

## Belarus Human Rights Index

<http://index.belhelcom.org>

2024

## Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

Expert Commentary

The score:	1,9	-0.3
Including scores by component:		
• Freedom of thought, conscience and religion	2,3	-0.1
• Rights of religious organizations	1,5	-0.5

Assessing the situation with the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in 2024, the Index experts gave lower ratings than in 2023. **Among the main reasons:**

- implementation of the new version of the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, including conditions for re-registration of religious organizations;
- the cumulative effect of repression is beginning to be felt, leading to serious self-censorship, in particular, religious figures have left social media.

**• Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion**

In 2024, **repression and restrictions** continued against clergy, active lay people, and independent religious initiatives. Experts note a “cumulative effect” that creates a sense of constant anxiety and leads to self-censorship, in particular, a mass “exodus” of clergy from social media.

Prosecution on charges of extremism has become a key tool for suppressing disloyal religious activity. In fact, the authorities interpret any expression of independent opinion by believers (whether it be comments on political events, criticism of the war, participation in peaceful protests, or even the presence of opposition symbols on social media) as “extremism” or “discrediting the Republic of Belarus” and other mechanisms of administrative and criminal prosecution continue to be used<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 2024, law enforcement agencies carried out a series of arrests of Catholic and Protestant priests. On May 8, 2024, in the town of Shumilino (Vitebsk region), two Catholic priests from the Oblate religious order, Andrzej Juchniewicz OMI and Paweł Lemekh OMI, were detained immediately after they held a meeting of priests from the Vitebsk diocese in a local church. They were officially charged with administrative offenses: on May 10, the Pervomaisky District Court of Vitebsk arrested Fr. Juchniewicz for 15 days for posting photos on Facebook with a white-red-white flag and the flag of Ukraine (this was classified as a violation of the rules of picketing under Article 24.23 of the Code of Administrative Offenses). After serving 15 days, the priest was not released—he was immediately sentenced to another arrest, this time under Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (distribution of extremist materials). As a result, Fr. Juchniewicz spent at least 45 days in custody, after which he was charged with criminal offences and recognised as a political prisoner by human rights defenders. His colleague, Father Paweł Lemekh, also served 14 days in prison and was forced to leave Belarus immediately after his



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Experts highlighted the case of Father G. Roy, whose Facebook account was added to the Republican list of extremist materials on December 23, 2024. In addition, the text “Georgy Roy” was added to this list, effectively banning any written mention of his first and last name<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, Father G. Roy was one of the founders and editors of the Minsk Spiritual Academy and Seminary magazine “Steps,” and accordingly, his first and last names were printed in every issue. The archive of the magazine has been removed from the main website<sup>3</sup>, but due to the magazine’s importance to the Orthodox community, copies and references to it are widely available online.<sup>4</sup>

In 2024, the practice of increased control, in fact profiling on the basis of religion, continued, especially at border crossings: some individuals were selectively checked for the contents of their phones, personal correspondence, photographs, and conclusions about their “loyalty” were made on the basis of the presence of religious materials or subscriptions<sup>5</sup>. There were cases where belonging to a certain religion (like Protestantism) led to stricter searches and questioning when leaving the country.

In 2024, there were still violations of the **conditions of detention** in places of confinement related to being able to follow one’s beliefs and religion. Political prisoners are often denied meetings with clergy, and only occasionally are prisoners who are believers allowed to listen to excerpts from religious

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release. [Monitoring of the persecution of Christians in Belarus in June 2024 – Tsarkva i palitychny kryzys u Belarus, Andrzej Juchniewicz – Political prisoners in Belarus](#)

On April 24, 2024, Nikolai Khilo, a preacher at the Baptist Church “Blagovestie” and an employee of the EC Delegation, was detained in Minsk, later recognized as a political prisoner and sentenced to four years in prison. [Nikolai Khilo – Political prisoners in Belarus](#)

