

BELARUS 2015 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 Republic of Belarus, its constitutional system, and civic harmony.” The government selectively denied registration to some minority religious groups, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses, while others, such as the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), were reluctant to apply for registration because members were unwilling to provide their names, as required as part of the registration application process, for fear of intimidation and retribution by the authorities, according to human rights observers. The law prohibits all religious activities by unregistered groups, and authorities detained, fined, and harassed members of unregistered religious communities and surveilled and controlled the activities of those communities, including proselytizing. According to independent religious experts, many communities were reluctant to report abuses and restrictions, fearing intimidation and retribution. The government recognizes a special role for the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) and has negotiated agreements with it granting the Church special privileges. Religious groups reported authorities limited the ability of groups to obtain or convert property for religious use and limited foreign missionary activities. Senior government officials, including the president, criticized foreign clergy, especially Catholic priests.

There were reports of anti-Semitic graffiti and vandalism at Jewish and Christian cemeteries. The BOC continued to honor annually Hauryl Belastoksky, a young child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. The commemoration included a prayer stating the child had “exposed Jewish dishonesty.”

U.S. embassy officials and a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor visited the New Life Church (NLC) to follow up on reports of harassment by government authorities. Embassy officials discussed government restrictions with religious freedom advocates and representatives of religious groups, including Jews and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Section I. Religious Demography

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The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.6 million (July 2015 estimate). There are no authoritative statistics on religious affiliation. According to a March-April 2013 survey by the private Zerkalo-Info Sociological Center, approximately 68 percent of citizens belong to the BOC and 14 percent to the Roman Catholic Church. Smaller religious groups together constituting 3 percent of the population include Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics (“Uniates”), Old Believers (both priestly and priestless) and other Orthodox groups besides the BOC, Lutherans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, the Messianic and Reformed Churches, Presbyterians, other Protestant groups, Armenian Apostolics, Latin Catholics, Christ’s Church, the St. Jogan Church, Hare Krishnas, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Buddhists. Jewish groups state there are between 30,000 and 40,000 Jews. Four percent of the population said they were atheist, 3 percent were not sure, and 8 percent responded they did not belong to any religious group.

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 influences on the formation of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people.” It prohibits activities by confessional organizations 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 conditions for exemption for military service and its substitution by alternative service shall be determined by law.

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 newer religious groups or

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groups such as the priestless Old Believers and Calvinist Churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century, as “traditional” faiths.

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 can be formed only when they comprise active religious communities in at least four of the country’s six regions.

There are 26 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,315 religious communities and 173 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,643 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 491 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 14 denominations have 1,057 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions, and five schools. There are 33 religious communities of Old Believers registered. There are three Jewish religious associations – Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism – comprising 52 communities, including 10 autonomous communities. In addition, 25 Muslim religious communities, 24 Sunni and one Shia, are registered.

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

The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered and establishes registration requirements some groups find complex and difficult to fulfill.

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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 indicated in its founding statutes. A religious group not previously known to the government must also submit information about its beliefs. In the latter case, the law stipulates authorities may take up to six months to review a registration application due to an additional evaluation of the religion by a state-appointed religious commission of experts. Regional and municipal authorities (for groups outside of Minsk) or the Minsk city authorities review all registration applications. Permissible grounds for refusal are broad and include failure to comply with requirements for establishing a community; inconsistent or fraudulent charter or other required documents; violations of procedures to establish religious organizations; and a negative evaluation by the state-appointed religious commission of experts. Communities may appeal refusals in court.

To register, a religious association or national religious association 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 that they include failing 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 can be appealed in court.

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.

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

The housing code permits religious groups to hold services at residential premises if the 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, however, 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 are required to seek 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 property restitution process, including religious property, seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, groups may apply for the restitution of property, and some have successfully done so in the past. The law on religion specifically restricts the restitution of seized property used for cultural or sports purposes.

The law does not permit religious communities to establish schools to train clergy, although associations and national associations may do so.

The law does not allow homeschooling for religious reasons, or private religious schools.

The law only permits 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 MOE. 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.”

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The law prohibits religious groups from conducting activities in schools 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.

