

26 January 2023

BELARUS: Religious freedom survey, January 2023

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

Forum 18's freedom of religion and belief survey analysis of Belarus notes continuing violations of this freedom and of interlinked freedoms. These include a web of "legal" restrictions on which communities can meet, where, who they are led by, and what literature they may use. These restrictions make the exercise of freedom of religion and belief dependent on state permission. Violations have worsened since fraudulent presidential elections in August 2020, and the regime's support for Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Freedom of religion and belief, with its interlinked human rights, are seriously violated by the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko. Violations by his regime of the human rights of the people it rules have increased since fraudulent presidential elections in August 2020, and the regime's support for Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Serious freedom of religion and belief violations documented by Forum 18 include but are not limited to:

- a web of "legal" restrictions which against international human rights law make the exercise of freedom of religion and belief dependent on state permission;
- surveillance by the KGB secret police of religious believers along with monitoring of and restrictions on religious communities by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs;
- banning religious communities from legally existing unless they have state registration;
- arbitrary obstacles imposed on the activities of even registered communities, such as denials of building permission;
- multiple restrictions on where religious events can be held, what an event can be about, and how participants can act;
- obstacles against religious communities using and reclaiming their places of worship including, in Minsk, the denial of use of the Catholic "Red Church" after a fire in unexplained circumstances, and the forcible eviction of New Life Pentecostal Church and bans on it meeting in-person for worship;
- compulsory prior state censorship of and restrictions on the distribution of most religious literature and objects, which runs in parallel with the threat of banning texts or websites as allegedly "extremist";
- large scale repression of meetings for worship and nationwide belief-based protests against election fraud, regime violence, and the invasion of Ukraine;
- the prosecution of and removal from office of religious leaders, which in the case of Orthodox clergy happens in collaboration with the Belarusian Orthodox Church;
- forced participation of state employees in regime-ordered religious events to support the regime;
- serious human rights violations against political prisoners, including their freedom of religion or belief;
- strict controls on the exercise by foreign citizens of their freedom of religion and belief, including arbitrary denials of permission to work to Catholic priests.

Context

Belarus is located between Russia, Ukraine, and European Union member states Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Aleksandr Lukashenko has ruled the country since 1994 without free and fair elections being held (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/belarus>). The most recent fraudulent August 2020 presidential election was condemned by

Belarusian and international human rights defenders such as Viasna (Spring) as the "worst election ever" (<https://elections2020.spring96.org/en/news/98960>), and was marked by large-scale regime violence against people protesting nationwide against the regime's serious violations of the human rights of the people it rules. Repression related to the fraudulent election has continued since then (<https://spring96.org/en/news/108663>), and among the large numbers of political prisoners is Viasna chair and 2022 Nobel Peace Prize winner Ales Bialiatski (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/ales-bjaljackiy>).

Repression has increased and continues after Russia's renewed February 2022 invasion of Ukraine (<https://spring96.org/en/tags/1333>), which large numbers of Belarusians have protested against. Human rights defenders such as Humana Constanta (<https://humanconstant.org/en/news-en/>) have also documented the regime's "legal" changes to criminalise even more the exercise of human rights. Many religious believers have been among the large numbers protesting against election fraud and the invasion of Ukraine, as Belarusian human rights defender group Christian Vision has documented (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/category/other/en/>).

Belarus has a population of about 9 and a half million people, around half of whom are thought to self-identify with the Orthodox Church and in order of magnitude smaller numbers self-identifying as Protestants, Catholics, and non-believers. As with other human rights, the regime's basic approach is to - in violation of international human rights law - make the exercise of freedom of religion and belief dependent on state permission.

Web of restrictions

The 2002 Religion Law is central to the regime's web of restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion and belief. This Law specifies compulsory state registration of all religious communities and geographical limits on where they may exercise their freedom of religion and belief. Foreign religious personnel invited by local registered religious communities require state permission to exercise freedom of religion and belief. This stops them leading any meetings for worship outside the one building within which the regime allows them to lead such meetings.

All exercise of freedom of religion and belief must have prior state permission. Religious meetings in private homes must not be either regular or large scale. The only permitted places of worship and places where religious literature may be sold or distributed are those designated by the regime. All public events must have state permission and entail high fees for the police, first aid and other public health and hygiene services. Some communities do not attempt to hold public events or apply for state permission for them, because of the detailed information and high costs the regime demands.

Many decisions and official warnings – especially those by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak – cannot be legally challenged. Under the Religion Law, a religious organisation found to have violated the law must correct the alleged violation within six months and not repeat it within a year. If it fails to do so, the authorities may shut the organisation down (Article 37). No legal possibility exists to challenge such warnings, despite a 2007 Constitutional Court decision highlighting this legal omission negating the rule of law. Jehovah's Witnesses failed even in the Supreme Court to challenge such warnings.

"There always was surveillance"

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 have told Forum 18.

A network of state religious affairs and "ideology" officials also closely monitors religious communities. The most senior such official is Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Rumak. His Office has nine publicly named senior staff in Minsk, three of whom are known to work exclusively on state restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion and belief. In addition, each of the country's six regions and the city administration of the capital Minsk employ about 20 more officials in local Ideology Departments whose mandate includes controlling religion. The KGB secret police also restrict freedom of religion or belief.

