



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **77.5%**
- Agnostics : **19.6%**
- Atheists : **2.5%**
- Others : **0.4%**

9,482,000

207,600 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by article 31 of the constitution<sup>[1]</sup>, which allows individuals to manifest their religious views and gather for corporate worship so long as they do not do anything prohibited by law. Article 16 of the constitution declares the legal equality of all religions and faiths. It also prohibits religious activities which threaten morals or are directed against the state, its political system or the civil liberties of its citizens. The same article also states that the relationship between the state and particular religious organisations “shall be regulated by the law with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people”.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations of 1992<sup>[2]</sup> more specifically defines the legal framework for religions in Belarus. Article six establishes the equality of all religions before the law. As long as a religious organisation does not participate in the activities of “political parties and other public associations pursuing political aims” it is allowed to participate in public life and to use state media. Articles 14 and 15 differentiate between religious communities, which are organisations with at least 20 adult members living in one or more settlements in close proximity, and religious associations, consisting of at least 10 religious communities, of which at least one has been active in Belarus for more than 20 years. The latter have the right to establish monasteries, male and female religious orders, religious missions and educational facilities. The religious activities of both communities and associations are limited to the territory in which the given group operates. Article 25 additionally limits those activities to properties that belong to these organisations or its members. In the case of private homes, there are a number of safety regulations a religious organisation has to follow. Large-scale religious events may be held in public if they receive approval from local authorities.

Articles 16 through to 19 regulate the registration process for religious organisations. Registration is necessary for a

religious organisation to be recognised as a legal entity. To register, it needs to provide various information including details about its beliefs and its founders, among other requisites. As specified in article 21, an application for registration can be denied if the authorities deem the information unsatisfactory or the doctrines professed to be non-compliant with the law.<sup>[3]</sup>

According to article 13, only Belarusian citizens can lead religious organisations.<sup>[4]</sup>

Article 29 limits the period that a foreign missionary without Belarusian citizenship can be engaged in religious missionary activities to one year, but this can be extended or reduced by the authorities. In April 2017, the authorities refused to extend the residency visa of Father Robert Maciejewski, a Catholic priest, who had served in the country for more than 10 years. The Polish national was required to leave Belarus. He had been the parish priest in Mstislav in the Mogilev (Mahilyow) region. This occurred just two weeks after the head of the diocese, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, criticised government regulations.<sup>[5]</sup> Archbishop Kondrusiewicz identified this as one of several areas of tension between the Church and the state during a speech at the Academy of Public Administration on 2nd May 2017. He also mentioned attempts to control Sunday schools and an unequal conscription policy which unduly affected students in Catholic schools.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Republic of Belarus and the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) signed an agreement that establishes a special relationship between the two. While it is not explicitly directed against other religions, article 2 of the concordat speaks about cooperation “against pseudo-religious structures presenting a danger to personality and society”<sup>[7]</sup>

In July 2016 the Law of the Republic of Belarus on Alternative Service came into force. This allows those who object to participating in military activities for religious reasons to take part in humanitarian activities instead. This development was welcomed by the Jehovah’s Witnesses among others.<sup>[8]</sup>

However there seems to be increased hostility towards Jehovah’s Witnesses in Belarus. In March 2018, a petition on the change.org website called on the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, to suspend all Jehovah Witness activities pending a study by religious experts. The petition cited the recent Russian clamp-down on the group<sup>[9]</sup> Gulyako has in the past made negative comments about Catholics and Jehovah’s Witnesses and previously threatened to rescind the latter’s registration.<sup>[10]</sup>

In October 2017 two members of a Baptist group were detained and fined for religious activities and publicly distributing literature in the city of Vebeľ. One of them received an injury to his face during the arrest, while the other lost all feeling in his hands due to the handcuffs restricting his circulation. Although Baptists in Belarus refuse state registration on principle, they had not been harassed by the police in over 10 years.<sup>[11]</sup>

Vadzim Smok, the coordinator of the Ostrogorski Centre in Belarus, noted that, while the Belarusian state has still not fully condemned Communist atrocities, there have been some positive changes; for example, the acknowledgement and memorialisation of the Kurapaty executions during Stalin’s Great Terror – during which a number of Catholics were killed. Smok’s assessment of recent developments between the Roman Catholic Church and the government is that not only have bilateral meetings intensified, as the state increasingly realises the importance of the Church for its own political goals, but that there are now also more open discussions on difficult issues.

