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BELARUS: "God may be calling you to church, but prison officials decide"

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

Four of the freed political prisoners recount restrictions on prisoners' exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Political prisoners are barred from attending Orthodox prison chapels. "God may be calling you to church, but prison officials decide," Ihar Karnei notes. Orthodox Christian Sergei Tikhanovsky was denied access to a priest for more than 5 years. Denials of access to meetings for worship, religious literature and clergy visits violate the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Officials of four of the prisons refused to discuss the restrictions with Forum 18.

Four of the political prisoners the regime suddenly freed on 21 June and deported to Lithuania have spoken since their release of restrictions on prisoners' exercise of freedom of religion or belief. "As a rule, political prisoners are never allowed to go to services," Natallia Dulina told Forum 18. Ihar Karnei notes that only Orthodox prison chapels exist and prison officials approve or reject applications to attend. "God may be calling you to church, but prison officials decide," he told Forum 18.

Non-Orthodox prisoners had no provision for religious services. Dulina recalled that a Catholic fellow-prisoner applied to attend the Orthodox chapel in women's Labour Camp No. 4 in Gomel. Prison officials denied her application. Officials of Shklov Labour Camp told one Catholic political prisoner in 2024 that if he changed faith and became Orthodox, they would allow him to attend the Orthodox prison chapel (see below).

Karnei says that not only are applications from political prisoners to attend the Orthodox prison chapel rejected. So too are applications from those the camp administration has punished three times for alleged violations of the prison regime, categorised as "malicious violators" (see below).

Akikhiro Hayeuski-Hanada notes that new restrictions in early 2023 severely impacted access to the Orthodox prison chapel. "At the beginning of 2023, it was possible for political prisoners to attend the Orthodox prison chapel in Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov," he told Forum 18. "After that it became impossible. The prison authorities feared the political prisoners would then get together and talk after the service. Access to sports facilities for political prisoners was similarly ended" (see below).

Prison administrations also restrict access to religious literature, particularly for political prisoners. They are no longer allowed to have their own books and can only order books from the prison library (which they are not allowed to visit). Almost all the religious literature in prison libraries is Orthodox (see below).

Given the limit of only one book at a time, a prisoner was therefore not allowed to have a religious book such as the Bible at the same time as another book. "It is terrible when a believer cannot read the Bible," Karnei told Forum 18 (see below).

A political prisoner in Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov – who was not a Muslim – wanted to read the Koran to learn more about Islam. He wrote an application to the camp administration to have it and other books sent from outside. The camp administration punished the prisoner with 10 days' detention in the punishment cell. "Prison officials told him that he should not get interested in such matters and study changing his faith," Hayeuski-Hanada said. "He was banned from receiving the Koran, but the punishment was formally for another reason" (see below).

Prison officials generally rejected requests for visits from clergy of non-Orthodox faiths. In Prison No. 4 in Mogilev political prisoners were generally allowed to meet the visiting Orthodox priest. "Several political prisoners asked for visits from a Catholic priest," Hayeuski-Hanada told Forum 18. "Officials told them to go to the Orthodox priest." However, political prisoners are elsewhere generally banned from meeting visiting Orthodox priests (see below).

Sergei Tikhanovsky was held for nearly three years of his time incommunicado in Prison No. 8 in Zhodino. "The whole five years and more, they didn't even let me confess - can you imagine, an Orthodox Christian, I can't confess or take communion," Tikhanovsky told a press conference in Vilnius (see below).

Denials of access to meetings for worship, religious literature and clergy visits violate the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules) (see below).

Forum 18 tried to find out why prison administrations restrict prisoners' rights to freedom of religion or belief. Officials at the women's Labour Camp No. 4 in Gomel (where Dulina was held), Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov (where Karnei and Hayeuski-Hanada were held), Labour Camp No. 20 in Mozyr (where Karnei was held), and Prison No. 8 in Zhodino (where Tikhonovsky was held) refused to answer Forum 18's questions (see below).

Viasna (Spring) human rights group recognises more than 1,000 political prisoners. Although they have to wear yellow name tags listing them under the category Preventive Register No. 10, regime officials deny the country has political prisoners (see below).

