduct.” On September 28, he received an additional 15 days for a new accusation. Before that, on August 13, 2020, he went on a solitary picket to the building of the Investigative Committee. He was wearing priest’s clothing and holding a sign with the inscription “Stop violence.” In addition to the arrest, the Archbishop of Gomel and Zhlobin subjected him to ecclesiastical punishment and stripped him of the right to serve as priest and wear priest’s clothes. He was forced to flee Belarus together with his wife and six children.



On September 30, 2020, Orthodox priest **Alexander Bogdan** of the Peter and Paul Church in Volkovysk was sentenced for placing flowers near the Bagration Museum in memory of its late director, Konstantin Shishmakov. The priest was charged with participation in an unsanctioned mass gathering that took place in Volkovysk on August 16. On August 9, Konstantin Shishmakov, a member of the election commission, refused to sign the final protocol, believing it to be falsified. He disappeared on August 15, and his body was found near the Neman River on August 18.²⁷



In the fall of 2020, the **New Life Evangelical Christian Church** in Minsk faced accusations. In response to believers praying for justice and an end to violence, the congregation was accused of “extremist activities.” In February 2021, the church was evicted from its own prayer house and prohibited from meeting for worship in the parking lot outside the church building. On June 20, 2023, at the order of local authorities, bulldozers began demolishing the church building, which the New Life Church had purchased in 2002 and owned as a private property. In December 2023, the Belarusian Supreme Court dissolved the church as a legal entity after three years of bans and hardships.²⁸

25 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/obrashhenie-arxiepiskopa-artemiya-grodnenskogo-i-volkovysskogo/>

26 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/persecuted-priests-belarus-ru/>

27 Ibid.

28 https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2841



From September 27 to 29, 2022, Old Believers **Herman** and **Natalia Snezhkov** were detained in Gomel. A few hours after the rally, they were searched at home, after which Herman was taken away. The next day, he was sentenced to 14 days of arrest for participating in an unauthorized action. A couple of days later, his wife Natalia was arrested. The Belarusian authorities took their minor children – Aglaya and Matvei – to the orphanage. The Snezhkov family did not commit anything illegal but only supported the protesters against the falsification of the presidential election.²⁹



On October 16, 2020, Catholic believer **Irena Bernatskaya** from Lida was fined by the court for violating the order to hold mass gatherings. In fact, she peacefully prayed for Belarus with other members of the “Mothers in Prayer” community near the Catholic cathedral from August 12 to September 1. Later, on March 25, 2021, she was arrested, brought to Minsk, and detained there as part of the criminal case on rehabilitation of Nazism. On June 2, it became known that she was released and deported outside Belarus, to Poland. She was designated as a political prisoner. During her imprisonment, she was deprived of pastoral visits and religious literature.³⁰



In early October 2020, **Alexander** and **Tatiana Tsilindz** were charged for participating in a prayer for peace in Belarus without permission. On 30 September, clergy of four religious confessions attended the court hearing to support Alexander Tsilindz, a well-known surgeon. The hearing was postponed. On 12 October, Tsilindzs were summoned to the police station where Tatyana Tsilindz was charged with violating the order to hold mass gatherings “by public protesting about the elections of the President of the Republic of Belarus; specifically, [she] was part of an organized group of citizens who prayed and had an icon hanging on her chest, which violate the established procedure [for mass gatherings]”.

On October 4, 2020, in Volkovysk in the Grodno region, police detained about 15 parishioners before and after the prayer service for Belarus in the Orthodox parish in honor of Saints Methodius and Cyril. Such prayer services were held at the call of Metropolitan Veniamin, the Primate of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, every Sunday in all Orthodox parishes of the country. No political symbols were used during the prayer service. At the police station, the detained believers were questioned, and the contents of their cell phones were checked. Later, police released them without any record of the detention.³¹

On October 14, 2020, Greek-Catholic believer **Maryna Bulatouskaya** was fined for being near the peaceful procession in Vitsebsk on September 23, 2020, praying the rosary to God’s mercy. At the same time, she did not violate public order, create a threat to public security, or even participate in the peaceful action itself. She did not shout slogans or use any political symbols. She only prayed for the participants of the peaceful march, among whom were her friends.³²

