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BELARUS: Police take relatives' DNA after KGB declares religious freedom group "extremist"

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

On 1 April the KGB ruled that religious freedom group Christian Vision, its website and social media channels are "extremist" and banned. Police raided the homes of three relatives of Dzmitry Korneyenko, one of the members identified by the KGB, taking DNA samples from two. "When [my brother] asked the police why they needed his DNA, they responded that it made it easier for them to hunt for me," Korneyenko said. Orsha District Police refused to say why officers visited Korneyenko's relatives and why they needed DNA samples.

On 1 April, the KGB secret police ruled that Christian Vision, its website and social media channels are "extremist" and are banned. The KGB identified three of its leading members by name. The group documents violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. The Interior Ministry added the group to its list of "extremist" organisations on 8 April. The following day, police visited the home in Orsha of the father of a group member and took his DNA. Two weeks later, the same happened to his brother.

Between August 2023 and March 2024, several courts declared Christian Vision's social media channels and logo "extremist" (see below).

Anyone who shares, copies or likes material from or provides information to a site deemed "extremist" risks punishment under the Administrative or the Criminal Code (see below).

The three Christian Vision members the KGB identified are Natallia Vasilevich, Natallia Harkovich and Dzmitry Korneyenko. All three, who are Orthodox Christians, are outside Belarus (see below).

Korneyenko said his father was too confused to ask Orsha police why they needed his DNA, but his brother tried to find out. "When he asked the police why they needed his DNA, they responded that it made it easier for them to hunt for me," Korneyenko told Forum 18 (see below).

The duty officer at Orsha District Police refused to answer any questions as to why officers had visited Korneyenko's relatives and why they needed to take DNA samples. He referred Forum 18 to its head, Dmitry Borodavko. However, he did not answer his phone (see below).

Korneyenko indicated that visits to his relatives are not unusual. "They visit with varying frequency (sometimes investigators, sometimes police officers), but these days they have slightly expanded their schedule of visits," he noted. "But taking DNA – that's something new" (see below).

Korneyenko is also wanted on criminal charges related to non-religious public activity (see below).

Neither the KGB, nor the Interior Ministry nor the courts have ever informed Christian Vision of their "extremism" declarations. "We only found out when the [extremism] lists were updated," Orthodox theologian and human rights defender Vasilevich, the group's coordinator, told Forum 18 (see below).

"The decision is not unexpected - it follows the logic of oppression of any independent voice," Vasilevich added. "Sooner or later this destiny awaits everyone." She worries that the designation "might jeopardise the situation of those Christians still in Belarus who cooperate with us and give us information" (see below).

Telephones at the KGB secret police in Minsk went unanswered each time Forum 18 called. The telephones of the press secretary of the Interior Ministry in Minsk, Natalya Sakharchuk, and her deputy went unanswered each time Forum 18 called (see below).

The woman who answered the phone at the office in Minsk of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr

Rumak put the phone down when Forum 18 introduced itself (see below).

On 16 April, the Interior Ministry declared what it believes to be a one-person organisation "Priest Barok" "extremist" and banned. This includes Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok, his YouTube, Facebook and Telegram sites, and his personal email address. On 2 May, a court in Minsk Region declared Fr Barok's TikTok account "extremist". Fr Barok fled to neighbouring Poland in 2021 to escape prosecution. He is wanted in Belarus and Russia on criminal charges (see below).

Concept of extremism "can be applied to any sphere of human activity"

Article 12 of the new Religion Law that came into force on 5 July 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2884) bans individuals who are on either the "List of organisations and individuals involved in terrorist activities" or the "List of citizens of the Republic of Belarus, foreign citizens or stateless persons involved in extremist activities" (<https://humanconstantia.org/en/overview-of-the-fight-against-extremism-in-belarus-for-january-march-2023/>) from being leaders or founders of registered religious organisations.

The regime maintains multiple similar lists targeting anyone, any organisation, any document, any communication, or any website the regime dislikes, including the Information Ministry's "Republican List of Extremist Materials" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806). As of 7 May, it runs to 1,654 pages.

