

2 May 2025

BELARUS: "They decided to fabricate a case and accuse him of espionage"

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

On 1 April, the Supreme Court rejected Catholic priest Henryk Okolotovich's appeal against his 11-year jail term on treason charges. Both his trial and appeal were closed. In a message from prison, he denied "espionage for Poland and the Vatican". He rejected pressure to implicate the country's Catholic bishops. "Priests are being persecuted to shut our mouths, so that the Catholic Church does not tell the truth." Even before his arrest, the 65-year-old had suffered a heart attack and had part of his stomach removed due to cancer.

On 16 November 2023, officials arrested Catholic priest Fr Henryk Okolotovich and detained him in the KGB secret police Investigation Prison in Minsk. On 30 December 2024, Minsk Regional Court handed him an 11-year jail term on treason charges at a closed trial. He was also ordered to pay a massive financial penalty. On 1 April 2025, a week before his 65th birthday, the Supreme Court in Minsk rejected his appeal. Hearings were again closed. He was then sent to a Labour Camp in Bobruisk to begin serving his sentence.

Fr Okolotovich – who was parish priest in Volozhin in Minsk Region - vigorously rejected the accusations. It is known that during the investigation, he refused to implicate the country's Catholic bishops, despite pressure to do so (see below).

In a message to fellow Catholics from prison in early April just after his appeal had been rejected, according to independent Catholic news website Katolik.life, Fr Okolotovich said he had been accused of "espionage for Poland and the Vatican". He insisted he had never been anyone's spy, that he was a servant of God, and that it was not he who was being tried, but "the entire Catholic Church in Belarus". "Priests are being persecuted to shut our mouths, so that the Catholic Church does not tell the truth" (see below).

Fr Okolotovich is suffering from advanced cancer. Even before his arrest, he had suffered a heart attack and had part of his stomach removed due to cancer (see below).

"He will not survive 11 years in prison. His health condition is deteriorating. Lukashenka's regime is tormenting the clergyman in a vile way," an individual familiar with the case against Fr Okolotovich told the Polish paper "Rzeczpospolita".

The individual added: "The authorities in Minsk did not like the fact that he was steadfast and telling the truth. He had been under surveillance for a long time. Every Mass was attended by undercover agents, whom he had seen, and after the Mass he invited people to convert. He did not have a mistress or children with a housekeeper, so they decided to fabricate a case and accuse him of espionage" (see below).

Telephones at the Minsk city and region branch of the KGB secret police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called (see below).

Asked if prosecutors from Volozhin District Prosecutor's Office had been involved in Fr Okolotovich's criminal case, its head Oleg Nesteryonok told Forum 18: "Volozhin District Prosecutor's Office has no information about this case." He then put the phone down (see below).

Irina Zhdanyuk, head of the Ideology, Culture and Youth Department of Volozhin District Executive Committee, refused absolutely to answer any questions about Fr Okolotovich's case or even to say if she knew him. "I can't give any commentary at all," she told Forum 18. "Thank you for your call." She then put the phone down (see below).

Telephones at the office in Minsk of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak also went unanswered each time Forum 18 called (see below).

The prison authorities transferred Fr Okolotovich in April to Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk in Mogilev Region. Each time Forum 18 called any of the numbers at the camp, the lines appeared to be diverted to fax machines (see below).

On 1 April, the KGB secret police ruled that Christian Vision (which documents violations of freedom of religion or belief), its website and social media channels are "extremist" and banned. Also identified as "extremists" were three people linked to the group. Courts had earlier banned the group's social media channels and logo as "extremist". On 16 April, the Interior Ministry declared "extremist" and banned what it believes to be a one-person organisation "Priest Barok", his YouTube, Facebook and Telegram sites, and his personal email address. Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok fled to neighbouring Poland in 2021 to escape prosecution (see forthcoming F18News article).

