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AMENDMENT TO THE LAW OF 30 DECEMBER 2023 ON FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS. THE SACRED UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE BELARUSIAN STATE

Abstract: In December 2023, the Belarusian Parliament adopted an amendment to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations. The new version of the law significantly restricted the already limited possibilities for the independent functioning of religious organisations while simultaneously enabling full state control and facilitating the discrimination of Catholics and Protestants in particular. The amendment introduced new, stringent criteria for religious activity in Belarus and imposed the obligation of re-registration on organisations that had previously been registered. At the same time, it curtailed opportunities for religious education for children and adults and strengthened the state's supervisory role over so-called minority religious associations, treated as culturally foreign. The legislative changes were designed to ensure strict monitoring by the Belarusian state and to enable the liquidation of religious organisations based on arbitrary administrative decisions, justified by claims of alleged extremist or terrorist threats.

Keywords: Belarus, state control, state-church relations, restrictions on freedom of conscience and religion

Introduction

The Constitution of Belarus[1] formally guarantees religious freedom, and the "Religion Law" reiterates these constitutional provisions[2]. In reality, however, every aspect of Belarusian social life, including the religious sphere, has been subject to close supervision of the regime authorities since the establishment of the Republic's new statehood following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

[1] *Constitution of the Republic of Belarus of 1994*, in: *National Legal Information Centre of the Republic of Belarus. Legislation of the Republic of Belarus*, pp. 1–27.

[2] *Law of 17 December 1992 on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations*, „Bulletin of the Supreme Council of Belarus" 1993, No. 2.

An unambiguously negative assessment of the state of freedom of conscience and religion has been voiced not only by Belarusian opponents of President Lukashenko but also by independent experts outside the country. Notably, periodic reports on religious freedom prepared for the United States government strongly criticise the Belarusian government for curtailing the religious rights of the citizens, highlighting practices such as privileging one religious organisation at the expense of others, restricting religious education, creating obstacles for the registration of religious bodies, limiting missionary activity by foreigners, imposing administrative fines on clergy, and failing to return confiscated church property. The conduct of state institutions reflects the political directives of the President of the Republic, which have materialised as successive amendments to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations. The very original version of the Law was already a manifestation of tight state control over the religious domain, with each subsequent amendment reminding Belarusians that the authorities had no intention of relinquishing their monopoly on monitoring religious organisations, treating them as potential adversaries to an authoritarian model of governance. The amendments adopted in 2023 confirmed the concerns of many religious communities that the new criteria for the operation of religious organisation, although officially justified as measures to protect state security, in practice granted the state even greater control than before. Non-Orthodox organisations, particularly those of foreign origin, have been subjected to heightened pressure and stricter supervision of their religious life by the state, compared to the period before the amendment, which appears to reflect a deliberate strategy by the regime to intimidate society as a whole.

Religious Structure and State-Church Relations in the Republic of Belarus

As of 1 January 2025, twenty-five religious denominations and associations were officially registered in the Republic of Belarus, five of which are recognised as traditional and culturally formative: Orthodoxy, Catholicism, the Evangelical-Augsburg denomination, Judaism, and Islam[3]. However, the data from as early as 2013 provide more detailed statistics, showing that at the time 3,488 religious organisations were registered, including 173 organisations of general character. These included religious associations, monasteries, missions, confraternities, communities of female secular institutes, and religious educational institutions. In 2013, there were 2,618 buildings designated for religious purposes, with an additional 245 under construction[4]. At the same time, 3,116 clergy were active, including 143 foreigners, most of whom had been invited by the Roman Catholic Church. The Latin Church comprised 491 parishes across four dioceses,

[3] *Religion in Belarus*, <www.belarus.by/ru/aboutbelarus/religion>, accesse: 01/08/2025.

