

Belarus Human Rights Index

<http://index.belhelcom.org>

2025

Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

Expert Commentary

The score:	1,8	-0.1
<i>Including scores by component:</i>		
● Freedom of thought, conscience and religion	2,1	-0.2
● Rights of religious organizations	1,5	

In assessing the state of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in 2025, the Index experts recorded a decline in the overall score relative to 2024.¹The key events and trends of the year include the following:

- Completion of the mandatory re-registration of religious organizations (by 5 July 2025), with uneven consequences for different denominations;
 - A mounting "cascade" and cumulative effect of repression: individual prosecutions trigger chains of prosecutions of associated organizations and persons;
 - Intensified surveillance of the internal life of religious communities through infiltration, recruitment, and the recording of religious services;
 - Growing difficulty in monitoring violations: affected communities more frequently request that information about their situation not be published, for reasons of personal security.
- **Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion**

The exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in Belarus in 2025 continues to be attended by the risk of repression.² In a situation of legal default and the absence of effective

¹ https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/7_right_to_freedom_of_thought_conscience_and_religion_2024.pdf

² Detailed Monitoring of Persecution of Christians: [Monthly Reports on the Persecution of Christians in Belarus – The Church and the Political Crisis in Belarus](#); specifically:

On January 9, 2025, it became known that **Nikolai Khilo**, a preacher at the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church "Blagovestie" in Minsk and an employee of the EU delegation who was detained on April 24, 2024, was sentenced by the Minsk City Court to four years of imprisonment. He was charged with inciting hatred (Article 130) and endangering national security (Part 3 of Article 361). On March 21, 2025, Nikolai Khilo was added to the Ministry of Internal Affairs' "extremist" list, and on April 9, 2025, the Belarusian KGB added his name to the list of individuals involved in terrorist activities; On April 23, 2025, it became known that Pastor **Oleg Loiko** had been detained in connection with a case involving the



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org

legal protection instruments, it is difficult to distinguish politically motivated repression from repression targeting civically active laypersons and clergy.³ The practice of arbitrary application of the ecosystem of "anti-extremism legislation" against believers, clergy, and religious and quasi-religious resources continued.⁴

As of the end of 2025, the lists of clergy from various Christian denominations who have been subjected to persecution – including all forms of persecution, not only criminal prosecution – comprise 92 individuals.⁵

In 2025, a mounting practice of recruiting clergy by security services was documented. The typical scheme involves the presentation of "compromising material" (subscriptions to resources designated as extremist, participation in protest activities, etc.) followed by an offer of a choice between criminal prosecution and cooperation. Recruitment undermines internal trust within communities, since those who have been recruited typically try to hint at the situation, which in turn generates mutual suspicion. Simultaneously, a "cascade effect" is evident: following the prosecution of one individual, the security services analyze their entire network of contacts, resulting in an avalanche-like expansion of the circle of those persecuted. The practice of attending religious services for the purpose of recording and subsequently analyzing sermons was also noted.

Monitoring has become a substantial challenge: according to reports by experts, in 2025 affected individuals and communities increasingly requested that information about their situation not be published, out of fear that it would worsen their position. This hinders human rights activity and creates conditions in which repression remains concealed.

Particular note should be made of situations that provide grounds to suspect discriminatory treatment on both grounds of national identity (an anti-Polish campaign) and religious beliefs (being a Catholic).

transmission of information about the movement of Russian military equipment on Belarusian territory ("Belaruski Gayun"). On August 20, 2025, Judge Sergei Solovsky, following a closed-door hearing, handed down a verdict sentencing the pastor to three and a half years of imprisonment under strict conditions pursuant to Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus ("Facilitation of Extremist Activities");

In the case of Father **Heinrich Okolotovich**, pastor of St. Joseph's Parish in Volozhin, a hearing on the appeal was held on April 1, 2025, at the Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court's decision (On December 30, 2024, the Minsk Regional Court sentenced Okolotovich to 11 years of imprisonment in a maximum-security penal colony.)

On April 8, 2025, it was reported that Okolotovich stated from prison that he was being accused of "spying for Poland and the Vatican," which he called a "blatant provocation." In his case, he said, "there is not a word of truth, not a single fact that incriminates him in espionage, and the entire indictment is based on lies, threats, and blackmail." "This is a political trial," the priest believes, emphasizing that he has never been anyone's spy, that he is a servant of God, and that it is not him who is on trial, but "the entire Catholic Church in Belarus." Furthermore, the report revealed that the priest was coerced into carrying out provocations against certain Catholic hierarchs, but he refused to participate. On May 30, 2025, the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs added him to the list of "extremists."

