

# **BELARUS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution grants individuals freedom to profess and practice any religious belief but prohibits religious activities directed against the sovereignty of the state, its constitutional system, and “civic harmony.” The law recognizes the “determining role” of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC). A concordat grants the BOC rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, although the law also acknowledges the historical importance of the “traditional” faiths of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. By law, all registered religious groups must seek permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing activities, and must obtain prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups. The government continued to detain or fine individuals for proselytizing. Minority religious groups, including those associated with the Council of Baptist Churches, continued to have difficulty registering. Some groups remained reluctant to apply for registration, reportedly due to fear of harassment and punishment. The government also continued its surveillance of minority and unregistered religious groups, especially those it labeled as “foreign” or “cults.” Human rights groups said that while BOC and Roman Catholic clergy had access to prisoners of their faiths, Muslim, Protestant, and clergy from nontraditional faiths did not. Protestant and other minority religious groups said they continued to have difficulties obtaining buildings to use as houses of worship. They also reported the government denied visas and requests to extend the stay of some foreign missionaries but also rescinded denials previously given to other clergy.

Jewish community leaders continued to express concern about the BOC’s annual commemoration of a young child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690 as one of its saints and martyrs. There were reports of vandalism at Jewish memorials in Mahilyou. In February a district court sentenced three individuals for spraying black paint on a monument commemorating Jews killed by Nazis. In May a higher court dismissed their appeal, upholding their conviction. In November Mahilyou police arrested two individuals for stealing parts of metal fencing from graves at a Jewish cemetery. Also in November a Mahilyou court sentenced an individual to six months in jail for inciting ethnic hatred against Russians and Jews and urging killings of Jews in his social media posts.

In September U.S. embassy officials and a visiting U.S. delegation met with officials from the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs as well as prosecutors to discuss concerns related to preservation of Jewish heritage sites. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with Jewish groups to discuss anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage. Embassy officials also met with Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), and other groups, as well as with civil society activists and lawyers for religious groups, to discuss government restrictions on registration and the activities of minority religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.6 million (July 2017 estimate). According to a January 2016 survey by the state Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration, approximately 53 percent of the adult population belongs to the BOC and 6 percent to the Roman Catholic Church. Eight percent of the adult population is atheist, and 22 percent is uncertain. Smaller religious groups together constituting approximately 2 percent of the population include Jews; Muslims; Greek Catholics (“Uniates”); Old Believers (both those who practice their faith with priests, usually termed “priestist,” and those who practice their faith without priests, usually termed “priestless”); and other Orthodox groups in addition to the BOC. This 2 percent also includes Lutherans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Presbyterians and other Protestant groups, Armenian Apostolics, Latin Catholics, ISKON, Bahais, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Buddhists. Jewish groups state there are between 30,000 and 40,000 Jews. Ethnic Poles, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the population, tend to be Roman Catholic.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess any religious beliefs and to participate in the performance of acts of worship not prohibited by law. It stipulates all faiths are equal before the law. The constitution states relations between the state and religious organizations 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.” It prohibits activities by religious groups that

are directed against the country's sovereignty, its constitutional system, and civic harmony; involve a violation of civil rights and liberties; "impede the execution of state, public, and family duties" by its citizens; or are detrimental to public health and morality. The constitution states the law shall determine the conditions for exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) regulates all religious matters.

The law recognizes the "determining role" of the BOC in the development of the traditions of the people as well as the historical importance of religious groups commonly referred to as "traditional" faiths": Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law does not consider as "traditional faiths" the newer religious groups or older groups such as the priestless Old Believers, Greek Catholics (Uniates), and the Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century.

A concordat between the government and the BOC provides the BOC with autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and a special relationship with the state. The concordat recognizes the BOC's "influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people." Although it states the agreement does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, the concordat calls for the government and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society." The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives state subsidies. In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word "orthodox" in its title and to use as its symbol the double-barred image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the country's patron saint.