On August 16, 2024, Father Pavel Yaroshevich, dean of the Pruzhany deanery and rector of the local parish of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Pinsk diocese), was detained. On August 19, a court hearing was held, and the clergyman was brought to administrative responsibility for subscribing to so-called extremist media (Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses). [Monitoring of the persecution of Christians in Belarus in August 2024 – Church and political crisis in Belarus](#)

On August 15, 2024, the trial of Roman Smirnov, former chairman of the local Jewish community, began in Grodno. He is charged with insulting Lukashenko (Article 368, Part 1). The religious leader was detained in April 2024 with the participation of fighters from the special forces unit “Typhoon” and placed in custody. [Monitoring of the persecution of Christians in Belarus in August 2024 – Church and Political Crisis in Belarus](#)

One of the most severe judicial repressions of the year was the sentence handed down to Catholic priest Father Henrykh Akalatovich, rector of St. Joseph’s parish in Volozhin. Father Henrykh Akalatovich was detained in November 2023 on suspicion of “treason.” More than a year later, in a closed session of the Minsk Regional Court, the priest was found guilty of treason and sentenced on December 30, 2024, to 11 years in a maximum security prison. [Evangelical believer from Dokshitsy on trial today for “extremism” – Church and political crisis in Belarus](#); [Monitoring of persecution of Christians and other believers in Belarus in October 2024 – Church and political crisis in Belarus](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://dzh7f5h27xx9q.cloudfront.net/ru/2024/12/23/roj-koushyk/>

<sup>3</sup> [Журнал «Ступени» – православная вера и церковная жизнь](#)

<sup>4</sup> <http://church.by/news/vyshel-novyy-nomer-zhurnala-minskih-duhovnyh-akademii-i-seminarii-stupeni-1-45-2012>

<sup>5</sup> In June 2024, while attempting to leave the country with his family to travel to Poland, Dmitry Chovgan, a minister of the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church, was detained at the border and sentenced to 15 days in prison. <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring-presledovaniy-hristian-v-belarusi-za-iyun-2024-goda/>



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services on the radio, but personal spiritual guidance is virtually blocked<sup>6</sup>. The new building of Minsk Pre-Trial Detention Center No. 1, opened in April 2024, has an Orthodox church, but only a small group of “privileged” prisoners are allowed to attend services there – usually those who cooperate with the administration, while political prisoners remain without access to religious services.<sup>7</sup>

In February 2022, seven UN human rights mandate holders (including the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion) sent a request to the Belarusian government regarding the denial of access to priests for political prisoners. In particular, they cited the case of Protestant philosopher Vladimir Matskevich, who went on hunger strike in SIZO-1 demanding to meet with his pastor. He was refused on the pretext that the invited pastor represented an unregistered church (the Minsk community “New Life,” which had already been liquidated by the authorities). The authorities did not provide a substantive response and did not remedy the situation<sup>8</sup>.

According to experts, there is a departure from religious neutrality in state education, with new editions of history textbooks for secondary schools<sup>9</sup> describing religions that are significant for Belarus in a less pluralistic manner: there is an increased emphasis on the role of the Orthodox Church.

In 2024, there were cases of intimidation of Belarusian religious communities abroad (vandalism of premises, intimidation in online chats)<sup>10</sup>.

#### • Rights of religious organizations

A key event in 2024 was the entry into force of the new version of the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations<sup>11</sup>, published on January 5, 2024, with new provisions coming into force on July 6, 2024. Experts note<sup>12</sup> that the law continues and reinforces the state’s restrictive policy in the religious sphere. Three UN special rapporteurs (on Belarus, on freedom of religion or belief, and on freedom of peaceful assembly and association) expressed their concern about the new law in a joint statement on February 20, 2024, stating that the law does not comply with international standards<sup>13</sup>, while the previous appeal sent to Belarus in 2023<sup>14</sup> by three UN Special Rapporteurs regarding the draft law in 2024 remained unanswered.

