



BELARUS: Country Dossier

June 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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research@od.org

www.opendoorsanalytical.org

World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

Rank	Country	1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
		Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

BELARUS – Country Dossier (June 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

BELARUS		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	No published details	-
WWL 2017	No published details	-
WWL 2016	No published details	-
WWL 2015	No published details	-
WWL 2014	No published details	-

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding BELARUS

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17941131>

Recent country history

Belarus has only gained independence recently. Before 1990 the country has always been dominated by powerful neighboring countries – and one could argue that this is still pretty much the case today. The government of Belarus under President Alexander Lukashenko cannot make major decisions on policies without bearing in mind what its powerful eastern neighbor Russia thinks.

Until the 20th century, the territory of modern-day Belarus was controlled by a variety of states including the Principality of Polotsk (11th-14th centuries), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (14th-18th centuries), and the Russian Empire (1795-1917). When the Russian Empire ended with the Communist revolution in October 1917, Belarus officially became a socialist republic becoming a founding member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922. Soviet agricultural and economic policies, including collectivization and five-year plans for the national economy, led to famine and political repression.

Belarus declared itself sovereign on 27 July 1990 and officially became the Republic of Belarus on 25 August 1991. A national Constitution was adopted in March 1994 in which the functions of prime minister were given to the President of Belarus - thus concentrating most of the power in the country in the hands of one person. The formerly unknown Alexander Lukashenko was elected president in July 1994 and he was re-elected 2001, in 2006, in 2010 and again in 2015. Western governments have criticized Lukashenko's authoritarian style of government.

After years of embracing Russian influence in the country, President Lukashenko began to encourage a revival of Belarusian identity in 2014, following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. For the first time, he delivered a speech in Belarusian (rather than Russian, which most people use), in which he said "We are not Russian - we are Belarusians", and later encouraged the use of Belarusian. Trade and border disputes, and a much more relaxed official attitude towards dissident voices are all part of a weakening of the longtime warm relationship with Russia.

The religious landscape

78.2% of the population are Christian according to World Christian Database, the majority being Orthodox believers (75.2%). According to the [2009 census](#) ethnic Belarusians constitute 83.7% of Belarus's total population, Russians 8.3%, Poles 3.1%, Ukrainians 1.7% and 3.1% other groups.

In 1993 one Belarusian publication reported the numbers of religious communities as follows: 787 Orthodox, 305 Catholic, 170 Pentecostal, 141 Baptist, 26 Old Believer, 17 Seventh-Day Adventist, 9 Apostolic Christian, 8 Greek Catholic, 8 New Apostolic, 8 Muslim, 7 Jewish, and 15 other religious groups.

Despite decades of atheistic propaganda by the Communists during the Soviet era, most Belarusians consider themselves Christians, and part of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. There is no social hostility towards believers, who generally live their faith as a cultural tradition. Few have read the Bible or attend church services. Outreach activities by non-Orthodox denominations are not welcomed.

The second-largest denomination in Belarus is the Roman Catholic Church (13.9% of the Christians in the country). Belarus's Catholic minority is concentrated in the western part of the country, especially around Hrodna. It is made up of a mixture of Belarusians and the country's Polish and Lithuanian minorities. This church is also recognized favorably by the government.

Protestants take up most of the remaining percentage (approx. 3.7%) of Christians in Belarus. Of all Christians in Belarus, these Christians experience the most difficulties for their faith. Because they are active in evangelism they are accused of sheep-stealing by the Orthodox – who are favored by the government. A second problem for the Protestants is that they are regarded as a Western/alien religion.

The political landscape

According to the [Belarusian Constitution](#),⁴ Belarus is a presidential republic, governed by a president and the National Assembly. The term for each presidency is five years. Under the 1994 constitution, the president could serve for only two terms as president, but a change in the constitution in 2004 eliminated term limits. Alexander Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus since 1994.

The National Assembly is a bicameral parliament comprising the 110-member House of Representatives (the lower house) and the 64-member Council of the Republic (the upper house). In the 2012 parliamentary election, 105 of the 110 members elected to the House of Representatives were not affiliated with any political party. The Communist Party of Belarus won 3 seats, and the Agrarian Party and Republican Party of Labor and Justice, one each.