[4] See V. Burko, *The Church and Local Communities in Belarus in the Face of Social Challenges*, „Sympozjum" 2018, No. 2(39), p. 251.

with 488 churches and 194 more under construction. Protestant communities numbered 1,057, Old Believers 33, Muslim communities 25 (almost all Sunni), and Jewish associations 52. In 2013, Muslims operated seven places of worship and a mosque in Minsk, while Jewish communities were authorised to use nine buildings (Belarusian Judaism being represented by Orthodox, Progressive, and Chabad Lubavitch traditions). Since 2015, a registered Buddhist community, Shen Chen Ling, belonging to the Bon tradition, has also been operating in Minsk. Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church remains the core religious institution in Belarusian society, with 1,643 parishes across 15 dioceses. In 2013, it operated 1,535 church buildings with 194 under construction. It also maintained seven denominational schools, 35 male monasteries and ten female monasteries, as well as 15 Orthodox confraternities, which, in the broader picture, confirms the dominant position of the Orthodox Church compared to other religious associations. Orthodoxy has been prevalent in both the legal framework and the state practice since the origins of Belarusian statehood. The preamble to the "Religion Law" explicitly underlines the importance of Orthodoxy for Belarusians by stating: "This Law regulates legal relations in the field of human and civil rights to freedom of conscience and religion, recognising the decisive role of the Orthodox Church in the historical formation and development of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian nation, as well as the spiritual, cultural, and historical role of the Catholic Church, and the inseparability of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Judaism and Islam from the common history of the Belarusian people".

The position of the Orthodox Church in Belarus is visible across numerous domains. The Belarusian national coat-of-arms incorporates the five-pointed cross of St. Euphrosyne of Polotsk, an Orthodox nun who lived in the 12th century, clearly referring to the Eastern Christian traditions in these lands. The appointment of a foreign citizen, Metropolitan Pavel Ponomariov, to the position of head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, contrary to the religious law, was also tolerated. Being a citizen of the Russian Federation and known as "Lukashenko's confessor," he led the structures of Belarusian Orthodoxy from 2013 to 2020, following his prior appointment by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was only in 2020 that the same synodal authorities in Moscow decided that the leadership should be entrusted to a Belarusian citizen, who in this case was Metropolitan Beniamin (Vitaly Tupeko) from the region of Brest, an opponent of autocephaly, called the "Belarusian Onufriy"[5].

The authorities of the Republic also formally support the Orthodox Church, as exemplified by the 2003 agreement between the government and the leadership of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, often, albeit inaccurately, referred to as a "concordat" (concluded on 12 June 2003 and comprising 14 programme points). On its basis, the church gained autonomy in internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and "special" relations with the state, which other legally recognised religious communities did not enjoy. The agreement called

[5] See A. Matrenchyk, *New Metropolitan*, „Przegląd Prawosławny" 2020, No. 25, p. 2.

for cooperation between both parties in the fields of education, development, and security as well as combating pseudo-religions. Thus, the agreement opened the door to discrimination against other religions, apart from those historically established, and fostered religious intolerance toward "non-believers." For instance, a school textbook issued for the subject "Fundamentals of Home and Personal Safety" included a chapter entitled "Beware of Sects," in which groups such as the Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses were explicitly named. President Lukashenko, on the other hand, used the agreement to consolidate his position within the state, and described the very idea of the agreement as an unprecedented phenomenon within the Orthodox world. In doing so, he gained the approval of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, particularly since he assured that "the government will always support the Orthodox Church" (statement made during Kirill's official visit to Belarus in 2009).

By contrast, a concordat with the Holy See was never concluded, and activity in this regard was observable only during presidential election campaigns. Outside election periods, the Belarusian government has consistently pursued a policy of restricting the presence of Latin clergy in the country, with repressive measures primarily targeting priests from Poland. The President of the Republic visited the Vatican twice, in 2009 and 2016; however, none of the visits resulted in any arrangements regarding signing of the concordat. A provisional and substitutive measure for a potential concordat was the initiative put forward by Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz in 2017 regarding a draft agreement with the authorities modelled on the "Orthodox" agreement of 2003. It proposed solutions regarding pastoral care in schools, hospitals and prisons, and despite the initial acceptance of this idea by the Commissioner for Religious Affairs and Nationalities, the agreement was never finalised. It was also not possible to invite subsequent popes (John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis) to pay an apostolic visit to Belarus, since the authorities conditioned the invitation on the consent of the leadership of the dominant church in that country. Minsk-Vatican relations warmed after the establishment of a Belarusian embassy to the Holy See and the appointment of Ambassador Yuri Ambrazewicz (1 September 2025). Earlier, from 25 March 2025, Archbishop Ignazio Ceffalia had been appointed Apostolic Nuncio to Belarus[6].