A 2003 concordat between the BOC and the government 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 also serves as the framework for at least 12 other agreements between the BOC and various state agencies. For example, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the BOC signed a 2015-20 cooperation agreement on February 13. 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 subsidies from the state. 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 current law establishes penalties ranging from fines to five years in jail for failure to fulfill mandatory military service, with no exemptions for conscientious objectors for religious or other reasons. The government enacted a law allowing alternative civilian service on May 13, which will enter into force on July 1, 2016.

Only registered religious associations may apply to OPRRNA for permission to invite foreign clergy to the country. OPRRNA 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 can be reduced or extended. OPRRNA 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

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of foreign clergy within a religious association, including from one parish to another, require prior state permission. By law foreigners may not lead religious groups. The authorities may reprimand or expel foreign citizens officially 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 compel the departure of foreign clergy.

Government Practices

The government continued to detain and fine religious leaders for engaging in unregistered religious activities, surveil and scrutinize members of minority and unregistered religious groups, and deny registration to minority religious groups. According to independent religious experts, religious groups were reluctant to speak publicly on these matters, fearing intimidation or retribution from the government. Except for the BOC and the Roman Catholic Church, religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Buddhists, had difficulties obtaining buildings for worship, distributing religious literature, and proselytizing. The government failed to provide prisoners of some religious groups access to their clergy. Authorities limited the number and length of stay of foreign missionaries.

Jehovah's Witnesses officials reported cases where police detained members of the community who were proselytizing. For example, police briefly detained and charged a member of the local Jehovah's Witness community for holding an unsanctioned "demonstration" in the town of Hlybokae in May, but a local court later dismissed the charges and closed the case.

The Vitsebsk-based Hare Krishna community reported a local government ideology officer and other officials detained three of their believers on June 17, when they were sharing their religious views and distributing religious literature and other printed materials. The three were first transported to the local State Security Committee (KGB) offices and then moved to a police precinct, where police confiscated their materials, detained them for five hours, and released them without charges.

On September 1, police detained for several hours several Hare Krishna devotees dressed in robes and singing religious songs as they processed along the streets in

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Vorsha, according to Forum18, a Norwegian religious freedom nongovernmental organization. They were released without being charged.

The government continued to allow Roman Catholic priest Uladislau Lazar, accused of high treason in 2013, to work in the village of Kamen, but the charges remained pending and the case unresolved. The Catholic Church and the KGB continued to decline to release any information about the case.

Some Christian groups stated the registration requirements for religious groups restricted their activities, suppressed freedom of religion, and legalized criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs. According to some observers, the government's guidelines for evaluating registration applications were general enough to give authorities a broad pretext for denying applications from groups they considered unacceptable. A number of local authorities, such as in Barysau, Mariyna Horka, and Lida, continued to refuse to negotiate registration agreements with Jehovah's Witnesses. Authorities also continued to refuse registration to several Protestant communities, including a Baptist community in the town of Slutsk.

Many unregistered communities stated they maintained a low profile because of what they believed to be government hostility and fears of criminal liability, including imprisonment of members for up to two years. According to independent religious experts, many communities were reluctant to report abuses and restrictions, fearing intimidation and retribution. They also said some minority religious groups, for example, the Hare Krishnas, were reluctant to apply for registration because members were unwilling to provide their names as part of the registration application process for fear of intimidation and retribution by the authorities.

Authorities in Minsk registered one Buddhist community, Shen Chen Ling, of the Bon tradition. On February 17, OPRRNA registered the John Paul II Minsk Theological Academy, a higher educational institution of the Roman Catholic Church, to train clergy and lay people. In December the Minsk city authorities allocated land to the Church to build the academy.

The government continued to monitor minority religious groups, especially those it labeled "foreign" or "cults." According to religious leaders, state security officers often attended Protestant services to conduct surveillance, which group members described as intimidation and harassment.

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Religious groups, especially Protestants, said they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing material due to the general atmosphere of intimidation, fear of retribution, and other possible limitations.

Nontraditional religious groups said the procedure for registering residential premises for religious use remained cumbersome and arbitrary. For example, authorities denied permission to a registered Jehovah's Witness community in Rechytsa to hold religious services at a private home. The government continued to warn or fine religious groups for violating the legal prohibition on organizing or hosting unauthorized meetings, especially in private homes.

On April 30, the Minsk regional court turned down an appeal from Jehovah's Witness Andrei Kuzin to challenge a December 2014 fine of 3.75 million rubles (\$202), which he received for organizing a religious meeting without permission from local authorities in his home in Barysau in November 2014. According to the Forum18 news service, Barysau ideology officer Ludmila Hornak stated "there was no such community as Jehovah's Witnesses in Barysau, and there was no application for registration submitted to the city authorities" despite 11 earlier registration refusals.