State surveillance of clergy is routine. Polish Catholic priest Fr Andrzej Bulczak noted that throughout his 14 years' service in Belarus from 2007 to 2022, "there always was surveillance". He noted that all foreign clergy are under such surveillance. "My phone was listened in to, for example," he told Forum 18 from the Polish city of Gdansk on 13 April 2022.

Police and officials of local Executive Committees' Ideology Departments often visit religious leaders, including Catholic priests, Belarusian human rights defender group Christian Vision notes. Forum 18 knows of one senior Catholic priest who received such a visit in March 2022.

Orthodox theologian and human rights defender Natallia 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 visited by regime officials after expressing online opposition to the war against Ukraine.

Compulsory state registration = compulsory state permission to exist

Under the Religion Law, the only communities which may "unobstructed" exercise their freedom of religion and belief are state-registered religious communities within state-approved places of worship or other venues (Article 25).

Restrictions begin from the moment a community forms. Under the Religion Law, all religious organisations must have state registration (Article 14). The Law is silent on those with fewer than 20 members – the minimum for registration. This means that new religious communities must not publicise their existence before they have 20 committed members, but this makes it difficult for them to attract members. This exposes meetings of new communities the regime dislikes to the threat of state reprisals, even if they meet in private homes.

A community requires a legal address for registration applications and registration itself, but using a private home as a legal address is illegal. Especially in villages, some religious communities – including Jehovah's Witnesses and independent Pentecostals – find it difficult to get the authorities to agree the use of a building as a legal address. They complained to Forum 18 that owners of premises who are initially willing to allow an address to be used to register a community often back down under pressure from officials. This stops registration applications being lodged.

The registration requirements break Belarus' international human rights law obligations, as outlined in the OSCE/Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>) – for example Belarus' review of a religious community's beliefs before granting legal status to it.

Officials arbitrarily deny registration to religious communities they do not like, such as Orthodox communities outside the framework of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). These include the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which claims descent from a church which left the Russian Orthodox Church in 1922 and in the Soviet period survived outside Belarus.

In a further obstacle, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) registered its title in the early 2000s as a brand name "so that no other organisation can register with that name", a church official told Forum 18. No other religious community has been given such a state-backed monopoly.

State registration doesn't end problems

Even if a community is registered, this does not guarantee an end to official obstruction. Pomore Old Believers in Minsk (who are registered) have made persistent attempts since 2005 to relocate to Minsk a historical wooden church on the border with Lithuania. In 2010 Minsk City Executive Committee claimed – without giving reasons – that relocating the church to the city was "inexpedient". It gave no explanation for this claim, despite repeated questions by the community and Forum 18.

The Old Believer community then sought to build a new church in a village near Minsk. However, Minsk District Executive Committee Chair Vladimir Yurkevich claimed in March 2022 that the community had failed to lodge completed building plans by an August 2021 deadline. The community insisted to Forum 18 that this was not mentioned in any meeting with officials in late 2021 and early 2022.

Currently, Minsk's Old Believers have to meet for worship in a converted house, in the nearest Old Believer church 75 kms (45 miles) away, or in Vilnius in Lithuania.

Old Believers think that officials consulted the Belarusian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate before rejecting the plans, as the regime has in the past given the Belarusian Orthodox Church unwritten but real veto powers over a related religious group. Although based on Russian Orthodoxy, the Pomore Old Believers are independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, of which the Belarusian Orthodox Church is a part. Neither the Executive Committee nor the Belarusian Orthodox Church's Minsk Diocese Chancellery was in April 2022 willing to discuss the issue with Forum 18.

"Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"

The 1997 Mass Events Law imposes restrictions on where events can be held, what an event can be about, and how participants can act. Such restrictions include that events must not be held between varying distances of 50 to 200 metres from a very wide range of state buildings, and a ban on "the use of flags or pennants that are not registered under the established [state] procedure".

Amendments to the Mass Events Law which came into force in June 2021 require organisers of mass events to get permission from local administrations before they start to advertise them. Holding mass events without such permission is punishable. The amendments also banned the collection of funds to pay for any fines imposed for violating the Mass Events Law.

Those who violate these provisions can be punished under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration") [until March 2021 Administrative Code Article 23.34]. Punishments

include a possible 15-day jail sentence being imposed, while the March 2021 Administrative Code changes doubled the maximum fine for repeat offences to 200 base units, or about 4 months' average wages, or a jail sentence of between 15 and 30 days.

In January 2019, the Council of Ministers adopted Decree No. 49 ("On the procedure of payment for public security provided by police, for healthcare services, for cleaning a venue after a public event"). The Decree imposes further conditions related to the Mass Events Law by setting varying event fees to be paid to state agencies depending on the number of participants. It requires that all permitted public event organisers - including of religious events – must both agree event fees with the police, state healthcare, and cleaning services, and also pay these fees in advance.

Some religious communities told Forum 18 that after the decree came into force, they had to cancel or change their plans for annual pilgrimages and religious meetings because they cannot afford the fees.

Regime officials are given a wide range of vague and arbitrary excuses to ban or halt events with no notice. On 28 July 2022, a court in the south-eastern city of Gomel fined Protestant Pastor Dmitry Podlobko of Living Faith Church two weeks' average wage for holding outdoor baptisms earlier that month in a pool on family-owned property without seeking official approval. The Church is a state-registered congregation of the Full Gospel Union. This was his second fine within a year to punish him for conducting outdoor baptisms.