³ [Мониторинг преследований по основаниям, связанным с религией, во время политического кризиса в Беларуси \(ОБНОВЛЯЕТСЯ\) – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)

⁴ [Преследование религиозного сообщества в Беларуси через обвинения в экстремизме – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)

⁵ [Белорусские священнослужители, подвергшиеся преследованиям – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org

On 4 September 2025, Belarusian state media reported the detention near Lyepyel (Vitsebsk Region) of Polish national **Grzegorz Gawel**. He was accused of allegedly obtaining documents relating to the "Zapad-2025" military exercises for onward transmission to Polish intelligence. According to the KGB, in his possession was an eight-page printout of an "Order on the Organization of Preparation and Participation of the SSU 'Zapad-2025,'" which served as the basis for the initiation of criminal proceedings under Article 358 of the Criminal Code ("Espionage"). The 27-year-old Gawel is a member of the Carmelite monastery community of the Basilica of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Kraków. He professed his perpetual vows on 19 March 2025. In 2020 he began studying theology at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków, and in early July 2025 he defended his master's thesis in theology.⁶

A form of "special attention" bordering on profiling on the basis of religious beliefs persists: clergy are subjected to special checks when crossing the border, involving "inspection" of their mobile phones.⁷

The release from places of detention of a number of political prisoners – whether through "pardons" or upon completion of their sentences – and their testimonies offer a fuller understanding of the **violations of freedom of religion in places of deprivation of liberty**.⁸ These include, in particular: continued restriction of access to religious services and pastoral care, especially for believers of denominations lacking institutional state support (such as Protestants); confiscation of religious literature – which, according to reports by some political prisoners, occurred on a mass scale in early 2025 in the run-up to the 2025 presidential elections*; confiscation of personal religious symbols (crosses); and confiscation of prisoners' personal notes,⁹ among other violations.

In October 2025, the Belsat channel reported¹⁰ on a letter from the Minsk Regional Executive Committee of 16 July 2025, circulated through the education system, which instructed educational institutions to identify and report on the activities of unregistered religious organizations, and to conduct "prevention" work against "destructive sects." This expansion of administrative surveillance over the religious life of schoolchildren creates a risk of interference in the religious life of families and individuals' private religious lives, and is primarily aimed at small communities and home groups.

⁶ [Grzegorz Gawel – Political prisoners and repressed in Belarus; Мониторинг преследований по основаниям, связанным с религией, во время политического кризиса в Беларуси \(ОБНОВЛЯЕТСЯ\) – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)

⁷ On February 22, 2025, at the Brest-Terespol border crossing, Father Dmitry Malets, vicar of the Parish of the Exaltation of the Cross in Lida, Grodno Diocese, was detained following a search of his phone. On February 25, 2025, the Moscow District Court of Brest heard a case regarding an administrative offense under Part 2 of Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (distribution of extremist materials) due to the presence on the priest's mobile device of subscriptions to resources deemed extremist. The case was heard by Judge R. Ya. Karaban. It is unknown what penalty was imposed on the priest.

⁸ [Дмитрий Козлов \(блогер «Серый Кот»\), верующий, бывший политзаключенный: «я ни на кого зла не держу». – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)

⁹ [Уладзімір Мацкевіч, філосаф і хрысціянін падзяліўся назіраннямі, што дапамагала трымацца ў вязніцы і пры чым тут вера – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)

¹⁰ [Следчы камітэт просіць установы адукацыі даносіць на незарэгістраваныя рэлігійныя арганізацыі](#)



#human rights

#human rights based approach



office@belhelcom.org

#business and human rights

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



www.belhelcom.org

#discrimination

No cases of refusal to perform alternative civilian service were recorded in 2025. However, a new legal gap has emerged in connection with the practice of mandatory military reserve training: a citizen who has not performed alternative military service does not have the right to claim an alternative form of participation in reserve training exercises.¹¹

In 2025, attempts by structures of the Russian Orthodox Church to censor of publications by secular academic institutions through complaints to state bodies were recorded. The state did not suppress this interference. Experts characterize this situation not so much as state interference in church affairs but as the granting of church structures tools of pressure over secular institutions.

The situation with freedom of religion in Belarus was addressed in the new 2025 annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).¹² The report mentions the re-registration of religious organizations following the adoption of the new religion law in 2023, which "replicated and amended several restrictive provisions contained in the previous law and introduced new requirements and restrictions for religious communities," and also notes other "concerning developments in recent years," including "the prohibition of the dissemination of religion- and freedom-of-belief-related content as 'extremist,' as well as the detention of clergy for their alleged political activities."