On June 8, a court in Svetlahorsk fined Uladzimir Daineka and Yury Valadzenkou, presbyter and member, respectively, of a local Baptist community, 3.6 million rubles (\$194) each for holding an unsanctioned religious gathering. According to local independent media outlets, on May 17, unidentified armed police officers broke into Daineka's private home, interrupted a service, took down the names of all present, and charged the two individuals. Forum18 reported eight other community members were fined later that month for refusing to testify against Daineka and Valadzenkou. For example, authorities fined Lyubou Kundas, a member of the community, 1.44 million rubles (\$78) for refusing to testify and answer who was reading the Bible when police arrived at the service. On August 24, a higher court upheld all fines.

On August 15, police interrupted a mass baptism ceremony held by a local Protestant community, the Church of Grace, at a lake in the Minsk region. After they charged the pastor with violating regulations for holding an unsanctioned mass event, police allowed the community to proceed with the ceremony, which officers closely monitored. No charges were brought to court.

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On August 20, a Homyel district court fined Siarhei Nikalaenka, pastor and leader of the Transfiguration Church of God, a registered religious group, 3.6 million rubles (\$194) for holding a religious service at leased facilities without permission from local authorities on May 31. Police interrupted the service, videotaped community members, recorded their passport information, and questioned them. On June 25, police searched Nikalaenka's residence and confiscated the community's paperwork and other printed materials. Authorities warned the pastor and his fellow church member Alyaksandr Chueu, whose home was also searched on June 28, they might face criminal charges of leading another, unregistered religious group – Christ the Savior Church – based on Nikalaenka's publications on the internet, including on his personal social media accounts. Local ideology officer Ala Anisimava testified at a hearing on August 20 that she closely followed Nikalaenka's publications and activities online and generally monitored and surveilled religious gatherings, including the one on May 31. According to religious freedom advocates, Anisimava was also behind the authorities' decision to bar, effective June 11, the Transfiguration Church of God community from continuing to lease facilities for holding Sunday worship services.

According to various observers, government ideology officers charged with promoting official policies and views continued to scrutinize unregistered religious groups, including by monitoring the activities of members in their workplaces, but did not prosecute any.

Authorities allowed Jehovah's Witnesses to hold a national convention in Minsk on July 24-25. Thousands of members from across the country reportedly attended the fifth state-approved convention without official interference. The community's leaders reported local officials denied requests for smaller conventions to be held in some regional towns and in Minsk.

Religious groups reported they continued to experience problems renting, purchasing, or registering properties to establish places of worship. Converting residential property to religious use was also difficult. Renting a public facility to hold religious services, particularly for unregistered groups, remained difficult as well. For example, some Protestant communities reported they were only able to conclude 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 to prevent religious activities. Protestant groups said they were most severely affected; they were less likely to own property and their private homes were too small to accommodate their numbers.

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There was no progress on the freeze placed on the assets of the NLC during the year. The city did not renew attempts to evict the Church from its premises. The NLC continued to use the space for religious purposes but was still unable to obtain proof of ownership from authorities and still had no access to electricity. The NLC leadership met with Minsk city authorities to continue negotiations on the status and operations of the Church.

The government continued to require students to use textbooks which representatives of nontraditional religious groups said promoted intolerance toward them. Leaders of minority communities said the language in one textbook was discriminatory, citing a chapter labeling groups such as Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Maria, the White Brotherhood, and Jehovah's Witnesses as "sects." They said another textbook also labeled certain Christian denominations and Hare Krishnas as "sects." The government made no changes to these textbooks despite requests from religious groups.

In practice, the right of educational institutions to cooperate with registered religious groups was limited to the BOC, which was the only religious group to sign a concordat with the government. School administrators had the authority to invite BOC priests to lecture to students, organize tours of BOC facilities, and participate in BOC festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects. A program of cooperation between the MOE and the BOC provided for joint projects for the spiritual and moral education of students based on BOC traditions and history.