Human rights groups – such as Viasna (Spring) (<https://spring96.org/>) and Human Constanta (<https://humanconstantia.org/>) – and independent media outlets are among the many groups courts, the Interior Ministry or the KGB secret police have declared "extremist".

Anyone who shares, copies or likes material from a site deemed "extremist" risks punishment under Administrative Code Article 19.11 ("Distribution, production, storage and transportation of information products containing calls for extremist activities, or promoting such activities").

Anyone joining or providing information or an interview to such a site risks punishment under Criminal Code Article 361-1 ("Creation of or participation in an extremist organisation") or Criminal Code Article 361-4 ("Supporting extremist activity").

Human Constanta notes (<https://humanconstantia.org/en/results-of-the-fight-against-extremism-in-belarus-in-2024/>) that "prosecution for 'extremism' has often taken absurd forms", including for songs and memes. "However, the consequences of such repression are far from humorous."

The then United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, warned in an August 2023 report to the UN General Assembly (A/78/327 (<https://docs.un.org/A/78/327>)) that "the concept of extremism contained in the law on countering extremism can be applied to any sphere of human activity".

Marin added: "it can be applied not only to various forms of freedom of association, peaceful assembly or freedom of expression, but also to all civil society activities, primarily owing to broad formulations and the wide range of interpretation powers granted to authorities. Any form of expression, civic activism and political opposition can fall under the 'extremism' label."

KGB declares Christian Vision group "extremist"

Human rights defenders from various Christian Churches across Belarus formed the group Christian Vision (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/>) in September 2020, amid protests against the falsified presidential elections, to document violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. (The group is currently registered, under the name Christian Vision for Belarus, in Lithuania.)

Between August 2023 and March 2024, several courts declared Christian Vision's Telegram channel (twice), Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki pages, and logo "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2874).

On 1 April 2025, the KGB secret police ruled that Christian Vision, its website and social media channels are "extremist" and are banned. Also identified were three people linked to the group: Natallia Vasilevich, Natallia Harkovich and Dzmitry Korneyenko. (All three, who are Orthodox Christians, are outside Belarus.) The decision came into force on being issued. The Interior Ministry added the group to its list of "extremist" organisations on 8 April.

Neither the KGB, nor the Interior Ministry nor the courts has ever informed Christian Vision of their "extremism" declarations. "We only found out when the [extremism] lists were updated," Orthodox theologian and human rights defender Vasilevich, the group's coordinator, told Forum 18 on 6 May.

"We understand the decision of the KGB as their recognition of Christian Vision's ecumenical, human rights and anti-war work," Vasilevich added. "The decision is not unexpected - it follows the logic of oppression of any independent voice. Sooner or later this

destiny awaits everyone."

Vasilevich said being branded an "extremist" organisation would not affect Christian Vision's work. "However, it might jeopardise the situation of those Christians still in Belarus who cooperate with us and give us information. They will have to be more cautious and careful about their security while communicating with us."

Vasilevich worries that the decision might make monitoring of freedom of religion or belief violations more difficult. "At present, information from the ground is the only source about persecutions."

Telephones at the KGB secret police in Minsk went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 29 April and 7 May.

The telephones of the press secretary of the Interior Ministry in Minsk, Natalya Sakharchuk, and her deputy went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 7 May.

The woman who answered the phone at the office in Minsk of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak put the phone down on 7 May when Forum 18 introduced itself.

Police raids, DNA extraction follow "extremist" declaration

On 9 April, the day after the Interior Ministry added the Christian Vision group to its list of "extremist" organisations, police in the town of Orsha in Vitebsk Region visited Viktor Korneyenko, the father of Dzmitry Korneyenko, one of those listed by the KGB secret police as a participant of Christian Vision. Officers "even took his DNA. My father was confused and did not ask much about why," Korneyenko noted on Facebook on 10 April. The following day, 10 April, police visited Korneyenko's mother-in-law in Vitebsk.