29 https://ruvera.ru/news/zaderzanie_snezhkov_vss

30 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/bernaczkaya-irena/>

31 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring-presledovaniy-po-cerkovnoj-linii-vo-vremya-protestov-v-belarusi/>

32 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/zajavlenije-o-marine-bulatovskoj/>

Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians in Belarus have been remarkably united in condemning the lawlessness perpetrated by the authorities. To suppress this stance of clergy and believers, the regime began to harshly persecute dissenters, accusing churches of “interfering in politics.” In response to these accusations, over 6,000 Christians in Belarus signed an open letter in December 2020, demanding that the government cease violence. The epigraph for this letter was chosen from the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “I cry out, I proclaim violence and destruction.” The letter reads:

“Deliberate distortion of information about the results of the presidential elections on August 9, 2020, perjury in courts, disinformation in the media, and unjust judicial decisions are not only violations of the laws of the Republic of Belarus but also grave sins. ‘Do not lie, do not bear false witness’ – this is God’s commandment. The use of weapons by Belarusian security forces, which led to the deaths of civilians, torture, and severe bodily harm, has shifted the political conflict to a moral and ethical plane. Supporting the illegal actions of the authorities is immoral. Remaining silent about the lawlessness in Belarus means to inflict suffering on tens of thousands of people across the country.”³³

It’s worth noting that the Belarusian Orthodox Church did not remain passive amid the protests against election falsifications. On August 10, 2020, the day after the elections, Metropolitan Pavel, then the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, congratulated Lukashenko on his victory. Before this, Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church had also congratulated Lukashenko. Later, on August 14, in light of the widespread protests across Belarus, Metropolitan Pavel took the unprecedented step and apologized for his hasty congratulations.³⁴ On August 25, in Moscow, the Russian Orthodox Church Synod removed Metropolitan Pavel from his position as a head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and transferred him in Russia to the Kuban Metropolitanate. That same day, Bishop Veniamin was appointed as the new head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church.³⁵

Moscow’s change of the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church came after Lukashenko spoke at a pro-government rally in Grodno on August 22, 2020. The Belarusian ruler expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that clergy dared to have their own opinions, called for honesty from the authorities, and spoke out against the violence of security forces. **Alexander Lukashenko** then stated:



“I am surprised by the position of our [leaders of] denominations. My dear clergymen, come to your senses and mind your own business. People should come to churches to pray! Churches and cathedrals are not for politics. People should come there with their souls, as it has always been. Do not follow the path of dissenters. You will be ashamed and disgraced for the position some of you are taking now. And the state will not look at this with indifference.”³⁶

Even back then, caught up in the heat of the moment, Lukashenko hinted at the fate that awaited all those who opposed his policies. These policies were later made clear through decisions that severely restricted democratic freedoms.

33 <https://baznica.info/2020/12/otkrytoe-pismo-xristian-belarusi-podpisali-bolee-5000-chelovek/>

34 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30784028.html>

35 <https://www.dw.com/ru/sinod-rpc-osvobodil-ot-dolzности-glavu-belorusskoj-cerkvi/a-54698025>

36 <https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-hramy-kostely-ne-dlja-politiki-403780-2020/>

The war in Ukraine provided the Belarusian authorities with another reason to intensify their crackdown on their fellow citizens, including religious leaders.



On February 28, 2022, priest **Mikhail Marugo**, cleric of the temple of the Belarusian Orthodox Church in Minsk, was detained by police. He was at Minsk railway station during the anti-war action and was holding a bouquet of flowers. On March, he received an administrative penalty in the form of arrest for 13 days.³⁷



Priest **Vasily Yegorov**, a rector of the Greek Catholic parish of Mother of God Belynichskaya in Mogilev, was fined 1,350 Belarusian rubles (about 410 USD) for putting a sticker on his car that read “Ukraine, forgive us!” From March 25 to March 28, 2022, the priest was kept in a temporary detention center.³⁸

