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BELARUS: Greek Catholic website among religious works banned as "extremist"

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

A Greek Catholic website and a YouTube interview with a Catholic priest are the latest religious items banned by courts as "extremist" and added to the Information Ministry's "Republican List of Extremist Materials". Deputy Information Minister Igor Buzovsky, who is also Deputy Chair of the "Republican Expert Commission for the Evaluation of Symbols, Attributes, and Information Products for the presence (or absence) in them of signs of Extremism", defended such bans. "This is done exclusively on the basis of the law," he insisted.

A Greek Catholic news website and a YouTube interview with a Catholic priest who fled to neighbouring Poland in 2021 to escape prosecution are the latest religious items to be banned by local courts as "extremist" and added to the Information Ministry's "Republican List of Extremist Materials". Other banned religious works include an introduction to Orthodoxy published in Russia's capital Moscow and added to the Republican List in 2016, as well as several Muslim books. Anyone who distributes any of these works risks criminal prosecution in Belarus.

The threat of banning religious literature and websites as "extremist" runs in parallel with the existing state censorship of religious literature, overseen by Belarus' senior religious affairs official, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak (see below).

On 14 December 2022 Judge Yelena Kovalchuk of Lenin District Court in the western city of Brest declared the Greek Catholic news website Tsarkva (Church) "extremist", as well as its pages on two social media sites. The sites were added to the Republican List of Extremist Materials, published on the Ministry's website, on 26 December. The editors have since taken the pages offline (see below).

Judge Kovalchuk's secretary told Forum 18 that the Judge does not discuss her decisions with those who are not parties to a case. The secretary would say only that the decision had not been appealed within the 15-day deadline (see below).

The regime did not ban any of the Belarusian Orthodox Church's diocesan or monastery websites that similarly contained logos of websites the authorities deemed "extremist", even when activists brought this to the attention of the Information Ministry and the police.

The Republican List of Extremist Materials – which as of 26 December 2022 ran to 480 pages – includes many xenophobic and racist works (such as Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf"), as well as material produced by the political opposition and foreign-based news websites. It also includes some religious works that do not call for the violation of anyone's human rights. All had been banned as "extremist" by a local court (see below).

In October 2022, a court in Vitebsk Region banned as "extremist" a YouTube interview with the Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok, who had fled from Belarus in July 2021 to avoid prosecution. The video was similarly added to the Information Ministry's Republican List of Extremist Materials (see below).

Deputy Information Minister Igor Buzovsky, who is also Deputy Chair of the "Republican Expert Commission for the Evaluation of Symbols, Attributes, and Information Products for the presence (or absence) in them of signs of Extremism", defended the banning of specific publications and websites as "extremist". "This is done exclusively on the basis of the law," he insisted to Forum 18 (see below).

However, Buzovsky refused to discuss the banning of the Tsarkva Greek Catholic website or other religious publications. "You speak about one website – I wouldn't want to talk from memory. You need to apply officially." He refused to discuss anything else about why religious publications are banned and put the phone down (see below).

Forum 18 reached Andrei Aryayev, the Head of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and

Ethnic Affairs, on 4 January. However, he put the phone down so Forum 18 was unable to ask him about the enforced closure of and ban on the Tsarkva news website – and earlier bans on other religious publications (see below).

Meanwhile, the Organised Crime Police detained Orthodox priest Fr Dionisy Korostelev for praying at a New Year service in a Minsk church on 1 January for the defenders of Ukraine. He had been denounced by a pro-regime activist, who had allegedly learnt of the prayer from a parishioner. The head of the Orthodox Church in the country, Metropolitan Veniamin (Tupeko), banned Fr Dionisy from further religious service on 4 January (see below).

Religious censorship

The threat of banning religious literature and websites as "extremist" runs in parallel with the existing state censorship of religious literature (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612). This censorship is overseen by the country's senior religious affairs official, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak in the capital Minsk.

The regime imposes compulsory prior state censorship of and restrictions on distribution of most religious literature and objects (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612). Under Religion Law Article 26, all imported religious literature and objects undergo state censorship enacted by an "Expert Council" attached to the Plenipotentiary's Office, as does all religious literature which libraries wish to acquire.