On 23 April, police visited Korneyenko's brother in Orsha. They also took his DNA. "When he asked the police why they needed his DNA, they responded that it made it easier for them to hunt for me," Korneyenko told Forum 18 on 6 May.

The duty officer at Orsha District Police refused to answer any questions as to why officers had visited Korneyenko's relatives and why they needed to take DNA samples. He referred Forum 18 on 7 May to its head, Dmitry Borodavko. However, he did not answer his phone that day.

Korneyenko indicated that such visits are not unusual. "They visit with varying frequency (sometimes investigators, sometimes police officers), but these days they have slightly expanded their schedule of visits," he noted on Facebook. "But taking DNA – that's something new," he told Forum 18.

Korneyenko is also involved in a project in which Christian Vision takes part, Christians Against War (<https://shaltnotkill.info/>). Its website and social media channels chronicle prosecutions of clergy and believers in Russia and Belarus who oppose Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as the sacking and defrocking of Moscow Patriarchate priests who oppose the war. Its website was blocked in Russia in September 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2935). A court in Belarus declared it "extremist" in 2024 (see below).

Belarus has launched several criminal cases against Korneyenko. One, on charges of "supporting an extremist organisation", is for an interview he gave to the Polish-funded television station Belsat in March 2022 from the Ukrainian city of Odessa criticising Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Because of these criminal cases opened against him in Belarus, Russia put him on its Federal Wanted List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2892).

On 21 April 2025, the KGB secret police banned as "extremist" People's Deputy, another group Korneyenko is involved in that monitors the activity of local administrations. "In fact, I am now a three-time participant in extremist formations," Korneyenko noted on Facebook on 2 May. "Imagine how much more the security forces have to work on me."

Exiled priest's Youtube channel among others declared "extremist"

On 16 April 2025, the Interior Ministry declared what it believes to be a one-person organisation "Priest Barok" "extremist" and banned. This includes Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok, his YouTube, Facebook and Telegram sites, and his personal email address.

On 2 May, Dzerzhinsky District Court in Minsk Region declared Fr Barok's TikTok account "extremist" (though the last video posted to the account was from October 2022). The Information Ministry added it to its Republican List of Extremist Materials.

Fr Barok fled to neighbouring Poland in 2021 to escape prosecution. In October 2022, a court in Vitebsk Region banned as "extremist" a YouTube interview with Fr Barok. The video was similarly added to the Information Ministry's Republican List of Extremist Materials. Before February 2024, Russia added Fr Barok to its Federal Wanted List

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2892) as he is wanted in Belarus.

On 12 January 2025, the KGB secret police ruled that the Democratic Media Institute, its founders and online materials are "extremist" and are banned. The Institute, based in Lithuania, supports independent media in the region, particularly on Belarus. The KGB identified Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Kukhta as among the founders. Among the online content the KGB banned as "extremist" in its 12 January decision is Fr Aleksandr's YouTube channel Batushka Otvetit (<https://www.youtube.com/@AliaksandrKukhta>), where he comments on faith and current affairs.

Fr Aleksandr and another Orthodox priest Fr Georgi Roi left Belarus in April 2023. They then left the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate accepted them. They serve in its parish in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. In October 2023, a Baranovichi court declared the Telegram channel of the Belarusian Orthodox parish in Vilnius "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2874). In 2024, Russia added Fr Georgi to its Federal Wanted List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2892) as he is wanted in Belarus.

On 23 January 2024, Baranovichi District and City Court declared Christians Against War's Telegram channel "extremist".

In July 2024, the Information Ministry blocked access to independent Catholic news website Katolik.life (<https://katolik.life>) in Belarus. In August 2024, a court in Minsk Region declared Katolik.life's Telegram channel "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2952).

In August 2023, decisions from several courts declared some of New Life Full Gospel Church's online materials "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2855). Its website had already been blocked. In June 2023, officials bulldozed 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2883) in December 2023.

Among the other banned "extremist materials" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2801) on the List are a Greek Catholic news website, an introduction to Orthodoxy published in Russia's capital Moscow, and numerous Muslim books. Anyone who distributes any of these works risks criminal prosecution. (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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