• Rights of Religious Organizations

The key issue for the practical exercise of freedom of religion in 2025 was the approaching final deadline for the submission of documents for the de facto re-registration of religious organizations in connection with the adoption of the new version of the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations¹³ (see commentary for 2024) – 5 July 2025. Failure to comply with the re-registration requirements means the inability of an organization or community to function – that is, the restriction of an entire range of rights, from leasing/owning property and conducting financial transactions to holding public religious services and inviting ministers.

As of the beginning of 2026, no centralized, up-to-date statistical data on the number of religious organizations in the country are available; such data are required to be published on the website of the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs¹⁴ (the website presents data as of 1 January 2024).

According to calculations by "Christian Vision"¹⁵ based on regional statistical data, the outcome of the re-registration process was that in several regions of Belarus a number of denominations ceased their activities entirely. It was noted, however, that in a number of instances the liquidation of communities

¹¹ [Право на отказ от военной службы по соображениям совести в Беларуси и его реализация: проблемы и перспективы – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)

¹² [2025 USCIRF Annual Report](#)

¹³ [«О свободе совести и религиозных организациях» – тематические подборки НПА на Pravo.by](#)

¹⁴ [Главная | Уполномоченный по делам религий и национальностей Республики Беларусь](#)

¹⁵ [Несколько конфессий прекратили деятельность в регионах Беларуси после перерегистрации – Царква і палітычны крызіс у Беларусі](#)



#human rights

#human rights based approach



office@belhelcom.org

#business and human rights

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



www.belhelcom.org

#discrimination

occurred for natural reasons. For example, some Roman Catholic parishes in Mahilyow Region existed "on paper only" but did not function in practice due to an insufficient number of believers. In certain parishes, membership declined due to the death and emigration of parishioners, while some had initially registered with the minimum number of believers in the hope that their numbers would grow in future, but this did not come to pass.

This is broadly consistent with another source of official information: in its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report,¹⁶ the state provided aggregate figures for registered religious organizations, which Christian Vision compares with previous data.¹⁷ The total number of registered religious organizations fell from 3,592 to 3,426 (-4.7%); the number of religious communities – from 3,419 to 3,257.

According to official data, "following the re-registration, inter-denominational diversity was preserved – all 25 denominations and religious trends confirmed their existence."¹⁸

In general, experts note that the re-registration campaign itself violates the rights of religious organizations, but no mass reduction in their number occurred. At the level of local executive committees, in several cases a willingness to informally assist communities in finding solutions was observed, which stands in stark contrast to the position of the security forces. At the same time, re-registration involved the submission of the personal data of founders, which became a further instrument for compiling an up-to-date registry of religious activists. The re-registration campaign also revealed the limitations on freedom to appoint clergy and on the internal personnel policies of religious organizations: according to information from experts, organizations were presented with requirements regarding specific ministers as a condition for passing through the re-registration procedure.

In March 2025, 15 individuals – leaders and members of the unregistered religious organization "IVDIVO" – were detained and recognized as suspects in a criminal case initiated under Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code (organization of and participation in the activities of an unregistered organization).¹⁹ This confirms that the prohibition of unregistered religious activity is operative in the dimension of law enforcement as well.

The new version of the Law²⁰ introduced the concept of "missionary activity," including online, for the exercise of which a special document from a registered religious organization is required. The broad definition of this concept encompasses any form of religious blogging. No cases of criminal prosecution under this provision were recorded in 2025; however, it creates the potential for future prosecutions.

¹⁶ <https://docs.un.org/ru/A/HRC/WG.6/50/BLR/1>

¹⁷ <https://t.me/christianvision/4714>

¹⁸ [Состоялось заседание коллегии аппарата Уполномоченного по делам религий и национальностей по итогам работы в 2025 году](#)

¹⁹ [Январь-декабрь 2025 | Lawtrend – Исследования Образование Действия](#)

²⁰ [«О свободе совести и религиозных организациях» – тематические подборки НПА на Pravo.by](#)



#human rights

#human rights based approach



office@belhelcom.org

#business and human rights

#international human rights enforcement



www.belhelcom.org

#discrimination

mechanisms



Belarusian religious congregations abroad operate under conditions of forced secrecy (avoiding public photographs from religious services) due to the risks of repression against people who have relatives in Belarus. Cases of vandalism and intimidation through messaging platforms continue to be recorded.

Belarus takes virtually no part in the ecumenical movement, and its religious organizations are not members of the World Council of Churches nor Conference of the European Churches. Formal "inter-denominational dialogue" exists primarily in the format of state ceremonial events. Against this backdrop, experts consider worthy of mention the initiative to establish a "Museum of the History of World Religions."²¹

²¹ [Лукашенко анонсировал создание Музея истории мировых религий в Минске](#)



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org