

World
Watch
Research

Belarus: Full Country Dossier

March 2023



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

March 2023

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Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Belarus

Brief country details

Belarus: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
9,433,000	7,452,000	79.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Map of country



Belarus: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	43	76
WWL 2022	33	-
WWL 2021	30	-
WWL 2020	28	-
WWL 2019	35	-

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Belarus: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials
Christian denominational protectionism	Religious leaders of other churches

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Ever since demonstrations occurred all over the country against the outcome of the August 2020 presidential elections, the regime has reacted by cracking down on all forms of opposition. In 2022, the country continued its harsh policy, supported by Russia. Christians must be very careful in what they say and do. No change in this respect is likely in the foreseeable future.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **July 2022:** Pastor of Gomel's Living Faith Church was fined two weeks' average wage after carrying out baptisms in his garden in July 2022. Previously, In late 2021, he had held river baptisms without state permission. He was fined two days' average wage and his church received a warning. (Source: [Forum 18, 5 August 2022](#))
- **28 March 2022:** A Belarusian Greek Catholic priest was fined 1,600 rubles (\$490) for displaying a bumper sticker on his car saying: "Ukraine, Forgive Us".: [Radio Free Europe - RFE-RL, 29 March 2022](#))
- **March 2022:** The homes of several Catholic priests were raided in late March 2022. One was given a 10-day jail term, while another had to flee the country. A human rights defender observed that they are targeted because "they have authority in their community and work with a wide range of people, including young people." On 25 March, police raided the home of a Baptist pastor Roman Rozhdestvensky in Cherikov (who was fined about two weeks' average wage). Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Protestant church leaders have all been targeted for opposing regime violence after the disputed 2020 elections fraud, or for opposing Belarus' role in Russia's war against Ukraine. (Source: [Forum 18, 13 April 2022](#))
- **March 2022:** Minsk's Pomore Old Believers were finally denied a church building permit in March 2022, having struggled through the application process since 1998. (Source: [Forum 18, 10 May 2022](#))

Specific examples of positive developments

- **October 2021:** The Belarusian Ministry of Information officially requested the state newspaper Minskaya Pravda not to publish any future material similar to its recent satire on the Catholic Church. On 7 September 2021, the newspaper carried a front-page caricature of Catholic priests depicted as Nazi collaborators, with the Christian cross replaced by a swastika. (Source: [Asia News, 5 October 2021](#))
- **December 2021:** The National Library of the Republic of Belarus staged a conference on the role of the Bible in the formation of democratic societies. Leading historians shared their findings on the theme; the World Evangelical Alliance was represented by Prof. Dr. Johannes Reimer, Germany, who spoke on "The Role of the Bible in the Transformation of

Society". The event received broad coverage in the Belorussian press and marked a new opening of the academic world to the Bible and Christianity. (Source: [World Evangelical Alliance, 3 December 2021](#))

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 5 August 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2764
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Radio Free Europe - RFE-RL, 29 March 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-priest-fined-ukraine-sticker/31776172.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 13 April 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Forum 18, 10 May 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2739
- Specific examples of positive developments: Asia News, 5 October 2021 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Belarusian-government-steps-in-to-defend-Catholic-priests-54206.html>
- Specific examples of positive developments: World Evangelical Alliance, 3 December 2021 - <https://worldea.org/news/17056/discovering-the-bible-as-gods-instrument-of-transformation/>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Belarus

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report - covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/belarus/report-belarus/	6 March 2023
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17941131	6 March 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 - covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/BLR	6 March 2023
CIA World Factbook (CIA Factbook)	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/belarus/summaries	6 March 2023
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/belarus	6 March 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 - p.44	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	6 March 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 - covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	6 March 2023
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index - covering 29 countries	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/nations-transit/2022	6 March 2023
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index - covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-world/2022	6 March 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report - covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2022	6 March 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 country chapter - covering 100+ countries	HRW 2023 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/belarus	6 March 2023
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#by	6 March 2023
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index - covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/belarus	6 March 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2022	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/blr	6 March 2023
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators - covering 189 countries	HDI country profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BLR	6 March 2023
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/belarus/	6 March 2023
USCIRF 2021 country reports - covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL (Belarus not included)	USCIRF 2022	https://www.uscirf.gov/countries	
World Bank country overview - covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/belarus/overview	6 March 2023
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank data profile	https://data.worldbank.org/country/belarus	6 March 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022	https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/09994950422232066/pdf/1DU08cab8fb90b3d404afc0893c0920f61949bc0.pdf	6 March 2023

Recent history

Belarus only became an officially independent republic in 1991. Neighboring countries have always been dominant: The government of Belarus under President Alexander Lukashenko cannot make major policy decisions 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 and 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 in 2001, 2006, 2010, 2015 and again in 2020. 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 long-time warm relationship with Russia.

On 9 August 2020 presidential elections were held in Belarus, but this time, things did not go so smoothly. On 24 May 2020 more than a thousand people [demonstrated](#) against Lukashenko and his intention to go for a sixth term in office (RFE-RL, 24 May 2020). Demonstrations in Belarus became more widespread and continued after Lukashenko won the 9 August elections. When the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, made some critical remarks, the Belarusian government refused him [entry to the country](#) after he had visited family in Poland (Source: Asia News, 1 September 2020). The conflict with the Roman Catholics was only solved when the archbishop [stepped down](#) in December 2020 (Asia News, 25 January 2021).