On March 3, 2022, the special police in Minsk prevented the prayer for peace in Ukraine, against Russia’s aggression and Belarus’ participation in it, which about 100 mothers of Belarusian soldiers attended. Police officers checked the identities and photographed some of the women gathered near the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. The police then detained four of the prayer participants and interrogated them for four hours at the police station. Just before the beginning of the service, the police detained journalist **Diana Serediuk** and her husband as they were leaving the cathedral. The court later sentenced both to 15 days of arrest. The next day, the police came to the home of the fifth woman, but they didn’t find her at home.³⁹

Many Christian churches across Belarus, including Catholic and various Protestant congregations, issued statements and held services and prayers for peace in Ukraine and an end to the war. However, Orthodox Archbishop Antony (Doronin) of Grodno has banned services or prayers for an end to Russia’s war against Ukraine. Forum 18 has not been able to find out whether the authorities ordered Archbishop Antony to ban such services and prayers or whether this was his personal initiative.⁴⁰

Since August 2020, at least 82 clergy have faced persecution, fines, arrests, and other forms of pressure, forcing many to flee the country. Among them are 30 hierarchs of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, 27 pastors and church ministers of Protestant Evangelical churches of different denominations, 20 hierarchs of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, and five priests of the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church.⁴¹

The Lukashenko regime is operating in survival mode, perceiving any dissent as a threat to its existence. According to a Belarusian priest:

“The persecution of believers in Belarus is driven by officials’ desire to maintain power at any cost. Since any criticism of the authorities in Belarus is considered ‘extremist activity,’ believers are also subject to repression.”⁴²

37 <https://shaltnotkill.info/svyashh-mihail-marugo-bpcz-minsk/>

38 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/oshtrafovan-belorusskij-greko-katolicheskij-svyashhennik-vasilij-egorov-zanaklejku-ukraina-prosti/>

39 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/belarus-soldatskih-materej-zaderzhali-za-molitvy-o-prekrashhenii-vojny-s-ukrainoj/>

40 Ibid.

41 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/persecuted-priests-belarus-ru/>

42 The name of the interviewee is not disclosed for security reasons.

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who faced government persecution



For objecting to Lukashenko’s usurpation of power, police brutality, judicial arbitrariness, and expressing their anti-war views, dissidents will continue to be arrested by law enforcement agencies, and courts will continue to issue rulings on charges of “disrupting public order,” “extremism,” and “unauthorized missionary activity.” Their accusations of “Belarusian churches interfering in politics” are far from reality but are used as a formal reason for the oppression of those churches and believers who cannot remain silent, seeing the lawlessness of the government.

Throughout the massive protests of 2020-2021, Christians of various denominations in Belarus showed exceptional courage as they supported the Belarusian people in their quest for fair elections, democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. The position of the churches of Belarus differed significantly from that of Russian religious leaders. In Russia, churches are not only afraid to speak out against the oppression of Putin’s regime and the genocide of the people of Ukraine during the Russian invasion but also justify Russia’s aggression and call it a “holy war.”⁴³ Christians in Belarus have become more robust in matters of moral virtue and have begun to demonstrate this principled stance precisely in response to the unprecedented acts of violence, lawlessness, and violations of rights and freedoms with which the current regime is trying to prolong its existence.



Orthodox theologian, human rights activist, and constitutional law specialist **Natalia Vasilevich**, concluded:

“Any policy that the regime likes and that it intends to involve the churches in will be considered ‘public life.’ And any participation in public life that the authorities do not like will automatically be considered ‘politics,’ for which they will be persecuted.”⁴⁴

43 <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4568860-the-russian-orthodox-church-declares-holy-war-on-ukraine/>

44 <https://www.dw.com/ru/nadzirat-i-nakazyvat-lukashenko-podpisal-zakon-o-nesvobode-sovesti/a-67917328>

7. Comparison of the religious situation in Belarus and Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine

Imposing the chauvinistic ideology of the “Russian World”

When observing the situation in the field of religious freedom in the Republic of Belarus, there are similarities with the situation of faith-based communities in the territories of Ukraine occupied by Russia. It is caused by the chauvinistic ideology of the “Russkiy Mir” (Russian World) that the Kremlin actively imposes along with the Russian Orthodox Church, considering Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, as well as ethnic Russians all around the world, as a supposed sphere of a single civilization, politically and religiously led and directed from Moscow. According to Ecumenical Patriarch **Bartholomew I**:



“The Russian World ideology is the main instrument for a “spiritual” legitimation of the invasion in Ukraine. ... With the end of the Soviet Union and the bankruptcy of the communist ideology, pseudo-religion emerged. The old imperial strategies were then combined with the cynical techniques and mechanisms developed and inherited from the Soviet Union. The Church and the State leadership in Russia cooperated in the crime of aggression, and share the responsibility for the resulting crimes, like the shocking abduction of Ukrainian children. They have provoked enormous suffering not only to the Ukrainian people, but also to the Russians, who count more than a hundred thousand casualties and the responsibility for terrible atrocities.”⁴⁵

The construction of any dictatorship requires the presence of an ideological component. During the Soviet era, the communist ideology of Marxism-Leninism was used. Now, this role in Russia has been assigned to the ideology of the Russian World promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church. In terms of this imperial ideology, Belarus and Ukraine are the “legitimate” territory for spiritual annexation and comprehensive Russian influence.

Canonical (religious) and administrative control by the Russian Orthodox Church

Over the past ten years, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), headed by Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovskiy), has tried to hide its dependence on the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). After the occupation of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions in 2014, the ROC tried to maintain some semblance of non-interference, formally leaving the dioceses in these regions under the leadership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Then, with the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow’s real influence was manifested openly. The ROC began to openly interfere in the internal affairs of the UOC, arbitrarily annexing its dioceses in the territories occupied by the Russian army and replacing bishops there at its own discretion.⁴⁶

45 <https://ec-patr.org/address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-seminar-reaction-of-churches-and-religious-communities-to-war-and-conflict-lit/>

46 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/09/ukraine-russian-orthodox-church-war-religious-freedom-ban/>



After the Russian troops suffered a crushing defeat near Kyiv in February-March 2022, and the attempts to capture Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia were unsuccessful, it became clear that the Russian so-called “special military operation” could drag on indefinitely. On June 7, 2022, the ROC Synod decided to accept the Dzhankoy, Simferopol, and Feodosia dioceses in Crimea from the UOC into the direct subordination of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.⁴⁷ Later, on October 11, 2023, the ROC Synod retired Metropolitan Lazar (Shvets) of Simferopol and Crimea and replaced him with Putin’s spiritual adviser, Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov).⁴⁸ In addition, the ROC arbitrarily took control of the Luhansk, Rovenky, and Alchevsk dioceses in the Luhansk oblast, as well as the Donetsk and Horlivka dioceses in the Donetsk oblast, which are part of the UOC structure.⁴⁹ In 2023, the Russian Orthodox Church similarly annexed the Berdiansk diocese and partially the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson dioceses of the UOC.⁵⁰

These examples are proof of how the ROC arbitrarily interferes with the structure and leadership of the UOC, which silently agrees with this without any objections to Moscow’s influence. Such “spiritual annexation” vividly exposed the ROC’s true intentions to strip its vassal church in Ukraine of any formal autonomy they previously had in the territories under the Ukrainian government’s control.

47 <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/russkaya-pravoslavnyaya-tserkov-anneksirowala-1654612602.html>

48 <https://religionnews.com/2023/10/16/russian-orthodox-church-appoints-putins-spiritual-advisor-metropolitan-of-crimea/>

49 <https://hrwf.eu/ukraine-the-russian-orthodox-church-annexes-dioceses-of-the-ukrainian-orthodox-church-in-occupied-territories/>

50 <https://society.comments.ua/news/warrussia/u-patriarha-kirilla-reshili-anneksirowat-berdyanskuyu-eparhiyu-712846.html>

At the same time, the Belarusian Orthodox Church did not even have a chance to act independently, as the status of an exarchate implies direct dependence on the Moscow Patriarchate. Despite this, many Belarusian bishops and priests have shown the courage to speak out against the violence of the Lukashenko regime, call for peace in Ukraine, and an end to the war.⁵¹ The ROC maintains complete canonical (religious) and administrative control over the Belarusian Orthodox Church leadership and successfully combats opposition sentiment in this church by removing head, bishops, and priests disloyal to the Lukashenko regime.