The concordat also serves as the framework for agreements between the BOC and individual state agencies. There are at least a dozen such agreements, including an agreement with the Ministry of Education covering cooperation on education through 2020 and providing for joint projects for the "spiritual and moral education" of students based on BOC traditions and history.

The law establishes three tiers of registered religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities must include at least 20 persons over the age of 18 who live in one or several adjoining areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious

communities, one of which must have been active in the country for at least 20 years, and may be constituted only by a national-level religious association. National religious associations may be formed only when they comprise active religious communities in at least four of the country's six regions.

According to government data as of January 1, there are 25 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,350 religious communities and 174 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,681 religious communities, 15 dioceses, seven schools, 35 monasteries, 15 brotherhoods, and 10 sisterhoods. The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, five schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 496 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 14 denominations have 1,033 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions, and five schools. There are 33 registered religious communities of Old Believers. There are three Jewish religious associations – Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism – comprising 52 communities, including 10 autonomous communities. In addition, 24 Muslim religious communities – 23 Sunni and one Shia – are registered.

National religious associations include the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Old Believers Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, Association of New Apostolic Churches, Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches, Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, and Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches. National-level Jewish associations include the Jewish Religious Union, Association of Jewish Religious Communities, and Union of Reform Judaism Communities. National Muslim associations include the Muslim Religious Association and Spiritual Board of Muslims. The Religious Association of Bahais is also a national religious association.

To register, a religious community must submit an official application with the following information: a list of its founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of its founding statutes; the minutes of its founding meeting; and permission from the regional authorities confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property referenced in its founding statutes. A religious group not previously registered by the government must also submit information about its beliefs. The law stipulates authorities may take up to six months to review a new registration application due to an additional evaluation of the religion by a state-appointed religious commission of experts. The commission evaluates the fundamental teachings of the religion; rituals, practices, history, and forms and methods of activities; welfare and charitable services;

proselytizing and missionary activities; approaches towards marriage and family; educational activities; attitudes toward health care; and compliance with legal requirements. In addition, the community must submit any texts written by its founder or considered sacred by the followers of the religion, information about prohibitions on clergy or adherents, a list of countries where the religion is widely practiced, and a list of countries officially recognizing the religion. It also must submit information about countries that have refused to recognize the religion and information about court cases against followers of the religion in other countries.

Regional government authorities as well as Minsk city authorities or local municipal authorities (for groups outside of Minsk) review all registration applications. Permissible grounds for denial of registration are broad and include failure to comply with requirements for establishing a community, an inconsistent or fraudulent charter or other required document, violations of the procedures to establish religious organizations, or a negative evaluation by the state-appointed religious commission of experts. Communities may appeal refusals in court.

In order to register as a religious association or national religious association, a group must provide an official application with a copy of the founding statutes, a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and the minutes from its founding congress. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions and organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applications to establish associations and national associations must be submitted to OPRRNA, which has 30 days to respond. Grounds for refusal are the same as for religious communities except they also include failure to comply with requirements for establishing an association rather than a community. Refusals or a failure by OPRRNA to respond within the 30-day period may be appealed in court.

The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered. The law permits state agencies in charge of registration to issue written warnings to a registered religious group for violating any law or undertaking activities outside the scope of responsibilities in the group's charter. The government may apply to a relevant court, depending upon jurisdiction, to shut down the group if it has not ceased the illegal activity outlined in the written warning within six months or if the activity is repeated within one year of the warning. The government may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court's decision. The law contains no provision for appeal of the warning or suspension.

The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups and subjects group members to penalties ranging from unspecified fines to two years in prison.

The housing code permits religious groups to hold services at residential premises if local authorities grant permission. The local authorities must certify the premises comply with a number of regulations, including fire safety, sanitary, and health code requirements. Such permission is not granted automatically, and the law does not permit religious groups to hold services in private residences without prior permission from local authorities.

By law, all religious groups must obtain permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing.

