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BELARUS: "Low status" prisoners denied prison church visits

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

The administration of Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk deemed political prisoner Vadim Yermashuk to be "low status" (alongside more than 100 other prisoners) and thus banned from attending the camp's Orthodox church. "When my brother died I was not even allowed to go to light a candle for him." Another political prisoner, Yahor Martsinovich, expressed shock at the ban. Forum 18 was unable to reach camp officials. Political prisoners are particularly targeted for denial of rights. Protestant political prisoner Vladimir Matskevich has had no visit from a pastor since his 2021 arrest.

Inmates the prison authorities have deemed "low status" are refused access to the limited religious services held by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in prisons, a former political prisoner and Orthodox Christian Vadim Yermashuk told Forum 18. He was held in Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk in Mogilev Region from March 2022 to June 2024. "Not once in all that time was I allowed to attend services in church. When my brother died I was not even allowed to go to light a candle for him."

Another former prisoner of the camp, Yahor Martsinovich, noted in October 2023 that "not much can shock me", but that "he still can't comprehend" why "low status" prisoners were banned from attending the camp's Orthodox church (see below).

Prisoners with "low status" – a category not officially acknowledged – includes some of those convicted of sex crimes (but not murderers) and a few political prisoners. They are shunned by other prisoners, given menial and degrading tasks, and are often insulted by staff and other prisoners. Yermashuk said about 5 per cent of inmates at Labour Camp No. 2 – more than 100 prisoners – were in this category when he was there. Many wanted to attend church, he added (see below).

Despite his "low status", Yermashuk attended Baptist meetings for worship in the camp. These were held not in the chapel but in an office made available to them and led by a visiting pastor. "However, it was bad for them afterwards," he told Forum 18. "The prison administration then banned the pastor from visiting the prison" (see below).

Each time Forum 18 called any of the numbers at Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk, the lines appeared to be diverted to fax machines (see below).

Other prisoners also face restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief in prison. In 2023, the administration of the women's Labour Camp No. 4 in Gomel banned some inmates – including political prisoners – from attending the church in the prison. The administration of Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov in Mogilev Region banned a political prisoner from attending the prison's Orthodox church. In 2023, the prison administration of Labour Camp No. 15 in Mogilev banned political prisoner Denis Ivashin from attending the church in the camp (see below).

Those held in Investigation Prison also face restrictions. A Catholic held in Investigation Prison twice requested a visit from a Catholic priest. The reply she received stated that a visit by a priest "is not envisaged", as such requests can be submitted only after an individual has been sentenced. The prison administration also banned her from attending the prison's Orthodox church (see below).

The new building of Investigation Prison No. 1 in Minsk – opened in April 2024 – now contains an Orthodox church. The head of the Orthodox Church's prison department Fr Georgy Lopukhov held the first service there on 25 December 2024. "However, traditionally only prisoners from the works detachment are allowed to attend services," the Mayday team from the human rights group Viasna in Mogilev noted (see below).

Those held in Open Prisons also face restrictions. While held at Open Prison No. 46 in Krugloye in Mogilev Region, a police officer refused political prisoner Sergei Vasilyev's request to be allowed to visit the local Catholic church for Mass. The officer claimed that Catholic churches "are not on the list of places that prisoners are allowed to visit" (see below).

Those serving restricted freedom sentences can also face restrictions. Regina Lavor, a Catholic from Iyve in Grodno Region serving a restricted freedom sentence at home between 2021 and 2023, was allowed to leave her home for only two hours a day and was prohibited from attending church (see below).

Jailed philosopher and Protestant political prisoner Vladimir Matskevich has not once had a visit from a pastor since his 2021 arrest. He would like such a visit, but "knows it is not realistic", his former wife told Forum 18. "He doesn't want to submit a request for a visit from a pastor as he understands that it wouldn't be fulfilled. Any such request angers the prison administration." United Nations human rights mechanisms asked the regime about the denial of permission for pastors to visit Matskevich in 2022. The regime's response did not explain why the visits were denied (see below).