Captain Vasili Kravtsov, head of Gomel District Police which prepared the 2022 case against Pastor Podlobko, insisted that he had violated the law. "Before conducting any religious rituals you need to ask permission from the local Executive Committee," Kravtsov told Forum 18. "He didn't have such permission. This is the law and I am obliged to carry it out." Asked if Pastor Podlobko would have been punished had he and his friends simply been swimming in a pool on his family-owned property, Kravtsov responded: "They weren't swimming in the pool. This was a religious ritual. They are completely different."

After the regime's falsification of the August 2020 presidential election results and violence against people taking part in the ongoing protests, public events to pray for Belarus and for an end to violence by the regime increased. The regime has increasingly used Administrative Code Article 24.23 against public protests of any kind by anyone, including those taking part in public prayer events.

Censorship and "extremism"

The regime imposes compulsory prior state censorship of and restrictions on distribution of most religious literature and objects. Only registered religious organisations can establish companies to produce religious literature. Shops selling religious literature require permission to do this from local administrations.

This censorship is overseen by the country's senior religious affairs official, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. 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. "Expert analyses" can take up to three months, making timely delivery of imported religious publications impossible. One religious community told Forum 18 in January 2023 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, published by Jehovah's Witnesses.

Censorship can also take place outside the formal state procedures, as when the regime on 23 August 2020 without warning halted state radio broadcasts of Catholic Mass on Sundays. Catholic Mass had been broadcast regularly since the 1990s, and has been widely listened to by many Catholics, especially those who are elderly, sick, or living in rural areas far from a Catholic church. No explanation was given, and state broadcaster Belteleradio refused to answer Forum 18's questions. Regular broadcast of Sunday Mass resumed at the end of 2021.

No individual or belief community is able to have a religious FM broadcasting band radio station, despite several attempts.

Formal state censorship runs in parallel with the threat of banning texts or websites as allegedly "extremist". The regime began publishing the "Republican List of Extremist Materials" listing such court-ordered bans in 2008.

After protests against the regime's fraudulent August 2020 elections began, the regime expanded its use of the "Republican List of Extremist Materials" and a range of Criminal Code and Administrative Code articles to target belief-based protests against election fraud, regime violence, and Russia's renewed February 2022 invasion of Ukraine (see below).

Such targeting of protests includes use of Administrative Code Article 19.11 ("Distribution, production, storage and transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activities, or promoting such activities") against religious community leaders.

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 from Minsk on 5 January 2023. He refused to discuss anything else about why religious publications are banned and put the phone down.

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". A 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 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. These include Islamic and Protestant Christian books discussing these beliefs.

Authors have told Forum 18 that they were not told of the investigation or court hearings which led to the bans. One such author, Azerbaijani Muslim theologian Elmir Kuliyeu, whose book "The Way to the Koran" was banned in March 2014, questioned why his and other such books are banned. "In whose interests is the ban on such books?" he asked Forum 18. "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."

None of the religious books on the Republican List of Extremist Materials 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.

In late 2022, police in Brest found on the Greek Catholic Belarusian-language news website Tsarkva (Church) 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 Lenin District Court in Brest declared the Tsarkva website "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 Information Ministry's website, on 26 December. The editors took the pages offline.

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 against within the 15-day deadline.

Deputy Information Minister 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," he claimed to Forum 18. "You need to apply officially."

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.

Repression of belief-based protests against election fraud and invasion of Ukraine

Amid a continuing crackdown on civil society, Lukashenko's regime is pressuring religious communities to support it. The regime has also sought to ban prayers for political prisoners.

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.

In summer 2021 the Belarusian Orthodox Church is known 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 2021. 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 removed Fr Kukhta from office.

One of the other clergy removed by the Orthodox Church was Archbishop Artemy (Kishchenko) 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."

Between August and December 2020 the regime denied Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, then-head of the Catholic Church, the second largest religious community, re-entry to his own country. Other religious communities condemned this, including Orthodox believers who launched a campaign "Orthodox with Metropolitan Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz". The Pentecostal Union stated that the Archbishop had "raised his voice in defence of peace, mercy and unity, and in condemnation of violence, lies and hatred. This is the spiritual, moral and ethical duty of any clergy member, and does not represent political activity."

The regime allowed Archbishop Kondrusiewicz's return on 24 December 2020 following a letter to Aleksandr Lukashenko from Pope Francis. The day the Archbishop reached the age of 75 on 3 January 2021 he offered his resignation to Pope Francis (as all Catholic Bishops must do). The same day the Pope accepted the resignation, and immediately appointed the also 75-year-old but almost 8 months older Bishop Kazimierz Wielikosielec as temporary diocesan administrator in the Archbishop's place.

In March 2021, inspections began in Catholic churches in various parts of Belarus after prosecutors launched a criminal case against the Union of Poles, human rights defender group Christian Vision noted. 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.

Earlier, in November 2020, prosecutors had begun an investigation into the YouTube and other social media accounts of Fr Vyacheslav Barok, parish priest of Rasony in the northern Vitebsk Region. Three weeks later, Fr Barok was jailed on 3 December for 10 days for publishing on Instagram a copy of a poster, Stop Lukashism!, by Belarusian artist Vladimir Tsesler.

On 1 July 2021, police visited Fr Barok's parish, and 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. 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.

Police said they had opened a case against Fr Barok under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"), and 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 2021 from First Deputy Prosecutor of Vitebsk Region Denis Shapovalov about posting "extremist" materials on the internet. "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 [Belarusian Orthodox pro-regime] 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 on 4 July 2021, 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 left the Rasony parish without a priest.

