

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS

STATEMENT BY THE EUROPEAN
ASSOCIATION OF JEHOVAH'S
CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL
WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

**OSCE Human
Dimension
Implementation
Meeting, Warsaw**

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Belarus

Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus enjoy a measure of freedom to worship. Throughout the country in the past year, they have held weekly religious services without police disruption. In July, they even held a large religious meeting in Minsk with over 7,000 in attendance.

Yet the Witnesses in Belarus still contend with the prejudice of local authorities. At times, officials hinder them from obtaining legal registration, holding religious meetings, or finding suitable venues for religious services.

Abuses and Restrictions of Religious Freedom

INTERFERENCE WITH FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus meet freely for worship in the religious buildings they own. However, local authorities must first give their approval before the Witnesses may legally meet in homes or rented premises for religious services. Although in some cities officials have given approval for the Witnesses to meet together, in many others the authorities refuse to do so. They have informed the Witnesses that non-residential buildings are not available to rent for religious meetings. When the Witnesses request permission to meet in private homes for worship—for example in Gomel, Mogilev, and Rechitsa—authorities refuse.

Without suitable places for worship, Jehovah's Witnesses have no choice but to hold their religious meetings “illegally” in private homes. Although police have not disrupted any of these meetings this year, they have disrupted Witness religious services in the past, asserting that residential buildings are not intended for religious meetings. The Witnesses effectively have no legal protection of their right to assemble, since the authorities can interfere with their religious meetings at any time and prosecute them for religious activity.

INTERFERENCE WITH MANIFESTATION OF BELIEF

Authorities continue to misapply Article 26 of the Law of the Republic of Belarus on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations (Law on Religion). This article defines where religious legal entities may distribute publications, yet law enforcement officials unlawfully apply these restrictions to

individuals. Police regularly detain Jehovah's Witnesses on suspicion of violating the Law on Religion and demand a written explanation of their preaching activity. The following are typical examples of such police interference.

- ✎ **On 25 November 2016**, law-enforcement officials detained 60-year-old Valentina Bykova and 80-year-old Zinaida Trigubovich for sharing their religious beliefs with others on the street in Dzerzhinsk. The police seized all of their religious publications.
- ✎ **In March 2017**, local authorities in the town of Smorgon asked the police to investigate whether the public preaching of Olga Fedulova, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, with the use of religious publications was legal. The police questioned her, and dismissed the administrative case on **14 April 2017**.
- ✎ **On 10 June 2017**, Alena Kitlinskaya and Juliya Sheipak, Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Grodno, were discussing their beliefs with others near the bus station and using religious publications. Police detained them and accused them of illegal picketing. At two separate hearings in **August 2017**, the Oktyabrskiy District Court of the city of Grodno found both of them guilty of illegal picketing. They have appealed these decisions.

LEGAL RECOGNITION WITHHELD

- ✎ **According to the Law on Religion**, worshippers must register a local religious organisation (community) in every town where they have over 20 members. Otherwise, authorities consider religious activity without State registration illegal. Jehovah's Witnesses in Pinsk (Brest Region), Borisov (Minsk region), and Lida (Grodno region) have been trying unsuccessfully to register communities in Belarus for over ten years. At times, when groups of worshippers wish to use a building as the legal address for their community, authorities pressure the building's owner to deny the community permission.
- ✎ **Borisov, Minsk Region.** On 30 November 2016, Witnesses were unable to register a community in Borisov for the 12th time. Their 13th attempt also failed on 14 April 2017. As before, city officials pressured the owners of the buildings to break their agreement with the Witnesses, who were seeking legal addresses for future registration.
- ✎ **Slonim, Grodno Region.** On 4 January 2017, the authorities refused to consider the application of Jehovah's Witnesses, who wanted to register a religious community in Slonim. The local authorities explained that the community had no right to have a legal address in a non-residential building. Even though a different religious organisation had been registered at this address previously, officials stated that the building was not designated for religious activities.
- ✎ **Vileika, Minsk Region.** In the first half of 2017, authorities denied registration of the religious community four times.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

INTERFERENCE WITH MEDICAL TREATMENT

Kamenets (Brest Region). **On 14 June 2017**, doctors forced a blood transfusion on an elderly woman who is one of Jehovah's Witnesses, despite her explicit written refusal of blood transfusions.

NEGATIVE MEDIA

The Russian TV channels transmitted in Belarus cast the legal problems of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia in a negative light.

Positive Developments

- **Belarus media** carried no negative reports about Jehovah's Witnesses in the country for the reporting period.
- **Import of religious publications.** All printed religious materials of Jehovah's Witnesses have passed State religious examination and have been imported into Belarus in 2017. However, since the law does not set a time limit for the State to study the literature, Jehovah's Witnesses generally must wait three months before receiving permission to import new religious periodicals.
- **Meeting disruptions.** Since the end of 2014, police have not disrupted any religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus.
- **Large religious assemblies.** On 7–9 July 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses held a large religious convention in Minsk with nearly 7,300 people in attendance. Officials granted permission to hold the convention in advance.
- **Alternative civilian service.** Beginning in January 2017 dozens of Jehovah's Witnesses began alternative civilian service. Before Belarus's law on alternative service came into force on 1 July 2016, young adult Witnesses faced administrative or criminal charges for their conscientious objection to military service.

Meetings With Officials

- **Representatives** for Jehovah's Witnesses met with the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in **December 2016**, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in **May 2017**, with positive results.
- **From 4 to 11 May 2017**, representatives of the European Association of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses met with Belarus government officials and members of the diplomatic community about the ongoing difficulties faced by Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus. They were able to meet for the first time with Mr. Vladimir Makei, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus. The representatives also met with Mr. Jim Couzens, Counsellor and Head of Political, Press & Information Section at the European Union delegation, Mr. Lauri Pullola at the Finnish office, Mr. Ian Fox, the Deputy Head of Mission at the UK Embassy, Ms. Monica Bland, Political-Economic Section Chief at the US Embassy, and Mr. Magnus Sätterberg, Second Secretary at the Swedish Embassy.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RESPECTFULLY REQUEST THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF BELARUS:

- Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to register additional religious communities
- Grant permission for Jehovah's Witnesses to build new Kingdom Halls
- Issue occupancy permits for Jehovah's Witnesses to hold religious meetings in rented venues
- Allow Jehovah's Witnesses to express their beliefs and to distribute their religious publications freely without fear of being accused of illegal religious activity

Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses welcome the opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of the Belarus government.

For more information: Please contact the Office of General Counsel of Jehovah's Witnesses at generalcounsel@jw.org



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