The duty officer at the Department for the Implementation of Punishments of the Interior Ministry in Minsk, which oversees prisons, refused to explain why the rights to freedom of religion or belief of prisoners are restricted, particularly of political prisoners. "We don't have political prisoners," the official – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 on 10 July. He refused to put Forum 18 through to any official who could answer questions on prison conditions. He said all questions had to be sent in writing.

Forum 18 reached Andrei Aryaev, Head of the Religious Department of the Office in Minsk of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, on 10 July. As soon as it introduced itself he put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Belarus has no Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office accredited by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI).

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).

A 4 October 2023 survey

(<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/ushhemlenie-svobody-religii-v-otnoshenii-zaklyuchennyh-soderzhashhihsya-pod-strazhej-zaderzhannyh-i-arestovannyh/>) (most recently updated on 27 June 2025) 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=2976)) 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 access to worship meetings and religious literature 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 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."

Denials of clergy visits are also in violation of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Rule 65 includes the provision: "Access to a qualified representative of any religion shall not be refused to any prisoner."

Political prisoners

As of 10 July, Viasna (Spring) human rights group recognises 1,150 people as political prisoners (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>).

The duty officer at the Department for the Implementation of Punishments of the Interior Ministry in Minsk, which oversees prisons, denied to Forum 18 that the regime holds political prisoners. "We don't have political prisoners," the official – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 on 10 July.

An official of Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov – who did not give his name – used exactly the same wording to Forum 18 the same day.

Prisoners all wear tags with their name, Criminal Code Article they have been jailed under, date they began and are due to end their prison sentence, and category of prisoner. Criminals have a white tag. Those with yellow tags (to make them more immediately identifiable) are:

- political prisoners (Preventive Register No. 10);
- those jailed for attacking a police officer (Preventive Register No. 3);
- those inclined to suicide (Preventive Register No. 7).

The regime freed 14 political prisoners on 21 June before the end of their sentences. They were all taken to Lithuania. Four of the freed political prisoners have spoken since their release of restrictions on prisoners' exercise of freedom of religion or belief (three of them to Forum 18 from Lithuania in early July):

Natallia Dulina, a university professor arrested in October 2022, had been serving a three and a half year prison sentence (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/natallja-dulina>). She was held from June 2023 at the women's Labour Camp No. 4 in Gomel until her release.

Ihar Karnei, a journalist arrested in July 2023, had been serving a three year and 10 month prison sentence (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/ihar-piatrovich-karnei>). He was held from June 2024 at the Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov. In December 2024, the prison authorities transferred him to Labour Camp No. 20 in Mozyr, where he was held until his release.

Akikhiro Hayeuski-Hanada, an anarchist activist arrested in August 2020, had been serving a 15 year and 9 month prison sentence (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/akichirahajeski-chanada>). He was held at the Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov from March 2023 to July 2024 before being transferred to Prison No. 4 in Mogilev, where he was held from July 2024 until his release.

Sergei Tikhanovsky, a political activist (and husband of Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the presumed winner of the 2020 presidential election) arrested in May 2020, had been serving a 19 and a half year prison sentence (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/siarhiej-cichanouski>). He was held in Labour Camp No. 15 in Mogilev until August 2022, when he was transferred to Prison No. 8 in Zhodino. He was held there incommunicado until his release.

2023 harshening further restricted prisoners' freedom of religion

In 2023, prison authorities introduced tighter restrictions on political prisoners which also had an impact on their exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Until 2023 political prisoners often had their applications to attend Orthodox prison chapels rejected. Following the tightening of restrictions, prison officials thereafter routinely rejected such applications.

"At the beginning of 2023, it was possible for political prisoners to attend the Orthodox prison chapel in Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov," Akikhiro Hayeuski-Hanada told Forum 18. "After that it became impossible. The prison authorities feared the political prisoners would then get together and talk after the service. Access to sports facilities for political prisoners was similarly ended."

Ihar Karnei similarly noted that the general ban on approving political prisoners' applications to attend the Orthodox prison chapels appears to have been introduced in about 2023.

Until early 2023, political prisoners could often have their own books with them, after prison officials had checked them. After that, books were taken away from prisoners and they could only read books they could get indirectly from the prison library, both Hayeuski-Hanada and Karnei noted. This included religious books.

