

8 June 2022

BELARUS: "A Christian cannot say that what's going on in Ukraine is good"

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Police warned Orthodox priest Fr Andrei Nozdrin and his church transferred him to a remote parish after he publicly opposed Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine, and Belarus' role in this. He insisted that "a Christian cannot say that what's going on in Ukraine is good, and should understand that killing is a sin". He told Forum 18 that he will continue to teach these Christian principles. The regime has similarly targeted other Orthodox and Catholic priests.

The regime's current main focus of its freedom of religion and belief and related human rights violations is monitoring, threatening and punishing religious leaders and people opposing Russia's renewed war against Ukraine and the Belarusian regime's role in this.

From 2014, Orthodox priest Fr Andrei Nozdrin led the St Spyridon of Trimython parish in Grodno. He also had two diocesan roles. In April, local police summoned Fr Nozdrin for a "preventive conversation" after complaints from two informers who were not happy with his anti-war position and singing the hymn Mighty God. The hymn is associated with opposition to the regime. Both the regime and the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Veniamin, have banned the singing of the hymn (see below).

"They questioned me about my statements regarding Ukraine and why we sing Mighty God in the church," Fr Nozdrin told Forum 18. "They even talked to my neighbours and friends but found no criminal wrongdoing" (see below).

On 25 April, Grodno's October District Police wrote to Fr Nozdrin warning him against alleged "extremist violations and crimes". Fr Nozdrin pointed out that everyone knew that in his sermons and elsewhere he always insisted that "a Christian cannot say that what's going on in Ukraine is good, and should understand that killing is a sin". He maintains that he will continue to teach these "Christian principles" (see below).

On 18 May Archbishop Antony (Doronin) of Grodno dismissed Fr Nozdrin from all his diocesan roles, and transferred him away from Grodno to a small village. Fr Nozdrin regrets leaving the Grodno parish where together with the parishioners he built a church, and the largest Sunday school for children in the city. He told Forum 18 that the parishioners were upset about his transfer (see below).

The regime sent a police unit to attend Fr Nozdrin's 20 May farewell service, "but the people showed them out because they did not pray," Fr Nozdrin said. Grodno Diocese spokesperson Fr Igor Danilchik insisted to Forum 18 on 2 June that Fr Nozdrin's transfer was Archbishop Antony's decision alone, and claimed that the transfer was not done under pressure from the regime. He did not explain why the regime sent police to Fr Nozdrin's farewell service. Fr Danilchik also claimed that Grodno parishioners had not complained to the Diocese (see below).

Two Catholic priests of Minsk-Mogilev Diocese have been accused of violating Administrative Code Article 19.11, Part 2 ("Distribution, production, storage and transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activities, or promoting such activities") by allegedly "spreading information included in the Republican List of Extremist Materials, as well as printing, publishing and storing or transporting for further distribution of these materials".

Police detained Fr Andrei Kevlich, the dean of Mogilev Deanery, on 18 April in his church in the town of Gorki in Mogilev Region. Officers searched his home and seized his phone, from which he had accessed his Facebook account. They drew up a record of an offence against him for reposting material from Belsat and Radio Free Europe (RFE), which the regime has claimed to be "extremist". He had placed on his Facebook page a video of a female pensioner in Ukraine's capital Kyiv who had endured Russian artillery bombardment. Fr Kevlich also added a flag in the Ukrainian colours to his Facebook picture (see below).

On 12 May, a court fined Fr Kevlich the equivalent of over two weeks' average wages (see below).

Another Catholic priest, Fr Igor Lashuk of St Kazimir parish in the town of Stolbtsy in Minsk Region, organised a special meeting for prayer on 4 March in parishes close to the Ukrainian border. While organising the meeting Fr Lashuk said: "God, please forgive

your people for not knowing how to talk peacefully with each other". Police detained him on 20 April. On 28 April, a court fined him the equivalent of over three weeks' average wages for reposting anti-war articles from the banned Belsat and RFE media outlets. The court also ordered Fr Lashuk's mobile phone to be confiscated (see below).

Catholic priest Fr Andrzej Bulczak, who has now fled Belarus after the state stripped him of the right to work as a priest, was on 13 May fined over three weeks' average wages in absentia. He had posted a YouTube video of less than three minutes recounting a letter a girl writes to a friend in Poland opposing the war in Ukraine. One photo in the video shows the logo of Belsat, a Polish-based television channel the regime has deemed "extremist", as well as the white-red-white Belarusian flag used by protestors against the regime (see below).