The new version of the law retains many of the previous harsh provisions and adds new ones:

<sup>6</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/forum-18-belarus-zaklyuchennym-nizkogo-statusa-zapreshhayut-hodit-v-cerkov/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/forum-18-belarus-zaklyuchennym-nizkogo-statusa-zapreshhayut-hodit-v-cerkov/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/forum-18-belarus-zaklyuchennym-nizkogo-statusa-zapreshhayut-hodit-v-cerkov/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://nastgaz.by/novye-uchebniki-po-istorii-dlya-10-11-h-klassov-poyavyatsya-v-shkolah-belarusi/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://reform.news/mid-litvy-osudil-akty-vandalizma-protiv-belarusskih-organizacij-v-vilnjuse>

<sup>11</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=V19202054>

<sup>12</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/novaya-redakciya-zakona-respubliki-belarus-o-svobode-sovesti-i-religioznyh-organizatsiyah-usilenie-ogranichenij-kontrolya-i-repressij/>; <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/sravnitelnyj-analiz-dejstvuyushhej-i-novoj-redaktsii-osnovnyh-polozhenij-zakona-o-svobode-sovesti-i-religioznyh-organizatsiyah>

<sup>13</sup> [Belarus: UN experts concerned about new law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations | OHCHR](#)

<sup>14</sup> <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=28342>



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- additional restrictions are introduced on the leaders of religious organizations. Now, only a Belarusian citizen permanently residing in the country can head a religious organization;
- one citizen is now entitled to be the founder of only one religious community, which narrows the possibilities for the same activists to create new parishes.
- a vague provision is introduced stating that religious education of children and adults, the dissemination of faith, and the publication of religious literature must not contradict the “ideology of the Belarusian state”;
- provisions prohibiting the activities of religious organizations if they are “directed against the sovereignty, constitutional order, or public harmony... or involve incitement to religious or national discord or other extremist activities” have been confirmed;
- a ban is introduced on the political activities of religious organizations, their use of symbols not associated with religion, and “propaganda of extremism” during religious services;
- the powers of the authorities to control the activities of religious organizations are significantly expanded, allowing them to ban any religious activity that contradicts “state ideology”.

Article 4 of the law establishes an obligation **for all** religious organizations registered before July 6, 2024, to bring their statutes into line with the new requirements of the law **within one year** of that date and to undergo re-registration or decide to dissolve.

The process of mandatory re-registration of all religious organizations, which began on July 5, 2024, is tense and non-transparent. As of January 1, 2024, there were 3,592 religious organizations registered in Belarus<sup>15</sup>. Of these, 3,419 are local religious communities, and 173 are hierarchical structures, associations, monastic communities, and religious educational institutions. Among the registered religious organizations, 1,819 belong to the Orthodox Church, 1,086 to various Protestant communities, about 530 to the Roman Catholic Church, 16 to the Greek Catholic Church, 54 to three separate Jewish organizations, 34 to Old Believers, 23 to Sunni Muslims, 1 to Shiite Muslims, and 1 to Buddhists. Religious organizations of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Krishnaites, and the Armenian Apostolic Church are also registered.<sup>16</sup> Experts note, on the one hand, attempts by state authorities to clarify the provisions of the law, and on the other hand, the unwillingness of re-registering religious organizations to share their problems and experiences in the public sphere<sup>17</sup>. During 2024, there were no publications of current statistics on the progress of re-registration at either the central or local levels (where local religious communities are undergoing re-registration).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/belarus/society/religia>

<sup>16</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/belarus-procress-obyazatelnoj-pereregistraczii-religioznyh-obshhin-soprovozhdayut-obespokoennost-i-sekretnost/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/belarus-procress-obyazatelnoj-pereregistraczii-religioznyh-obshhin-soprovozhdayut-obespokoennost-i-sekretnost/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/belarus-procress-obyazatelnoj-pereregistraczii-religioznyh-obshhin-soprovozhdayut-obespokoennost-i-sekretnost/>



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It is known that by the end of 2024, not all organizations had managed to complete the procedure, especially small Protestant churches and religious groups in rural areas. Representatives of major denominations (the Roman Catholic Church, the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims) have tried not to dramatize the situation in their official comments, saying that “re-registration is a normal procedure”<sup>19</sup>. However, behind closed doors, Baptist and Muslim leaders admit that the new requirements have put their communities in a vulnerable position: small rural churches may not have 20 adult parishioners in one district, which is a prerequisite for registration; and for Muslims, questionable is the very possibility of meeting the criterion of a republican association (it is necessary to have organizations in all regions of the country)<sup>20</sup>.