The state's relations with religious associations other than the Orthodox Church are discriminatory in nature, especially towards Catholics, despite apparent stabilization measures. The case of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, who was denied entry to Belarus on charges of actions undermining the security of the Republic, is an example of the unlawful conduct of the Belarusian regime. He was forced into exile in Poland for several months, and it was only through the efforts of Vatican diplomacy that he was able to return for Christmas 2020. Other clergymen were also sentenced to long-term imprisonment under aggravated

[6] The efforts of Belarusian Catholics to regulate their legal status through a concordat have been visible since the collapse of the Soviet Union. See A. Grajewski, *Concordat with Belarus*, „Gość Niedzielny" 2008, No. 23, p. 6.

conditions, accused of espionage on behalf of Poland and the Vatican (sic!), with Father Andrzej Juchniewicz serving 11 years and Father Siergiej Riezanowicz 16 years of imprisonment. A particularly repressive measure was forcing Father Juchniewicz's defender to sign the declaration of confidentiality regarding the findings of the trial. Other forms of repression used against Catholic priests included denial of entry to the Republic (e.g. I. Laszuk, A. Kewlicz, J. Uczkoronis, J. Gęza) or the imposition of heavy fines without legal justification. Other examples of aggressive behaviour towards Belarusian Catholics were the search of church premises at the Parish of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Minsk, the assault on a priest, the arson of the so-called Red Church in Minsk, and the state-mandated suspension of the operation of the seminary in Pinsk[7].

Other religious communities, particularly Protestants, likewise experienced various forms of discrimination. For instance, in 2005, a court dissolved the Belarusian Evangelical Church on the grounds that it did not possess a postal address, while the dissolution of the Evangelical Reformed Church was justified by its failure to rent premises for its headquarters. In the same year 2005, representatives of the New Life Church were heavily fined for holding an "illegal" service in a former kolkhoz (collective farm) which they had previously purchased and renovated. In 2009, clergy of the Pentecostal Church in Hrodna, of the Baptist Church in Brest, Baranovichi, and Malaryta, of the Embassy of God Church in the village of Harbowicze, as well as members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Minsk, were all penalised for conducting illegal services. In 2010, a practising follower of the Jewish religion was sentenced to imprisonment for allegedly evading military service, despite his application for alternative service guaranteed to him under Article 57 of the Constitution. That same year, a Pentecostal pastor in Kobryn, a Baptist minister in Drahichyn, a pastor of the New Generation Church in Navahrudak, and a minister of the Breakthrough Protestant Church in Hrodna were all fined, while in 2020, pastor Alexander Zaretsky was sentenced to thirty days' arrest for praying for unjustly convicted individuals and for Ukraine. A Polish citizen, Pastor Jarosław Łukasik, was also deported to Poland on the grounds that, by participating in a prayer meeting, he had allegedly contributed to the politicisation of the local Protestant community.

The state-church relations in Belarus are governed directly by constitutional provisions set out in Article 16 of the Basic Law[8], which according to J. Matwiejuk

[7] See W. Konończuk, *In Belarus, History Comes Full Circle. Catholics Back in the KGB Crosshairs*, „Tygodnik Powszechny" 2015, No. 6, p. 2.

[8] It is necessary here to trace the evolution of the wording of this constitutional provision. In its original version, it was decided that "all religions and faiths are equal before the law, and the granting of any privileges or the imposition of any restrictions upon one religion or faith compared to others is not permissible." Subsequently, Article 16 of the Constitution was amended, and its second part was reformulated to state that "the relations between the state and religious organisations are regulated by law, taking into account their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people". This new constitutional provision amounts to nothing less than the legalisation of religious inequality and the marginalisation of so-called "non-traditional" religions. Furthermore, the criterion of "formation" is not a legal category but merely an instrument applied arbitrarily by state authorities. See J. Waszkiewicz,