Lukashenko was sworn in as president on 23 September 2020. After consultations with Russian President Putin the regime of Lukashenko began tightening the screws. Hundreds of pro-democracy demonstrators were arrested. In March 2021 more than 400 people had been convicted in the crackdown. In April 2021, lawmakers approved a second reading of [several amendments](#) to legislation severely restricting civil rights and the free flow of information (RFE/RL, 16 April 2021). These events caused the Lukashenko regime to move closer to Russia.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Lukashenko officially stated that his country's armed forces were not taking part in the operation ([RFE-RL, 24 February 2022](#)). It soon became clear that this did not mean his country was not assisting Russian forces. In March 2022 the Belarusian government shut down Ukraine's consulate in the western city of Brest and ordered an unspecified number of Ukrainian diplomats to leave the Ukrainian Embassy in Minsk ([RFE-RL, 23 March 2022](#)).

Political and legal landscape

According to the Belarusian Constitution, Belarus is a presidential republic, governed by a president and the National Assembly. The term for each presidency is currently five years. 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.

President Lukashenko has 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. The political unrest after the 9 August 2020 presidential elections was brutally crushed (see further below in this section).

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.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- "The constitution grants the freedom to profess and practice any religious belief but prohibits religious activities directed against the sovereignty of the state, its constitutional system, and 'civic harmony'. ... The law prohibits all religious activity by unregistered groups and requires all registered religious groups to obtain permits to proselytize or hold events outside of their premises, as well as prior approval from the authorities to import and distribute religious literature."

- "The authorities continued to repress peaceful protesters and supporters of the prodemocracy movement which emerged following the election, including clergy. Human rights groups said authorities restricted clergy access to prisons, denied pastoral visits to some political prisoners, and confiscated necklaces with crosses from some prisoners. According to observers, authorities continued surveillance of registered and unregistered religious groups. In February [2021], the authorities evicted the New Life Church from its church building as part of a longstanding dispute over the ownership of the property."

When Lukashenko was sworn in as president on 23 September 2020, he held consultations with Russian President Putin and then began tightening the screws. This was aimed primarily against political demonstrators, but when church leaders began to show support for the demonstrations, they were targeted by Lukashenko's regime too. There have been no changes in the religious legislation of Belarus after it came under closer Russian influence again. The equivalent of the Russian Yarovaya laws, for instance, have not been introduced in Belarus, and Jehovah's Witnesses are not banned in Belarus as they are in Russia.

On 21 December 2020, President Lukashenko issued a [decree against all forms of regime dissent](#) by religious leaders (Asia News, 23 December 2020). The decree required the new head of the Department for Religions and Nationalities, Aleksandr Rumak, "to punish in the most severe way all those who disturb the peaceful coexistence of our people and work to the detriment of our state". According to the president, "these are not many, but we must take them and show them, even within religious communities". Among those targeted was the former Orthodox Metropolitan Pavel, removed by the very top of the Moscow patriarchate and replaced by the more loyal Venjamin. Lukashenko has thus made it clear that no church leaders in Belarus may express any form of government criticism.

When dispersing peaceful protests, the authorities, including plain-clothes law enforcement officers, resorted to excessive use of force. Police arbitrarily detained people for wearing or exhibiting the white-red-white stripe pattern associated with the protest movement, at times using brutal force, and charged them with violating rules on public gatherings even if they were detained during raids on apartment buildings (HRW 2022 country chapter).

On 27 February 2022 a referendum was held in Belarus. The vote was marked by large protests in Minsk and elsewhere against the ballot and Belarus's role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nearly 800 people were detained by police, according to the Interior Ministry. The constitutional changes would allow Lukashenko, who has ruled the country since 1994, to secure further time in office and guarantee him lifelong immunity from prosecution after his eventual withdrawal from politics. It would also allow Russian troops and nuclear weapons to be permanently stationed in Belarus in the future. (Source: [RFE-RL, 28 February 2022](#))

Religious landscape

Belarus: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	7,452,000	79.0
Muslim	25,700	0.3
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	1,300	0.0
Ethno-religionist	520	0.0
Jewish	8,100	0.1
Bahai	130	0.0
Atheist	217,000	2.3
Agnostic	1,728,000	18.3
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

79.0% of the population are Christian according to World Christian Database 2022 estimates, the majority being Orthodox believers (76.8%). The minority is made up mainly of Roman Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal and Seventh-Day Adventist churches. Despite decades of atheistic propaganda by the Communists during the Soviet era, most Belarusians consider themselves Christians and part of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC). There is no social hostility towards Orthodox Christians, who generally live their faith as a cultural tradition with only occasional attendance at church services. Outreach activities by non-Orthodox denominations are not welcomed.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- "A concordat grants the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, and the law recognizes the 'determining role of the BOC' and historical importance of the 'traditional faiths' of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism."
- From July to November [2021], authorities across the country shut down approximately 300 NGOs, including some faith-based groups and those groups whose activities were widely supported by Protestant and other religious activists and volunteers. For example, in July, authorities in Orsha shut down the AIDS Care Education Training, an independent educational center supported by local Baptist and Pentecostal communities.
- "Several religious groups reported instances of vandalism of their properties. In March [2021], ... the Orthodox Saint Maria Magdalena Church in Navalukaml was vandalized. In May, the Roman Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral in Minsk was vandalized."