A Protestant in Minsk admitted that the regime has reduced Protestant Churches' access to prisons. "We used to visit more prisons but now there's only one facility left," he told Forum 18. "Another in Volkhovysk is assigned to Baptists." He did not explain why his Church is allowed to visit only one prison when their website indicates that they visit ten. "Belarus is an Orthodox country and Orthodox priests have more access" (see below).

No official at the Department for the Implementation of Punishments of the Interior Ministry in Minsk was prepared to discuss the violations of prisoners' rights to freedom of religion or belief with Forum 18 on 15 January. Forum 18 asked in writing the same day why, despite rights enshrined both in law and in international human rights commitments, many prisoners:

- are denied religious literature or objects;
- are denied meetings with clergy of their choice;
- and denied the possibility of attending prison meetings for worship.

Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Minsk of 16 January.

Longstanding violations of prisoners' rights to freedom of religion or belief

Such violations of prisoners' rights to freedom of religion or belief – particularly for political prisoners - are longstanding (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2696). As of 16 January, Viasna (Spring) human rights group recognises 1,245 people as political prisoners (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>).

A 4 October 2023 survey

(<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/ushhemlenie-svobody-religii-v-otnoshenii-zaklyuchennyh-soderzhashhihsya-pod-strazhej-zaderzhannyh-i-arestovannyh/>) by the Christian Vision group (which documents violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights, and whose social media sites and logo the regime has declared to be "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2874)) noted five main areas of concern:

- forcible seizure of religious items;
- difficulties accessing religious literature;
- difficulties subscribing to religious publications;
- difficulties over pastoral visits to pre-trial prisoners;
- and obstructions to religious life of sentenced prisoners.

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 includes the provision: "Access to a qualified representative of any religion shall not be refused to any prisoner."

Denials of access to worship meetings and religious literature are also in violation of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Rule 66 declares: "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."

"Low status" prisoners denied entry to prison churches

Inmates the prison authorities have deemed "low status" are refused access to the limited religious services held by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in prisons, a former political prisoner and Orthodox Christian Vadim Yermashuk (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/vadzim-ermaszuk>) told Forum 18 on 13 January.

The regime arrested Yermashuk in August 2021. On 21 December 2021, Shuchin District Court jailed him for three years.

Yermashuk was held in Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk in Mogilev Region from March 2022 to June 2024. "Not once in all that time was I allowed to attend services in church," he told Forum 18. "When my brother died I was not even allowed to go to light a candle for him."

Yermashuk was also banned from getting holy water from the Orthodox priest. He had been able to do so while in Investigation Prison before his trial, he said.

Prisoners with "low status" – a category not officially acknowledged - includes some of those convicted of sex crimes (but not murderers) and a few political prisoners. "The category is the decision of the prison leadership – they could change it," Yermashuk told Forum 18.

"Low status" prisoners are shunned by other prisoners and are not even allowed to shake hands with them. They have the most uncomfortable places to sleep in crowded cells and have to sit at meals and wash separately. They are given menial and degrading tasks, and are often insulted by staff and other prisoners.

Yermashuk said about 5 per cent of inmates at Labour Camp No. 2 – more than 100 prisoners – were in this category. "Many of these wanted to attend church," he told Forum 18. "Murderers and those jailed for corruption could go to church, but not us."

Despite his "low status", Yermashuk attended Baptist meetings for worship as Baptists welcomed any prisoners. These were held not in the chapel but in an office made available to them and led by a visiting pastor. "However, it was bad for them afterwards," he told Forum 18. "The prison administration then banned the pastor from visiting the prison." The Baptists continued to meet for worship but without a pastor.

Another former prisoner of Labour Camp No. 2 was the journalist Yahor Martsinovich (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/jahor-marcinovicz>). The regime arrested him in July 2021. On 15 March 2022, a Minsk court jailed him for two and a half years for "damaging property". The regime transferred him to Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk in June 2022. He was freed from there on 18 August 2023.