The law requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The approval process includes official examination of the documents by state-appointed religious studies experts.

Although there is no law providing for a systematic restitution process for property, including religious property, seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, groups may apply for the restitution of property to local authorities. The law on religion specifically bans the restitution of seized property currently used for cultural or sports purposes.

The law permits associations and national associations to establish schools to train clergy; however, it does not permit religious communities to do so.

The law permits only registered religious groups that are members of national religious associations to organize extracurricular religious activities at educational institutions. The law states the national religious association must first conclude an agreement on cooperation with the Ministry of Education. Students who wish to participate in voluntary “moral, civic, and patriotic education” in collaboration with religious groups must either provide a written statement expressing their desire to participate or secure their legal guardians’ approval. According to the law, “such education shall raise awareness among the youth against any religious groups whose activities are aimed at undermining Belarus’ sovereignty, civic accord, and constitutional system or at violating human rights and freedoms.”

The law prohibits religious groups from conducting activities in any school without identifying themselves. It also prohibits visits from representatives of foreign

religious groups; missionary activities; collections of donations or fees from students for religious groups or any charity; distribution of religious literature, audio, video, and other religious materials; holding prayer services, religious rituals, rites, or ceremonies; and placing religious symbols or paraphernalia at educational institutions.

The law does not allow private religious elementary, junior, and senior high schools or homeschooling for religious reasons.

The law establishes penalties ranging from fines to five years in prison for failure to fulfill mandatory military service, with an exemption for conscientious objectors for religious reasons. A 2016 provision allows alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. By law, individuals who evade alternative civilian service may face up to five years in prison.

Only registered religious associations may apply to OPRR for permission to invite foreign clergy to the country. OPRR must grant permission before foreign religious workers may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, or participate in charitable work. Such permission is generally granted for a period of one year, which may be reduced or extended. OPRR has 30 days to respond to requests for foreign clergy permits (religious visas) and may deny requests without explanation. There is no provision for appeals.

By law, the government permits foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity only in the territorial area where their religious association is registered. Transfers of foreign clergy within a religious association, including from one parish to another, require prior government permission. By law, foreigners may not lead religious groups. The authorities may reprimand or expel foreign citizens who officially are present in the country for nonreligious work if they lead any religious activities. Law enforcement agencies on their own initiative or in response to recommendations from other government entities, such as the security service, may require foreign clergy to depart the country.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

*Summary paragraph:* The government continued to detain or fine individuals for proselytizing, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists. Minority religious groups continued to have difficulty registering; some groups remained reluctant to

apply for registration, reportedly due to fear of harassment and punishment. The government also continued its surveillance of minority and unregistered religious groups, especially those it labeled as “foreign” or “cults.” According to human rights groups, prison authorities denied Muslim and Protestant clergy, as well as clergy from nontraditional faiths, access to prisoners of their faiths, while they granted such access to BOC and Roman Catholic clergy. Protestant and other minority religious groups said they continued to have difficulties obtaining buildings to use as houses of worship. They said the government continued to arbitrarily grant or deny permission for holding religious gatherings and denied visas and requests to extend the stay of some foreign missionaries but also rescinded denials previously given to other clergy.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, there were incidents in which authorities briefly detained Jehovah’s Witnesses for proselytizing in Hrodna, Dziarzhynsk, Loeu, and Smarhon. In Smarhon, authorities detained Volha Fiadulava for disseminating Jehovah’s Witnesses printouts in March; however, a local court dismissed her case on April 14. In a similar case, a local court in Hrodna fined two Jehovah’s Witnesses on charges of holding an unauthorized gathering on June 10. A court of appeals reportedly dropped their case in July.

