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Lukashenko attacks religious organizations, broadens grounds for their banning

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Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko ([Wikimedia](#))

[The Kyiv Independent](#) (12.01.2024) - Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko enacts restrictive religious law, mandating re-registration of every religious organization in the country and broadening grounds for their banning.

Belarus refuses to let OSCE observe parliamentary elections, citing alleged "dominance of Western representatives in OSCE missions" and sanctions policies.

Belarus and Sweden recall their emissaries in a diplomatic clash due to the appointment of a Swedish special envoy to the exiled Belarusian democratic movement.

Lukashenko signs a bill granting former Belarusian presidents immunity from prosecution.

A Belarusian woman charged with spying on the Belarusian diaspora in Poland for the Belarusian KGB faces up to 10 years in prison.

The European Commission urges Big Tech companies to support Belarusian independent media, citing concerns over search engines' wrongful compliance with the Lukashenko regime's censorship laws.

Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko has signed into effect a new law on religious groups that requires all denominations to reapply for state registration and introduces more grounds for their banning, his press service [reported](#) on Jan 3.

The law **requires** all religious organizations to undergo re-registration within a year or risk being banned.

The authorities also reserve the right to deny re-registration and have broadened the list of grounds for banning a religious group. Among the reasons listed are actions that do not comply with Belarus' domestic and foreign policy or "civil harmony," activities aimed at "discrediting the state," so-called "extremist activities," and "humiliating national honor and dignity," which includes "insulting officials."

Only citizens permanently residing in Belarus retain the right to lead a religious group. Clerics labeled by the authorities as "extremists" or "terrorists" – a term often used by Belarusian authorities to refer to those who do not support Lukashenko's regime – are prohibited from holding leadership positions.

The use of any symbols other than religious ones is completely banned during religious services.

The law also lifts restrictions on involving children in religious activities against their will and without the approval of their caregivers, paving the way for further indoctrination in schools **initiated** in 2021 by the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has described the law as a setback to religious freedoms in the country and **called** on U.S. President Joe Biden and the U.S. Congress to hold Belarus accountable for human rights violations.

"Instead of repealing its highly restrictive religion law enacted over two decades ago, which did not meet international human rights standards, Belarusian officials have doubled down and implemented a more repressive religion law that grants the government unbridled control over religious communities and their affairs," **said** USCIRF Chair Abraham Cooper.

The introduction of **similar re-registration requirements** for political parties in 2023 led to the banning of all but three out of the country's 15 political parties. The remaining three parties have declared their absolute loyalty to the regime.

As of Jan. 1, 2023, Belarus had 3,590 registered **religious organizations**. The majority of them belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center **study**, 73% of Belarusians consider themselves Orthodox Christians, 12% belong to the Catholic Church, and the remaining 6% are members of the 23 other confessions registered in Belarus.

During the anti-government protests in Belarus in 2020, Catholic and Protestant churches actively opposed police brutality and gave shelter to protesters, while the Orthodox Church routinely congratulated Lukashenko on his fraudulent victory.

The church also dismissed priests supporting the protests and banned the singing of "Mahutny Bozha" (Almighty God), a secular "prayer" hymn for Belarus that had been sung for years in churches and during the protests.

The Belarusian regime also targeted religious leaders for supporting the protests. According to Christian Vision, an interfaith Christian group, around 60 religious leaders

have been persecuted by the state. Twenty-two religious leaders have been subjected to legal or criminal proceedings, Christian Vision says.

More reading

[Officials warn clergy not to violate strict state restrictions](#) (4 January 2024)

[Repressive new Religion Law imposes compulsory re-registration](#) (11 January 2024)