amount to three constitutional religious principles. The first one is the principle of equality of religions and beliefs before the law, linked to the norm enshrined in Article 22 of the Constitution, and ultimately "appears to be the most significant constitutional principle, determining the legal position of religious organisations in the Republic of Belarus"[9]. The second provides for the exclusive use of statutory legislation for regulating issues of state-church relations, and the third is the principle of freedom of operation of religious organisations. The latter, however, is not unlimited, since the activities of religious organisations, their bodies and representatives, that are directed against the sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, its constitutional system and civic harmony, or involve a violation of civil rights and liberties of its citizens as well as impede the execution of State, public and family duties by its citizens or are detrimental to their health and morality are prohibited (Article 16 of the Basic Law). At this juncture, it must be explicitly emphasised that the concepts of, for example, "civic harmony" or "detriment to health and morality" are poorly defined, which appears to be a deliberate decision of the constitutional legislator, aimed at enabling the discretionary assessment of specific factual situations solely in line with the interests of state authorities. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that Article 5 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion as a supreme principle, insofar as it prohibits the creation and operation within the Republic of social organisations and political parties whose purpose is to promote religious or racial hatred.

Formally, in Belarus, the body responsible for the coordination and implementation of state policy in the field of relations with the authorities and in the interreligious dimension is the Commissioner for Religious and National Affairs. The Commissioner is appointed and dismissed by the President upon the recommendation of the Council of Ministers, which underscores his subordination to the government. His responsibilities are officially reduced to participation in the elaboration and execution of state policy in the religious sphere; however, this remains a rather imprecise mandate. More concrete and measurable duties of the Commissioner include supervising the activities of religious organisations, maintaining the State Register of Religious Organisations, submitting applications to the court for the dissolution of religious organisations, issuing opinions regarding the location of land for the construction of sacred facilities, and deciding on the advisability of exempting free foreign aid from customs duties and taxes[10].

At the same time, it should be observed that state's religious policy remains inconsistent: on the one hand, the state attempts to present itself as an "ally" of religious communities, while on the other, it acts as their tangible adversary. Religious holidays, including Christmas and Easter celebrated in both Eastern

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Religious Identification and State Religious Policy in Belarus, „Studia Białorutenistyczne" 2016, No. 10, pp. 85–86.

[9] See J. Matwiejuk, *Religious Issues in the Constitutions of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine*, „Studia z Prawa Wyznaniowego" 2013, Vol. 5, p. 171.

[10] See K. Fedorowicz, *The Sacred Under Control. Amendment to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations in Belarus*, „Komentarze IEŚ" 2024, No. 1092, p. 4.

and Western traditions, were recognised as public holidays, permission was granted for the opening of theological studies at the Belarusian State University in Minsk, and alternative (non-military) service on religious grounds was authorised. Simultaneously, the Catholic seminary was closed and church property was not returned, e.g. in Zhlobin (the former church still serving as a museum) and in Rechytsa (now a bar), while the Sunday Catholic liturgy broadcast was reduced to 30 minutes, and in 2025 the Epiphany procession was substituted with Father Frost parades. For example, in 2010, Metropolitan Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz met with the President of the Republic to discuss the return of the Bernardine Monastery Complex in Minsk, the allocation of building plots for the needs of the faithful in new residential districts of Minsk, and the improvement of cooperation between the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Belarus[11] and state religious officials, and in none of these did he receive government support[12].

The Belarusian Religion Law Before and After the 2023 Amendment

The Religion Law of 17 December 1992 was intended to open new relations between the young state and religious organisations. It was modelled on earlier solutions applied in the former Soviet Union and, in principle, resembled the provisions found in the Russian and Ukrainian Laws on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations. This is also evidenced by the terminology adopted in the Law, typical for post-Soviet states, where instead of references to "churches" or "other religious associations," the phrase "religious organisations" was introduced, not always equivalent to the former concepts. Indeed, following the amendment of 2002, the Belarusian Law did not define the term "religious organisations" but instead established three levels of religious groups. The first category comprised religious communities, which, in order to register, must consist of at least twenty persons over the age of eighteen residing in neighbouring areas. The second level consisted of religious associations, understood as at least ten religious communities, one of which had to have been active in the country for at least twenty years, and these could be formed exclusively by a national-level