Martsinovich noted on Facebook on 4 October 2023 that "not much can shock me", but that "he still can't comprehend" why "low status" prisoners were banned from attending the camp's Orthodox church. "Well, according to your own philosophy, God loves everyone, doesn't he?" he asked rhetorically. He noted that Baptist meetings for worship in the camp were open to all.

Yermashuk said that neither Orthodox nor Catholic priests were known to have objected to the bans on "low status" prisoners attending meetings for worship in Labour Camp No. 2.

Each time Forum 18 called any of the numbers at Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk on 15 January, the lines appeared to be diverted to fax machines.

Religious freedom of political prisoners restricted

Prison administrations also restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief of those jailed for opposing the regime on political grounds. Many are refused permission to attend the limited meetings for worship allowed in prisons, prevented from meeting priests or other religious leaders, and denied access to religious literature of their choice.

"Catholic priests visit prisons, but can't visit political prisoners," a Catholic priest who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 on 14 January. "Prison administrations tell the priest that the prisoners don't want a visit, while the prison administrations tell the prisoners the priest hasn't visited," the priest added. "All this is done verbally with nothing in writing."

In spring 2023, the administration of the women's Labour Camp No. 4 in Gomel banned some inmates – including political prisoners - from attending the church in the prison, the human rights group Viasna noted on Telegram on 17 April 2023 (https://t.me/prisoners_spring96/2661).

The administration of Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov in Mogilev Region banned a political prisoner from attending the prison's Orthodox church, Christian Vision learnt in September 2023 (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/ushhemlenie-svobody-religii-v-otnoshenii-zaklyuchennyh-soderzhashhihsya-pod-strazhej-zaderzhannyh-i-arestovannyh/>).

The regime arrested the journalist Denis Ivashin (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/dzianis-ivashyn>) on 12 March 2021. On 21 February 2022, Grodno's Lenin District Court jailed him for 13 years and one month. He was initially held in Investigation Prison in Grodno before being transferred to Labour Camp No. 15 in Mogilev in January 2023 to serve his sentence. In June 2023 he was transferred to Prison No. 8 in Zhodino, where he remains.

In 2023, the prison administration in Labour Camp No. 15 in Mogilev banned Ivashin from attending the church in the camp, his

family noted on Telegram on 15 October 2023 (<https://t.me/dzianisivashyn/1684>). Relatives were later able to hand over a prayer book for him.

Clergy meetings, church visits banned in Investigation Prison

Those held in Investigation Prisons – sometimes for many months – are often denied access to meetings for worship, clergy visits and religious literature of their choice. Those arrested for political activity face the greatest restrictions.

The regime arrested the journalist Denis Ivashin (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/dzianis-ivashyn>) on 12 March 2021. On 21 February 2022, Grodno's Lenin District Court jailed him for 13 years and one month. He was initially held in Investigation Prison in Grodno before being transferred to Mogilev in January 2023 to serve his sentence. In June 2023 he was transferred to Prison No. 8 in Zhodino, where he remains.

Ivashin repeatedly asked his family while he was in Grodno Investigation Prison to send him a rosary. "In Grodno prison, when Denis was there, officers fought with his prayer book, Bible, and rosary," his family noted.

"The first rosary was pulled out of his belongings by prison officers without explanation during one of the searches in his cell," Ivashin's family wrote on Telegram on 4 September 2023 (<https://t.me/dzianisivashyn/1617>). "After Denis complained and demanded that the item be returned to him for prayers, the prison psychologist mumbled something incomprehensible about the fact that this item was similar to the rosaries used by experienced 'prisoners', that Denis's possession of a rosary could cause... envy in other prisoners, which could provoke conflicts." The rosary was handed back to his family after Ivashin had been transferred to Mogilev in January 2023.

"The second rosary was taken from Denis again in Grodno by the transport guards when he was being transferred for the announcement of the Supreme Court's [20 December 2022] decision on his appeal. This rosary simply disappeared."

The regime arrested a Catholic and placed her in pre-trial detention in an Investigation Prison. As soon as she arrived there she wrote a request to the prison governor to be allowed a meeting with a Catholic priest. After it was refused she wrote a second similar request. The reply she received stated that a visit by a priest "is not envisaged", as such requests can be submitted only after an individual has been sentenced.