Police have also summoned and warned Orthodox priests who signed an open letter calling for "reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire" in Ukraine, published on 1 March by priests from the Russian Orthodox Church within Russia, Belarus and elsewhere. One priest who signed the open letter, who wished to remain anonymous, said "I signed it because it was important to set out my position," he told Hrodna.life. He confirmed that he had "a dangerous conversation" at the police, meaning that the consequences could be serious (see below).

Orthodox theologian and human rights defender Natalia Vasilevich – who now lives outside Belarus – has warned of regime surveillance of priests' social media accounts, especially by Ideology Departments. Various regional Executive Committee Ideology Departments and the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs' office denied this to Forum 18, but clergy have told Forum 18 that they have been targeted by regime officials after expressing online opposition to the war against Ukraine (see below).

Targeting religious opposition to war against Ukraine

The regime's current main focus of its freedom of religion and belief and related human rights violations is monitoring, threatening, and punishing religious leaders and people opposing Russia's renewed war against Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734) and the Belarusian regime's role in this. This is a shift from targeting those criticising regime violence after the August 2020 falsified presidential election (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674).

The regime expects religious leaders to support – or at least not contradict - the regime's political position. Since August 2020, the Belarusian Orthodox Church – which comes under the Moscow Patriarchate and is the largest religious community in Belarus – has removed senior bishops and lower clergy (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674) 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.

"A Christian cannot say that what's going on in Ukraine is good"

Such targeting continues. Orthodox priest Fr Andrei Nozdrin led the St Spyridon of Trimythou parish in Olshanka District of Grodno. He also worked as Head of the Missionary Department of Grodno Diocese and as the diocesan official for Physical Education and Sports.

In April, local police summoned Fr Nozdrin for a "preventive conversation" after complaints from two informers who were not happy with his anti-war position and singing the hymn Mighty God (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674). The hymn is associated with opposition to the regime. Both the regime and the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Veniamin, have banned the singing of the hymn.

"They questioned me about my statements regarding Ukraine and why we sing Mighty God in the church. They even talked to my neighbours and friends but found no criminal wrongdoing," Fr Nozdrin explained to Forum 18 on 20 May. He added that police even wanted to file a criminal case against him under Criminal Code Article 130-1 (<https://humanconstantia.org/en/extremism-in-wartime-review-of-the-fight-against-extremism-in-belarus-for-january-march-2022/>) ("Rehabilitation of Nazism").

On 25 April, Grodno's October District Police wrote that they had found no violations of the law in Fr Nozdrin's actions. However, the letter (seen by Forum 18) noted that officers had warned him against alleged "extremist violations and crimes".

Fr Nozdrin pointed out that everyone knew that in his sermons and elsewhere he always insisted that: "a Christian cannot say that what's going on in Ukraine is good, and should understand that killing is a sin". He maintains that he will continue to teach these "Christian principles".

Forum 18 was unable to reach Konstantin Smolyakov, first deputy head of October District Police who had signed the letter detailing the police warning to Fr Nozdrin. Smolyakov's phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 8 June.

"They did not even let me say goodbye to parishioners"

On 18 May, Archbishop Antony (Doronin) of Grodno dismissed Fr Nozdrin from all his diocesan roles, and transferred him to a new parish in the small village of Komotovo (about 30 kilometres or 20 miles from Grodno). The diocese did not explain the reasons for his transfer, though it did still allow him on weekdays only to celebrate the liturgy in a Grodno parish he has not previously served in, Fr Nozdrin told Forum 18.

Archbishop Antony has also banned in his diocese services and prayers (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2724) for an end to Russia's war against Ukraine.

After eight years of service from 2014, Fr Nozdrin regrets leaving the Grodno parish where, together with parishioners, he built a church, and the largest Sunday school for children in the city. He told Forum 18 that parishioners were upset about his transfer.

"20 May was my last day in the parish," Fr Nozdrin said. "It was Friday and people had to take a day off from work to come to the service. There were a lot of people in the church, more than 70 communicants."

Regime sends police to farewell service

The regime sent a police unit to attend Fr Nozdrin's 20 May farewell service, "but the people showed them out because they did not pray," Fr Nozdrin said. He thinks the police were sent because the regime expected public protests.