Belarus has been labeled "Europe's last dictatorship" by some Western journalists, because President Lukashenko has described himself as having an "authoritarian ruling style". The Council of Europe has barred Belarus from membership since 1997 for undemocratic voting and election irregularities in the November 1996 constitutional referendum and parliament by-elections. The Belarusian government is also criticized for human rights violations and its harsh attitude towards non-governmental organizations, independent journalists, national minorities and opposition politicians.

⁴ See: http://president.gov.by/en/constitution_en/, last accessed February 2018.

President Lukashenko continued a number of Soviet-era policies, such as state-ownership of large sections of the economy. Elections under Lukashenko's rule have been widely criticized as unfair; and according to many countries and organizations, political opposition has been violently suppressed. Belarus is also the last country in Europe using the death penalty.

Belarus's [Democracy Index](#)⁵ rating was the lowest in Europe until 2014 (when Russia took its place). Belarus was labelled "not free" by [Freedom House](#)⁶ in its 2018 report, as "repressed" in the Index of Economic Freedom, and is rated as by far the worst country for press freedom in Europe in the 2017 Press Freedom Index published by [Reporters Without Borders](#),⁷ which ranked Belarus 153rd out of 180 nations worldwide.

According to Article 16 of the Constitution, Belarus has no official religion. While the freedom of worship is granted in the same article, religious organizations deemed harmful to the government or social order can be prohibited. The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) regulates all religious matters. The government has continued to restrict religious freedom in accordance with the provisions of a 2002 law on religion. The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups and subjects group members to penalties ranging from unspecified fines to two years in prison. The government has continued to arrest or fine individuals for organizing unauthorized religious meetings in private homes, for proselytizing, and for refusing to serve in the armed forces despite the enactment of a law permitting alternative forms of national service. Minority religious groups continued to have difficulty registering and in some cases remained reluctant to apply for registration, reportedly out of fear of harassment and punishment.

A [concordat](#)⁸ between the government and the Belarusian Orthodox Church dating from 2003 provides the BOC with autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and a special relationship with the state. The concordat recognizes the BOC's "influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people." Although it states the agreement does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, the concordat calls for the government and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society." The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives 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 socio-economic landscape

During the time when Belarus formed part of the Soviet Union, it had a relatively well-developed, though aging industrial base. Belarus has retained this industrial base - which is now outdated, energy inefficient, and dependent on subsidized Russian energy and preferential access to Russian markets.

⁵ See: <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>, last accessed February 2018.

⁶ See: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>, last accessed February 2018.

⁷ See: <https://rsf.org/en/2017-press-freedom-index-ever-darker-world-map>, last accessed February 2018.

⁸ See: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269036.pdf>, last accessed February 2018.

Since independence Belarus has gone through ups and especially downs regarding its vulnerable economy. From 1991–1995, all sectors of the national economy were affected by the profound economic crisis, triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The period between 1996 and 2000 was also characterized by significant financial difficulties, in particular in 1998 and 1999 as a result of the financial and economic crisis in Russia. In 1999, consumer prices rose by 294%.

Then came a period of economic boom. Between 2001 and 2009, the national economy demonstrated steady and dynamic growth. The GDP grew at an average rate of 7.4%. But another crisis put an end to this in 2011. Since 2012, Belarus's economy has suffered stagnation, which has led to widening productivity and income gaps between Belarus and neighboring countries. Since 2015, the Belarusian government has tightened its monetary policies (including allowing a more flexible exchange rate) and reduced subsidized government lending to state-owned industrial and agricultural enterprises, amid a drop in state budget revenues owing to falling global prices on key Belarusian export commodities - petroleum products and potash fertilizer.

Many people in Belarus earn small wages – luxury goods are hardly available and sold. About 1% of the Belarusian population is [unemployed](#),⁹ while 5.7% of the population is living below the poverty line. The economic problems have also had its effect on the Church. During the years of crisis, Christians were unable to build new churches and the maintenance of existing buildings took up a large part of the budget. Buying equipment and materials abroad was nearly impossible. The fact that Belarus depended so heavily on Russia also affected Protestants in particular, since contacts with the West were limited.

Due to the old Soviet educational system, practically all Belarusian citizens (99.7%) can read. As a result, Christian materials potentially have a big market. But printing, importing and distributing of religious materials is strictly monitored.