Public Prosecutor Aleksandr Kazakevich claimed to Forum 18 on 23 July 2021 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.

On 3 November 2021, Rasony District Court banned as "extremist" a YouTube video of a Prayer for Belarus gathering on the streets of Warsaw on 17 July 2021 which Fr 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.

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 2021, Lukashenko threatened people allegedly wanting "to crush our sovereign state" under the banner of the Nazis. He

claimed 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 "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 2021. "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". He concluded: "Why can't we sing 'Mighty God'? A rhetorical question.."

An official of Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Rumak's office claimed to Forum 18 on 15 July 2021 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.

Under a 2 February 2021 Council of Ministers Decree setting out events for 2021, described as "the year of national unity", Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs 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 2021, 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 2021 services. Rumak's letter to the Minsk-Mogilev Catholic Archdiocese, drafted by Andrei Aryayev (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 – who then put the phone down - that Plenipotentiary Rumak would not talk to Forum 18. Aryayev's phone was not answered.

In the run-up to the 3 July 2021 "For Belarus" prayer day, First Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications Aleksei Lyakhnovich sent a letter to all organisations under the Ministry's control. He repeated word for word the instructions Rumak had issued "to organise the participation in this event of representatives of organisations in accordance with their religious affiliation".

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".

About 50 uniformed officials of the Emergency Situations Ministry attended a service at Vitebsk's Assumption Orthodox cathedral on 3 July 2021. A short video of the service, posted by the Ministry the same day, does not appear to show anyone who was not an official taking part in the service.

On 3 July 2021, 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," human rights defender group Christian Vision, noted, "information emerged that the authorities are putting pressure on the organisers not to have the hymn sung."

Dmitry Korneyenko, an Orthodox Christian from Vitebsk, stated that the regime was forcing state employees to attend Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) 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 2021. "Dozens of employees of the Emergency Situations Ministry of Vitebsk Region were forcibly summoned to provide an image of large numbers attending."

Denis Zakharov, head of personnel at Vitebsk Emergency Situations Department, refused on 23 July to answer when Forum 18 asked whether attendance at the Orthodox prayer service had been voluntary.

When Forum 18 on 15 July 2021 asked an official of the Plenipotentiary's Office why the regime had ordered religious communities to hold prayers for Belarus on 3 July, he replied: "There were no orders. You have distorted information."

Regime officials frequently issue orders to Orthodox leaders. On 10 June 2021, 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 obey the regime's 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 2021. "They could agree or not agree – it was only a proposal." The official refused to discuss anything else and put the phone down.

Renewed invasion of Ukraine

From February 2022, the regime's main focus of its freedom of religion and belief and related human rights violations has been monitoring, threatening, and punishing religious leaders and people opposing Russia's 24 February 2022 renewed invasion of Ukraine, 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.

On 3 March 2022, about 100 mothers of young men serving in Belarus' armed forces attended the regular evening prayer service 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 partly launched from Belarus.

OMON riot police and ordinary police were already waiting for the mothers when they arrived for the 6.00 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.

Just before the service started, police arrested journalist Dziana Seradzyuk and her husband. A court jailed both the following day for 15 days.

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. "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. Police came the following day to the home of a fifth woman who had prayed at the cathedral, but she was not at home.

Neither Minsk's Central District Police, nor Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Rumak, would explain the regime's actions to Forum 18.

Human rights defenders think that the regime is targeting for prosecution religious leaders prominent in their local communities, if they publicly oppose regime violence following the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, or oppose Belarus' role in Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine.

Of two Catholic priests targeted in March 2022 in the northern Vitebsk Region, Fr Aleksandr Baran was given a 10-day jail term under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration") for having the white-red-white flag of Belarus which is associated with the opposition, as well as a Ukrainian flag on his social media profile. He added the Ukrainian flag the day Russia invaded Ukraine.

Police also accused Fr Baran under Administrative Code Article 19.11 ("Distribution, production, storage and transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activities, or promoting such activities") for likes and comments during 2020 on social media pages which the regime later deemed to be "extremist".

On 13 May 2022, a court fined Fr Andrzej Bulczak – a Polish citizen who has served for 14 years in Belarus – over three weeks' average wages in absentia. He had posted a YouTube video of less than three minutes recounting a letter a girl wrote 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. Fr Bulczak had fled

the country ahead of a court hearing that could have jailed him.

On 25 March 2022, police raided the home of Baptist Pastor Roman Rozhdestvensky in Cherikov. A court fined him about two weeks' average wage under Administrative Code Article 19.11. The same day police in Mogilev raided the home of Greek Catholic priest Fr Vasily Yegorov. A court fined him more than one month's average wage under Administrative Code Article 24.23 for displaying a "Ukraine, forgive us" sticker on his car.

Fr Baran, who was given a 10-day jail term, spoke to the police about why he was being singled out. "I tried to explain to them that hundreds of thousands of Belarusians at that time posted similar likes [of pages protesting against regime violence and election falsification] – does it follow that they too should be prosecuted?" he told Katolik.life.

Fr Baran observed that the regime is "meddling in the life of every person, in the life of the Church, they want to destroy its authority and shut people's mouths". He commented after his arrest that "they were already prepared for my arrest; there were piles of papers and some other documents about me lying there."