Given the strong dependence on Moscow, the prospect of Belarusians seeing their own autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church in the near future seems unrealistic. In contrast to this, besides the UOC, there are other Orthodox churches in Ukraine that have various canonical subordinations. For example, in 2019, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine received the Tomos (decree) of autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarch. After that, hundreds of UOC parishes joined this newly recognized church to liberate themselves from the ROC's influence.⁵²

Demanding loyalty and eliminating dissent

In Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine, as well as in Belarus and Russia itself, the regimes require religious leaders who are faithful to exhibit an exceptionally high level of loyalty to the current regime. The deportations of dissenting priests and pastors from the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine after their occupation by the Russian military are identical to the actions taken by the Belarusian government against clergy who refused to submit to Lukashenko's regime. The only difference is that expelled Ukrainian clergy can seek refuge in Ukraine-controlled regions, while Belarusian priests are forced to flee abroad.

Accusations of cooperation with Western intelligence services

Even abroad, priests and pastors are not left in peace. The Belarusian government's accusations of the Western world being the motivation and resources behind protest movements in Belarus closely resemble the accusations made by Russian authorities against religious leaders in the occupied territories of Ukraine. All clergy who opposed or rejected to cooperate with the occupying authorities were uniformly accused of spying with Western intelligence services. The Belarusian government also often labels the dissent priests as "Western spies," "foreign agents," or "renegades."

In Russia, such accusations of religious leaders gained a legal basis with the passing of a new version of the "foreign agents" that came into force on December 1, 2022.⁵³ For example, in June 2023, the Russian government recognized **Pinchas Goldschmidt**, the chief rabbi of Moscow and rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue, as a foreign agent. He had previously been forced to flee Russia because of the pressure exerted on him:

"Anyone who speaks out about the war risks being punished and going to prison. We were pressured to have the Jewish community officially speak out in favor of the war."⁵⁴

The Belarusian government is also going to enact a law to designate fellow citizens and domestic non-profits as "foreign agents," which would further expand the scope for repression and limit the international connections of Belarusian churches and other faith-based communities.⁵⁵

51 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/persecuted-priests-belarus-ru/>

52 <https://archons.org/the-ecumenical-patriarch-the-tomos-of-autocephaly-was-an-act-of-responsibility-of-the-mother-church-towards-millions-of-our-ukrainian-orthodox-brethren/>

53 <http://duma.gov.ru/news/54760/>

54 <https://www.dw.com/ru/byvshij-glavnyj-ravvin-moskvy-rasskazal-o-davlenii-iz-za-vojnny/a-62564610>

55 <https://euroradio.fm/ru/posle-vyborov-v-belarusi-mogut-prinyat-zakon-o-inostrannykh-agentakh-karpenko>

Prohibition of unregistered religious groups

A common feature in both Belarus and the occupied territories is the absolute prohibition of unregistered religious groups. Such activities, as well as the mere existence of unregistered Christian communities, are now banned in Belarus under the revised Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” adopted in December 2023 (Article 15), and under the Criminal Code (Article 193.1). At the same time, Belarus hosts many churches of the International Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists (IUC ECB). This Baptist denomination adheres to the practice of not registering its congregations to avoid any state interference. According to the IUC ECB data, churches and their ministers endured brutal repression by the atheistic communist regime from 1961 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Believers from these churches spent a total of 5,000 years in prison. Thus, under the new law in Belarus, the IUC ECB churches could face severe persecution without state registration, including arrests and harsh sentences for parents for illegal religious indoctrination of their children, who would probably be sent to orphanages.

In 2022-2023, faith-based communities in Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine faced bans on activities, arrests of clergy, and confiscation of church buildings. The IUC ECB churches also experienced persecution for refusing to re-register under Russian legislation. While Russian military authorities compelled clergy to register through repression and intimidation, most IUC ECB churches continue to operate underground, suffering oppression.