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 religious materials is strictly monitored.

As described above in *Political and Legal landscape*, Lukashenko made it clear that no church leaders in Belarus can expect to make any form of criticism against the government without punishment. Christians can practice their faith without disruption as long as they are not critical of the regime. They know they are under constant surveillance.

Economic landscape

According to the World Bank country data profile:

- **GDP (current US\$) (billion):** 68.22 (in 2021)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 2.5% (in 2021)

Since independence Belarus has gone through many ups and downs regarding its vulnerable economy. According to the CIA World Factbook:

- “As part of the former Soviet Union, Belarus had a relatively well-developed industrial base, but it is now outdated, inefficient, and dependent on subsidized Russian energy and preferential access to Russian markets. The country’s agricultural base is largely dependent on government subsidies. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, an initial burst of economic reforms included privatization of state enterprises, creation of private property rights, and the acceptance of private entrepreneurship, but by 1994 the reform effort dissipated. About 80% of industry remains in state hands, and foreign investment has virtually disappeared. Several businesses have been renationalized. State-owned entities account for 70-75% of GDP, and state banks make up 75% of the banking sector.”
- “Economic output declined for several years following the break-up of the Soviet Union, but revived in the mid-2000s. Belarus has only small reserves of crude oil and imports crude oil and natural gas from Russia at subsidized, below market, prices. Belarus derives export revenue by refining Russian crude and selling it at market prices. Russia and Belarus have had serious disagreements over prices and quantities for Russian energy. Beginning in early 2016, Russia claimed Belarus began accumulating debt – reaching \$740 million by April 2017 – for paying below the agreed price for Russian natural gas and Russia cut back its export of crude oil as a result of the debt. In April 2017, Belarus agreed to pay its gas debt and Russia restored the flow of crude.”
- “New non-Russian foreign investment has been limited in recent years, largely because of an unfavorable financial climate. In 2011, a financial crisis led to a nearly three-fold devaluation of the Belarusian ruble. The Belarusian economy has continued to struggle under the weight of high external debt servicing payments and a trade deficit. In mid-December 2014, the devaluation of the Russian ruble triggered a near 40% devaluation of the Belarusian ruble.”
- “Belarus’s economy stagnated between 2012 and 2016, widening productivity and income gaps between Belarus and neighboring countries. Budget revenues dropped because of falling global prices on key Belarusian export commodities. Since 2015, the Belarusian government has tightened its macro-economic policies, allowed more flexibility to its ex-

change rate, taken some steps towards price liberalization, and reduced subsidized government lending to state-owned enterprises. Belarus returned to modest growth in 2017, largely driven by improvement of external conditions and Belarus issued sovereign debt for the first time since 2011, which provided the country with badly-needed liquidity, and issued \$600 million worth of Eurobonds in February 2018, predominantly to US and British investors.”

Christians in Belarus do not experience any difference in economic matters from other Belarusian citizens.

Social and cultural landscape

According to CIA World Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Belarusian 83.7%, Russian 8.3%, Polish 3.1%, Ukrainian 1.7%, other 2.4%, unspecified 0.9% (2009 est.)
- **Main languages:** Russian (official) 70.2%, Belarusian (official) 23.4%, other 3.1% (includes small Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking minorities), unspecified 3.3% (2009 est.)
- **Urban population:** 80.3% of total population (2022)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.9% (male: 99.9%, female: 99.9%) (2019)

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI country profile):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.823 (0.824 for females, 0.819 for males), ranking 53
- **Total population:** 9.4 million (2019)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 74.8 years (79.6 for females, 69.7 for males) (2019)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 15.4 years (15.7 for females, 15.2 for males) (2019)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.118 (2019)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 57.7, Male: 71.8 (2019)

Like many other eastern European countries, Belarus has a negative population growth rate and a negative natural growth rate. In 2007, Belarus's population declined by 0.41% and its fertility rate was 1.22, well below the replacement rate. Its net migration rate is +0.38 per 1,000, indicating that Belarus experiences slightly more immigration than emigration.

With an efficient health system, Belarus has a very low infant mortality rate. According to the United Nations Development Program, the Gini coefficient (inequality indicator) is one of the lowest in Europe.

The Belarusian labor market is highly regulated. Important elements of the central-planning system are still in place. In principle, the decision to determine wages is left to firms, but the government can influence the structure of wages through the so-called tariff system, a type of centrally determined wage grid. The tariff system is binding in the budget sector, including enterprises and organizations mainly financed and subsidized within the state and/or the local budgets. The private (so-called self-financing) sector, representing only a small share of employment, has little autonomy.

The official unemployment rate is lower than 1%. Many unemployed people in Belarus are trying to avoid registration because of the resulting obligatory public duties, while unemployment benefits are very low (~70,000 BYR per month, or less than \$5).