[11] Since 14 April 2021, the presidium of the Belarusian episcopate has been composed of Bishop Aleh Butkiewicz (Bishop of Vitebsk) as chairman, Bishop Aleksander Kaszkiewicz of Hrodna as deputy chairman, and Józef Staniewski, auxiliary bishop of Hrodna, as secretary (source: <www.old.catholic.by/2/conference/bishops.html>, accessed: 01/08/2025. It must be emphasised that only in 2003 did the state authorities issue a decree recognising the legal personality of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus, although ecclesiastically this body had been established on 11 February 1999. In 2003, the legal personality of individual dioceses was also acknowledged, namely the Archdiocese of Minsk-Mohilev and the dioceses of Pinsk, Hrodna, and Vitebsk, which formally enabled these entities to participate in legal transactions at both national and international levels. See J. Dębiński, *The Catholic Church in Belarus at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries*, „Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne" 2009, No. 92, pp. 31–36.

[12] See K. Fedorowicz, *The Catholic Church in Belarus. Politics of Repression and Persecution*, „Komentarze IEŚ" 2023, No. 166, p. 6.

religious association. The third tier of such organisations was designated as national religious associations, which, under the Law, could only be established if active religious communities operated in the majority of the six regions of the country. This tripartite division introduced by the legislator was of practical importance at the registration stage of religious organisations. For instance, a religious community was required to submit a list of founders including their names, addresses, citizenship, signatures, copies of founding statutes, minutes of the founding committee's meeting, and government authorisations to use or occupy the property listed in the founding statute. In the case of national associations, it was necessary to attach a list of members of the governing body together with biographical details, confirmation of consent to the association's presence in a designated location, and minutes of the founding meeting. All these documents (whether concerning religious communities or national associations) were verified by Regional Executive Committees, and in Minsk by the City Executive Committee. It must also be stressed that in the case of a community professing a religion previously unknown to the state authorities, information regarding its doctrine had to be submitted. As for national associations, the legislator provided them with the exclusive right to establish educational institutions, to organise monastic communities, and to invite foreigners to engage in religious missionary activities.

The difficulties associated with the registration of religious organisations under the original wording of the Religion Law became evident in light of subsequent amendments, which directly took on a restrictive character. As early as 2002, the Law in question was amended so as to require the re-registration of all religious organisations, even though they had previously met the statutory requirements. This manoeuvre was aimed at verifying "disloyal" individuals and organisations vis-à-vis the state and at the same time leading to the dissolution of some of them, especially charities. As a result of these actions, in 2007 more than 50,000 people (Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox) submitted a nationwide petition opposing the introduction of the new registration rules. Ultimately, the petition was unanimously rejected by all the state bodies to which it was submitted, namely the Constitutional Court, the House of Representatives, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus, and the presidential administration. After more than a decade, in 2022, the issue of amending the Law was revisited by the Belarusian parliament at the initiative of the President, on whose behalf the Commissioner for Religious and National Affairs argued for the need to harmonise the religious provisions with the Basic Law and to realise the idea expressed in the statutory preamble regarding the role of the Orthodox Church. As a result, on 30 December 2023 the House of Representatives adopted the amendment, which entered into force on 5 July 2024. The several-month *vacatio legis* was intended to give all religious organisations, without exception, time to align their statutes with the new provisions. The deadline of 6 July 2025 was set as the final date for submitting a new application for registration. Failure to comply with this requirement resulted in immediate dissolution and removal from the State Register of Religious Organisations. The new requirements for the establishment