The news service of the international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported police in Lepel detained Council of Baptist Churches members in mid-October and November. According to Forum 18, police detained church members for singing and offering Christian books and magazines to passersby near the town market. Authorities fined church member Andrei Fokin 460 rubles (\$230) for reportedly organizing an illegal picket on October 21. They fined him and his wife 460 rubles (\$230) and 575 rubles (\$290), respectively, for a similar repeated offense on October 30. On November 4, police briefly detained at least nine church members and reportedly questioned them at a precinct. Fokin said police officers injured his face and put handcuffs on another church member so tightly that his hands became numb. On November 10, Fokin’s brother received a fine of 460 rubles (\$230) for organizing a demonstration without permission from local authorities. Fokin told the press that he filed a complaint about the mistreatment with the prosecutor’s office; however, there was no response from the prosecutor’s office by the end of the year.

The government continued surveillance on minority religious groups of various Protestant denominations, especially those it labeled “foreign” or “cults.” According to various observers, government ideology officers continued to monitor the activities of members of unregistered religious groups in their



workplaces, although there were no reports of prosecutions. Government officials reportedly had occasional informal talks with members of religious groups to learn about their activities. According to religious leaders, state security officers also continued to attend religious services of registered Protestant communities to conduct surveillance, which group members described as intimidation and harassment. The Roman Catholic Church expressed concerns that in some regions of the country local ideology officers requested the Church provide them Sunday school programs and lists of children attending them.

Christian groups continued to state the registration requirements for religious groups remained complex and difficult to fulfill, which they said restricted their activities, suppressed freedom of religion, and legalized criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs. The government's guidelines for evaluating registration applications remained sufficiently broad, they said, to continue to give authorities a pretext for denying applications from groups they considered unacceptable. Authorities in Barysau refused registration to a Jehovah's Witnesses community on April 14. Local authorities in Slonim and Vileika continued to deny multiple registration applications from Jehovah's Witnesses. Authorities also continued to deny registration to several Protestant religious communities, including a Baptist community in Slonim.

Independent religious experts continued to report minority religious groups remained reluctant to apply for registration because members continued to be unwilling to provide their names as part of the application process due to fear of harassment and punishment by the authorities. Additionally, a number of them said they did not report registration denials because they believed that if they did not publicize the denials, they might still be able to negotiate their communities' registration with local authorities.

Many unregistered religious groups stated they continued to maintain a low profile because of what they believed to be government hostility and due to fear of criminal prosecution. According to independent religious experts, many registered religious communities also remained reluctant to report abuses and restrictions because of fear of punishment.

Nontraditional religious groups continued to state the procedure for registering and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and arbitrary. Authorities continued to deny permission granted in 2014 for a registered Jehovah's Witness community in Homyel to hold religious services at a private home, but allowed it to hold services at rented premises.

Human rights groups reported prison administrators continued to deny Muslim and Protestant clergy, as well as clergy from nontraditional faiths (any faiths not among the four recognized as “traditional”), permission to visit inmates in prison. At the same time, they said, authorities continued to grant BOC and Roman Catholic clergy permission to visit believers in prison on a regular basis, and many prisons had designated Orthodox religious facilities.

On May 5, authorities in Brest refused to permit a local Full Gospel Church to organize a bicycle ride celebrating the 500th anniversary of the publication of the Bible in the Belarusian language in 1517 and to promote Christian values. The community planned to start the ride in Brest and finish in Baranavichy, stopping and meeting with supporters in the towns of Kobryn, Drahichyn, and Pinsk. Authorities banned the ride and the meetings, citing lack of the church group’s coordination with traffic police and claiming, “Mass events in the proposed formats in towns en route are not considered possible.”

The Jehovah’s Witnesses reported Minsk city officials approved a request for a convention to take place in the city on July 7. Approximately 7,300 members attended the convention without hindrance. In Vitebsk, authorities denied a similar request to hold a local convention.

Religious groups, especially Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to what they said was the general atmosphere of intimidation and fear of punishment. Orthodox literature, they said, remained available countrywide. They also said the BOC remained able to proselytize freely and, unlike other religious groups, continued to participate in government-sponsored public events such as rallies without the need to seek prior approval from authorities.