The prison administration also did not allow the Catholic to attend services in the Orthodox church in the pre-trial detention centre, giving a similar reason, she told the Catholic website Katolik.life for a 14 June 2024 article (<https://katolik.life/rus/news/sotsium/item/5407-byvalo-na-pyat-minut-proryvalas-messa-kak-vyglyadit-religioznaya-zhizn-v-tyurme.html>), after she had been freed. The website did not identify her or the place where she was held.

The Catholic noted that on occasion she was able to hear parts at least of the Catholic Mass broadcast on state radio from the Cathedral in Minsk on Sunday mornings, if inspections had been completed by then. She added that friends were able to send her the Gospel readings from Sunday Mass they had written out by hand.

(In July 2024, the Information Ministry blocked access to Katolik.life website in Belarus. On 30 August 2024, Myadel District Court in Minsk Region declared Katolik.life's Telegram channel "extremist".)

The new building of Investigation Prison No. 1 in Minsk – opened in April 2024 – now contains an Orthodox church. The head of the Orthodox Church's prison department Fr Georgy Lopukhov held the first service there on 25 December 2024. "However, traditionally only prisoners from the works detachment are allowed to attend services," the Mayday team from the human rights group Viasna in Mogilev noted on Telegram on 30 December (<https://t.me/MAYDAYMog/4726>).

Open prison inmate banned from attending local church

Human rights defenders told Forum 18 in July 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2672) that prisoners in open prisons can generally visit nearby places of worship if they wish to in non-working time.

The regime arrested Sergei Vasilyev (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/sjarhei-vasileu>), a Catholic from Miory in Vitebsk Region, on 26 August 2021. That year a court sentenced him to three years in an open prison for "slandering" Aleksandr Lukashenko. On 28 December 2021, the regime took him to Open Prison No. 46 in Krugloye in Mogilev Region. He was freed from there on 3 March 2024.

While held at the Open Prison, police Lieutenant Colonel Igor Ivitsky refused Vasilyev's request to be allowed to visit the local Catholic church for Mass. Ivitsky claimed that Catholic churches "are not on the list of places that prisoners are allowed to visit", Christian Vision learnt in February 2023 (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/ushhemlenie-svobody-religii-v-otnoshenii-zaklyuchennyh-soderzhashhihsya-pod-strazhej-zaderzhannyh-i-arestovannyh/>).

Attending places of worship banned for those on restricted freedom sentences

Restricted freedom sentences (popularly known as "home disinfection") are served at home. Individuals are confined to their homes with the exception of a short period each day. However, the regime has banned some political prisoners serving restricted freedom sentences from using the time they are allowed outside the home to attend places of worship.

The regime arrested Regina Lavor (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/rehina-lavor>), a Catholic from Iyve in Grodno Region, on 18 February 2021. On 16 September 2021, Iyve District Court sentenced her to two years' restricted freedom for "insulting officials". She was allowed to leave her home for only two hours a day and was prohibited from attending church, she told Belarus Solidarity Foundation BYSol in May 2023. She left Belarus in April 2023.

No regime response to UN concern about political prisoner's denial of clergy visit

Seven United Nations human rights mandates – including the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention - raised concerns with the regime on 25 February 2022 (BLR 2/2022 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27117>)) about the treatment of political prisoners, including philosopher and Protestant Vladimir Matskevich (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/uladzimir-mackevicz>). The regime arrested him on 4 August 2021 and held him in Investigation Prison No. 1 in Minsk. On 23 June 2022, a closed hearing at Minsk Regional Court jailed him for five years on a range of charges. In February 2023 he was transferred to serve his sentence in Prison No. 4 in Mogilev.