of a religious association stipulated that it must include at least fifteen religious communities from all regions of Belarus and from the city of Minsk, with at least one of them having been active continuously for at least thirty years. In addition, it was decided that the head of such a religious association could only be a Belarusian citizen with permanent residence in the country. At the same time, persons listed in the "Register of Organisations and Individuals Involved in Terrorist Activities" and in the "Register of Belarusian Citizens, Foreigners or Stateless Persons Involved in Extremist Activities" were excluded from this category. Furthermore, a ten-day deadline was imposed for notifying the registration authority in writing of the appointment of a new chairperson. In this way, a "door" (indeed, even a "gate") was opened for the swift liquidation of religious organisations, since they could henceforth be dissolved for engaging in activities against the sovereignty of the state or the main directions of its internal and external policies, its constitutional order and social harmony, or even for activities deemed to discredit the Republic of Belarus. This catalogue was further expanded to include the dissemination of war propaganda, the incitement of social, national, religious, or racial hostility, extremist activity, the denigration of national honour and dignity, and the obstruction of citizens in fulfilling their broadly understood civic duties. Such a construction of the provision, employing vague and legally undefined terms, was designed solely to enable the use of arbitrary decisions by state authorities, immune to challenge through any means of appeal. The broad discretionary powers of state religious officials are also evident in the wording of the Law, which provided for the liquidation of a religious organisation in the event of its failure to remedy, within six months, the infringements specified in a written warning issued by the authorities.

The 2023 amendment also restricted religious education, as it permitted such teaching only if it was explicitly provided for in the statute of a religious organisation and solely within premises under its control (owned or leased), unless these were state educational institutions. It was further stipulated that religious instruction did not constitute educational activity, and the participation of minors in Sunday school classes was contingent upon a prior written request submitted by parents or legal guardians. The curricula of these religious schools (for both minors and adults) could not be formulated in contradiction with the values and ideology of the Belarusian state, while the state authorities were granted access to school documentation and were to receive reports. The legislator's strictness towards members of so-called minority religious associations became evident in the requirement that religious instruction be conducted exclusively in one of the state languages. Thus, from that point onwards, religious education could be carried out only in Belarusian or Russian, while the display of symbols other than religious ones in places of worship was prohibited. In practice, this prevented, for example, Belarusian Catholics of Polish descent from displaying the national flag on public holidays or from including Polish emblems in church decorations at Christmas or Easter. At the same time, places of worship could not serve as venues for political meetings or for speeches offensive to representatives of state authorities (implicitly, above all, the President).

The new structure of the Religious Law was, in fact, a means of consolidating the position of the state and its supremacy over religious organisations. In particular, the restrictions affected the Roman Catholic Church, the use of the Polish language, the ability of foreign clergy to conduct missionary work, and the obligation to pay registration costs. Furthermore, the radicalism of the amendments rendered it impossible for newly established religious communities in Belarus to function legally, as they could not meet the conditions required for registering a nationwide religious association. It should also be noted that the Belarusian authorities opted for such far-reaching changes despite earlier signs of a willingness to discuss the direction of amendments to the Religious Law. Even prior to the adoption of the new provisions, on 3 November 2023, a so-called round table meeting was organised in the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus with the participation of hierarchs of the "major" religious associations, during which Archbishop Staniewski appealed to the authorities to provide in the new version of the law for the exemption of clergy (including seminarians) from compulsory military service as well as for the right to conduct religious education in their native language. The Catholic clergyman also referred to the provisions of the synodal statutes of the Archdiocese of Minsk-Mohilev and the Dioceses of Pinsk and Vitebsk of 2002, which stipulated that the Polish language should serve as an auxiliary to Belarusian and be used whenever pastoral necessity required[13].

Report on the Assessment of the State of Freedom of Conscience and Religion

According to the official position of the Belarusian authorities, the government guarantees an adequate level of religious freedom. However, an independent report of the United States government assessed the "quality" of the implementation of these rights as highly unsatisfactory and significantly below the standards of a democratic state governed by the rule of law[14]. The report of 17 November 2010 contained an extensive analysis of freedom of conscience, pointing to concrete instances of its violation. Although the report concerned events of more than a decade ago, Belarusian practice continues to confirm those earlier findings. Already in 2010, it was observed that the government had imposed regulations which directly and indirectly restricted religious freedom in the Republic of Belarus. This was visible particularly in the strict requirements for the

[13] Historically, the problem of the use of the Polish language in liturgy and pastoral work in the territories of present-day Belarus was radically "resolved" by Tsar Alexander II, who ordered the publication of the so-called Trebnik (ritual book) in Russian and imposed exclusive use of the Russian language in this respect. See J. Dworzecka, *Polish and Belarusian Identity of the Catholic Church in Belarus. History and Contemporary Dilemmas*, „Studia Białorutenistyczne" 2018, No. 12, pp. 57–59.