Many people in Belarus earn low wages – luxury goods are hardly available. About 1% of the Belarusian population is unemployed, 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.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 82.8% penetration - survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 47.8% penetration - survey date: January 2022

According to the World Bank country data profile:

- **Mobile cellular subscriptions:** 123.9 per 100 people (2020)

According to the CIA World Factbook:

- "7 state-controlled national TV channels; Polish and Russian TV broadcasts are available in some areas; state-run Belarusian Radio operates 5 national networks and an external service; Russian and Polish radio broadcasts are available (2019)"

Key technological developments according to [BuddeComm Research](#) (Publication date: March 2023):

- "The government of Belarus has successfully promoted the migration to an all-IP platform as part of a wider effort towards a digital transformation for the economy. In the process, the state-supported infrastructure operator beCloud has built an extensive fibre network which reaches all but the smallest settlements in the country. Belarus has the second highest fibre penetration rate in Europe, behind only Iceland. LTE coverage is almost universal, while considerable progress has also been made in developing 5G services."
- "On the down side, the country faces considerable political and economic turmoil, and telcos have had to invest in network infrastructure while managing a significant fall in the value of the local currency (particularly against the euro and the US dollar)."
- "Although the sector has been reformed, this has not yet resulted in the privatisation of the incumbent, despite the government being pressed to sell state enterprises in a bid to reduce overall debt. Revenue growth for Beltelecom is expected to come from the FttP sector, where much of the company's capex is directed."

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022:

- "Internet freedom in Belarus deteriorated further during the coverage period. While the government did not repeat its previous shutdowns of internet service, it continued an intense campaign to suppress online dissent. Authorities blocked access to independent media outlets, foreign news sites, and materials deemed 'extremist'. Although virtually all nonstate media outlets were forced to close or leave the country, independent Belarusian outlets operating from exile disseminated their content via social media and messaging applications. In the context of an ongoing political crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the government stepped up its arbitrary arrests of media workers, bloggers, online activists, and ordinary users, imposing unprecedented prison sentences on those detained. Security forces conducted raids, employed torture, and released forced confession videos to deter and silence critical speech. The impact of war and international sanctions on public opinion compelled the government to sharply increase its propaganda and manipulation of the information environment."

Security situation

Until 2020, Belarus was a very stable, authoritarian country ruled by President Alexander Lukashenko. Until 2020, Belarus tried to maintain good relationships with the West. No visas were required and usually travelling and the crossing of borders went without problems. This changed dramatically in May 2020, when growing numbers of the opposition took to the streets to protest against President Lukashenko running for re-election. At first these demonstrations took place peacefully, but after President Lukashenko claimed he had won the 9 August 2020 elections the situation deteriorated. Security forces and police began to use increasing violence and hundreds of protestors were arrested and sent to jail. Leaders of the opposition fled abroad, but even this did not satisfy the regime. In a dramatic example of the regime's ruthlessness towards the opposition, the [Belarusian authorities](#) forced down a Ryanair flight on false pretenses on 23 May 2021 to enable them to detain activist Raman Pratasevich and his girlfriend, Sofya Sapega (Human Rights Watch, 24 May 2021).

In 2021, thousands of migrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa attempted to enter Poland and fellow EU members Latvia and Lithuania illegally from Belarus, many of them after arriving in Minsk by plane. This led to a huge refugee crisis and the sealing of the borders ([RFE-RL, 10 November 2021](#)).

Although the regime of Lukashenko has so far managed to stay out of the war in Ukraine that was launched by Russia on 24 February 2022, there have been joint military drills in Belarus which clearly gives a signal to Ukraine. The war has also increased tension with neighboring NATO countries Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. This means that access to the border regions of Belarus is restricted (Source: [RFE-RL, 30 December 2021](#)).

Trends analysis

1) Belarus remains an authoritarian regime and the situation has deteriorated

Since the unrest in 2020/2021, the regime of President Alexander Lukashenko has done its very best to eradicate all forms of opposition. There are no signs that he will step down any time soon. Although President Lukashenko aimed at gaining some measure of independence from Russia, the recent demonstrations pushed him in exactly the opposite direction. Only with Russian support was he able to stay in power.

2) The attitude of the regime towards Christians has hardened

The political unrest had consequences for church leaders (Roman Catholics and Orthodox) who criticized the regime. The situation regarding religious freedom is tense and any criticism of the regime by any Christians is very risky.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: demonstrated - <https://www.rferl.org/a/more-than-1-000-belarusians-protest-lukashenka-s-bid-for-sixth-term/30631784.html>
- Recent history: entry to the country - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Lukashenko:-Archbishop-Kondrusiewicz-'persona-non-grata'-in-Russia-and-Belarus-50917.html>
- Recent history: stepped down - <http://asianews.it/news-en/Msgr.-Kondrusiewicz-s-farewell-:'Thank-you-for-your-solidarity'-52155.html>
- Recent history: several amendments - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lawmakers-approve-second-reading-of-draconian-bills-to-limit-freedoms/31207699.html>
- Recent history: RFE-RL, 24 February 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31720334.html>
- Recent history: RFE-RL, 23 March 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31767073.html>
- Political and legal landscape: decree against all forms of regime dissent - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/-Lukashenko-clamps-down-on-churches-and-opposition-51920.html>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE-RL, 28 February 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31727695.html>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Belarus-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Security situation: Belarusian authorities - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/24/belarus-shocking-new-low-crushing-dissent>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 10 November 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-eu-migrants-border-explainer/31555214.html>
- Security situation: RFE-RL, 30 December 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-russia-military-drills-/31632460.html>

WWL 2023: Church information / Belarus

Christian origins

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 (1515-1565).