The Plenipotentiary can seek an "expert analysis" of any religious literature being distributed. Only registered religious organisations can establish companies to produce religious literature. Shops selling religious literature require permission from local administrations. "Expert analyses" can take up to three months, making timely delivery of imported religious publications impossible.

One religious community told Forum 18 in January that getting permission for imported religious literature currently takes several weeks.

The most recent known denial of permission to distribute a religious publication came in June 2019, when the Deputy Plenipotentiary upheld the "Expert Council" rejection of the April 2019 issue of "The Watchtower" magazine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612), published by Jehovah's Witnesses.

Greek Catholic news website banned as "extremist"

In 1996, the Greek Catholic parish of the Holy Apostles Peter and Andrew in the western city of Brest took over publication of the Belarusian-language newspaper Tsarkva (Church), which had begun publication in Minsk the previous year. From 2011, the publication was available on the website only.

"The newspaper covers the life of Greek Catholic communities in Belarus and other countries of the world, contains official documents of the Church, covers the issues of ecumenism and Christian unity, publishes materials on the history of the Uniate Church, and other religious and educational information," its website explained.

In late 2022, police in Brest found on the Tsarkva website links to materials and logos from other websites that the regime had declared "extremist" in 2021.

Forum 18 was unable to find out whether – as prescribed by a Council of Ministers Decree of 12 October 2021 – the Brest Regional "Expert Commission for the Evaluation of Symbols, Attributes, and Information Products for the presence (or absence) in them of signs of Extremism" examined the Tsarkva website and social media pages and produced an official declaration that they contained elements of "extremism".

One of the site's editors Ihar Baranovsky told Katolik.life news website on 27 December 2022 that by early December, the site's editors had removed all links to such materials from their website as well as their pages on two social media sites, Facebook and VKontakte. "This did not help," Baranovsky added.

On 14 December 2022, Judge Yelena Kovalchuk of Brest's Lenin District Court declared the Tsarkva website "extremist", as well as its pages on Facebook and VKontakte, a court official told Forum 18 on 5 January. Judge Kovalchuk's secretary, who did not give her name, told Forum 18 the same day that the Judge does not discuss her decisions with those who are not parties to a case. The secretary would say only that the decision had not been appealed within the 15-day deadline.

The sites were added to the Information Ministry's Republican List of Extremist Materials, published on the Ministry's website, on 26 December 2022. It said the banning order had to be "immediately implemented".

On 27 December, Baranovsky noted that they had been forced to take the website and social media pages offline. "In connection with this, we will have to stop the work of this page in order not to frame those who were subscribed to it," he told Katolik.life. "Thank you for being with us since 2011. Be careful, don't make reposts from the page now."

Baranovsky was detained and sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment in November 2022 for "spreading extremist materials". Fr Igor Kondratiev, a co-editor of Tsarkva website who was detained together with Baranovsky, was sentenced to 12 days' imprisonment.

Deputy Information Minister insists bans "exclusively on the basis of the law"

Deputy Information Minister Igor Buzovsky, who is also Deputy Chair of the "Republican Expert Commission for the Evaluation of Symbols, Attributes, and Information Products for the presence (or absence) in them of signs of Extremism" (<https://humanconstantia.org/en/overview-of-the-fight-against-extremism-in-belarus-in-october-december-2021/>), defended the banning of specific publications and websites as "extremist". "This is done exclusively on the basis of the law," he insisted to Forum 18 from Minsk on 5 January 2023.

However, Buzovsky refused to discuss the banning of the Tsarkva Greek Catholic website or other religious publications. "You speak about one website – I wouldn't want to talk from memory. You need to apply officially." He refused to discuss anything else about why religious publications are banned and put the phone down.

Religious leaders targeted

Baranovsky and Fr Kondratiev of the Tsarkva website were among 24 Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and Protestant leaders known to have been in 2022 detained, searched, summoned by the ordinary police or KGB secret police, arrested, or prosecuted for a variety of political offences, according to the Christian Vision group (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/presledovaniya-belorusskih-svyashhennosluzhitelej-v-2022-godu-spisok/>).

