



## **Institute on Religion and Public Policy: Religious Freedom in Belarus**

### **Executive Summary**

(1). Religious communities in the country of Belarus face significant obstacles to the free practice of religion. Religious repression has continued even after independence from the Soviet Union. While the Constitution of the Belarus provides for freedom of religion on paper, the Government significantly interferes and curtails the rights of religious freedom in practice.

### **Institute on Religion and Public Policy**

(2). Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights, and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world

### **Introduction to the Legal Situation**

(3). Although the 1996 amendment to the Constitution of Belarus asserts that “all religions and faith shall be equal before the law,” the government of Belarus has imposed special requirements on newer religions that are not consistent with international standards.

(4). In 2002, despite protests from human rights organizations, the European Union, and domestic religious groups, President Lukashenko signed a religion law, “About the Freedom of Confessions and Religious Organizations.” The 40 complex articles which make up this law severely hinder and curtail religious freedom.

(5). The 2002 religion law increased government control of the activities of religious groups. Religious groups must receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute literature, foreigners are prevented from leading religious organizations, and religious communities are denied the right to establish schools to train their own clergy. Under this law, religious groups registered before 2002 were required to reregister by 2004.

(6). The religion law requires religious organizations to register with the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationalities Affairs of the Council of Ministers (OPRRNA) or with local and regional governments. As of January 1, 2007, the OPRRNA reported that 25 religious denominations with 3,103 religious organizations were officially registered. The OPRRNA continues to deny registration to what it considers nontraditional faiths, mainly Protestant groups, such as the New Life Church and the Belarusian Evangelical Church.

(7). Any organized faith must have at least 10 churches and be able to prove that it had a church in Belarus before 1982. Under the 2002 religious law, three tiers of religious groups are established: religious communities, religious associations, and republican religious associations. A religious community is defined as including at least twenty persons over the age of 18. Religious associations are defined as consisting of at least ten religious communities, at least one of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years. This clause makes it impossible for an organized faith to become legitimate due to Soviet leader Yuri Andropov's repression of religion in Belarus during his reign.

(8). The 2002 religion law works against some Protestant faiths because while some of these faiths are refused registration because they do not have legal address, they are also denied the right to purchase property which qualifies legal redress.

(9). In addition to Article 25 of the 2002 law, which requires state permission for religious events outside purpose-built places of worship, the August 2003 law on demonstrations also requires prior state permission for public religious events.

### **Instances of Official Discrimination**

(10). There have been numerous incidences where authorities have harassed, fined, or deported members of religious minorities for practicing their faith. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008 a court in Belarus handed down a fine of 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (211 Euros or 329 US Dollars), more than two months' average wages, to Vladimir Burshtyn, a Baptist who "organized choir singing and conducted conversations on religious topics" outside a public market.

(11). On April 29, 2008, three human rights defenders were fined for organizing a mass petition to challenge the 2002 Religion Law. The government justified their actions by stating that the organizers failed to adhere to the proper legal procedure of registering an group with the electoral commission before collecting signatures.

(12). On February 29, 2008, officials disrupted a small charismatic youth group meeting in a private house in the southern city of Mazyr in Gomel. Citing the 2002 law, the officials justified their actions by stating that the group was in

violation of the law by engaging in "political agitation" at a place used for worship services.

(13). Belarus has tightened its already severe regulations on foreign religious workers. The changes give the country's top religious affairs official sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by foreign citizens is necessary. The Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs now has the right not to give reasons for refusing a foreign religious worker's visit, and to shorten a visit "if the period of time required for realization of the aims for which the foreign citizen is invited does not correspond to that requested." The 2002 law states that foreign religious workers must be invited by registered religious associations.

(14). On December 14, 2007, a Baranovichi district court judge fined Baptist pastor Dmitriy Osyko \$65 (140,000 Belarusian rubles) for leading an unregistered religious organization, and Stepan Paripa and Nikolay Pestak \$160 each (350,000 Belarusian rubles) for providing residential premises for illegal services.

(15). On October 26, 2007, a district judge fined Baptist pastor Gennady Ryzhkov \$115 (248,000 Belarusian rubles) for leading religious services of an unregistered Evangelical Christian Baptist church in Osipovichi.

(16). On July 2, and July 3, 2007, police detained 19 Christian activists petitioning to change the harsh 2002 Religion Law at a prominent Catholic pilgrimage site and in the Belarusian capital. Over 2,300 signatures were collected.

(17). In June 2007, judges in Mogilyov reversed an order to deport seven U.S. citizens, who were banned from the country for two years on charges of illegal teaching and illegal religious activities. Authorities claimed the seven had failed to obtain prior permission from the Ministry of Education before teaching English at a house of worship.

(18). The 2002 religion law prohibits foreign organizations from establishing offices that incite "national, religious, and racial enmity" or could "have negative effects on the physical and mental health of the people." On May 30, 2007, Polish citizen Yaroslav Lukasik, an unofficial pastor of the St. John the Baptist Church, was fined \$14 (31,000 Belarusian rubles) for conducting unauthorized religious services at a fellow pastor's home; he was subsequently deported for "repeated violations of laws regulating the presence of foreigners."

(19). On March 14, 2007 authorities deported a Protestant U.S. citizen humanitarian aid worker on the grounds that he involved in activities "aimed at causing damage to national security."

(20). The government of Belarus has continued to use textbooks that promote religious intolerance, especially toward "nontraditional" faiths. The language of

the textbook *Basics of Home and Personal Security* has been viewed by Protestant communities as containing discriminatory language. Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Maria, White Brotherhood, and Jehovah's Witnesses are all described as sects in the "Beware of Sects" chapter. The Ministry of Education has continued to use the textbook *Man, Society, and State*, which also views Hare Krishnas as "sects," despite numerous protests by religious groups.

(21) In February 2009, Two Danish citizens, Erling Laursen and Rolf Bergen, faced deportation for taking part in worship services in Gomel's charismatic Living Faith Church.

(23) In August 2009 European Ambassadors intervened in Belarussian officials' efforts to shut down the largest Evangelical church in Minsk, the New Life Church. Authorities had threatened to destroy the church's building and have failed to offer any type of compensation.

(24) Also in August 2009, officials in Baranovichi fined two Baptists for holding worship services in their homes. The officials did not seem concerned with the fact that this action violated the Constitution because they claim they were following the laws.

## **Conclusion**

(22). The government of Belarus needs to make drastic improvements for the respect of religious freedom. Specifically, President Lukashenka needs to stop pursuing a policy of favoring the Russian Orthodox Church and harassing other non-Russian Orthodox denominations and religions. The government also needs to stop denying the right of some religious groups to register under the weak assertion that it "run[s] counter to the Constitution." The government of Belarus must adequately deal with the restrictions and abuses of religious freedom that they impose on its citizens and foreigners. The government needs to stop its policies that limit freedom of worship, speech, and assembly. Belarus must stop acting in defiance of international human rights standards.