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 eradicated 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 instill patriotism during World War II.

Church spectrum today

Belarus: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	5,727,000	76.9
Catholic	1,018,000	13.7
Protestant	238,000	3.2
Independent	65,100	0.9
Unaffiliated	424,000	5.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-19,600	-0.3
Total	7,452,500	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	83,900	1.1
Renewalist movement	248,000	3.3

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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:** Christians 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. **Evangelical movement:** 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. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The largest official church denominations in **Belarus** as recorded by World Christian Database (accessed in April 2022) are:

- The Belarusian Orthodox Church
- The Roman Catholic Church
- Unaffiliated Christians
- The Pentecostal Union

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

The levels of pressure and violence exerted by government officials in Belarus is the same all over the country. Pressure from family, friends and community on 'denominational converts' is stronger outside the urban areas.

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 (BOC), which holds a privileged position in the country, and the Roman Catholic Church. 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. The Catholic Church is also recognized favorably by the government.

Converts: This category consists of 'denominational converts' from Orthodoxy to Protestantism. They experience pressure from society and the BOC. However, the individuals involved join non-traditional congregations and do not form separate communities.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Of all the Christians in Belarus, Baptists and Pentecostals experience the most difficulties for their faith. Because they are active in evangelism, they are accused of sheep-stealing by the Orthodox and are regarded as propagating a Western/alien religion.

WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Belarus

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Belarus: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	43	76
WWL 2022	33	-
WWL 2021	30	-
WWL 2020	28	-
WWL 2019	35	-

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The score of 43 points was 10 points higher than in the WWL 2022 reporting period. There were increases in both pressure and violence scores. Pressure increased in almost all *spheres of life* (except the *Family sphere of life*) and violence against Christians in Belarus rose from 2.4 points in WWL 2022 to 3.3 points.

Persecution engines

Belarus: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Not at all
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

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. The level of repression has increased dramatically since August 2020. Foreign funding and support to churches in Belarus has been stopped and foreign Christians active in Belarus have been expelled.

Christian 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

Belarus: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	-	-	-	-	MEDIUM	-	-	STRONG	-
Government officials	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	Strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	Weak	-
One's own (extended) family	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-	-	Weak	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

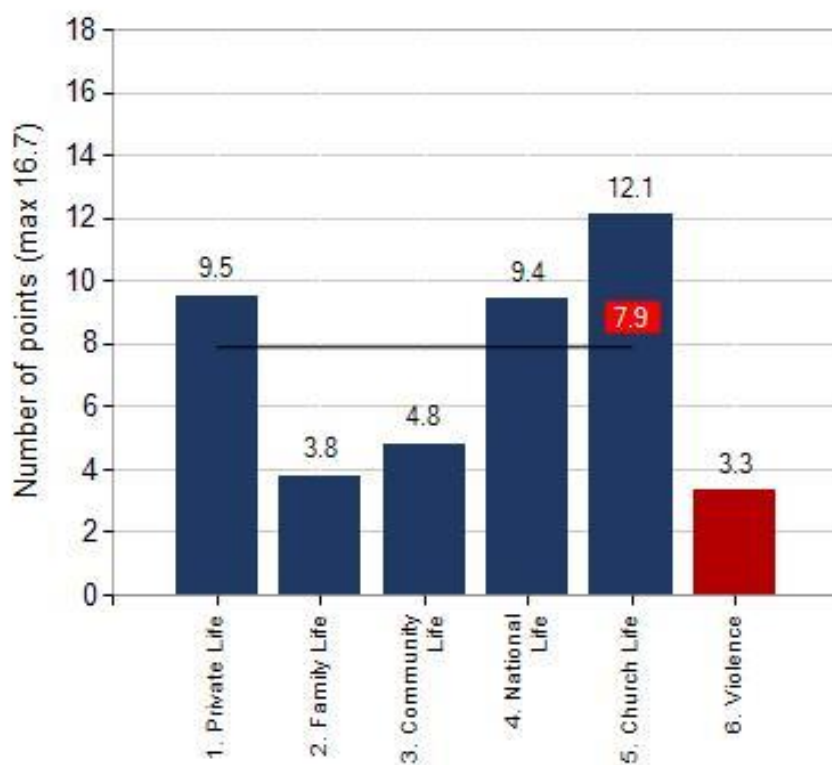
- **Government officials (Strong):** State agents at every level of society try to control religion. They will impose restrictions and occasionally raids meetings.

Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism

- **Christian religious leaders (Medium):** The Belarussian Orthodox Church actively supports the persecution of non-Orthodox Christian groups, and primarily evangelical groups.

