

23 July 2021

BELARUS: "To put the church in its place"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

As more human rights defenders are jailed, others protesting against election falsification and regime violence are also targeted. The Belarusian Orthodox Church has fired many priests including Archbishop Artemy of Grodno, who spoke of a "general purge" as "not all church figures support the existing regime". Among others targeted, Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok fled to Poland. A public prosecutor claimed it is illegal to give Fr Barok a copy of an official warning he was read. The regime tried to stop singing of the hymn Mighty God and organised instead a pro-regime "prayer day".

Amid a continuing crackdown on civil society after the August 2020 falsified presidential election, Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime is pressuring religious communities to support it. At the same time, the regime has sought to change prayers for Belarus' future – which many communities have organised since regime violence following the election – into pro-regime prayers. The regime has also sought to ban prayers for political prisoners.

The KGB secret police (which has retained the same name since the Soviet period) keeps political opponents or perceived opponents under close scrutiny. Among their targets are clergy and active members of a wide range of religious communities and initiatives, human rights defenders told Forum 18 (see below).

Since August 2020, the Belarusian Orthodox Church – the largest religious community in Belarus - has removed senior bishops and lower clergy seen as disloyal to the regime. The Church has also given the regime lists of priests who have supported protests against the regime, human rights defenders told Forum 18 (see below).

One of the clergy removed by the Orthodox Church was Archbishop Artemy of Grodno in June 2021. "This [removal from office] happened on the orders of the state," the Archbishop told Radio Free Europe, adding that "they considered it necessary to deal with me". He commented that the regime has been undertaking a "general purge" since the August 2020 election. "While they have a bit of quiet, there's time to put the church in its place a little. Because not all church figures support the existing regime" (see below).

Lukashenko has also intervened in the way the Belarusian Orthodox Church (which is part of the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church) may decide to structure itself. He publicly warned against any moves to try to create an autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church under the direct authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, even though there have been no serious proposals for such a church. Archbishop Artemy has described such claims by the regime as "unreal", commenting that it is "speculation and false accusation" (see below).

The regime has repeatedly criticised and warned the Catholic Church, the second largest religious community. For four months in 2020 exiled the country's then senior Catholic bishop was exiled, before returning and resigning. The regime has also punished priests who have supported the protests, most recently bringing new charges against Fr Vyacheslav Barok for his opposition to election fraud and regime violence. In early July 2021 he fled to neighbouring Poland (see below).

Public Prosecutor Aleksandr Kazakevich claimed to Forum 18 on 23 July that Fr Barok was not given a copy of the official warning read to him as: "The law specifies that such documents are not to be handed over." Prosecutor Kazakevich added that he had followed Fr Barok's account of the case against him which he had posted on social media, as well as other sermons and messages he had posted online. He refused to comment on what he had thought of Fr Barok's messages against state violence (see below).

The regime has also tried to stop individuals and religious communities singing the hymn Mighty God (Mahutny Bozha in Belarusian), which dates back to the 1940s and was unsuccessfully proposed as a new national anthem in 1995. Since August 2020 it has often been sung by protestors against the regime's election falsification and violence. On 2 July, Lukashenko threatened that "our media are writing more and more that in [Catholic] churches they want to pray (tomorrow, not today) under 'Mighty God'. Let's see, they'll get what for." Police raided Minsk's Catholic cathedral after the congregation sang the hymn at the end of Mass on 3 July 2021 (see below).

The regime also attempted to impose a pro-regime "prayer day" on 3 July "in the form of a morning service .. in all [Orthodox] churches, [Catholic] churches, mosques and synagogues of the traditional confessions of Belarus with the widest attraction of

believers, as well as representatives of the agencies of state administration, society, culture and art" (see below).

Dmitry Korneyenko, an Orthodox Christian from Vitebsk, stated that the regime was forcing state employees to attend Russian Orthodox prayers for Belarus. He commented that state compulsion was necessary as trust by local Orthodox Christians in their religious leaders had declined. "The attendance at the prayer 'For Belarus', organised in Assumption Cathedral, was few in number," Korneyenko noted on his Facebook page on 11 July. "Dozens of employees of the Emergency Situations Ministry of Vitebsk Region were forcibly summoned to provide an image of large numbers attending" (see below).

An official told Forum 18 on 23 July that the regime's main religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) Aleksandr Rumak, will not talk to Forum 18. "No comment," the official in Rumak's office added before putting the phone down.

The many Protestant churches and smaller religious communities have not been targeted for high profile repression, with the exception of the February 2021 eviction of New Life Church from its building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639) after many years of regime pressure. Also, some other religious communities and individuals have been punished for protesting against election fraud and regime violence (<https://www.belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring>).

The regime has jailed an increasing number of political prisoners (<http://spring96.org/en/press-releases>) since protests broke out against the falsified presidential elections of August 2020. Many have been tortured (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>), and political prisoners are frequently denied other human rights such as freedom of religion and belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2672).

Removing "disloyal" Orthodox clergy

The Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is part of the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church, is seen as the religious community most loyal to Lukashenko.

Following the outbreak of protests in August 2020, the Patriarchal Exarch in Minsk, Metropolitan Pavel (Ponomaryov), expressed mild support for reconciliation and an end to violence from the regime. He also apologised for what his press secretary Fr Sergei Lepin said were "hasty" congratulations to Lukashenko after the elections.

On 25 August 2020, Moscow Patriarch Kirill removed Metropolitan Pavel as Patriarchal Exarch (<https://belsat.eu/en/news/metropolitan-pavel-removed-from-office-belarusian-orthodox-church-now-led-by-bishop-veniamin>). He replaced him with Veniamin (Tupeko), who was widely seen as more loyal to the regime. Forum 18 was unable to establish whether the regime called for Metropolitan Pavel to be removed, or whether Moscow Patriarch Kirill chose to do so.

On 18 November 2020, the General Prosecutor's Office announced that it had issued official warnings to Belarusian Orthodox Church press secretary Fr Lepin – as well as to the Catholic Minsk-Mogilev Diocese Vicar-General, Bishop Yuri Kasabutsky - about alleged violations of the law. Fr Lepin resigned as Church spokesperson in late November 2020.

On 27 November 2020, the then- Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612), Leonid Gulyako, issued a written warning to the Belarusian Orthodox Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639). It pointed to the "strict obligation" on all religious communities to abide by Article 16 of the Constitution, which among other things bans religious organisations which "are directed against the sovereignty of Belarus, its constitutional system and social accord". The warning also noted Article 8 of the Religion Law, which among other things bans the use of places of worship for "events of a political nature, as well as speeches and calls insulting representatives of the agencies of state power, officials and individuals".

The warning also pointed out that if a religious community repeats the "violation" within a year, the Plenipotentiary can apply to the court for the religious community to be stripped of its legal status (and thus its right to exist).

On 17 December 2020, the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Veniamin, wrote to Archbishop Artemy (Kishchenko) of Grodno, informing him of the warning (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639) and instructing him to ensure his diocese obeyed these demands.

Archbishop Artemy had in his sermons repeatedly condemned the falsification and violence (<https://www.belarus2020.churchby.info/archbishop-artemy-hrodna>) that followed the August 2020 election. He did not ban priests under his jurisdiction from taking part in events which did not have state permission. In response, some local Orthodox during pro-regime prayer events began to collect signatures on petitions for the Archbishop's removal.

On 9 June 2021, the Russian Orthodox Holy Synod accepted a request from the Belarusian Orthodox Exarchate to retire the 69-year-old Archbishop Artemy "on grounds of health". "This [removal from office] happened on the orders of the state," the

Archbishop told Radio Free Europe's Belarusian Service on 13 July, adding that "they considered it necessary to deal with me".

Archbishop Artemy outlined how he thinks his removal had come about. "At the initiative of this government, representatives of our system spoke with the patriarch in Moscow and asked him to provide assistance in order to pacify the situation in Belarus. Apparently, he gave them his blessing and consent to this. The Synod immediately announced its decision."

Among the complaints against the Archbishop was that he was dividing society, an accusation he rejected. One complaint was that in photographs they showed him, a boy in one church in the diocese had painted on a decorated egg at Easter an image of the Pahonia, the mounted rider which had been the emblem of Belarus between 1991 and 1995, which Lukashenko regards as an opposition symbol. The Archbishop dismissed this complaint as "laughable".

Archbishop Artemy added: "The second accusation was that [opposition hymn] Mighty God had been sung here" (see below).

Archbishop Artemy added that the regime has been undertaking a "general purge" since the August 2020 election. "While they have a bit of quiet, there's time to put the church in its place a little. Because not all church figures support the existing regime."

In the mid-2000s, Archbishop Artemy had rejected pressure from the current KGB to remove icons in Grodno cathedral (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1127) depicting 10 Orthodox bishops executed by the Soviet secret police. The bishops were among more than 1,000 New Martyrs formally canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) in August 2000.

However, pressure to remove the icons from Grodno cathedral has continued up till now. On 10 April 2021, pro-government videobloggers posted a video on YouTube attacking Archbishop Artemy for commissioning the icons, which they described not as "icons" but as "pictures" which "emanate hatred".

Following Archbishop Artemy's removal and the arrival of his successor, the Grodno diocese removed several priests seen as supporting the protests. Among them was Fr Georgi Roy, priest of Grodno's Orthodox cathedral.

Fr Roy "is one of the few clergymen who openly expressed their grief over the violence and lawlessness in the country", Christian Vision noted (<https://www.belarus2020.churchby.info/category/other/en>) on 19 July. "He spoke about this not only on the internet, but also from the pulpit of the cathedral. In addition, regular prayers were held in the cathedral for an end to the terror and for peace in Belarus. As a sign of this and to support the victims and their loved ones following the elections, the cathedral's large bell sounded every hour."

Orthodox Church and KGB

The KGB secret police (which has retained the same KGB name since the Soviet period) keeps political opponents or perceived opponents under close scrutiny. Among their targets are clergy and active members of a wide range of religious communities and initiatives, human rights defenders told Forum 18. As part of this effort, the KGB is known to have visited and warned religious leaders, including Orthodox priests.

The KGB's Fourth Chief Directorate controls civil society organisations, including religious organisations, the Nic and Mike Telegram channel (https://t.me/nic_and_mike) noted. (The channel reports on government leaks.)

In one case, the Belarusian Orthodox Church is known in summer 2021 to have given the regime the names of about 100 priests which it regarded as disloyal to the regime, the Nic and Mike Telegram channel noted on 10 June. It said the list included Fr Vladislav Bogomolnikov and Fr Aleksandr Kukhta, who had led a service on the streets of Minsk to commemorate Roman Bondarenko, a demonstrator beaten by unknown assailants in November 2020 and who died of his injuries shortly after his arrest.

In January 2021 the Belarusian Orthodox Church had removed Fr Kukhta from office.

Targeting Catholic clergy

While the Belarusian Orthodox Church has removed or transferred many clergy to punish them for their support or perceived support for the opposition to Lukashenko, the state has moved against Catholic clergy and parishes.

On 2 September 2020 the Catholic bishop of Vitebsk was given one day's notice that the regime was annulling permission for Polish priest Jerzy Wilk to serve in his parish (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2602), giving no reason. Fr Wilk had served in Belarus since 2003. For many years the regime has arbitrarily denied other foreign Catholic priests permission to work (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612). In 2018 two Russian priests invited by the Belarusian Orthodox Church were also denied permission to work.

On 26 August 2020 Minsk's Catholic church of Saints Simon and Helena (the Red Church) – which has a long-running property

dispute with the regime (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) – was blockaded by OMON riot police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2597) with about 100 anti-government protestors sheltering inside. The then-head of the Catholic Church in Belarus, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, described the 40-minute blockade as "illegal" and called on those responsible to be punished.

On 31 August the regime refused to let Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, who is a Belarusian citizen, return to his own country (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2597). It allowed him to return only on 24 December (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2627) and he resigned on 3 January 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639).

In March, inspections began in Catholic churches in various parts of Belarus after prosecutors launched a criminal case against the Union of Poles, Christian Vision noted (<https://www.belarus2020.churchby.info/category/other/en>). Prosecutors, as well as officials from local Ideology Departments at the request of prosecutors, demanded reports from priests, catechetical plans and other internal information about parish life.

On 1 July, police arrived at the parish in Rasony in the northern Vitebsk Region of Fr Vyacheslav Barok. A caller who claimed to be the local police chief told Fr Barok by phone that he needed to explain a photo he had posted on Instagram of a demonstration against the regime. Police claimed Fr Barok had taken the photo in the nearby town of Gorodok and that it showed the children of parishioners from Vitebsk.

Prosecutors had begun an investigation into Fr Barok's YouTube and other social media accounts in November 2020 (<https://www.belarus2020.churchby.info/monitoring>), three weeks before he was jailed on 3 December for 10 days. His offence was to have published on Instagram a copy of a poster, Stop Lukashism!, by Belarusian artist Vladimir Tsesler.

The photo, which had earlier been widely circulated on the internet, showed a demonstration on 12 June 2021 in Poland not in Gorodok. Fr Barok himself had not taken the photo, "so there was no event that could be qualified as an offence", Christian Vision noted on 7 July (<https://www.belarus2020.churchby.info/christian-vision-statement-viachaslau-barok>).

Police said they had opened a case against Fr Barok under Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration") of the new Administrative Code (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2627), which came into force on 1 March 2021. They summoned him for questioning at the district police station. Police showed him prosecutor's warrants to search the church, the priest's house and his living quarters. Officers took his mobile phone. However, as the search warrants gave the addresses of the church and his home incorrectly, officers could not search them.

Rasony Prosecutor's Office official Sergei Olesko read him an official warning from 25 June from First Deputy Prosecutor of Vitebsk Region Denis Shapovalov about posting "extremist" materials on the internet. This was despite "expert analyses" finding on 22 April that his posts contained no "extremism". The official warning was therefore "unfounded and contradicted the results of the expert analyses", Christian Vision noted.

"When I was read that formidable text," Fr Barok noted on his Telegram channel on 4 July, "I had the impression that I was being accused of extremism, incitement to hatred, propaganda of fascism, disrespect for the state, slander of civil servants and false information about election fraud, and even disrespect for Metropolitan Veniamin and disbelief in the great victory that is celebrated on 9 May. I remember all this from memory from what I heard, because I was not given anything, perhaps it was a secret document."

Fr Barok was due to face an administrative hearing, originally set for 1 July 2021, on 4 July, according to the summons seen by Forum 18. After the police released him on 4 July after five hours, Fr Barok fled to Poland. This has left the Rasony parish without a priest.

Vitebsk Region Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Deputy Prosecutor Shapovalov in 23 July, insisting that regulations do not allow prosecutors to be contacted by telephone.

Aleksandr Kazakevich, Rasony's Prosecutor, insisted that his office had not initiated the action against Fr Barok. "The case was initiated in Gorodok," he told Forum 18 on 23 July. He noted that his official Olesko had read the official warning to Fr Barok, but this had been prepared by Shapovalov. Kazakevich claimed that Fr Barok was not given the text as: "The law specifies that such documents are not to be handed over."

Prosecutor Kazakevich added that he had followed Fr Barok's account of the case against him which he had posted on social media, as well as other sermons and messages he had posted online. "My work requires me to read and familiarise myself with these messages," Kazakevich told Forum 18. He refused to comment on what he had thought of Fr Barok's messages against state violence following the presidential election.

Banning a hymn

Lukashenko and his regime have tried to suppress the singing of the hymn Mighty God in churches and elsewhere.

Mighty God (Mahutny Bozha in Belarusian) is a hymn based on a 1943 poem by Natallia Arsiennieva and set to music in 1947 by Mikola Ravienski. It was unsuccessfully proposed as a new national anthem in 1995, and has since August 2020 often been sung by protestors against the regime's election falsification and violence.

One of the accusations when the Belarusian Orthodox Church removed Artemy as Archbishop of Grodno (see above) was that he had permitted the singing of Mighty God. On 14 October 2020, soon after his appointment as Patriarchal Exarch, Metropolitan Veniamin had banned singing the hymn, describing it as a secular song which "divides people".

Archbishop Artemy noted that they had sung Mighty God "for years", but "suddenly it is banned and is almost anti-church". "And in one of our parishes, the children's group organised an Easter concert and sang Mighty God, which was considered a state crime."

On 16 June 2021, the Minsk-Mogilev Catholic Archdiocese sent a message to all priests, signed by Fr Roman Strashko, complaining of the state instruction to hold prayers in all places of worship on 3 July. It also posted the message on the Catholic.by website. Within less than three hours the website announcement was changed to remove the complaint.

The revised message asked all priests "if the opportunity arises" to add prayers for "unity and peace in our country, as well as a call that the decisions taken today, in the 21st century, do not lead to that horror which took place in the 20th century". It also encouraged priests at the end of Mass on 3 July "to sing the hymn Mighty God, in which we will ask Almighty God to save us and our land from all evil".

Speaking on 2 July, Lukashenko warned of those wanting "to crush our sovereign state" and gather "in the sacred places of our statehood" under the banner of the Nazis, according to the presidential website. "And recently our media are writing more and more that in [Catholic] churches they want to pray (tomorrow, not today) under 'Mighty God'. Let's see, they'll get what for."

On 3 July, at a major pilgrimage to the Catholic shrine at Budslav, the hymn Mighty God was not sung for the first time since the 1990s. "Before the start of the Budslav festival," Christian Vision noted (<https://www.belarus2020.churchby.info/category/other/en>), "information emerged that the authorities are putting pressure on the organisers not to have the hymn sung." This meant that the hymn was not sung at any of the four public Masses during the pilgrimage, it added.

Also on 3 July, pro-regime videobloggers visited Grodno's Catholic St Francis Xavier Cathedral as "the White-Red-White demons promised to sing the Nazi hymn 'Mighty God' in all Catholic churches". "According to my sources," the pro-regime videobloggers added, prayers were said in the cathedral for Lukashenko's death. "Unfortunately at that moment I wasn't able to record the 'prayers', so all we have is simply the witness testimony," they claimed. After about 40 minutes, a cathedral employee and a priest politely asked the regime videobloggers to stop filming, but they refused.

However, after Sunday Masses on 4 July, the priest and congregation of the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the capital Minsk sang the hymn Mighty God. "Nasha Niva" newspaper (which the regime banned several days later) posted a short video on its Telegram channel of the hymn being sung at the end of one of the Masses.

After one of the 4 July Masses, police came to the Minsk Cathedral "with a complaint that some norm of the law had been violated on account of the prayer Mighty God", Bishop Yuri Kasabutsky wrote on his Facebook page on 6 July. "What exactly, they did not understand themselves.."

Bishop Kasabutsky asked: "So what's wrong with our favourite religious hymn?" He added that the hymn "has become a prayer used in the worship of Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, and recently this hymn is sung by people who do not identify with any religion". And he concluded: "Why can't we sing 'Mighty God'? A rhetorical question.."

An official of Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) Aleksandr Rumak's office claimed to Forum 18 on 15 July that Rumak "has not said if it [Mighty God] is banned or not". The official refused to discuss official warnings not to sing the hymn, or the police raid on Minsk's Catholic cathedral after it was sung there.

Who shouldn't churches pray for?

The regime is trying to prevent religious communities from publicly praying for political prisoners.

Following his removal from office in July, Archbishop Artemy stated that officials "are touring the dioceses" and speaking to Church people. "Even I have heard that they are asked not to pray for those who are imprisoned," the Archbishop told Radio Free Europe. "Such prayers are forbidden so that there is not the slightest dissent anywhere."

Pro-regime "prayer day"

Under a 2 February Council of Ministers Decree setting out events for 2021, described as "the year of national unity", the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) Aleksandr Rumak and the "basic denominations" were tasked with organising an event on 2 July entitled "All-Belarus prayer 'For Belarus!'". The date later appears to have been changed to 3 July, a Saturday, marked as Independence Day.

The Decree also tasked religious organisations, the Plenipotentiary and other organisations with organising and participating in various events throughout 2021, including some to counter "extremism" and Nazism, and to promote knowledge of "the role of Orthodoxy in the formation of Belarusian statehood".

Plenipotentiary Rumak wrote to state organisations in June, in a letter seen by Forum 18. He instructed them that, "with the aim of the widest possible attraction of individuals to the given event", it was "desirable to hold the all-Belarus prayer in the form of a morning service on Saturday 3 July 2021 in all [Orthodox] churches, [Catholic] churches, mosques and synagogues of the traditional confessions of Belarus with the widest attraction of believers, as well as representatives of the agencies of state administration, society, culture and art".

Rumak added that letters had been sent to the leaders of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church's dioceses, the Jewish community and the Muslim community instructing them to hold the 3 July services. Rumak's letter to the Minsk-Mogilev Catholic Archdiocese, drafted by Andrei Aryaev (the Head of the Religious Department) and sent on 11 June (seen by Forum 18), called for the diocese to hold morning services on 3 July "with a wide attraction of believers" in all the diocese's churches.

On 23 July, Forum 18 was told by an official that Plenipotentiary Rumak will not talk to Forum 18. "No comment," the official in Rumak's office added before putting the phone down. Aryaev's phone went unanswered.

In the run-up to the 3 July "For Belarus" prayer day, Aleksei Lyakhnovich, the first deputy Transport and Communications Ministry prepared a letter for leaders of all relevant organisations. He repeated word for word the instructions Rumak had issued in his letter.

Lyakhnovich instructed leaders of organisations under the Ministry's jurisdiction "to organise the participation in this event of representatives of organisations in accordance with their religious affiliation".

The opposition Nexta group published the undated letter on its Telegram channel on 17 June. Describing the instruction as "corralling" employees of state enterprises to attend the prayers and noting that they should do so "in accordance with their religious affiliation", it added: "And what about atheists and agnostics?"

About 50 uniformed officials of the Emergency Situations Ministry attended a service at Vitebsk's Assumption Orthodox cathedral on 3 July. A short video of the service, posted by the Ministry the same day, does not appear to show any laypeople taking part in the service.

Dmitry Korneyenko, an Orthodox Christian from Vitebsk, stated that the regime was forcing state employees to attend Russian Orthodox prayers for Belarus. He commented that state compulsion was necessary as trust by local Orthodox Christians in their religious leaders had declined.

"The attendance at the prayer 'For Belarus', organised in Assumption Cathedral, was few in number," Korneyenko noted on his Facebook page on 11 July. "Dozens of employees of the Emergency Situations Ministry of Vitebsk Region were forcibly summoned to provide an image of large numbers attending."

Asked on 23 July about whether attendance had been voluntary at the prayer service in the Orthodox Cathedral, Denis Zakharov, head of personnel at Vitebsk City Emergency Situations Department, asked Forum 18 to call back in five minutes. Called back, he refused to discuss anything and referred all questions to the press secretary of the Regional branch of the Ministry, Zofiya Glinskaya. However, her number went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 23 July.

Asked on 15 July why the regime had ordered religious communities to hold prayers for Belarus on 3 July, an official of the Plenipotentiary's Office told Forum 18: "There were no orders. You have distorted information."

State officials frequently issue orders to Orthodox leaders. On 10 June, the deputy head of the Ideology and Youth Work Main Department of Grodno Regional Executive Committee, Sergei Shumeiko, wrote to Orthodox Bishop Porfiry (Prednyuk) of Lida instructing him to arrange for church bells in his diocese to be rung just after midday on 22 June to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Nazi German attack on the Soviet Union.

"We ask you to inform us the Main Department by 16 June 2021 of decisions taken, indicating which churches will take part in this action," Shumeiko's letter – seen by Forum 18 – instructs Bishop Porfiry. In a handwritten note on the letter, the bishop instructs local clergy to carry out the instruction.

Vladimir Skripko, the head of the Religious Department who drafted Shumeiko's letter, denied that it was an instruction. "No one

has to do anything," Skripko insisted to Forum 18 from Grodno on 23 July. "They could agree or not agree – it was only a proposal." The official refused to discuss anything else and put the phone down.

Regime's "unreal" claims that independent Orthodox church planned

The regime has long obstructed the functioning of any Orthodox Churches (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) apart from the Belarusian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate. Although individual parishes of various Orthodox jurisdictions function without state registration, the numbers of people involved have remained small.

There have been no serious proposals to try to create an autocephalous (independent) Orthodox Church under the direct authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Archbishop Artemy rejected the idea, which Lukashenko has claimed is being planned, describing the idea as "unreal". "People here did not even speak of any autocephalous church, as in Ukraine," he told Radio Free Europe on 13 June. "This question is not yet ripe even for discussion. This is speculation and false accusation."

Yet speaking to clergy during a visit to the Orthodox monastery at Zhirovichi near Slonim in western Belarus on 25 June, Lukashenko criticised what he claimed was "an attempt to destroy Orthodoxy in Belarus".

"Letters went to Constantinople [Istanbul, where the Ecumenical Patriarchate is located], to our Patriarch (he told me about this), and even here we already see this turn," Lukashenko told the clergy. He said he had instructed Natalya Kochanova, speaker of the upper chamber of parliament, "to make contact between the state, the country's leadership and the bishop [Metropolitan Veniamin]", apparently to prevent the emergence of any such autocephalous Church.

"Unfortunately, the churches were also connected to this. There was an attempt to connect almost all Catholic people, and many succumbed to it. And we had certain vacillations among the Orthodox, with which both the bishop [Metropolitan Veniamin] and the Belarusian Orthodox Church have dealt with today."

Forum 18 tried to find out what role Lukashenko had given Kochanova. However, an assistant to Speaker Kochanova told Forum 18 on 23 July that both she and her press secretary were out that day on a work trip.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) / Council of Europe Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities (<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/9/139046.pdf>) note that under international human rights law: "The freedom to practise and teach religion or belief includes, but is not limited to, acts integral to the conduct by religious groups of their basic affairs, such as the right to organize themselves according to their own hierarchical and institutional structures."

The Guidelines also note that "states should observe their obligations by ensuring that national law leaves it to the religious or belief community itself to decide on its leadership." (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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