Concluding remarks

There have been no real internal challenges to the government of President Lukashenko since 1990. It is to be expected that he will stay in power for some years to come and that the government will continue its heavy-handed control of society. More freedom - especially for Protestant Christians - is not to be expected soon. However, there has been a slight change in policies since the Russian annexation of the Crimea and the fighting in eastern Ukraine in 2014. It is obvious that President Lukashenko is trying to gain a little more distance from Russia, but he must proceed with extreme caution, bearing in mind the enormous dependence of Belarus on Russia, especially in economic and military matters.

⁹ See: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bo.html>, last accessed February 2018.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
9,459,000	7,394,000	78.2

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did Christians get there?

Christianity came to Belarus from two separate directions - in the form of Catholicism from the West, and in the form of Orthodoxy from the East. Poland converted to Catholic Christianity in 966, while Russia converted to Orthodoxy in 988. Both churches spread the Gospel into surrounding areas. By the end of the 12th century, Europe was generally divided into two blocks: a western area dominated by Catholicism and an eastern area dominated by Orthodox and Byzantine influences. The dividing line between the two was roughly along the Bug River. This is the area where today's Belarus is to be found. When Protestantism came into existence in the 16th century, it soon reached Lithuania (and Belarus). The first Protestant Church in Belarus was established in Brest by Mikolaj "the Black" Radziwill.

Before 1917 Belarus had 2,466 religious communities, including: 1,650 Orthodox, 127 Catholic, 657 Jewish, 32 Protestant, and several Muslim communities. Under Communist rule, the activities of these communities were severely restricted. Many religious communities were destroyed and their leaders exiled or executed; the remaining communities were sometimes co-opted by the government for its own ends, as in the effort to instil patriotism during World War II.

What church networks exist today? ¹⁰

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
5,563,000	1,026,000	274,000	139,000	414,000	-21,600	183,000	249,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to World Christian Database, 75.2% of Christians are Orthodox, 13.9% are Catholics and 3.7% Protestants.

¹⁰ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

Communities of expatriate Christians:

There are no communities of expatriate Christians in Belarus to be considered for WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

This category consists mainly of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. This church holds an unofficial, but privileged position in the country. Another denomination in this category is the Roman Catholic Church, which is closely linked to the ethnic Polish minority in Belarus.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

This category consists of cross-denominational converts from Orthodoxy to Protestantism. They experience pressure from society and the BOC. The converts join Protestant congregations and do not form separate communities.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Baptists and Pentecostals are persecuted since they are regarded as being a “Western” religion.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ¹¹
7,394,000	25,200	0	1,200	510	9,900	100	2,027,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to the [2009 census](#), ethnic Belarusians constitute 83.7% of Belarus's total population, Russians 8.3%, Poles 3.1%, Ukrainians 1.7% and 3.1% Others.

The government of Belarus monitors all religious activities in the country. One of their focuses is on religious material. Official permission is needed for the importation and distribution of Christian materials. It is quite obvious that the government has a tendency to support and endorse the Belarusian Orthodox Church.

Notes on the current situation

- Belarus is balancing uncertainly between a pro-European and pro-Russian direction of development. Whereas Belarus was previously more open towards Russia, since the recent events in Ukraine (since 2014), Belarus has been hesitating to come into closer contact with Russia. This political uncertainty could have a significant influence on religious freedom in the country. If Belarus will want to partner more with Europe in the future and seek protection against Russia, then non-Orthodox Christians could find themselves in a less restrictive context. Partnering more with Russia would lead to further consolidation of religious life in Belarus around the dogmas of Orthodoxy, thus further isolating non-Orthodox religious groups.

¹¹ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

- Despite a few restrictions, Christians in Belarus can currently practice their faith relatively freely. Only on rare occasions are church meetings targeted and Christians arrested.
- Any change in the situation for non-Orthodox Christians in Belarus is unlikely in the near future. At worst, Christian groups targeted by the authorities will be linked to their anti-government rhetoric, and therefore be persecuted less on religious grounds than for more secular, political reasons.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

Where persecution comes from

There are two main sources of persecution of Christians in Belarus: One comes from the state while the other comes from the Belarusian Orthodox Church. State persecution comes in the form of police, secret services and local authorities who monitor religious activities and attend church services. State authorities occasionally raid non-registered churches. The Belarusian Orthodox Church occasionally protests against evangelism activities by non-traditional Protestant churches by sending mobs to block meetings and harass believers.