Grodno Diocese spokesperson Fr Igor Danilchik insisted to Forum 18 on 2 June that Fr Nozdrin's transfer was Archbishop Antony's decision alone, and was done in accordance with church regulations. Fr Danilchik also claimed that the transfer was not done under pressure from the regime. "This is an internal decision within the diocese, and it should be met with understanding." He did not explain why the regime sent police to Fr Nozdrin's farewell service.

Fr Danilchik also claimed that Grodno parishioners had not complained to the Diocese. "It is always sad when a priest leaves a parish, but the people should get attached to God, to Christ, not to the priest," he claimed to Forum 18.

Catholic priests targeted

Recently, two Catholic priests of Minsk-Mogilev Diocese have been punished on charges of violating Administrative Code Article 19.11, Part 2

(<https://humanconstantia.org/en/extremism-in-wartime-review-of-the-fight-against-extremism-in-belarus-for-january-march-2022/>) ("Distribution, production, storage and transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activities, or promoting such activities"). The priests were allegedly "spreading information included in the Republican List of Extremist Materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612), as well as printing, publishing and storing or transporting for further distribution of these materials".

Punishments under Administrative Code Article 19.11, Part 2 for individuals are a fine of 10-30 base units, community service or detention, with possible confiscation of "device of the offence" (such as a computer or smartphone). Thirty base units is equivalent to over three weeks' average wages.

On 18 April (western Easter Monday), police detained Catholic priest Fr Andrei Kevlich, the dean of Mogilev Deanery, in his church in the town of Gorki in Mogilev Region. Fr Kevlich has served in the parish since September 2013.

Officers searched Fr Kevlich's home and seized his phone, from which he had accessed his Facebook account. They drew up a record of an offence against him for reposting material from Belsat and Radio Free Europe (RFE), which the regime has claimed to be "extremist". He had placed on his Facebook page a video of a female pensioner in Ukraine's capital Kyiv who had endured Russian artillery bombardment. Fr Kevlich also added a flag in the Ukrainian colours to his Facebook picture.

The regime has labelled many media outlets, including Belsat

(<https://belsat.eu/en/news/28-07-2021-belsat-officially-declared-extremist-in-belarus/>) and RFE

(<https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-rferl-labeled-extremist/31622912.html>), "extremist". Reposting or even reading articles on "extremist" media outlets risks punishments

(<https://humanconstantia.org/en/extremism-in-wartime-review-of-the-fight-against-extremism-in-belarus-for-january-march-2022/>) including prison terms, fines, and confiscation of electronic devices.

Fr Kevlich denied any involvement in "extremism" and did not see any evidence or proof of the alleged offence he was charged with, Katolik.life stated on 22 April. Fr Kevlich stated on Facebook that he adheres to the teaching of the Catholic Church that the state and the Church are autonomous in their own spheres, but that both should work for the good of humanity. He said he hoped that, if convicted, he would be given a short term jail term rather than be fined, as his parish does not have much money and "it would end up cheaper".

Several court hearings were cancelled when the Judge sent the case back to police for further work. Finally on 12 May, Judge Stanislav Lyashenko of Gorki District Court handed Fr Kevlich a fine of 20 base units (640 Belarusian Roubles), according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The Judge ordered his mobile phone to be returned to him. On his Facebook page Fr Kevlich thanked his fellow priests and parishioners who came to the hearing to support him.

Maksim Demensky, head of Gorki District Police, refused to discuss why his officers had detained Fr Kevlich and brought the administrative case against him. "I won't discuss anything at all with you by phone," he told Forum 18 on 8 June. He said Forum 18 could come to his office during reception hours on Thursdays. He then put the phone down.

Telephones at Gorki District Court went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 8 June.

"God, please forgive your people for not knowing how to talk peacefully with each other"

Another Catholic priest, Fr Igor Lashuk of St Kazimir parish in the town of Stolbtsy in Minsk Region, organised a special meeting for prayer on 4 March in parishes close to the Ukrainian border. While organising the meeting Fr Lashuk said: "God, please forgive your people for not knowing how to talk peacefully with each other".

Police detained Fr Lashuk on 20 April. At his trial on 28 April, the Judge at Stolbtsy District Court fined him 30 base units (960 Belarusian Roubles, equivalent to over three weeks' average wages) for reposting anti-war articles from the banned Belsat and RFE media outlets. The court also ordered Fr Lashuk's mobile phone to be confiscated.

Aleksandr Golikov, head of Stolbtsy District Police, refused to explain why his officers had detained Fr Lashuk and brought the case against him. "I don't give consultations by phone," he told Forum 18 from Stolbtsy on 8 June. "Come here to my office in person during reception hours." He then put the phone down.