[14] *2010 Report on International Religious Freedom*, <www.2009-2017.state.gov/j/are/rls/inf/2010>, accessed: 01/08/2025.

state registration of religious organisations, well before the 2023 amendment to the law. Even then, it was believed that the registration was discriminatory towards so-called minority religious organisations, and the government applied in practice an informal division into traditional and non-traditional religions. The former included Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Islam, and Judaism, while the latter were labelled as sects. According to the 2010 report, even Jewish communities were refused registration by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (e.g. the application of the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union) on the grounds that the registration request concerned premises located in a residential building. At the same time, the authorities consistently refused to return property previously belonging to Jewish communities, as the buildings were being used by the state for cultural, educational, or sporting purposes. Thus, not only was no legal basis created for the restitution of religious property confiscated by Nazi or Soviet authorities but disused synagogues were also demolished (e.g. in 2009 in Lyuban) under the false pretext of preventing a construction disaster. The report further highlighted that the authorities of the Mogilev region encouraged citizens to inform ideological officials about cases of functioning unregistered religious organisations. Such denunciations were to concern all forms of illegal religious activity. Indeed, the most frequent cases reported in connection with repression involved the conduct of religious activity without state authorisation. The confiscation of church property was a particularly severe form of state repression. Other burdensome consequences included the imposition of fines so high that payment was practically impossible for those punished. In practice, individuals were fined for holding services in private homes or public places without permission, for distributing religious materials, and for carrying out religious rites without state authorisation. Foreigners involved in religious activities were frequently fined or expelled from Belarus, and foreign clergy were subjected to practices effectively forcing them to leave the country through the refusal of residence permits. Thus, in 2009, two Polish Catholic priests were prevented from continuing their ministry in the Hrodna Region, despite the intervention of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Belarus and despite their prior compliance with the obligation to renew residence permits with the state authorities. In addition, Belarusian authorities informally monitor the sources of funding for foreign missionary activity, allegedly to detect possible links with terrorist organisations threatening state security. This also applies to non-religious organisations providing charitable assistance. Consequently, visa requirements for such foreign organisations are strictly observed, and religious organisations inviting foreign clergy are obliged to submit detailed documentation, including reports on the course of the mission carried out on Belarusian territory. Additional difficulties in exercising religious freedom (according to the U.S. government report) are those related to the rental or purchase of property for religious activities. This issue is directly linked to the registration of religious organisations, as the absence of a designated headquarters on the territory of the Republic automatically prevents the continuation of the registration process.

Conclusion

The amendment to the Law of December 2023 can only be assessed as yet another planned, and at the same time illegitimate, interference by the Belarusian state authorities in the sphere of religious freedom within the country. The adoption of the law in the form it took at that time demonstrates, above all, a high level of state control not only over religious activity understood as such but, more importantly, a clear tendency to limit organisations perceived as Western and inherently disloyal to the Minsk regime. The new rules were particularly burdensome for adherents of Catholicism and Protestantism as well as for religious associations unable to meet the new regulatory requirements (for instance, religious communities of "short" Belarusian origin). In practice, this translates into a radical restriction of religious practices at both the community and individual levels and, in the longer term, into discouraging society from any form of religious activity. The underlying purpose is to bring all social life under state control, especially with regard to religious organisations whose decision-making centres are located outside the territory of the Republic of Belarus. Consequently, the Catholic and Polish minority, associated with Belarusian Catholicism, is particularly exposed to discrimination not only on religious grounds but also on linguistic ones. In a broader sense, the obligation to conduct religious instruction in the national language can be interpreted as discrimination against national or religious minorities. It should also be noted that the mandatory payment to the state for public order services in the case of religious events, such as pilgrimages or processions, constitutes an additional financial "harassment" for most religious organisations, whose financial resources are generally very limited. This type of restriction also applies to access to religious literature and objects necessary for religious worship, whereas the changes introduced in the December amendment are, in effect, a form of arbitrary state control under the pretext of combating extremism, terrorism, and state anarchy. A symbol of the changes introduced after 5 July 2024 was the classification by the Belarusian authorities of merely "liking" an online post of an anti-regime character as an extremist act.

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