In May 2016 President Lukashenko met with Pope Francis in the Vatican to discuss bilateral relations. According to a statement by the Holy See Press Office, the meeting was cordial and underlined the good level of cooperation between Belarus and the Holy See.<sup>[12]</sup>

## **| Incidents**

In November 2016 three neo-Nazis vandalised a Holocaust memorial in Mogilev by smearing black paint on it. The police investigated the case and the culprits were later convicted for hooliganism. Alexei Kaplan, the chairman of the Directorate of the Jewish Community in Mogilev, suggested that acceptance of, or indifference to, Nazi graffiti runs deep in the

population. The monument was defaced during the night, but, according to him, the incident went unreported for 24 hours. Police only investigated the case after activists and reporters publicised it. According to Kaplan, unlike in Soviet times, Jews do not generally feel threatened in Belarus today, but they tend to keep a low profile, for example they would not put up signs that would identify Jewish institutions.<sup>[13]</sup>

An article from the Times of Israel described how the Jewish community generally feels secure as, unlike in neighbouring Russia or Ukraine, no violent anti-Semitic incidents have occurred in Belarus. The article stated that, while the Jewish community in Belarus profits from the stability of the regime, it also lacks legal protection for its sites and the freedom to speak out against abuses. In 2017, the authorities in the city of Gomel approved the construction of an apartment building on the site of a former Jewish cemetery, where bodies were still interred. In so doing, they drew much criticism from local and international Jewish groups. Yakov Goodman, a Jewish-American activist of Belarusian origin, accused the government of “state anti-Semitism”, claiming that there is disregard for the heritage sites of other religious groups. Other activists have spoken of “an information war” being waged by state-controlled media against Jewish groups opposed to the construction of apartments on the cemetery site in Gomel. A spokesman for the Belarusian Embassy in Israel rejected any notions of state anti-Semitism and stated that Goodman was “a prominent fake newsmaker”<sup>[14]</sup>

On 29th January 2018, Pavel (Ponomaryov), Metropolitan of Minsk and Zaslavje and Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus, gave a very hostile interview on the subject of the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church. Known for his harsh rhetoric against the West, he stated that “Uniates” believe in a “different God” to the Orthodox, and implied that they are a sectarian organisation prone to pagan idolatry.<sup>[15]</sup> An article by Dzmitry Mitskevich, an analyst at Belarus Security Blog and editor-in-chief of Varta magazine, explained how Metropolitan Pavel strongly opposes ecumenism and how he has attempted to strengthen ties between Belarus and Russia. In November 2017 he likened the idea of creating an autocephalous Belarusian Orthodox Church, which would be separate from the Moscow Patriarchate, to the temptations of the devil. In a move seen by some commentators as an attempt to counterbalance the scheduled Papal visit to Vilnius in September 2018, he invited Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to come to Minsk in October 2018 to hold a meeting of the Russian Holy Synod in Belarus.<sup>[16]</sup>

In May 2018 seminarians and young priests in Belarus, both Catholic and Orthodox, began receiving call-up papers for military duty.<sup>[17]</sup> The Military Service Law provides deferral only for men under 27 years of age – on health or family grounds.<sup>[18]</sup> Nonetheless, clergymen and seminarians have usually benefitted from a postponement of military service following a government decree of 13th April 2006. Deferral is usually granted when dioceses forward a request with the list of names to the Commission of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, which sends them to the Ministry of Defence.<sup>[19]</sup>

Belarus’s Catholic bishops appealed to President Alexander Lukashenko to release priests and seminarians from the draft because it would prevent the functioning of seminaries and some parishes.<sup>[20]</sup> Subsequently there were reports that conscripted clerics from both the Orthodox and Catholics would be granted a six-month postponement.<sup>[21]</sup>

## **Prospects for freedom of religion**

An article in BelarusDigest, drawing on data from the 2017 report on Global Restrictions on Religion by the Pew Research Center <sup>[22]</sup> and the US International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, stated that, at a societal level, hostility towards religious organisations in Belarus is relatively moderate and almost comparable to some of its neighbours, the notable exceptions being Russia and Ukraine. Hence, there are few incidents of social hostility of a religious nature. The actions and legislation of the government, directed against religious organisations, remain the most pressing problem for religious freedom in the country. In the last two years there have been both positive and negative developments. Examples of the first kind are the increasingly good bilateral relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the government, as well as the waiving of visa requirements for short visits by members of the clergy and the Law on Alternative Service. Yet, at the same time, the regime exerts its executive power through a registration policy that is hostile to religious organisations, which leaves the latter in a state of constant legal insecurity.

## Endnotes / Sources

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