When re-registering, religious organizations are required to follow a model charter that includes a phrase about the inadmissibility of activities directed against the state or “inciting discord” (understood as a ban on any opposition statements). Extensive information about the founders and financial status of the religious organization must also be provided, suggesting that the re-registration procedure is used to gather additional information about the internal affairs of communities and their members.

All this reinforces the atmosphere of mistrust: believers fear that any inaccuracy or “lists of disloyal persons” could be grounds for refusal of re-registration: the secrecy of the processes makes it impossible to check whether deadlines are being met or whether applications are simply being left unprocessed.

Nevertheless, in 2024, no cases of direct refusals to re-register religious organizations were formally reported.

The new law introduced for the first time a requirement to notify the authorities in writing of the intention to establish a new religious community<sup>21</sup>. Now, even if a group of believers has gathered the required number of persons, it must first notify the local executive committee of its plans to establish a community and hold a founding meeting, and only then, no later than one month later, can it hold the meeting itself. In this way, the state is trying to control even the earliest stages of self-organization by believers.

The implementation of amendments<sup>22</sup> to the **Law on Public Associations**, adopted in 2023, also continued, further restricting the opportunities for independent activity of religious groups<sup>23</sup>. Although the Law on Public Associations directly regulates primarily secular organizations, it also affects religious communities:

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<sup>19</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/belarus-procress-obyazatelnoj-pereregistraczii-religioznyh-obshhin-soprovozhdayut-obespokoennost-i-sekretnost/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring-presledovaniy-hristian-v-belarusi-za-yanvar-2024-goda/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/sravnitelnyj-analiz-dejstvuyushhej-i-novoj-redaktsii-osnovnyh-polozhenij-zakona-o-svobode-sovesti-i-religioznyh-organizatsiyah>

<sup>22</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300251>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/pravovoe-regulirovanie-nko/novoe-v-zakonodatelstve/zakon-ob-obshhestvennyh-obedineniyah-osnovnye-izmeneniya>

- the liquidation of human rights organizations deprives individuals of the possibility of obtaining assistance in cases of rights violations;
- public associations planning to address human rights issues, including, for example, religious freedoms, will not emerge in the legal field in light of the general repressive atmosphere;
- some organizations with a *de facto* religious or spiritual-educational mission could have been registered as public associations.

Such legislative changes are accompanied by official statements by the authorities on the need to preserve “traditional” values.

Politically motivated abuse of anti-extremism legislation against religious organizations continued.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/presledovanie-religioznogo-soobshhestva-v-belarusi-cherez-obviniya-v-ekstremizme/>

For example, on January 23, 2024, the Baranovich District Court and the city of Baranovich added a Christian anti-war Telegram channel, which is run by Christian activists including from Belarus, to the list of “extremist materials.” <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring-presledovanij-hristian-v-belarusi-za-yanvar-2024-goda/>

In August 2024, the Ministry of Internal Affairs added an organization called “Russian Orthodox Church – Tsarist Empire” (a small religious community with an ideology that deviates from official Orthodoxy) to the list of extremist groups. In its justification, the Ministry of Internal Affairs described the group as “grossly distorting the doctrines and religious practices of the Orthodox Church, opposing itself to other religious organizations and society as a whole, and turning its followers against the traditional confessions of the Republic of Belarus.” <https://spring96.org/ru/news/116173>

In July 2024, the Ministry of Information blocked access to Katolik.life, a popular website for Catholics in Belarus, without explanation. On August 30, 2024, by a decision of the Myadel District Court of the Minsk Region, the Telegram channel Katolik.life was recognized as extremist material. <https://belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring-presledovanij-hristian-v-belarusi-za-sentyabr-2024-goda/>



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