An official of Stolbtsy District Court – who did not give her name - similarly refused to explain why a Judge had fined Fr Lashuk. "In accordance with the law we don't give information to people who are not connected to a case," she told Forum 18 on 8 June.

Priest fined in absentia

On 7 March, Catholic priest Fr Andrzej Bulczak – a Polish citizen who has served for 14 years in Belarus – posted a video of less than three minutes on Misericors, a YouTube channel he runs which has about 160 followers. The video recounts a letter a girl writes to a friend in Poland opposing the war in Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734). One photo in the video shows the logo of Belsat, a Polish-based television channel the regime has deemed "extremist", as well as the white-red-white Belarusian flag used by protestors against the regime.

Police questioned Fr Bulczak and he was charged under Administrative Code Article 19.11, Part 2 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734) ("Distribution, production, storage, and transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activities or promoting such activities").

On 26 March, the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak, stripped Fr Bulczak of his permission to serve as a foreign religious worker (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734) in Belarus. On 29 March, Fr Bulczak decided to leave Belarus (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734) without waiting for another court hearing.

On 13 May, Postavy District Court fined Fr Bulczak in absentia 30 base units (960 Belarusian Roubles, or just over three weeks' average wages).

Earlier, on 25 March, police in Mogilev detained Greek Catholic priest Fr Vasily Yegorov after finding a "Ukraine, forgive us" sticker (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734) on his car. He was held in a detention centre for the next three days, and on 28 March a court fined him 50 base units, 1,600 Belarusian Roubles, more than a month's average wage. He was charged under Administrative Code Article 23.34, Part 1 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration").

Police summon, warn other anti-war priests

Police have also summoned and warned Orthodox priests who signed an open letter (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/viewform?edit_requested=true) calling for "reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire" in Ukraine, published on 1 March by priests from the Russian Orthodox Church within Russia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2725), Belarus and elsewhere. The letter condemns the suppression of protests against the war, and maintained that "we believe that the people of Ukraine should make their choice on their own, not at gunpoint, without pressure from West or East".

Small numbers of clergy and laypeople in Russia continue to protest for explicitly religious reasons (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738) against the renewed war in Ukraine. They often face detention, prosecution, and the loss of their jobs in consequence.

Belarusian police officers insisted that priests who had signed or supported the open letter should explain their support for the initiative, news website Hrodna.life noted on 21 April.

One priest who signed the open letter, who wished to remain anonymous, told Hrodna.life that only 20 priests from Belarus signed the document as there is a risk of pressure from the regime. "I signed it because it was important to set out my position," he told Hrodna.life. He confirmed that he had "a dangerous conversation" at the police, meaning that the consequences could be serious.

The priest also pointed out that in Russia too, some priests had faced regime pressure (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738) for supporting this initiative.

Monitoring social media "the main way the regime targets clergy"

Orthodox theologian and human rights defender Natalia Vasilevich – who now lives outside Belarus – has warned of regime surveillance of priests. "The regime is monitoring social networks of all the clergy of different denominations," she wrote on 19 April on her Telegram channel (<https://t.me/s/burbalka>). "Regional Ideology Departments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) are busy scanning local clergy's Facebook and Instagram accounts, as well as other independent media they read."

Human rights defender Vasilevich warned that officials are looking for "any pretext". This includes finding Ukrainian flags or the white-red-white Belarusian flag (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734) associated with the opposition, and reposts of articles from Belsat, Radio Free Europe, and other independent media the regime has claimed to be "extremist".

"This is aimed at cleaning the information space from any protest activities," Vasilevich added. "Today, this is the main way the regime targets clergy in Belarus."

However, various regional Executive Committee Ideology Departments denied to Forum 18 on 3 June that they monitor clergy's social media accounts. "I have not heard of it," Alexander Ilyasevich, Head of Minsk's Region's Ideology Department, claimed to Forum 18. "As an ideologist I do not do such things."

Ideology Department officials have visited numerous clergy due to their opposition to the regime (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2734) and its actions.

Forum 18 asked the Office of the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak, whether it monitors social networks for anti-war statements from clergy. The Head of its Religious Affairs Department Andrei Aryaev maintained that they simply conduct general monitoring of the media landscape. "We have always been doing it to assess the informational situation, but never clergy's personal accounts in social media," he claimed to Forum 18 on 3 June. (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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