Religious groups continued to report problems purchasing properties as places of worship. They said converting residential property to religious use also remained difficult. Renting a public facility to hold religious services remained difficult as well, especially for unregistered groups. For example, some Protestant communities continued to report they were able to conclude only short-term lease agreements with the owners of the facilities the communities rented, which allowed authorities to pressure owners to terminate or not renew lease agreements as a means of preventing religious activities. Protestant groups stated they continued to be more severely affected than other groups in this regard because

they were less likely to own religious facilities and their private homes were too small to accommodate their numbers.

The government continued the requirement for students to use textbooks that representatives of nontraditional religious groups said promoted intolerance towards them, citing chapters in the books that labeled such groups as “sects.” The government did not make changes to these textbooks despite continued requests from religious groups to do so.

School administrators continued to cooperate only with the BOC among registered religious groups based on the BOC’s concordat with the government. School administrators continued to invite BOC priests to lecture to students, organize tours of BOC facilities, and participate in BOC festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects.

Religious groups said the government continued to apply visa regulations in ways restricting the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country. According to the Roman Catholic Church, in April OPRRNA denied Polish citizen Reverend Robert Maciejewski permission to serve at a parish in Mstislau. Forum 18 said he returned to Poland after serving as a priest in the region for almost 10 years. On May 23, a representative of OPRRNA, Andrei Aryayev, told Forum 18 the office had the right not to give a reason for denial. On October 9, the NGO Aid to the Church in Need published an interview with Archbishop of Minsk Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz. In the interview, he described the problems experienced by foreign priests: newly arrived priests had to undergo a lengthy approval process before obtaining permission to celebrate Mass; they were often issued a visa for only three to six months; and they often encountered administrative difficulties when trying to renew visas.

In July OPRRNA revoked a previous decision not to renew religious work permits for at least two Polish priests, allowing them to continue their service in the country. The Roman Catholic Church had argued that while OPRRNA alleged the priests received multiple speeding tickets, at least one of them did not drive and did not have a driver’s license, and the traffic police confirmed that they had never held the two liable for speeding. OPRRNA reportedly extended their permits until “the situation was further examined.”

In April local residents in Homyel reported the construction of two luxury apartment buildings began on the grounds of a former Jewish cemetery. According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), a Jewish activist filed a motion for an

injunction, but the Tsentralny District Court denied his motion on August 21. The JTA said the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, World Jewish Congress, and Union of Public Associations criticized the court's ruling. Foreign ministry official told the JTA in a statement, however, that sampling for human remains conducted in March in the presence of Rabbi David Kantarovich demonstrated the "absence of human remains in the land," and the rabbi's community determined there was "no reason to fear the construction would disturb human remains." The contractor and the local Jewish community reportedly signed an agreement to cooperate and take appropriate action in the case anything was unearthed at the site. The construction resumed, and local rabbis reportedly did not express any further concerns because there were no claims of unearthed remains since the court hearing. The Israeli ambassador visited Homyel and met with local authorities in September, and the local Jewish community continued to monitor the continuing construction.

There still were no developments regarding the freeze placed on the assets of New Life Church. Minsk authorities renewed their attempts to evict the church from its premises, a process that began in 2007 and continued through 2012 after the authorities refused to register the church at its location. While the church continued to use the space for religious purposes, it remained unable to obtain proof of ownership from the authorities and had no access to electricity. District court bailiffs attempted to enter the premises to issue eviction orders on April 26, but church members refused to allow them in. Church leadership continued to meet with Minsk city authorities to negotiate the status and operations of the church, but without result at the end of the year.

On October 20, Deputy Foreign Minister Aleh Krauchanka met with two high-level Mormon officials to discuss religious operations of their local communities. The government also allowed the two to address their community in Minsk without a special permit for a religious activity.