Before the presidential elections in Russia, held in March 2024, a wave of repression affected again most congregations in the Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine. The Russian military and intelligence services conducted house-to-house raids, interrupting even home gatherings of believers, forcing landlords to report believers and home worships, deploying provocateurs and informers, and summoning leaders for interrogations and warning them about unacceptable activities.⁵⁶ There was a case when the Russian military illegally confiscated a church building from a local Ukrainian congregation for “delaying registration.” Even after the congregation obtained registration under Russian law, the building was not returned to believers, and their home gatherings were also banned. The congregation members sought justice for the return of their property, but unsuccessfully.⁵⁷

Religious repression under the guise of fighting extremism

The vague definitions of offenses such as “extremist activity,” “disruption of public order,” “resisting law enforcement,” or “discrediting the Republic of Belarus” (the Russian equivalent being “discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation”) create a similar picture of repression both in the Republic of Belarus and in Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine. For example, when Christians in Belarus condemn police officers for their brutality and violence against peaceful protesters, it is considered an insult to the state ideology and “extremist activity.” Similarly, praying for the cessation of Russian military’s tormenting the civilian population or destruction of Ukraine’s energy infrastructure can be designated as “discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation” with subsequent criminal prosecution or arbitrary arrest. Likewise, according to the Russian law, prayers held in public places are labeled as “mass riots” and home worships as “illegal missionary activity.”

Restrictions on religious activities for foreigners

Another similarity is the prohibition on foreign nationals serving as founders and leaders of religious organizations and restrictions on missionary activity. However, while the concept

56 <https://missioneurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023.12.15-Mission-Eurasia-report-on-Ukraine-ENG-web-version.pdf>

57 The interviewee’s name and the congregation’s location are not disclosed for security reasons.

of “foreign national” in Belarus somewhat aligns with international norms, instead in Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of people who have lived their entire lives in their native land are considered “foreigners” if they don’t accept the Russian citizenship and exchange their Ukrainian passport for Russian one. The Russian authorities force Ukrainians in different ways to take Russian citizenship, for example, as a condition to re-register a congregation according to Russian law to avoid the confiscation of church property. In 2022-2023, the Ukrainian citizenship of church leaders and members was one of the reasons for the vast closure of Ukrainian churches in the territories occupied by Russia.⁵⁸

Legislative initiatives are not the only factor driving the intensification of repression against religious liberty. The fear of the freedom that spiritual revival brings compels dictators to control every aspect of their people’s lives. A precedent for this is seen in the persistent attempts by Lukashenko’s regime to stifle even the smallest sprouts of freedom and self-awareness, exemplified by the incident surrounding the performance of Belarus’ spiritual hymn, “Magutny Bozha” (Mighty God). In the past, performing this hymn did not provoke any reaction, but now, the Belarusian authorities are increasing persecution for its performance. It has escalated to the point that, in June 2021, **Alexander Lukashenko** threatened Catholics:

“Recently, the media has increasingly reported cases where people want to pray with the ‘Mighty God’ hymn in churches. Be careful – you will get into trouble.”⁵⁹

Echoing that sentiment, Metropolitan Veniamin, head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, advised against singing “Mighty God” in Orthodox parishes, claiming that “it is a secular anthem, and it divides society.”⁶⁰

Similarly, singing or even listening to Ukrainian-language songs, as well as any manifestation of Ukrainian identity, in Russia-occupied territories have become grounds for preventive conversations by police, pressure on children in schools, threats, arrests, and interrogations by the Russian military or intelligence services.⁶¹ Considering this, the Lukashenko regime, under the influence of the Russian World ideology, has already turned Belarus into a semblance of the Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine, where there is no respect for human dignity, freedom of speech, religious pluralism, and the rule of law.

58 <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2024.03-IRF-Ukraine-report-ENG-web.pdf>

59 <https://ex-press.live/rubrics/obshhestvo/2021/07/03/smotrite-narvetes-lukashenko-predupredil-katolicheskuyu-cerkov-belarusi-iz-za-gimna-magutny-bozha-cto-proisxodit>

60 <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/mitropolit-veniamin-gimn-magutny-bozha-razdelyaet-nashe-obshhestvo/>

61 <https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2022.09-IRF-Ukraine-report-ENG.pdf>

8. Recommendations

Over the past few years, the religious situation in Belarus has remained outside the attention of international organizations against the backdrop of brutal political repression by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko. With the adoption of a new version of the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” in December 2023, the religious situation in Belarus will rapidly deteriorate in the coming months. The repressive nature of the law gives the Belarusian government broad discretion to use formal legal grounds to persecute disloyal religious figures, close churches and other religious communities from among religious minorities, and increase centralized control over any religious activity in the country.