Only two months remain of the one-year timeframe for Belarus' more than 3,500 registered religious communities to undergo compulsory re-registration by 5 July 2025. Concern and secrecy (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2945) surround the process. Any community that has not submitted a re-registration application by the deadline is to be liquidated through the courts. Compulsory re-registration follows the adoption of the repressive new Religion Law, signed on 30 December 2023 and which came into force on 5 July 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2884).

Volozhin's veteran parish priest

Since 2005, Catholic priest Fr Henryk (Gennady) Okolotovich (born 8 April 1960) has been the parish priest of St Joseph's Church in Volozhin in Minsk Region, 75 kms northwest of the city of Minsk. (In November 2024, a year after his arrest, the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese removed him from its list of parish priests on its website.)

Born in Belarus during the Soviet period, Fr Okolotovich tried to enter one of the two Catholic seminaries the Soviet authorities allowed to function in the Soviet Union (one was in the Latvian capital Riga, the other in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas). The Soviet authorities refused him permission. He trained for the priesthood in secret. In 1984, Archbishop Vincentas Sladkevicius of Kaunas in Lithuania ordained him priest in secret without state approval.

Soon after ordination, Fr Okolotovich visited Katyn near the Russian city of Smolensk to celebrate Mass for captured Polish military officers and others shot there by Soviet officers in 1940. He was reportedly detained and fined.

Fr Okolotovich "after ordination underwent the repeat study of theology for a year in our seminary and in 1986 was incardinated into the Riga Diocese", the then head of Riga's Catholic seminary Fr Henriks Trops recorded in a September 1987 list of clergy seen by Forum 18.

Fr Okolotovich later served as a priest in a number of towns, including Braslav, Rakov and Niasvizh before being sent to Bobruisk. He is known as an advocate for the Belarusian language, both within the church and in ordinary life. His younger brother, Leonard Okolotovich, is also a priest.

November 2023 arrest

Officials – apparently from the KGB secret police - arrested Fr Henryk Okolotovich in Volozhin on 16 November 2023, independent Catholic news website Katolik.life noted. Officials took him to the KGB Investigation Prison in Minsk.

Another Catholic priest, Fr Vladislav Lazar, spent six months in 2013 in the KGB prison on ungrounded charges of espionage before being freed (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1914). The case was eventually dropped.

Officials initially arrested two other church people, Fr Okolotovich's housekeeper and a retired military officer who was active in the parish. Both were pressured to give testimony against him.

During the raid to arrest Fr Okolotovich, officials seized money belonging both to him and to the parish, as well as icons, at least one of which was ancient.

The authorities gave no information about why they had arrested Fr Okolotovich, but it soon emerged that he was being investigated on criminal charges of treason. Prayers were said for him in a number of Catholic churches, without specific reasons for the prayers being given.

Fr Okolotovich was investigated under Criminal Code Article 356, Part 1 ("Treason"). This punishes: "The disclosure to a foreign state, an international or foreign organisation or their representatives of state secrets of the Republic of Belarus, as well as information constituting state secrets of foreign states, international organisations, inter-state entities, transferred to the Republic of Belarus on the basis of international treaties of the Republic of Belarus or in connection with its participation in these international organisations, inter-state entities, or espionage, or going over to the side of the enemy during a war or armed conflict, or other assistance to a foreign state, an international or foreign organisation or their representatives in carrying out activities aimed at causing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus, intentionally committed by a citizen of the Republic of Belarus (treason)." Punishment is a prison term of 7 to 15 years, with or without a fine.

Telephones at the Minsk city and region branch of the KGB secret police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 29 and 30

April 2025.

Asked on 30 April 2025 if prosecutors from Volozhin District Prosecutor's Office had been involved in Fr Okolotovich's criminal case, its head Oleg Nesteryonok told Forum 18: "Volozhin District Prosecutor's Office has no information about this case." He then put the phone down.

Staff in the KGB Investigation Prison banned Fr Okolotovich from keeping a small cross. They also banned him from saying Mass or receiving communion.

Health concerns

Parishioners were concerned about Fr Okolotovich's health. "In the first days after his detention, it was possible to hand over only hygiene objects, underwear and tablets," Katolik.life noted. "He had suffered from serious diseases, which made it necessary for him to take several sorts of medicine."