Police in Postavy refused to discuss with Forum 18 why it had taken action against both Fr Baran and Fr Bulczak. When the case against Fr Bulczak reached court, the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Rumak, told Fr Bulczak's bishop that he had stripped the priest of his permission to conduct religious work in Belarus. A colleague of Rumak refused to explain his actions to Forum 18.

The regime also targets priests of the regime-supporting Moscow Patriarchate Belarusian Orthodox Church if they oppose the regime and Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine. In April 2022, local police summoned Fr Andrei Nozdrin, who led the St Spyridon of Trimython parish in Grodno, 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, and both the regime and the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Veniamin have banned it (see above).

"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."

On 25 April 2022, Grodno's October District Police wrote to Fr Nozdrin warning him against alleged "extremist violations and crimes". Fr Nozdrin told Forum 18 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 said he will continue to teach these "Christian principles".

On 18 May 2022, Archbishop Antony (Doronin) of Grodno dismissed Fr Nozdrin from all his diocesan roles, and transferred him away from Grodno to a small village. 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.

Police refused to discuss the case with Forum 18, and Grodno Diocese spokesperson Fr Igor Danilchik insisted on 2 June 2022 that Fr Nozdrin's transfer was Archbishop Antony's decision alone without 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.

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 frequently launches campaigns against clergy and others she does not like), 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 regime-supporting Moscow Patriarchate Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Veniamin (Tupeko), banned Fr Dionisy from further religious service on 4 January 2023. Fr Dionisy's prayer had "aroused confusion among parishioners", Metropolitan Veniamin claimed in his letter to deans in Minsk Diocese, made public by human rights defender group Christian Vision.

Political prisoners' freedom of religion or belief

The regime has jailed an increasing number of political prisoners since protests broke out against the falsified presidential elections of August 2020. Many have been tortured, and political prisoners are frequently denied other human rights such as freedom of religion and belief.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, in her 4 May 2022 report to the UN Human Rights Council (A/HRC/47/49 (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/332/24/PDF/G2233224.pdf?OpenElement>)) stated: "The conditions in places of deprivation of liberty, pretrial detention centres and prisons are deeply concerning. Prisoners convicted on politically

motivated charges and persons arrested and detained for exercising their civil and political rights report widespread use of force and continued ill-treatment, which also includes overcrowding and unsanitary conditions."

Special Rapporteur Marin also observed that "the systemic impunity for crimes of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in Belarus compels human rights groups to seek justice abroad".

Such violations also affect the freedom of religion or belief. Prison authorities insist on removing from prisoners all jewellery and neck crosses – such as baptismal crosses commonly worn by Orthodox Christians. This is despite 2004 and 2016 Interior Ministry Decrees which allow prisoners to have "objects of religious cult for individual use for body or pocket wear, except for piercing and cutting objects, items made of precious metals, stones or of cultural and historical value".

Following his short-term jailing in September 2020, Dmitry Korneyenko, an Orthodox Christian from Vitebsk, the following month described the removal of his cross as the "greatest unhappiness in the conditions of my detention, as a believer". Noting that he understood the need to remove sharp metal objects and laces from prisoners, he questioned why the prison authorities had not worked out a way to deal with prisoners' neck crosses. "At almost all stages of my detention, I tried to find out how this prohibition could be circumvented, which greatly disturbed my religious feelings," Korneyenko added.

The prison authorities similarly demanded the removal of Korneyenko's cross during a subsequent short-term jail term handed down in January 2021, human rights defender group Christian Vision noted on 28 February 2021. His cross was taken and held with his other property during his entire jailing.

On 16 November 2020, an Orthodox Christian from Minsk, Roman Abramchuk, recounted how police had cut jewellery and crosses from the necks of those they detained, including himself. He had asked the police officer to at least leave his cross. "So he cut it off with particular harshness and threw it under his feet."

On 30 June 2021, an Interior Ministry decree (which came into force on 23 September) removed the right of those held in pre-trial Investigation Prison from subscribing to newspapers and magazines. In most cases this targets political prisoners, according to a human rights defender of the A Country to Live In Foundation (which helps political prisoners).

"Generally religious literature subscriptions are prohibited, as well as handing them in," the human rights defender commented to Forum 18 on 2 November 2021. "They may restrict people in taking meals, but to leave them without being able to read religious literature is inhuman and cruel."

Nastassia Yemeliyanava told Forum 18 that prison authorities sometimes handed over religious books (including the Bible and prayer books) she had sent to her son Mikita Yemalyianau, but parcels with books are limited to 2 kilograms per year. Her son had no problem subscribing to the "Catholic Herald", a monthly newspaper of the Vitebsk Roman Catholic Diocese, while he was being held in Investigation Prison No. 1 in Minsk and in Temporary Detention Centre No. 8 in Zhodino. He was also allowed to subscribe to it for the first six months of 2021 when he was in Mogilev Prison No. 4. However, prison officials did not hand to him the May 2021 edition and denied his request to renew the subscription until the end of 2021.

On 16 June 2021, the then-Acting Governor of Prison No. 4, Dmitry Yeliseyenko, claimed that the refusal was due to Criminal Enforcement Code Article 89, Part 2, which prohibits prisoners "to receive, acquire, store and distribute publications promoting war, incitement to racial, national and religious hatred, violence or cruelty, and publications of a pornographic nature; as well as subscribing to them". He did not specify which part of the "Catholic Herald" contained the prohibited information.

Prison Governor Yeliseyenko also wrongly claimed that prisoner of conscience Yemalyianau did not apply to subscribe to the "Catholic Herald" for the second half of 2021. His mother noted that prison officials had crossed out this newspaper by hand from the list of publications that prisoners could subscribe to.