These included Orthodox priest Fr Andrei Nozdrin, who was warned by police and transferred by his church to a remote parish (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2748) 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 in May that he will continue to teach these Christian principles.

Such targeting has continued in 2023. The Organised Crime Police detained Orthodox priest Fr Dionisy Korostelev for praying in a Minsk church on 1 January for the defenders of Ukraine, pro-regime Telegram channels announced. He had been denounced by the pro-regime activist Olga Bondareva, who had allegedly learnt of the prayer from a parishioner.

Fr Dionisy had said the prayers at a New Year service in the Minsk Church of the Joy of All the Sorrowful Icon of the Mother of God, where his father is priest.

The head of the Orthodox Church in the country, Metropolitan Veniamin (Tupeko), banned Fr Dionisy from further religious service on 4 January. Fr Dionisy's prayer had "aroused confusion among parishioners", Metropolitan Veniamin wrote in his letter to deans in Minsk Diocese, made public by Christian Vision (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/mitropolit-minskij-veniamin-nakazal-svyashhennika-za-molitvu-o-zashhitnikah-ukrainy/>).

Ever-expanding "Republican List of Extremist Materials"

The regime studies a wide range of materials for elements of what it regards as "extremism". These materials include not only printed and online publications, but "symbols and attributes". The 12 October 2021 Council of Ministers Decree specifies that these include "flags, anthems and other musical works, attributes of a uniform, swastikas, emblems, symbols, graffiti, logos, pennants and badges".

The Republican List of Extremist Materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) as of 26 December 2022 ran to 480 pages, with more than three-quarters of the materials added in 2021 and 2022. It includes many xenophobic and racist works (such as Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf"), as well as material produced by the political opposition and foreign-based news websites. It also includes some religious works that do not call for the violation of anyone's human rights. All had been added to the list after being banned as "extremist" by a local court.

Anyone distributing works on the Republican List risks criminal prosecution.

In March 2014, Frunze District Court in Minsk banned a number of Muslim books (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2338), including the third edition of "The way to the Koran" by Azerbaijani Muslim theologian Elmir Kuliyeu, published in Moscow in 2008. They were added to the Republican List of Extremist Materials.

Kuliyeu told Forum 18 in December 2016 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2338) that the first he knew of the ban

on his book was when Forum 18 asked him about it. "No one informed us of this, either at the investigation stage or when the court had issued its decision," he stated. He said his book contains general information on the origins of the Koran and the history of its study in the Islamic world and Russia.

Kuliyev questioned why his and other such books are banned. "In whose interests is the ban on such books?" he asked. "I am convinced that any literate expert on Islam could recommend this and other such books as material to prevent all kinds of extremist sentiments."

In May 2016, Central District Court in Gomel banned "An Orthodox on Orthodoxy: Popular theology, or theology for dummies" by Sergei Nikolaenko, Pastor of the city's Reformed Orthodox Transfiguration Church, published in Moscow in 2015. (The Information Ministry's List wrongly gives Nikolaenko's name as Nikonenko.) It was added to the Republican List of Extremist Materials.

Pastor Nikolaenko told Forum 18 in December 2016 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2338) that the first he knew of the banning of his book was when Forum 18 asked him about it. "No one invited me to any court hearing," he observed.

In August 2019, Orsha District Court in Vitebsk Region banned as "extremist" three further Muslim works. They were added to the Republican List of Extremist Materials.

On 3 November 2021, Rasony District Court in Vitebsk Region banned as "extremist" a YouTube video of a Prayer for Belarus gathering on the streets of Warsaw on 17 July 2021 which Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok addressed. On 14 October 2022, the same court banned as "extremist" a wide-ranging, 95-minute interview with Fr Barok by Nikita Melkozerov, who posted it to his YouTube channel. Both were added to the Republican List of Extremist Materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612).

Fr Barok in July 2021 fled to Poland (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674) to avoid prosecution for posting online a photo of a demonstration in Poland against Belarus' regime.

None of the religious books on the Republican List of Extremist Materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612) are listed in the electronic catalogue of Belarusian libraries. It remains unclear if libraries remove books from the catalogue if they appear on the Republican List. (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=2806)

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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