How Christians are suffering

Converts and non-traditional Protestant groups experience persecution in Belarus, while the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) holds a favored position. The BOC is fiercely against any evangelization activities of other denominations which they accuse of sheep stealing. People who do convert from Orthodoxy to other churches are put under pressure by local clergy, families and community to return to the faith of the ancestors – occasionally this is done with violence.

The law forbids foreign Christians to preach inside Belarus. The state authorities interfere in the religious affairs of non-Orthodox churches and hinder their development in variety of ways, for instance:

- Through making it difficult for them to find places for worship;
- Through strict processes of registration;
- Through strict financial controls concerning offerings and how funds are spent by the church.

Examples

- In December 2016, government authorities rejected the Roman Catholic bishop's request for a Russian priest to serve in a church in Vitebsk. This was the latest in a series of refusals to allow foreign priests to work in the country. In this context, officials in the

city of Bobruisk warned Baptists that if foreigners continued to participate in their church activities, the church would be closed down. (Source: [Forum 18](#)¹²)

- On 25 April 2017 Polish Catholic priest Fr. Robert Maciejewski was forced to leave Belarus after the authorities refused to extend permission for him to continue to serve in the country, where he had been a parish priest for almost ten years. (Source: [Forum 18](#)¹³)
- Three Ukrainian Evangelical Christians were detained in Minsk on 22 March 2017 and sentenced to 15 days in jail for allegedly “swearing in public”. Vladyslav Yermolov, Leonid Nemerchuk, and Ashot Sarkisian were released from custody on 6 April 2017 and extradited to Ukraine. (Source: [Radio Free Europe](#)¹⁴)

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The slight rise in score is due an increase in both pressure and in the number of incidents of violence that happened during the WWL 2018 reporting period. Most of the incidents reported concern foreign Christians active in Belarus – very few incidents concerning local Christians were recorded.

¹² See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2237, last accessed 14 February 2018.

¹³ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284, last accessed 14 February 2018.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-expels-ukrainian-evangelical-activists/28414521.html>, last accessed 14 February 2018.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Belarus ¹⁵	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Not at all
Religious nationalism	Medium
Ethnic antagonism	Not at all
Denominational protectionism	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Very weak

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

President Aleksandr Lukashenko has been in power in Belarus since 1994. Through many state agents (such as the police, secret police and local authorities) the government aims to keep the country under firm control. Registration is obligatory for churches and non-sanctioned meetings run the risk of being raided. Foreign funding and support to churches in Belarus has been stopped and foreign Christians active in Belarus have been extradited.

Religious nationalism/Denominational protectionism (Medium):

The Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) plays an important role in society and is clearly favored by the government. The BOC is fiercely against any evangelization activities carried out by other denominations who are frequently accused of sheep stealing. People who do convert from Orthodoxy to other denominations are put under pressure by local BOC clergy, families and community to return to the faith of the ancestors – occasionally this is done with violence.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Belarus	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Not at all
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Violent religious groups	Not at all
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very weak
Own (extended) family	Medium
Political parties at any level from local to national	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Very weak
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN/OIC) and embassies	Not at all

¹⁵ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia: Government officials and Political parties are the main drivers forming the oppression that comes from the authorities.

Drivers of Religious nationalism/Denominational protectionism: Both family and church leaders are the main drivers forming the oppression that comes from the Orthodox environment, and is especially experienced by cross-denominational converts.

Context

Belarus became an independent country with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It soon developed into an authoritarian state under the leadership of former Communists. Since 1994 the country has seen a stable government under President Aleksandr Lukashenko. Belarus has always tried to keep close to Russia, but not too close. President Lukashenko has succeeded in avoiding Russian intervention in his country, which economically depends heavily on Russia. Belarus also seeks closer connections with the European Union.

Belarus borders with Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. The country is officially a secular state. The majority of its population belongs to the Orthodox tradition but has a sizeable Roman Catholic Church as well. The government favors traditional churches like the Belarusian Orthodox Church, and has a negative attitude towards any non-traditional denominations. The government does its best to reduce foreign influence in the running of the churches as much as possible.

Christians are not the only believers persecuted by the government: The activities of all religious groups are under surveillance. Muslims, Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses all experience pressure.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

There are no communities of expatriate Christians in Belarus to be considered for WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities:

This category consists mainly of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. This church holds an unofficial, but privileged position in the country. Another denomination in this category is the Roman Catholic Church, which is closely linked to the ethnic Polish minority in Belarus.