The authorities continued to permit the BOC to collect charitable donations in public as well as on its religious property. While the law does not restrict other religious groups from raising donations in public, representatives of these groups said authorities continued to limit their fundraising activities to their own places of worship or other properties based on the harassment from authorities when they tried to raise donations at other locations. The Krishna community reported local authorities harassed and warned them against fundraising in public.

In July media reported many Holocaust memorials built in Soviet times and some others more recently did not acknowledge Jewish victims. During the year, the

Jewish community worked with local authorities to erect new monuments that specifically commemorate Jewish victims.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, on June 14, doctors in Kamyanets forced an elderly Jehovah's Witness woman to have a blood transfusion despite her explicit written refusal of blood transfusions.

The BOC, in particular the Minsk-based parish of the Feast of the Presentation of Blessed Virgin, continued its annual commemoration honoring Hauriyil Belastoksky, a child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. Jewish community leaders again expressed concern over the memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky's death on May 3, the text of which included a passage stating the "martyred and courageous Hauriyil exposed Jewish dishonesty."

Jewish community and civil society activists expressed concern regarding pan-Slavic nationalism professed by some extremist groups. Neo-Nazis such as the Russian National Unity group and supporters of similar groups were widely believed to be behind anti-Semitic incidents across the country. Anti-Semitic and xenophobic newspapers, literature, digital video discs, and videotapes, frequently imported from Russia, were widely available.

There were new reports of vandalism at Jewish memorials in Mahilyou. On February 20, a Mahilyou district court convicted three young men for spraying black paint on a monument in November 2016 that commemorated thousands of Jews killed by Nazis in the local ghetto during the Holocaust. The court sentenced two men to up to two and one-half years in prison and gave the third individual a two-year suspended sentence due to his minor age. All three pleaded guilty and admitted to expressing ultraright Nazi ideas and to belonging to a local skinhead group. On May 16, a higher court dismissed their appeal challenging their convictions.

On November 16, the Mahilyou police detained two local residents and charged them with stealing parts of metal fencing from graves at a local Jewish cemetery. The investigation continued at the end of the year.

On November 20, a Mahilyou court sentenced local resident Andrei Kuzmin to six months in prison on charges of inciting ethnic hatred against Russians and Jews

and urging killings of Jews in his social media posts, reportedly related to activities of ultraright Ukrainian groups. Authorities arrested him for posting Nazi symbols online on August 9, and he pleaded guilty.

The Bible Society, an interconfessional Christian fellowship center, continued to print and distribute copies of the Bible and other religious literature, including donating Bibles to a children's home and a hospital in January. Founded by the Belarusian Orthodox, Roman and Greek Catholic Churches, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, and Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, the Bible Society also engaged in educational and charitable projects targeting vulnerable populations.

The BOC, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, and Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches established an interreligious working group under the Minsk-based Belarusian-German International Educational Center when the latter opened in 1994. Jewish religious communities joined the group in 2015. The group worked to maintain an interfaith dialogue among Christian and Jewish denominations by organizing quarterly meetings, seminars on theological themes, trips around the country, and a trip to Siegen, Germany, during the year that focused on interfaith dialogue and social services. The group visited their German counterparts, a local museum, a children's hospital, and a family center; participated in commemorations at the site of a synagogue burned down in 1938; and met with local authorities.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In September embassy officials and a visiting U.S. delegation met with officials from the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs as well as prosecutors to discuss concerns related to the preservation of Jewish heritage sites. Embassy officials followed up with government officials on reports of vandalism and of construction on sites of former Jewish cemeteries.

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with representatives of the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, and minority religious groups. They discussed anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish religious groups, and government restrictions on registration and operations with the Jehovah's Witnesses, ISKON, and Protestant groups. Embassy officials also continued to hold regular discussions about restrictions on religious freedom with religious freedom activists, religious leaders, lawyers for religious groups, and representatives of the For Freedom of Religion initiative, a

group of civil society activists promoting religious tolerance. On social media, embassy officials posted the Secretary of State's speeches and other materials related to religious freedom during the year.