The Persecution pattern

WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Belarus



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Belarus:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a level of 7.9 points. It went up from 6.2 in WWL 2022.
- Pressure is highest (and increased) in the *Church, Private* and *National spheres of life*. This reflects the increasing pressure from the state (*Dictatorial paranoia*).
- Violence against Christians in Belarus is at a level of 3.3 points, an increase over the 2.4 points of WWL 2022.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression. (3.25 points)

This relates only to people who change their church allegiance and is risky because discussion of their new faith could be seen as proselytizing.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.25 points)

The attitude of Orthodox Christians against those who change churches and join a non-traditional group is negative.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (2.75 points)

The Orthodox family of a convert will react angrily if they discover Protestant materials. The state might also be interested to find out if the materials had been obtained legally.

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian materials on the Internet. (2.75 points)

It is risky for new converts belonging to non-traditional church groups as they would experience pressure from their Orthodox family.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (2.75 points)

This affects Christians who change churches whose family would want a traditional Orthodox education for the children, and Protestants who are opposed by Orthodox.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (2.25 points)

Basic classes on Orthodox culture is part of the school curriculum. Children are not obliged by law to attend these lessons but experience peer pressure and pressure at schools if they opt out of these subjects.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (2.25 points)

This will happen to children of non-Orthodox Christians. The Orthodox environment will treat children of Protestants hostilely and also children of those who change churches to join a non-traditional group.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (2.00 points)

This occurs in cases of baptism for converts, since it is seen as being a betrayal of one's national identity and family, and would be a cause of shame for the family.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.25 points)

Protestants and other non-Belarus Orthodox church believers are sometimes monitored by the local community and in some individual cases reported to police or to a 'Center for Sect Studies'. The state monitors all Christians and this has increased since August 2020.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Protestants and other non-Orthodox believers may be fined for different faith-related reasons especially for sharing faith and distributing literature. However, the authorities are currently more focused on targeting political opponents. Many Christians and priests were detained, interrogated, fined and imprisoned for organizing or participating in prayer events and singing the Mighty God hymn during protests. This crackdown continued after Russia invaded Ukraine. Priests and other Christians who spoke out against the war and organized prayer events for peace received warnings that they were committing "extremist violations and crimes" and were threatened with fines and imprisoned. Catholic priests have been targeted, in particular.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.25 points)

Local Orthodox priests have influence on the local police leadership and this means that the risk of non-Orthodox Christians being interrogated is much higher. Since August 2020 the (local) authorities have increased their control over Protestants and other non-Orthodox believers, which has involved regular reporting and questioning. This pressure increased during the WWL 2023 reporting period.

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (2.50 points)

Family and community will exert pressure on Christians who leave the Orthodox church and join a non-traditional Christian group. This pressure to return to Orthodoxy may occasionally be accompanied by threats and even violence.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.16: International monitoring has been hindered when Christians had to stand trial. (4.00 points)

The government of Belarus is actively trying to prevent any form of international monitoring of its treatment of Christians. The blocking intensified after the crackdown began in August 2020.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.75 points)

Since August 2020 the authorities in Belarus have increased their control over all religious organizations to prevent them from expressing criticism against the regime. All those who express criticism are detained. Any form of public religious activity by Orthodox/Catholic groups is seen as suspicious and as a result will be closely monitored by the government and the Orthodox community.

Block 4.5: Christians have been discriminated when engaging with the authorities. (3.50 points)

(Local) authorities interfere in church life and this has markedly increased since August 2020. The authorities cause difficulties for church groups looking for places to worship; they have introduced strict processes for registration and strict financial controls concerning the collecting of offerings and how this money is spent. Such control is mainly applied to non-Orthodox groups and is often driven in the background by representatives of the Orthodox Church.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (3.25 points)

The media are government-controlled and follow the government-approved pre-eminence of the Orthodox Church. An overall distrust, condescension, and disregard for non-Orthodox groups exists in the media and impacts all non-Orthodox churches, including Catholics.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.75 points)

This is risky for everyone in Belarus including churches and Christian organizations because the main instigator of aggression targeting churches is Lukashenko's regime. Even the powerful BOC have experienced problems when Orthodox clergy have spoken out against government abuses.

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.50 points)

Non-Orthodox churches - including Catholic groups - are impacted, but all forms of disruption and obstruction are mostly directed against Evangelical groups. Although not occurring in the WWL 2023 reporting period, there were previously numerous reports of raids by the authorities. However, there is also plenty of evidence showing that many unregistered church activities have

been able to continue unimpeded. The BOC is also known to obstruct the activities of other churches, accusing them of sheep-stealing.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (3.50 points)

All religious materials of non-Orthodox churches are monitored. This is exclusively done by state agents.

Block 5.16: Churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups have been prevented from using mass media to present their faith (e.g. via local or national radio, TV, Internet, social media, cell phones). (3.50 points)

No church has received permission to broadcast from a FM radio station, despite numerous attempts. This impacts all non-Orthodox groups. Internet traffic is also strictly controlled.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Belarus: Violence Block question	WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	2	1
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	10	2
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	10	2
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10	10
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10	1
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	2

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Churches damaged:** Sources reported that there was an arson attack on a Catholic church in a village named Kuntsevshchina in the outskirts of Minsk in April 2022. In June 2022 there was a report of vandalism on Catholic cemetery around Minsk.