The BOC was allowed to collect charitable donations, with no restrictions, in public as well as on its religious property, without interference from authorities. While the law did not restrict other religious groups from raising donations in public, in practice such groups limited their fundraising activities to their own places of worship or other properties. In past years, some religious groups had reported harassment from the authorities if they tried to raise donations at other locations. Orthodox literature was available countrywide. The BOC was able to proselytize freely, while other groups were occasionally harassed, even when they had been given authorization by local authorities to hold their events. The BOC was also allowed, unlike other religious groups, to participate in any government-sponsored public event without the need to seek prior approval from authorities.

Human rights groups continued to report that, while authorities generally granted BOC or Roman Catholic clergy permission to visit believers in jail on a regular

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basis, and many prisons had designated Orthodox religious facilities, prison administrations denied believers of other faiths, including Protestants and Muslims, visits by relevant clergy.

On June 22, President Lukashenka attended and spoke at the unveiling of a memorial at the site of the Trostenets Nazi death camp complex near Minsk. He condemned Nazism and intolerance.

On January 22, the head of OPRRNA publicly stated foreign Roman Catholic priests working in the country were “engaging in politics,” and “not approving of local laws, leadership, and our country.” He added the government was not against “inviting foreign clergy to serve in the country” if they complied solely with their religious duties. He also said the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church “was not interested in training more local clergy at their seminaries in Pinsk and Hrodna.” On January 30, the Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops in the country protested the OPRRNA head’s statements, describing his remarks as an “unjustified insult of the Catholic Church and incitement of interfaith and interethnic hatred.”

On January 30, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei met with Apostolic Nuncio Claudio Gugerotti. After the latter expressed concerns about possible interpretations of officials’ statements about the Roman Catholic clergy, Makei lauded the “constructive and balanced” work of the Church and said the government hoped the Catholic Church would train more local clergy to reduce the need for Polish priests.

At a press conference on January 29, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka expressed his “dissatisfaction over service of some Polish priests in the country.” On April 29, at his annual address to the nation and parliament, he criticized clergy, who lacked their own families, for advocating for more children and strong family values. He also charged clergy with “fooling around on the sly somewhere,” adding that “children are necessary [for one] to be human and you are not human without children,” and calling the clergymen “benighted.” The BOC and Roman Catholic Church separately dismissed the attacks made against their clergy.

Religious groups said the government continued to apply visa regulations in ways that restricted the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country and limited the groups’ capacity to carry out humanitarian and charitable projects.

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On July 31, without explanation, border officers denied the United States-based head of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church entry into the country, although his previous annual visits had been approved. The Autocephalous Orthodox Church's communities, whose previous registration applications authorities had denied, remained unregistered.

On October 29, a court in Pinsk fined two local residents 18 million rubles (\$970) each for vandalizing seven gravestones at a local Christian cemetery on July 11. The two individuals pleaded guilty, reimbursed all damages, and restored the gravestones prior to the sentencing.

On November 11, police arrested three people in Polatsk, charging them with destroying 63 graves at a local Christian cemetery on November 7. The case was ongoing at year's end.

A police investigation into a case of vandalism at a Jewish center in Homyel that took place at the end of 2014 did not yield any results. Police did not identify any perpetrators and closed the case.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The BOC, in particular the Minsk-based parish of the Feast of the Presentation of Blessed Virgin, continued to honor annually Hauriyil Belastoksky, a child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690, as one of its saints and martyrs. Jewish activists raised concerns that a memorial prayer used on the anniversary of his death on May 3 stated the "martyred and courageous Hauriyil exposed Jewish dishonesty."

In March in Svetlahorsk, unknown individuals vandalized a number of public buildings with anti-Semitic drawings of Stars of David and the phrase "Passover [Coming] Soon, There Will Soon Be Blood." Authorities launched an investigation on March 26, but there were no developments announced in the case.

On April 21, independent journalists reported they saw swastikas painted on gravestones at the Jewish cemetery in the town of Horki. Police did not launch an investigation.

Relations between the BOC and the Catholic Church continued to improve, according to members of both groups. Examples of increased cooperation

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included joint religious services and informal meetings. On May 13, BOC Metropolitan Pavel said there were “friendly and warm” relations between the two Churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In November U.S. embassy officials and a visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor visited the NLC to follow up on reports of harassment and pressure by the authorities.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups. Embassy representatives raised issues of anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish religious groups and discussed restrictions on registration and operations with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, and Protestant groups.

Embassy officers discussed restrictions on religion 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.