Clergy visits are also denied. After her 18 March 2021 arrest, Olga Zolotar repeatedly requested a visit from a Catholic priest, as did Catholic representatives. However, the Investigative Committee which was handling the criminal case against her refused such permission. Finally, on 2 June 2021, the prison administration allowed a visit by the Vatican nuncio, Archbishop Ante Jozic. Zolotar's mother earlier tried to hand in a prayer book for her, but the prison administration refused it.

While awaiting trial in Minsk's Investigation Prison No. 1 up till April 2021, Pavel Severinets requested a visit from an Orthodox priest in writing on at least five occasions, while his wife Volha requested such a clergy visit on three occasions. Representatives of religious organisations also requested visits with him. However, over nine months not one pastoral visit was permitted.

Denials of clergy visits are in violation of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3 (https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)). Rule 65 states: "Access to a qualified representative of any religion shall not be refused to any prisoner."

Current or former political prisoners have noted the difficulty of attending the limited meetings for worship allowed in prisons. The

administration of Prison No. 24 at Zarechye in Gomel Region prevented Orthodox Christian Yelena Movshuk from attending a worship service in the prison on 25 August 2021. The prison administration refused the Orthodox chaplain access to her.

A nurse from Vitebsk, Yuliya Kasheverova, was freed from prison on 16 September 2021 after nearly a year in detention, mostly spent in Prison No. 4 in Gomel. "In the labour camp there were courses in a foreign language and economics," she told the Reflection blog on 21 September, "but we, political prisoners, were not allowed to attend clubs, the church, the gym or places of study."

Denials of access to worship meetings and religious literature also violate the Mandela Rules, Rule 66 stating: "So far as practicable, every prisoner shall be allowed to satisfy the needs of his or her religious life by attending the services provided in the prison and having in his or her possession the books of religious observance and instruction of his or her denomination."

On 15 July 2021, Forum 18 asked the Department for the Implementation of Punishments of the Interior Ministry in Minsk in writing why prison administrations deny prisoners' (particularly political prisoners) freedom of religion or belief, including the right to have clergy visits and to receive and have religious literature and objects, such as neck crosses. Forum 18 has not yet (in January 2023) received a reply. Such violations continue.

Prisoners' freedom of religion or belief in Belarusian law

The regime's treatment of its prisoners often contravenes its own published law, as well as international human rights standards. Article 12 of the Criminal Enforcement Code guarantees prisoners serving sentences freedom of religious belief, where prisoners "are allowed individually or with other prisoners" to profess, express and share any faith "and participate in carrying out religious worship, rituals and rites not banned in law". They are also allowed to have and use religious objects and literature.

However, Article 12 restricts the ability to exercise this freedom by this statement: "In conducting religious worship, rituals and rites, the Rules for internal order of prisons or the rights of others who have been sentenced must not be violated."

Under Article 174 of the Criminal Enforcement Code, prisoners sentenced to death are allowed visits from a priest. However, against the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules, A/C.3/70/L.3 (https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/GA-RESOLUTION/E_ebook.pdf)), such prisoners may not be granted pastoral visits they request. Death-row prisoners are informed of their executions only minutes beforehand, making final meetings with families and others such as clergy impossible.

Paragraphs 116 and 117 of Interior Ministry Decree of 13 January 2004 (most recently amended on 30 June 2021) on the rules for investigation prisons, and a similar Interior Ministry Decree of 30 November 2016 (most recently amended on 2 August 2021) related to Temporary Detention Centres, make provision for prisoners on remand to have religious literature and other objects, as well as receive visits from clergy.

"Persons on remand are allowed to have with them and use religious literature, objects of religious cult for individual use for body or pocket wear, except for piercing and cutting objects, items made of precious metals, stones or of cultural and historical value," Paragraph 116 of the 2004 Interior Ministry Decree states.

"In order to provide spiritual assistance to persons on remand, at their request and with the permission of the body conducting the criminal proceedings, it is allowed to invite representatives of religious denominations registered in the Republic of Belarus to the pre-trial detention centre," Paragraph 117 states. "The services of the ministers of religious confessions are paid at the expense of the persons who are held on remand."

Rules for prisoners serving sentences in prisons (as set out in a 20 October 2000 Interior Ministry Decree, most recently amended in 2021) and in open prisons (as set out in a 13 January 2017 Interior Ministry Decree) note that prisons can have places of worship. However, the rules contain no guarantees of freedom of religion or belief for prisoners.

Religious property

Many communities without formal places of worship find it impossible to get property redesignated so that it can legally be used for worship. Without a designated place of worship, the legal exercise of freedom of religion and belief requires advance state permission. Officials often refuse this permission. Protestant communities have generally found it impossible to get property redesignated so that it can be used for worship in line with the law. Orthodox and Catholic communities are less affected, partly because they are more likely to occupy designated historically preserved places of worship.

Many places of worship confiscated in the Soviet era were in the 1990s returned to their original Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish community owners – if the communities were registered - at the request of communities.

Only a few historical places of worship remain in the state's possession, as their return was not requested in the 1990s. Subsequently,

many of these religious communities have repeatedly but unsuccessfully applied for ownership to be restored to them. In these cases, the state pays for continued maintenance of the building, and the religious community which uses the building pays an amount to the state as rent and for utility charges. There is no time limit for how long these agreements continue. Catholic journalist Maksim Hacak suggested to Forum 18 in August 2020 that the authorities are not now willing to transfer ownership back as "it's always easier to blackmail the communities using property they do not own".