Communities of converts to Christianity:

This category consists of cross-denominational converts from Orthodoxy to Protestantism. They experience pressure from society and the BOC. The converts join Protestant congregations and do not form separate communities.

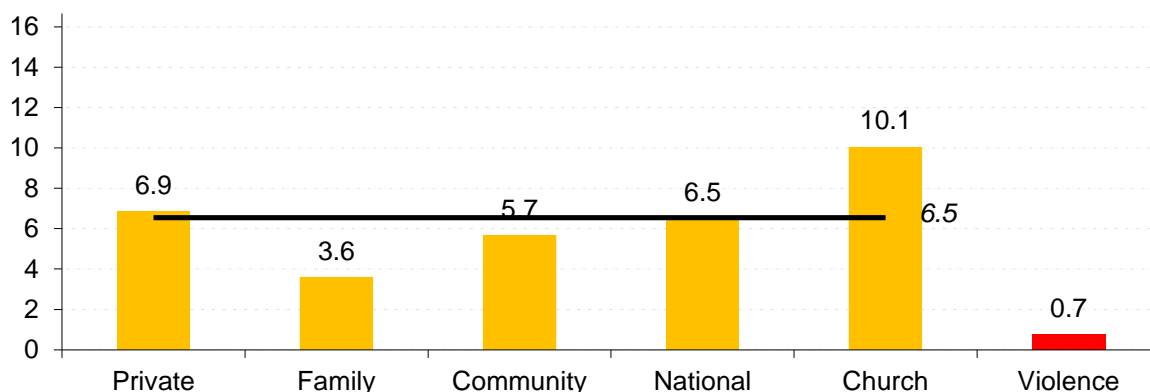
Non-traditional Christian communities:

Baptists and Pentecostals are persecuted since they are regarded as being a "Western" religion.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

Diagram showing number of points scored in each Sphere of Life and Violence. The maximum score for each block is 16.7.

WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Belarus



The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Belarus shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Belarus is 6.5, going up from 6.2 in WWL 2017.
- Pressure is highest in the *Private sphere of life* (especially for cross-denominational converts from the BOC) with 6.9 points and in the *Church sphere* with 10.1 points. This can be linked directly with the three main Persecution engines that are present in Belarus: *Religious nationalism*, *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Denominational protectionism*.
- The score for violence remained very low, scoring 0.7 points. This was a rise from 0.2 in WWL 2017.

Private sphere:

Cross-denominational conversions draw serious opposition from family, friends and community and also from Belarusian Orthodox church leaders. Converts have to be careful in matters of prayer, worship and the possession of Protestant materials, since they are under constant surveillance from their environment. Discussing their new faith with direct family members can be risky; pressure is less when they do this with others. In some cases physical violence occurs. Meeting other non-Orthodox Christians is a problem for known converts.

Family sphere:

Resistance within Orthodox families against the (re-)baptism of one of their members is great. It is also often regarded as damaging the family honor. The family may also raise objections when converts want to raise their children according to Protestant values. In schools, children are taught that non-Orthodox groups are “sects”. Such disparaging terms are offensive to these groups and makes them feel they are outcasts. Children of converts and non-Orthodox Christians can be harassed and/or discriminated at school. Occasionally, families may put pressure on spouses and children of converts to separate from them.

Community sphere:

Quite often it is the Orthodox Church that, with the help of the local authorities, attempts to monitor Protestants. Converts are monitored by their environment. Non-Orthodox Christians can experience certain problems in sharing community resources, especially if Orthodox priests are involved or invited to bless the usage of these resources. Converts are under pressure to adhere to Orthodox traditions and not attend their new group's activities. Political correctness is also one of the prerequisites for applying for university courses; being non-Orthodox (i.e. different from what is considered part of national identity) brings disadvantages. Fines are imposed on Christians found proselytizing or violating the government's strict laws on meetings in private homes (where these meetings are considered too large and/or too frequent).

National sphere:

The law of the Republic of Belarus "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" underlines the leading role of Orthodoxy in Belarus, stating that it had a "defining" or "founding" role in the historical development of the Belorussian people. The BOC therefore has a right to dominate church-state relations. Religion is not recorded in official documents like passports and ID cards. Belarusian Christians can travel freely inside the country and abroad, but the law forbids foreign Christians to preach inside Belarus.