In February 2022, while in pre-trial detention in Investigation Prison No. 1 in Minsk, Matskevich went on a two-week hunger strike to protest against his conditions, including the denial of access to a pastor. Prison authorities refused a visit by both Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of Minsk's New Life Church and Sergei Udalyov of Mogilev's Reformed Church, as it did not have state registration, Christian Vision noted on 4 October 2023 (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/ushhemlenie-svobody-religii-v-otnoshenii-zaklyuchennyh-soderzhashhihsya-pod-strazhej-zaderzhannyh-i-arestovannyh/>).

(In June 2023, officials bulldozed Minsk's New Life's church building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2841). The Supreme Court in Minsk upheld the liquidation of the Church in December 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2883).)

The UN mandates raised concerns in February 2022 about Matskevich's treatment, including about the "impossibility for him to see a protestant priest". They noted that his demand to see a Protestant pastor "was made unfulfillable by the Belarusian authorities in so far as the requirement for a priest to produce legal documents confirming his affiliation with a registered religious organization is hard to fulfill and Belarusian protestant organizations and congregations have been denied registration and are themselves subjected to various forms of repression".

The UN mandates noted that such denials of clergy visits violate 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)).

"Regrettably, no response has been provided to this communication," the UN mandates noted in a 23 October 2024 follow-up message (BLR 6/2024 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=29439>)).

The regime did then respond to the UN on 20 December 2024. However, it did not explain why the Investigation Prison denied Matskevich a visit from a pastor.

Matskevich's former wife Svetlana says he has not once had a visit from a pastor since his 2021 arrest. She said he would like such a visit, but "knows it is not realistic". "He doesn't want to submit a request for a visit from a pastor as he understands that it wouldn't be fulfilled," she told Forum 18 from Poland on 16 January. "Any such request angers the prison administration."

"Belarus is an Orthodox country and Orthodox priests have more access"

Only clergy of registered religious organisations are allowed to visit prisons. Many prisons have Orthodox chapels and some also provide more limited facilities for Catholics. Protestants are allowed occasional visits to some prisons.

The Orthodox Church established a synodal department for its prison ministry in 1994, which works closely with the Department for the Implementation of Punishments of the Interior Ministry. The regime has established chapels for the Orthodox Church in many prisons and its priests have greater access than leaders of other faiths.

"Catholic priests have much more limited possibilities in prisons compared with the Orthodox," a Catholic priest who did not want

to be identified told Forum 18.

A Protestant representative from Minsk has been visiting strict regime Labour Camp No. 14 in Novosady in Minsk Region twice a week for seven years, most recently in December 2024. The camp holds 1,760 prisoners.

"My worship meetings are attended by 100 people," the Protestant told Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 January. "I cannot say that inmates are obstructed from this. Everyone comes if they want to." He said he brings religious literature and small parcels for the prisoners. "We'll resume the visits in February."

The Protestant admitted that the regime has reduced Protestant Churches' access to prisons. "We used to visit more prisons but now there's only one facility left," he told Forum 18. "Another in Volkhovysk is assigned to Baptists." He did not explain why his Church is allowed to visit only one prison when the Church website indicates that they visit ten.

"Belarus is an Orthodox country and Orthodox priests have more access," the Protestant noted.

Prisoners' freedom of religion or belief in Belarusian law

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612). 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 15 August 2024) on the rules for Investigation Prisons, and a similar Interior Ministry Decree of 30 November 2016 (most recently amended on 10 March 2023) 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," declares Paragraph 116 of the 2004 Interior Ministry Decree.

"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. The services of the ministers of religious confessions are paid at the expense of the persons who are held on remand," declares Paragraph 117.

However, the 30 June 2021 amendment to the Interior Ministry Decree of 13 January 2004 stripped those held in Investigation Prison of the right to subscribe to newspapers and magazines. This deprived them of the right to subscribe to any religious publications.

Rules for prisoners serving sentences in prisons (as set out in a 20 October 2000 Interior Ministry Decree, most recently amended on 2 July 2024) and in open prisons (as set out in a 13 January 2017 Interior Ministry Decree, most recently amended on 23 December 2024) note that prisons can have places of worship. However, the rules contain no guarantees of freedom of religion or belief for prisoners. (END)

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

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