One such case is in Minsk, where the Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) is facing a large financial bill from the state for work on the church facade. It is thought that the authorities only did the work to make the outside of the building look good for tourists such as visitors to the 2019 European Games. The Church also faces demands for just under 13,000 Belarusian Roubles a month in rent to state-run Minsk Heritage, to which ownership of the church has been handed. As Red Church parish priest Fr Stanislav Stanevsky asked independent news agency Naviny.by in July 2020: "Why should we pay the state 13,000 Belarusian Roubles a month to pray in our own church?"

Also, the parish was not told before the work how much the authorities would charge the parish. People associated with the Red Church told Forum 18 that they think that it would take them at least 75 years to pay the authorities the current amount they are demanding. "It looks like the state without asking the parish decided to give us a large debt, and now demands that we pay them," Catholics told Forum 18.

Minsk Heritage would not explain why it is unilaterally imposing a large bill, or refusing to return the Church to Catholics. The latest refusal was in June 2020, and a parishioner-launched petition asking the Presidential Administration to return ownership of the Red Church to the parish gained 5,000 signatures within the first week.

In the early hours of 26 September 2022 a fire broke out in the sacristy, an annexe to the Red Church. Katolik.life noted the following day that two windows were found to have been broken at the entrance close to where the fire broke out, and that OMON riot police had closed off the square three hours before the fire. Parishioners told Katolik.life that, according to the Church watchman, "before the smoke appeared in the church, a rumble was heard". The Investigative Committee arrived practically together with the Emergency Situations Ministry, which parishioners described as "strange and ambiguous". Katolik.life also noted that Investigators took away computers and video surveillance recordings.

The parish has not been given access to information about the course of the investigation. The parish has sent a request to the Investigative Committee to provide information on the results.

Both Moscow District Police and the Investigative Committee refused to discuss with Forum 18 the suspicious circumstances of the fire and the progress of the investigation.

On 5 October 2022, Minsk Heritage, the building agency that has control of the Church, ordered the parish to remove all its property from the entire building by 12 October. Officials have given no timetable for the repairs they claim to be undertaking.

"Despite the small area of damage, the entire church is sealed and not accessible to the public for holding services," the parish complained in an online petition for the Church to be reopened for worship. It called for services to be allowed to resume in the main part of the Church, the side chapels, or the yard outside the Church.

Minsk Heritage refused to explain to Forum 18 why access to the church was banned when only a small part of it was damaged, when restoration works will start, and whether the cost for repair works will be charged to the parish.

Catholics in Mogilev, Grodno, Bobruisk and Niasvitzh are all also trying without success to regain ownership of their own historical churches which they already use.

One of the longest-running property cases is New Life Church, which bought its building - a former cowshed on the western edge of Minsk - in 2002. The Church converted the building into its place of worship, turning it into a spacious, modern structure, but the authorities have refused to change its legal designation as a cowshed. This is in contrast to a disused railway carriage 500 metres from New Life's building which was without regime obstruction used from January 2001 by a Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) community. That community has now built a church, also without any regime obstruction.

The regime repeatedly tried to evict New Life Church from 2009 onwards. On 17 February 2021, 30 police and court bailiffs forcibly evicted New Life from its building, using an angle grinder to cut the door lock to gain entry. The bailiff's enforcement order was signed by Aleksey Petrukovich, and he refused to explain to Forum 18 why the eviction happened and why force was used.

The Enforcement Department claimed it was executing an order of the Higher Economic Court in January 2009. The Secretary of the Head of the Enforcement Department refused to explain to Forum 18 on 18 February 2021 why the city authorities decided to evict the Church over 12 years later.

One New Life Church member suspected that the reason for the sudden eviction was that New Life recorded and on 21 November

2020 posted on its YouTube channel a video by church members protesting against the regime's violence against protestors objecting to election fraud.

After being ousted from its own place of worship, New Life Church held its worship services in the car park outside each Sunday, whatever the weather.

Artyom Tsuran, a Deputy Chair of Minsk City Executive Committee, subsequently rejected all New Life Church's attempts to seek permission to hold meetings either in the car park, or to have their church building returned to them.

On 1 August 2022 Tsuran wrote warning the Church that it had broken the law by holding Sunday meetings for worship in the church car park on 26 June and 24 July without official permission. He warned that if the "violation" is repeated within a year, the regime's Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs could go to court to liquidate the Church, with a possible ban on its activity as the court considers the suit.

On 1 September 2022, New Life wrote to Minsk City Executive Committee requesting permission for Sunday worship meetings in the Church's car park. Deputy Chair Tsuran replied on 15 September denying permission based on Decree No. 49 of the Council of Ministers requiring the payments of event fees to the regime in advance (see above), and claiming that New Life had not supplied the information required by the Mass Events Law (see above). The Church replied on 16 September "with all the requested information about our meetings" (seen by Forum 18).

On 19 September 2022, Frunze District Police summoned New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and detained him for several hours. The same day a court fined him two months' average wages under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"). On 22 September 2022, the same court fined Pastor Antoni Bokun of Minsk's John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, who regularly supported New Life Church, about two months' average wages under Article 24.23 after police had detained him overnight.