- **Christians arrested:** Sources reported that at least 10 Christians had been detained, including Protestant pastors, Catholic and Orthodox priests. The latter were detained for only a few days and then fined.
- **Christians sentenced:** Of the detained mentioned above, several received short-to-long term prison sentences for possessing "extremist material" or for criticizing the state.
- **Christians harassed:** Sources reported that on various occasions the authorities physically abused Christians who protested against the regime. One Christian was clearly tortured.
- **Christian properties damaged:** There have been at least 10 raids on Christian houses, the majority of which targeted pastors perceived to be critical of the government. These were arrested and some of their property was confiscated.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Belarus: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	7.9
2022	6.2
2021	6.0
2020	5.5
2019	6.7

As can be seen from the table above, the average pressure on Christians over the 5 spheres of life was fairly high in WWL 2019 and then dropped 1.2 points in WWL 2020. After WWL 2020 the average pressure started rising again. In WWL 2023 it jumped to a record high level (since WWL 2019). The reason for this rise is the growing state oppression following the large-scale antigovernment demonstrations in August 2020.

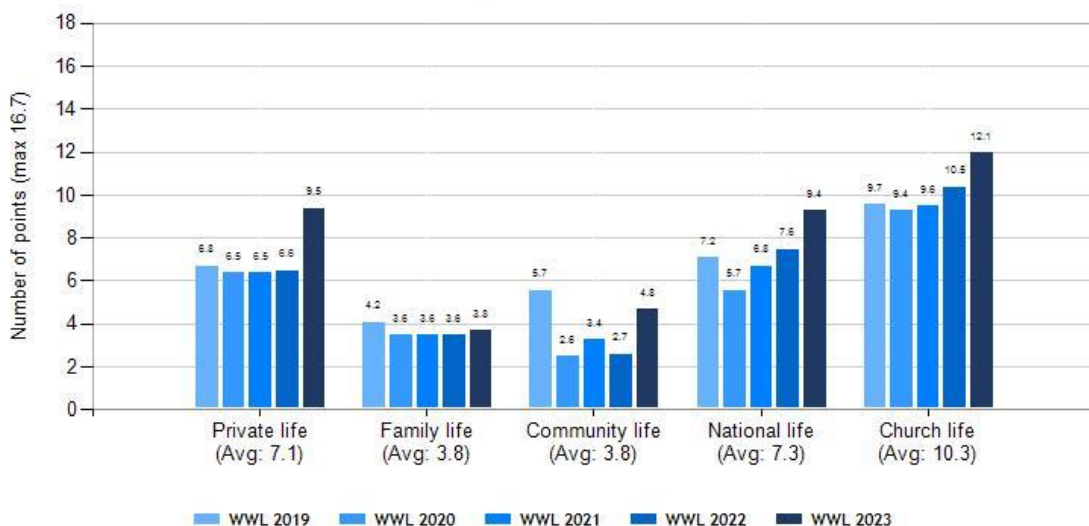
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

Christians in Belarus experienced increasing levels of state oppression since the clampdown on opposition by the regime after the August 2020 demonstrations. This increase of pressure is visible in almost all spheres of life – also in the spheres of life that already had the highest scores: *National and Church spheres of life*. As can be seen in the chart below:

- Pressure in *Private sphere of life* over the past years had always been stable at a fairly high level. However, it jumped to 9.5 points in WWL 2023.
- Pressure in *Family sphere of life* has been remarkably constant and low in Belarus. This means that pressure from family on Christians has been relatively limited. Most affected are people who change denominational loyalty.

- Pressure in *Community sphere of life* had the lowest score of the five spheres of life during WWL2020-WWL 2022. In WWL 2023 the score jumped to 4.8 points. Still, it indicates that Community pressure on Christians is limited and mostly affects people who change church affiliation.
- Pressure in *National sphere of life* over the past five years varied between 5.7 points (in WWL 2020) to 7.6 in WWL 2022 (fairly high). It jumped to 9.4 points in WWL 2023. The recent increase is a reflection of the restrictions imposed by the regime since the protests and crisis in 2020/2021.
- Pressure in *Church sphere of life* is the sphere of life that has always had the highest score of all five spheres of life in Belarus over the past five years. The score for WWL 2023 is high with 12.1 points, a major increase since WWL 2022 (10.5 points). As in the *National sphere of life*, the notable increase in the *Church sphere of life* in WWL 2023 is an indication of a government that is deliberately making life for (non-BOC) Christians increasingly difficult.