(In July 2024, the Information Ministry blocked access to Katolik.life's website in Belarus. On 30 August 2024, Myadel District Court in Minsk Region declared Katolik.life's Telegram channel "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2952).)

Even before his arrest, Fr Okolotovich had suffered a heart attack and had part of his stomach removed due to cancer, and he requires medical supervision and constant medication.

Trial, 11-year jail term

On 25 November 2024, Judge Vladimir Oreshko of Minsk Regional Court began hearing the case against Fr Henryk Okolotovich under Criminal Code Article 356, Part 1 ("Treason"). Fr Okolotovich rejected the accusations against him. The trial was closed, so no parishioners or Church representatives could attend.

On 30 December 2024, after eight days of hearings in the trial, Judge Oreshko handed Fr Okolotovich an 11-year jail term. The Judge also issued a massive financial penalty, apparently compensation for "damage caused" and possibly also a fine. Catholics believe the amount demanded to be more than 3.5 million Belarusian roubles. (A large house near Minsk might cost half a million Belarusian roubles.)

"Believers don't know exactly what is in the verdict, so they don't understand on what basis such an exorbitant sum arose," Katolik.life news website noted.

Fr Okolotovich continued to reject the charges against him and lodged an appeal to the Supreme Court in Minsk.

Transferred to Interior Ministry Investigation Prison

In January 2025, as Fr Okolotovich was awaiting his appeal hearing, he was transferred from the KGB Investigation Prison in Minsk to the Interior Ministry's Investigation Prison No. 1 (<https://katolik.life/rus/news/sotsium/item/5623-eto-ispytanie-byt-v-zaklyuchenii-nevinovnomu-ksjondz-okolotovich-molitsya-chtoby-dostojno-ego-vyderzhat.html>) in Pashkovichi in Minsk Region.

Unlike in the KGB Investigation Prison, Fr Okolotovich was allowed once again to have a small cross with him. However, staff banned him from celebrating Mass and also from visiting the chapel of the Investigation Prison, "since it is 'not for him' and is constantly closed", Katolik.life noted.

The new building of Investigation Prison No. 1 – opened in April 2024 – 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 in December 2024 (<https://t.me/MAYDAYMog/4726>).

Priest rejects all accusations

In a message to fellow Catholics from Investigation Prison in early April 2025, just after his appeal had been rejected, according to Katolik.life (<https://katolik.life/rus/news/sotsium/item/5683-sudyat-ne-menya-a-ves-kostjol-v-belarusi-ksjondz-okolotovich-otmetil-65-letie-i-pe-redal-vest-iz-za-reshetki.html>), Fr Henryk Okolotovich said he had been accused of "espionage for Poland and the Vatican". He vigorously rejected the accusation. He insisted he had never been anyone's spy, that he was a servant of God, and that it was not he who was being tried, but "the entire Catholic Church in Belarus".

In his case, "there is not a word of truth, not a single fact incriminating me in espionage, and the entire accusation is based on lies, threats and blackmail".

Of the dozens of witnesses, including officials and military personnel, none gave "incriminating testimony" against him. Fr Okolotovich believes that if there are no facts, but they persist with the case under a far-fetched pretext, it is a political trial.

Fr Okolotovich also pointed to the incorrect translation of a text in the case materials - probably a letter in Polish. He also mentioned experts from the Defence Ministry. Katolik.life concludes from this that the priest could have been accused of allegedly transmitting information on military topics. It notes that there is a military unit in Volozhin, located in a former palace in the centre of the town next to the church.

"Priests are being persecuted to shut our mouths, so that the Catholic Church does not tell the truth," Fr Okolotovich added.

Fr Okolotovich believes that his case was fabricated, among other things, in order to take away the donations that were confiscated from him under a far-fetched pretext, under the guise of "damage caused", and to demand an even larger sum.

It is known that during the investigation, Fr Okolotovich refused to implicate the country's Catholic bishops, despite pressure to do so.