Investigation Prison: Prison officials often take crosses "especially from political prisoners"

Prison authorities insist on removing all jewellery and neck crosses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2672) – such as baptismal crosses – from prisoners. This is despite provisions in the 2004 and 2016 Interior Ministry Decrees covering persons on remand (see above) that they are allowed to have with them "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".

Political prisoner Ihar Karnei was held under investigation in 2023 and 2024 in Minsk Investigation Prison No. 1 on its old site. "An Orthodox priest visited and prisoners could apply to meet him. They usually approved applications," Karnei told Forum 18. He later spent time in 2024 in Mogilev Investigation Prison. "No priest came there."

Karnei said that prison officials often take crosses (such as baptismal crosses worn round the neck) from prisoners, "especially from political prisoners".

Gomel Labour Camp No. 4: "As a rule, political prisoners are never allowed to go to services"

Political prisoner Natallia Dulina was held from June 2023 until her release at women's Labour Camp No. 4 in Gomel. While she was there, she estimated that the labour camp had between 1,700 and 2,000 prisoners. Of them, about 150 were political prisoners.

The Gomel camp had only an Orthodox chapel, where the liturgy was held twice a month by a visiting priest. A prisoner looked after the chapel.

Dulina noted that prisoners who wanted to attend the Orthodox liturgy needed to apply in advance, just as they needed to apply in advance to attend any other event. Officials have to approve such applications before a prisoner can attend.

"Prison officials generally won't approve such applications from political prisoners," Dulina told Forum 18. "Occasionally they do so to demonstrate their 'humanity', but this is very rare. As a rule, political prisoners are never allowed to go to services."

Dulina said she is not religious, so did not apply to go to the Orthodox prison chapel herself.

Dulina noted that prisoners of any sort who were punished for violating prison regulations three times were categorised as "malicious violators". ("It's very easy to become a 'malicious violator'," Akikhiro Hayeuski-Hanada stressed. "There's no need to really break the regulations.") Such prisoners were similarly routinely denied applications to attend services at the Orthodox prison chapel (as well as being denied access to non-religious events).

Non-Orthodox prisoners had no provision for religious services. Dulina recalled that a Catholic fellow-prisoner had applied to attend the Orthodox chapel, but prison officials denied her application.

Political prisoners could not have individual meetings with clergy of their faith. This meant it was impossible for them to confess or receive communion if they wished to, Dulina added. A priest could not bless their food at Easter, a local tradition in Christian Churches.

Religious literature was available in the prison library and in the chapel, "but only Orthodox", Dulina said.

The duty officer at Labour Camp No. 4 in Gomel put the phone down on 10 July after Forum 18 introduced itself and began asking about prisoners' possibility to exercise freedom of religion or belief.

Shklov and Mozyr Labour Camps: "God may be calling you to church, but prison officials decide"

In Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov (where more than a tenth of inmates were political prisoners) and Labour Camp No. 20 in Mozyr (where only a handful of inmates were political prisoners), only the Orthodox Church has a chapel to hold meetings for worship.

Political prisoner Ihar Karnei notes that prisoners need to apply in advance for permission to attend worship services in the Orthodox chapel. "Officials from the Operational Department need to approve these applications," Karnei told Forum 18. "An official has to say if an individual is worthy to attend."

Karnei said officials refused applications to attend the Orthodox chapel from political prisoners and others who have to wear yellow tags. "God may be calling you to church, but prison officials decide," he told Forum 18.

Akikhiro Hayeuski-Hanada also noted that after early 2023, prison officials in Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov (where he was held from March 2023 to July 2024) rejected applications to attend the prison Orthodox chapel from political prisoners (Preventive Register No. 10).

Prisoners with yellow tags with the category of Preventive Register No. 3 or No. 7 are not generally refused applications to attend the Orthodox prison chapel, unlike political prisoners, Hayeuski-Hanada told Forum 18.

However, Hayeuski-Hanada noted a case in January 2024 in Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov (where he was held from March 2023 to July 2024) when prison officials refused an application from a prisoner in the category of Preventive Register No. 3 of attending ceremonies in the Orthodox prison chapel to mark Epiphany, when Orthodox Christians often dive into icy water to commemorate the baptism of Jesus.