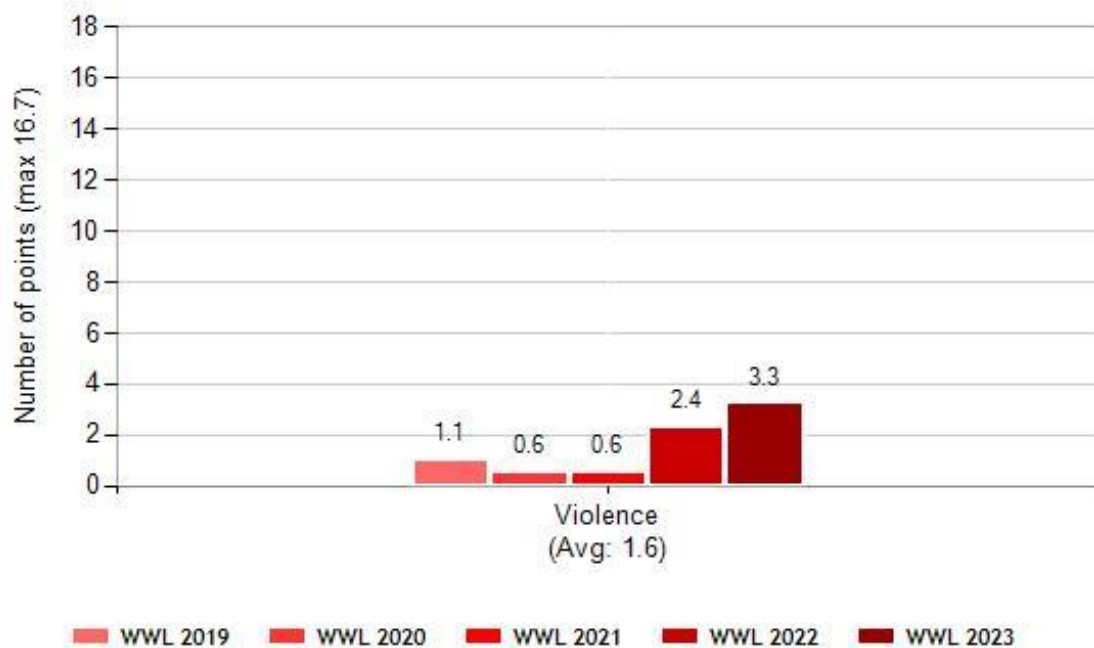
WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Belarus
(Spheres of life)



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

As in many other former Soviet republics, the number of violent incidents in Belarus has tended to be low or very low. Over the past five WWL reporting periods the score for violence varied between 0.6 points (in WWL 2019 and 2020) at the lowest to 3.3 points at the highest in WWL 2023. The chart below shows a trend of steadily rising violence in the last two reporting periods.

WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Belarus (Violence)



Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	-
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Christian women and girls are particularly affected through hate-speech, harassment and smear campaigns.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	-
Security	-
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Men are viewed as the main family breadwinners and it puts Christian families in a vulnerable position if men are targeted by the state. Male Christians are particularly affected through fines, detentions, interrogations, imprisonment, hate speech, harassment and smear campaigns.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- “Some minority religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report difficulty registering. Authorities denied a Russian extradition request of a Jehovah's Witness who had applied for political asylum.”
- “There were anti-semitic comments on social media and in the comment sections of local online news articles, but the origin of the comments was undetermined. Several religious groups reported instances of vandalism of their properties. In March, the Homyel Jewish community reported its building was painted with Nazi symbols”.
- “Also in July, Mahilyou authorities shut down a private educational organization associated with the local community of members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, "Vedanta Veda," alleging that its leader conducted illegal business activities.”
- “Nontraditional religious groups continued to state the procedure for registering communities and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and arbitrary. In March and August, authorities in Lida rejected a registration application and an appeal from a local community of Jehovah's Witnesses.”
- “Religious groups, especially Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to their perceptions that they could face intimidation or punishment.”
- “The BOC continued its annual commemoration in honor of Hauriyil Belastoksky (Gabriel of Bialystok), a child allegedly killed by Jews in Bialystok in 1690. The Russian Orthodox Church considers him one of its saints and martyrs, and the BOC falls under the authority of the Russian Church on traditional practices such as this. The traditional memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky's death on May 3 states the "martyred and courageous Hauriyil exposed Jewish dishonesty," although a trial after the boy's death acquitted the Jew who was charged with the crime. Some anti-semitic references about Belastoksky remained on the BOC's official website, though in recent years the BOC's online materials focused more on his role as a regional patron saint of children. While Jewish community leaders said they prioritized other concerns, prayers for the commemoration reportedly continued to include anti-semitic references.”

Further information:

- Some Krishna groups experienced hindrances in finding buildings and registering religious communities. Krishna groups claim that they have grown, despite having the same number of registered communities for the last 10 to 15 years, but due to the fear of being discriminated against, many members choose not to register.
- In December 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Committee asked Belarus to respond in the case of 33-year-old Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Dmitry Mozol. In Febru-

ary 2021, a court in Pinsk fined him four months' wages for refusing call-up to reservist military training on grounds of conscience. He failed to overturn the criminal punishment on appeal. The law allows only individuals who have completed alternative civilian service to be exempted from reservist military training. Alternative service was introduced only in 2016, after Mozol was initially called up. Jehovah's Witnesses fear that other young men could also face such prosecution. (Source: [Forum 18, 11 January 2022](#))

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia

Since demonstrations occurred all over the country against the outcome of the August 2020 presidential elections, the regime has reacted by cracking down on all forms of opposition. In 2022, it has continued its harsh policy, supported by Russia. Christians must be very careful in what they say and do. No change in this respect is likely in the foreseeable future.

Christian denominational protectionism

Orthodoxy is the predominant religion in Belarus, enjoys state protection and is considered to be the "religion of the Belarus people". Though the regime struck out against some Orthodox clergy who had spoken out against the outcome of the elections, the Orthodox Church in general did not suffer. It is likely that the influence of the Orthodox Church on the regime will remain limited. On the other hand, clergy and members of the Orthodox Church are likely to remain hostile towards other church denominations.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 11 January 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2710

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Belarus>