"Fr Henryk stresses that he is proud that he can endure for the Catholic Church, for the faith, for God, and asks Him to give him the strength to remain a worthy disciple of Christ to the end," Katolik.life noted.

Supreme Court rejects Fr Henryk Okolotovich's appeal

On 18 March, a panel of Judges at the Supreme Court in Minsk, chaired by Sergei Gurov, began closed hearings in Fr Henryk Okolotovich's appeal against his conviction and jail term.

On 1 April, the Court rejected Fr Okolotovich's appeal, Katolik.life noted the same day (<https://katolik.life/rus/news/tserkov/item/5678-delo-ksendza-okolotovicha-snova-rassmotreli-v-sude-izmenili-li-prigovor.html>), citing local Catholics. The verdict then entered into legal force.

Irina Zhdanyuk, head of the Ideology, Culture and Youth Department of Volozhin District Executive Committee, refused absolutely to answer any questions about Fr Okolotovich's case or even to say if she knew him. "I can't give any commentary at all," she told Forum 18 from Volozhin on 30 April. "Thank you for your call." She then put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Telephones at the office in Minsk of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak also went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 29 and 30 April.

Stolen money and icons used to part-pay massive financial penalty?

Local Catholics noted that the majority of the large financial penalty imposed on Fr Okolotovich has not been paid, Katolik.life added on 1 April (<https://katolik.life/rus/news/tserkov/item/5678-delo-ksendza-okolotovicha-snova-rassmotreli-v-sude-izmenili-li-prigovor.html>). "It was partly paid from the priest's and the parish's money seized during the search. Believers have also learned that the KGB confiscated not only money, but also icons, several of which, including an ancient one, did not belong to Fr Henryk but which he was only looking after."

Fr Okolotovich "was saving up his savings for his old age", local Catholics told Katolik.life. "After all, it is known that priests have no work record, so they can only count on the most minimal pension, which is impossible to live on. And now this money has been taken away and they are also demanding an exorbitant sum. Are they hoping that the Vatican will pay? Is this really a bargaining chip?"

Transferred to Bobruisk labour camp

Following the failure of his appeal, the prison authorities transferred Fr Okolotovich from the Investigation Prison to Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk in Mogilev Region, Viasna human rights group notes (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/henrykh-akalatovicz>).

Former political prisoner and Orthodox Christian Vadim Yermashuk was held in Labour Camp No. 2 from March 2022 to June 2024. "Not once in all that time was I allowed to attend services in church," he told Forum 18 in January 2025 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2952). "When my brother died I was not even allowed to go to light a candle for him."

Yermashuk was among inmates the prison authorities deemed "low status" who are refused access (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2952) to the limited religious services held by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches in prisons.

Another former prisoner of Labour Camp No. 2, Yahor Martsinovich, noted in October 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2952) 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.

Each time Forum 18 called any of the numbers at Labour Camp No. 2 in Bobruisk on 29 and 30 April 2025, the lines appeared to be diverted to fax machines.

Fr Okolotovich's prison address:

213800, Mogilevskaya oblast

g. Bobruisk

ul. Sikorskogo d. 1

Ispravitelnaya koloniya No. 2 upravleniya DIN Ministerstva vnutrennikh del po Mogilevskoi oblasti

"They decided to fabricate a case and accuse him of espionage"

An individual familiar with the case against Fr Okolotovich expressed concern about his health, given that he is suffering from advanced cancer. "He will not survive 11 years in prison. His health condition is deteriorating. Lukashenka's regime is tormenting the clergyman in a vile way," the individual told the Polish paper "Rzeczpospolita" for a 9 April article.

"The authorities in Minsk did not like the fact that he was steadfast and telling the truth," the individual added. "He had been under surveillance for a long time. Every Mass was attended by undercover agents, whom he had seen, and after the Mass he invited people to convert. He did not have a mistress or children with a housekeeper, so they decided to fabricate a case and accuse him of espionage."

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 in April 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806). (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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