Aiming to prevent an increase in violence, politically motivated arrests and imprisonments, oppression of religious minorities, and confiscation of church property, Mission Eurasia proposes the following **recommendations for responding to the current religious and political situation in Belarus:**

1. To unite and strengthen international efforts to release the arrested clergy, believers and other political prisoners in Belarus who have been arbitrarily convicted for political reasons.
2. *For the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF):* To place Belarus on a “Special Watch List” for its government’s violations of religious freedom.
3. *For United Nations, OSCE, Council of Europe, USCIRF:* To establish international monitoring of the implementation of the new law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” and so-called “anti-extremist” legislation in Belarus to document the suppression of religious minorities and any politically motivated violations against faith-based communities.
4. To publicly condemn the Russian World ideology and support the efforts of civil societies in the post-Soviet countries to eliminate Russia’s state interference in the internal affairs of other countries, primarily through the Russian Orthodox Church.
5. To introduce personal sanctions against Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who is responsible for justifying the Russian aggressive war against Ukraine and for carrying out repressions against Belarusian Orthodox clergy because of their anti-violence and anti-war stance.

6. To impose new comprehensive economic sanctions against Belarus and personal sanctions against Alexander Lukashenko and other officials responsible for Belarus' complicity in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and political repression in the country, including restrictions on religious freedom on political grounds and oppression of religious minorities.
7. To document government oppression against Belarusian religious leaders, clergy, believers, and other civic activists in a manner that ensures security for those who agree to testify, including non-disclosure of their private data and securing safety for them and their families.
8. To provide political asylum and legal assistance to Belarusian religious leaders, believers, and other civil activists who have been forced to flee government repression outside the country to prevent their deportation or extradition to Belarus, as well as a lack of legal status in case their Belarusian citizenship is revoked.
9. To develop and implement rehabilitation programs for those who have suffered torture and abuse as a result of political and religious repression and extend these programs to family members of victims. To involve international organizations with best practices exchanging experience in such rehabilitation programs.
10. To advocate for returning to faith-based communities all church buildings and other property confiscated or destroyed by the government of Belarus. To document all facts of material damage to faith-based communities due to government repression and develop effective mechanisms for restoring their property rights.
11. To be critical of and not accept as true statements by officials in Belarus and Russia, as well as government-controlled media, that make baseless accusations of so-called "extremist activity," "illegal missionary activity," and "interference in politics" as formal grounds for oppression religious minorities and persecuting disloyal religious leaders and believers.

Story of Sergiy Melyanets' family from Belarus

Sergiy Melyanets, a Protestant church minister in Belarus, was forced to seek refuge abroad with his family. As a church minister, Sergiy oversaw worship services, gave sermons, and led ministry for teenagers and youth. He and his wife Svetlana, a devoted Christian as well, are raising seven children. As each child grew older, they were baptized and now assist Sergiy and Svetlana in their Christian ministry.

The Belarusian State Security Committee (KGB) closely monitors religious communities and pays particular attention to prominent ministers and congregants. Sergiy's family came under special scrutiny from the intelligence services following the 2020 presidential election in Belarus. It was marred by numerous violations and raised many questions globally about the legitimacy of the results and the usurpation of power by Alexander Lukashenko.

Other Christians also responded to this injustice and violence against peaceful protesters. In various cities across the country, prayers for justice were held. Sergiy was among those who organized such prayer gatherings in his city square. For four years, people came out every Sunday to pray for their country, for the authorities, for society, for justice, and for submission to God. As a result of their activism, these organizers faced government threats, warnings, and blackmail.

Sergiy Melyanets recalls those events as follows:

“On August 10, 2020, shortly after the presidential election in Belarus, I went to the center of the city in the evening with two Christian brothers from our church to pray about the situation. We were attacked by unknown individuals in black clothing. They assaulted my Christian brothers and me, beating us with truncheons and fists, torturing us with a taser, and threatening us with death. They took us to the police station, where I began to feel unwell and had severe chest pains. The police were alarmed and allowed me to go to the hospital.”