On 25 September 2022, police banned the Church's Sunday meeting for worship held outdoors in its car park, threatening to detain anyone who did not leave. This forced New Life to halt the in-person worship meetings it had held in the church car park every Sunday, whatever the weather, since the February 2021 forcible eviction. The Church continues to hold meetings online or in other churches' premises.

On 28 September 2022, Deputy Chair Tsuran of Minsk City Executive Committee replied to Pastor Goncharenko's 16 September letter insisting that all meetings must have prior state approval. He added that, as Pastor Goncharenko had been punished for leading an unapproved mass meeting, he could not organise any meetings.

Neither Tsuran of Minsk Executive Committee nor Olga Chemodanova, Head of the Ideology Department (who drafted Tsuran's letters), would answer Forum 18's questions on 3 October 2022.

Controls on foreigners

The regime strictly controls the exercise by foreign citizens of their freedom of religion and belief, and only belief communities that have state permission to exist can invite foreigners to work with them. The Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs alone decides whether the religious work by a foreign citizen is "necessary", and can refuse permission without giving any reason.

Only registered religious communities are allowed to invite foreign citizens for any public religious activity. If the state grants such permission it is only valid for the one religious community which has obtained it.

Under a January 2008 Council of Ministers Decree (most recently amended in July 2018), permission for foreign citizens to work for religious purposes (whether as a resident or as a visitor) is given or refused by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. Foreign citizens must demonstrate knowledge of Belarus' state languages (Belarusian and Russian) in order to perform religious work. The Plenipotentiary defines the period of permission (up to one year), can at any time withdraw permission, and is not obliged to communicate the reasons for a refusal.

If the Plenipotentiary decides to give permission for a foreign religious worker to work, the regional Executive Committee's [local authority] Ideology Department is responsible for issuing a certificate specifying in which single religious community the individual can work, and the exact dates for which permission is given (usually three months, six months, or one year).

The Plenipotentiary may refuse permission for a foreign religious worker to conduct religious work without giving any reason. Such decisions are entirely within the Plenipotentiary's power and are difficult for the communities which have invited them to challenge.

The Catholic Church is the community most hit by such controls on foreigners invited to serve in the country, though the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) has also faced denials of permission to serve.

Such permission can be suddenly withdrawn, without any reason being given. On 2 September 2020, the Plenipotentiary's office wrote to the Catholic Bishop of Vitebsk, Oleg Butkevich, cancelling without any explanation the permission to work and say Mass of Fr Jerzy Wilk. The Plenipotentiary gave the Bishop only one day's notice of the cancellation, which came into effect on 3 September 2020, according to the letter seen by Forum 18.

Fr Wilk was parish priest of St Michael the Archangel Church in the village of Voropaevo, about 200 kms (125 miles) west of Vitebsk. He had been working in Belarus since 2003 and has an excellent command of the Belarusian language. Fr Viktor Misevich of Vitebsk Diocese told Forum 18 in September 2020 that Fr Wilk "has never violated the law, is sociable and dynamic in his parish activities. He even plays football for Vitebsk Diocese." A Polish citizen, Fr Wilk had the necessary permission to work as a priest from the Plenipotentiary, valid until 14 February 2021.

The Head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office, Andrei Aryayev, refused to explain to Forum 18 why Fr Wilk's right to work as a priest was suddenly revoked.

In the most recently known case, Polish citizen Fr Jozef Geza had served as Catholic parish priest in the western city of Grodno since 1997. In late 2022, Plenipotentiary Rumak refused Fr Geza's bishop's request to extend permission for him to continue to serve in the country. After his last Mass in Grodno's Holy Redeemer Church on 27 December, Fr Geza left Belarus after 25 years' service.

Aryayev of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs refused to say why Plenipotentiary Rumak had refused the bishop's request to extend Fr Geza's right to conduct religious work. "Under the law of Belarus, the Plenipotentiary has the right not to comment on such decisions," Aryayev told Forum 18. "He won't comment." Aryayev too refused to comment on the decision.

Fear of expulsion is a strong factor for the Catholic Church, about 80 of whose approximately 500 priests were in 2020 foreign citizens. In 2006 more than 125 of its then around 250 priests were foreign citizens.

Legally-resident foreign citizens who are not religious workers are banned from any active participation – as against passive attendance – in religious communities. Two warnings within one year or the failure to end a "violation" can lead to the stripping of a community's registration and so permission to legally exist.

The Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs has also refused Protestant and Catholic communities permission to invite specific individuals from abroad to take part in religious meetings.

An end to human rights violations?

The current Belarusian regime's decisions are arbitrary and unpredictable, showing increasing lack of respect for the rule of law and Belarus' legally binding international human rights obligations. There is no sign of the current regime ending its violations of freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of the people it rules. (END)

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

Previous surveys of freedom of religion and belief in Belarus (<http://www.forum18.org/analyses.php?region=16>)

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)

Follow us on Twitter @Forum_18 (https://twitter.com/forum_18)

Follow us on Facebook @Forum18NewsService (<https://www.facebook.com/Forum18NewsService>)

Follow us on Telegram @Forum18NewsService (<https://t.me/s/forum18newsservice>)

All Forum 18 material may be referred to, quoted from, or republished in full, if Forum 18 is credited as the source.

All photographs that are not Forum 18's copyright are attributed to the copyright owner. If you reuse any photographs from Forum 18's website, you must seek permission for any reuse from the copyright owner or abide by the copyright terms the copyright owner has chosen.

© Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved. ISSN 1504-2855.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY