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BELARUS: Soldiers' mothers detained for prayers for end to war on Ukraine

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Police in Minsk refused to say why they and OMON riot police were present in and around the city's main Orthodox cathedral on 3 March when about 100 soldiers' mothers attended regular evening prayers to pray for peace in neighbouring Ukraine. Officers checked the identity and photographed some of them before the service. Afterwards they detained four and questioned them at Central District Police Station for four hours. Police came the following day to the home of a fifth, but she was not at home. It remains unknown if the women will face punishment. A journalist and her husband were detained at the cathedral and jailed for 15 days.

Riot police in the capital Minsk detained four mothers of soldiers for attending prayers for peace at the city's main Orthodox cathedral. They were among about 100 soldiers' mothers who attended regular evening prayers on 3 March at Holy Spirit Cathedral. Officers detained the women despite the pleas of the priest for them not to do so. The four women were freed after about four hours. Police came the following day to the home of a fifth woman who had prayed at the cathedral, but she was not at home. It remains unknown if the women will face punishment.

About 100 mothers of young men serving in Belarus' armed forces attended the regular evening prayer service on 3 March at the Orthodox Holy Spirit Cathedral in central Minsk. They came to pray in front of the icon of the Mother of God for an end to the war in neighbouring Ukraine, which Russia launched on 24 February, partly from the territory of Belarus (see below).

OMON riot police and ordinary police were already waiting for the mothers when they arrived for the 6 pm service. "We went into the church, they followed us," the Union of Mothers Telegram channel noted. "Before going in they demanded our documents and photographed us." Plain clothes officers were present in the cathedral during the service (see below).

Afterwards, despite the pleas of the priest who had led the service, officers took four of the women to Minsk's Central District Police Station. When the duty officer asked colleagues who they were, he was told: "Four women from the cathedral." Officers questioned the four women for several hours before releasing them. "True, on leaving they warned us of the consequences of unapproved meetings. I no longer had strength to argue that prayer is not a meeting," one of the women noted (see below).

Just before the service started, police arrested journalist Dziana Seradzyuk and her husband as they were coming out of the cathedral. It remains unclear if officers thought they were planning on attending the prayer service. Minsk's Central District Court jailed both the following day for 15 days (see below).

After consulting colleagues, Mariya Panas, spokesperson for Minsk's Central District Police, refused to explain to Forum 18 why police were present in and around Holy Spirit Cathedral, why they checked the identities of and photographed participants in a religious service, why they detained and questioned the four women, and why they arrested two journalists who were subsequently jailed. She referred all questions to the spokesperson for Minsk City Police. However, the duty officer refused to put Forum 18 through to Natalya Ganusevich (see below).

Asked why police were present at the service, why the four women were detained and why the journalists were detained and jailed, an official in the office of the regime's main religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak, who did not give her name, told Forum 18: "We don't have this information. We won't comment on it." She then put the phone down (see below).

A wide range of Christian Churches across Belarus – including Catholics and different Protestant communities – have issued statements and held services and prayers for peace in Ukraine and an end to the war. So far no incidents or punishments have been reported.

However, Archbishop Antony (Doronin) of the Orthodox Diocese of Grodno banned services or prayers for an end to Russia's war against Ukraine. Forum 18 has been unable to find out if the state ordered Archbishop Antony to ban such services and prayers or

whether this was his initiative. The diocesan spokesperson denied that the Archbishop had issued any such ban (see below).

Warnings

The regime has been quick to try to prevent religious communities or individuals from exercising freedom of religion or belief in relation to anything that might appear to be political (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674). This was particularly the case following the falsified presidential elections of August 2020.

In November 2020, an Ideology Department in a Regional Executive Committee issued a written warning to a Catholic parish that it was violating the law by setting up a "memorial" in the church. Officials chose not to specify in their warning (seen by Forum 18) that the memorial was to Roman Bondarenko, who had died in hospital in Minsk earlier that month after being beaten by masked assailants, widely believed to have been associated with the police.

The Ideology Department warning claimed that the Catholic parish had violated Article 8 of the Religion Law. Presumably this was a reference to the part of the Article that bans religious communities from using their places of worship for "holding gatherings, meetings, pre-election agitation and other events of a political nature, as well as speeches and calls insulting representatives of the organs of state power, officials and individual citizens".

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.

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).

The regime is trying to prevent religious communities from publicly praying for political prisoners. Following his removal as head of the Orthodox Diocese of Grodno in June 2021, Archbishop Artemy (Kishchenko) 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674). "Such prayers are forbidden so that there is not the slightest dissent anywhere."

Aleksandr Lukashenko and his regime have tried to suppress the singing of the hymn Mighty God (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674) (Mahutny Bozha in Belarusian) in churches and elsewhere. Since August 2020 it has often been sung by protestors against the regime's election falsification and violence. On 2 July 2021, 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."

After one of the Masses on 4 July 2021 at Minsk Catholic Cathedral, at the end of which the congregation sang the hymn, police arrived "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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674). "What exactly, they did not understand themselves.."

Prayers for end to Russia's war against Ukraine

In response to messages on social media, about 100 mothers of young men serving in Belarus' armed forces attended the regular evening prayer service on 3 March at the Orthodox Holy Spirit Cathedral in central Minsk. They came to pray in front of the icon of the Mother of God for an end to the war in neighbouring Ukraine, which Russia launched on 24 February, partly from the territory of Belarus.

OMON riot police and ordinary police were already waiting for the mothers when they arrived for the 6 pm service. "We went into the church, they followed us," the Union of Mothers Telegram channel noted the same day. "Before going in they demanded our documents and photographed us." Many police also surrounded the nearest metro station, Nyamiga, apparently to watch those who might be wishing to attend the service.

One of the women praying in the cathedral, Anastasiya Nekrashevich, noted that "we were not shouting slogans and we did not have placards, only icons with us". However, inside the cathedral they saw people in plain clothes with radios, who they suspected of being police officers. OMON riot police waited outside.

Another mother who had attended the prayers noticed that one of the police officers who had photographed and questioned her on arrival was looking round the church during the service, apparently identifying where all the exits were. She stressed that "we had come to the church not to stage a demonstrative event (as it would subsequently turn out). Women who are believers had gathered

there. At least those that I know, who are parishioners of various churches."

"Four women from the cathedral"

After the service, Nekrashevich asked the priest Fr Igor Latushko to accompany the women as they left to try to ensure that the police did not detain them. He agreed. "We went in front of him and they were already waiting for us," she noted the following day. "I don't remember how our conversation started, but very quickly they asked us to present our documents, first of all from me only. I started to get angry and asked why, as we had come to pray. The reply was logical: to check your identity."

Officers – who were from the OMON or the Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption - threatened to use force against two of the women if they refused to come to the Central District Police Station. Two officers seized Nekrashevich's arms to force her to go. "The priest came out and for a long time tried to get us released, but they took us anyway." Officers seized another two women, one of them a Russian citizen who had come to attend a baptism.

As well as Nekrashevich, the women taken to the police station were Oksana Fyodorova, Tatyana Kotes and Yekaterina Mikhailova.

"In a large bus near the cathedral where they took us first, they checked our passports and phones," Nekrashevich noted. Officers then transferred the women to another bus. Once at the Central District Police Station, she said police officers were surprised by the arrival of the detained women. When the duty officer asked colleagues who they were, he was told: "Four women from the cathedral." ("This sounds like a threat to the whole of Belarus," Nekrashevich commented.)

Officers questioned the women for a long time, apparently unable to understand why they had been detained. Police let the four women go after about four hours. "We're grateful that they released us," Nekrashevich noted. "True, on leaving they warned us of the consequences of unapproved meetings. I no longer had strength to argue that prayer is not a meeting."

Nekrashevich said she remains grateful to the women who were not intimidated by the presence of many OMON and police officers around the cathedral and came in to join the prayers.

After consulting colleagues, Mariya Panas, spokesperson for Minsk's Central District Police, refused absolutely to explain why police were present in and around Holy Spirit Cathedral, why they checked the identities of and photographed participants in a religious service, why they detained and questioned the four women, and why they arrested two journalists who were subsequently jailed. "I can't give any comments," she told Forum 18 on 9 May.

Panas referred all questions to the spokesperson for Minsk City Police. However, the duty officer at Minsk City Police refused to put Forum 18 through to Natalya Ganusevich on 9 May.

Asked on 9 May why police were present at the cathedral service, why the four women were detained and why the journalists were detained and jailed, an official in the office of the regime's main religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) Aleksandr Rumak, who did not give her name, told Forum 18: "We don't have this information. We won't comment on it." She then put the phone down.

Journalists given 15-day arrests

Police arrested Dziana Seradzyuk, a journalist for Novy Chas news website, and her husband Yauhen Batura as they were leaving Holy Spirit Cathedral on 3 March shortly before the start of the evening service where the mothers of soldiers were to pray. Officers took them to the Temporary Detention Centre on Okrestina St, where they spent the night.

The following day, Judge Dmitry Karsyuk of Minsk's Central District Court sentenced each of them to 15 days' imprisonment under Administrative Code Article 24.3 ("Failure to submit to a legal instruction or demand by an official carrying out their official duties"), Novy Chas noted.

Forum 18 was unable to establish if police arrested the couple because they thought they were connected with the mothers coming to pray at the cathedral for an end to Russia's war against Ukraine.

Police home visit

On 4 March, police came to the home of another woman who had attended the prayers at Holy Spirit Cathedral the previous evening. Police had photographed her, but had not detained her after the service. She was not at home when police visited, someone close to the women told Forum 18.

Bishop bans prayers for peace in Ukraine

Following Russia's attack on Ukraine, which it launched on 24 February, Orthodox priests in the western Grodno Diocese asked

Archbishop Antony (Doronin) for his blessing for services and prayers for an end to the war. However, the Archbishop banned such prayers, Orthodox Christians told Forum 18.

Fr Ioann Danilchik, spokesperson for the Grodno Diocese, denied that Archbishop Antony had issued any bans. "We have held prayers following the prayer for peace issued by our Patriarch Kirill," he told Forum 18 from Grodno on 9 March. "I will be holding prayers for peace in my own church today."

Told that some priests and laypeople wish to pray for an end to Russian attacks on Ukraine, which Patriarch Kirill's prayer does not acknowledge, Fr Ioann insisted that "we pray for peace on Ukrainian land". He denied that the state had ordered Archbishop Antony to ban any form of services or prayers.

A wide range of Christian Churches across Belarus – including Catholics and different Protestant communities – have issued statements and held services and prayers for peace in Ukraine and an end to the war. Human rights defenders have not reported any obstructions or punishments for such statements, services and prayers. (END)

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

For background information, 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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