Starting in August 2020, mass protests swept across the country in response to election falsification. The Belarusian authorities reacted by brutally suppressing peaceful demonstrations. People were arrested, imprisoned, and fined. Criminal cases were opened against thousands of citizens. Sergiy felt called to attend the trials and pray for those who were unjustly accused. These included clergy, Christians of various denominations, secular individuals, as well as representatives of culture, education, and civil society.

Sergiy, along with his children, visited the families of those who were arrested and convicted. He organized support for them. He wrote letters to the convicted, sent them packages with necessities and financial assistance. The KGB began to take notice of Sergiy, suspecting him of working for foreign intelligence.

“In early 2021, after a police raid, my family faced numerous problems related to the blinds in our bedroom, which were white and red (colors of the unofficial Belarusian flag of the struggle for independence). In court, I explained that these colors represented our family's Christian perspective: red symbolizes the blood of Christ shed for us, and white symbolizes righteousness. The court imposed on me a fine of nearly \$400. We filed two appeals and then a complaint to the

Supreme Court of Belarus. The case was transferred to the enforcement department. Our bank card and account were blocked. We were forced to pay the fine.”

Sergiy Melyanets led home groups of believers and worked with teenagers at the church, but trouble was already brewing. In March 2023, KGB officers came to his home and forced him to undergo a polygraph test. The KGB closely monitored Sergiy’s religious ministry and publications.

In March 2024, Sergiy attended the trial of a Catholic journalist, Igor Karney, to offer support and pray for him. After the court session, Sergiy was detained by KGB officers and handcuffed. This marked a turning point in Sergiy’s life.

Since the Belarusian authorities couldn’t officially charge him for attending court hearings, they falsely accused him of publishing poetry. Sergiy is a creative person and writer. He was first arrested and sentenced to 13 days in prison for one of his poems, published on Instagram in 2020.

Sergiy’s home was searched. During interrogations at the KGB, both Sergiy and his wife, Svetlana, were pressured to sign false confessions. The KGB threatened them with even more significant consequences, including the destruction of their home and having their children taken to an orphanage.

“Our children also experienced difficulties because of their Christian beliefs and their living faith in God. The college and schools where our children studied were instructed to carry out ‘preventive measures’ with our family. The Social Service launched an investigation. My children had to meet with ideologists and psychologists and undergo various tests. My wife and I were forced to gather character references and documents to prove our family’s well-being. Ultimately, the school staff found no grounds for concern and closed the case.”



Sergiy and Svetlana Melyanets and their seven kids

During Sergiy's arrest, he was beaten several times, tortured by starvation and sleep deprivation, denied access to a shower, and forced to stay in a small cell with street criminals.

"The food in prison was poor. Prison guards often didn't provide a spoon to humiliate us. I had to sleep on the floor or a metal bed without a mattress. The cells were infested with bedbugs and fleas. I tried to be God's light in those places. I spoke to the prisoners about Jesus, to those willing to listen, and offered to pray for them. I called this prison ministry 'turning on the religious channel.' Prison administration frequently moved me from one cell to another so I wouldn't make friends. But again and again, I shared Bible stories and prayed for new people."

After completing his first prison term, the KGB extended Sergiy's confinement by an additional 12 days. His family, church, and Christians worldwide prayed for his release.

Sergiy Melyanets was released in April 2024, despite the KGB's threats of new criminal charges and their assertion that he would face ten years in prison. Realizing that the intelligence services would not stop persecuting him, Sergiy and his family decided to leave the country and find refuge in a safer place.

Mission Eurasia assisted Sergiy's family with fleeing from Belarus and resettling in a new location. We believe that God will guide Sergiy and his family, protect those who remain, and continue their ministry in Belarus.

Melyanets family is not the only one forced to seek refuge abroad. Mission Eurasia urges the international community to be aware of and respond to violations of religious freedom in Belarus.

Find out more stories and reports on the Eurasia Mission website:

MissionEurasia.org

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To stay informed about religious freedom and human rights trends in the Eurasian region, or to collaborate with Mission Eurasia and support their strategic ministry initiatives ministry, please contact us at: info@missioneurasia.org or visit our website: MissionEurasia.org



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