The authorities interfere in the religious practice of non-Orthodox churches and hinder their development in a variety of ways, for instance in creating difficulties for them for finding places for worship, in strict processes of registration and in strict financial controls over collecting offerings and how these are spent. Orthodox congregations are treated favorably and experience no such difficulties. Any form of public religious activity by non-Orthodox/Catholic groups is seen as suspicious and will be monitored by the government. All non-Orthodox religious organizations are also watched constantly by the government and suffer repression. The media is government-controlled and follows the government line of upholding the Orthodox Church and of regarding other religious groups as foreign and potentially subversive. An overall distrust, condescension, and disregard for non-Orthodox groups exists in the media. Members of non-Orthodox groups complain of "show trials" (in the past aimed particularly at conscientious objectors resisting military service) and there have been numerous reports in past years of leaders and members of non-Orthodox groups being arrested, held incommunicado and charged with crimes. In general, rule of law is weak and the court system is manipulated to make non-Orthodox Christians suffer more than others since they are inherently viewed as threatening and undermining the nation.

Church sphere:

In the past church raids in Belarus happened quite frequently, but during the WWL 2018 reporting period there were no such incidents reported, with even unregistered churches remaining undisturbed. The registration of churches is obligatory, but very difficult to obtain. Many church buildings that were confiscated during the Soviet period have still not been returned. Non-Orthodox communities experience problems when they ask for permission for their activities, since these will often be regarded as forms of evangelism. Protestant churches experience difficulties when there are converts from Orthodox churches present at their

services. All religious materials are closely monitored by the authorities. Protestants experience some problems in printing, importing, and distributing their religious materials. All media are state-controlled and are therefore not accessible for non-Orthodox Christians. Foreign Christians of non-Orthodox groups are seen as potentially undermining the social and political order, even in the case of the more accepted Roman Catholic Church. By law, foreigners are not allowed to preach in the country.

Violence:

Overall, very few violent incidents have been reported. Three Ukrainian Evangelical Christians were detained and later extradited. A Polish Roman Catholic priest was expelled from the country.

Examples:

- In December 2016, government authorities rejected the Roman Catholic bishop's request for a Russian priest to serve in a church in Vitebsk. This was the latest in a series of refusals to allow foreign priests to work in the country. In this context, officials in the city of Bobruisk warned Baptists that if foreigners continued to participate in their church activities, the church would be closed down. (Source: [Forum 18](#)¹⁶)
- On 25 April 2017 Polish Catholic priest Fr. Robert Maciejewski was forced to leave Belarus after the authorities refused to extend permission for him to continue to serve in the country, where he had been a parish priest for almost ten years. (Source: [Forum 18](#)¹⁷)
- Three Ukrainian Evangelical Christians were detained in Minsk on 22 March 2017 and sentenced to 15 days in jail for allegedly “swearing in public”. Vladyslav Yermolov, Leonid Nemerchuk, and Ashot Sarkisian were released from custody on 6 April 2017 and extradited to Ukraine. (Source: [Radio Free Europe](#)¹⁸)

Gender profile of persecution

Female/Male: No information currently available.

Future outlook

It is to be expected that the government will continue its control over each and every aspect of life in Belarus – and if possible, even to increase it. The government will continue to walk the tightrope between Russia and the West as long as possible – but it knows it is impossible to escape from Russia’s influence completely. What will happen to the country when President Lukashenko dies is unknown and no-one in the country dares to speculate about this. What is certain is that as long as Lukashenko stays in power little improvement for Christians (especially non-orthodox Christians) can be expected.

¹⁶ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2237, last accessed 14 February 2018.

¹⁷ See: http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284, last accessed 14 February 2018.

¹⁸ See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-expels-ukrainian-evangelical-activists/28414521.html>, last accessed 14 February 2018.

Policy considerations

Currently under review

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Belarus available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Belarus available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/belarus/>

- [Belarus renews pressure on Baptists after 10 years without conflict](#)
13 December 2017
Baptists in Vebeľ, north-eastern Belarus, have been detained and fined for singing songs and offering Christian books to passers-by in the market square.
- [Belarus archbishop: 'Give Catholic Church its rights'](#)
12 October 2017
A Catholic archbishop in Belarus has asked the government to make it easier for foreign priests to work in the country and to return ownership of church buildings.

Recent country developments

There are currently no recent articles on Belarus. Any new articles will be made available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Belarus> (password: freedom).

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