Officials of Shklov Labour Camp told one Catholic political prisoner in 2024 that if he changed faith and became Orthodox, they would allow him to attend the Orthodox prison chapel, Karnei told Forum 18.

Karnei also noted that prisoners categorised as "malicious violators" also generally have applications to attend Orthodox services rejected.

Although prisoners cannot have their own books, in the camps in Shklov and Mozyr they were able to borrow one book a week from the prison library. The library contains only pre-checked books. All the religious literature is Orthodox. Political prisoners are not allowed to visit the library, but their chosen book is brought to them, Karnei said.

Given the limit of only one book at a time, a prisoner was therefore not allowed to have a book like the Bible at the same time as another book. "It is terrible when a believer cannot read the Bible," Karnei told Forum 18.

In late 2023, a political prisoner in Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov, Sergei Matsiukhevich – who was not a Muslim – wanted to read the Koran to learn more about Islam. He requested that it be sent to him among other books from relatives outside the Labour Camp. He wrote an application with a list of the books to the camp administration. "They didn't reject the application – they just didn't respond," Hayeuski-Hanada told Forum 18.

However, in February 2024 the camp administration punished Matsiukhevich with 10 days' detention in the punishment cell. "Prison officials told him that he should not get interested in such matters and study changing his faith," Hayeuski-Hanada said. "He was banned from receiving the Koran, but the punishment was formally for another reason."

The duty officer at Labour Camp No. 17 in Shklov put Forum 18 through on 10 July to an unnamed other official when it asked about prisoners' possibilities to exercise freedom of religion or belief. Forum 18 asked the official why political prisoners are banned from attending the Orthodox prison chapel. "We don't have political prisoners," the official responded. Asked why prisoners in the category of Preventive Register No. 10 are banned from attending the chapel, he put the phone down.

The duty officer at Labour Camp No. 20 in Mozyr refused to give any information about prisoners' possibility to exercise freedom of religion or belief. "We don't provide such information by telephone," he told Forum 18 on 10 July and then put the phone down.

Mogilev Prison No. 4: Officials told Catholics "to go to the Orthodox priest"

Political prisoner Akikhiro Hayeuski-Hanada, who was held in Prison No. 4 in Mogilev from July 2024 until his release, noted that prison conditions were harsher than in labour camp. However, prisoners – including political prisoners – were able to request and hold meetings with a visiting Orthodox priest.

Prison officials generally rejected requests for visits from clergy of other faiths. "Several political prisoners asked for visits from a Catholic priest," Hayeuski-Hanada told Forum 18. "Officials told them to go to the Orthodox priest."

However, Hayeuski-Hanada noted that one persistent political prisoner eventually managed to get a visit from a Catholic priest. "This surprised all the political prisoners and showed them that it was possible to achieve this. They thought that if you follow another [non-Orthodox] faith you couldn't achieve your rights."

Prisoners in Mogilev prison are not allowed to have personal books but can have them brought from the prison library. This includes approved religious books. Hayeuski-Hanada said the library's religious books were mostly Orthodox. It had one copy of the Koran in Arabic, but not in Russian or Belarusian translation.

The telephone at Prison No. 4 in Mogilev went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 10 July.

Zhodino Prison No. 8: "All these five years and more, they didn't even let me confess .. or take communion"

Sergei Tikhanovsky, arrested in May 2020, was held incommunicado in Prison No. 8 in Zhodino from August 2022 until his release.

Tikhanovsky is Orthodox. He complained that political prisoners (those in the category of Preventive Register No. 10) are "actually limited in all rights", he told a press conference in Vilnius (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cN99Dal-xww&t=3728s>) with other freed political prisoners on 22 June.

"The whole five years and more, they didn't even let me confess - can you imagine, an Orthodox Christian, I can't confess or take communion," Tikhanovsky complained. "The law prescribes every month, in a pretrial detention centre or in prison, letters, calls, a priest, and lawyers. But there is nothing."

The duty officer at Prison No. 8 in Zhodino refused to answer any questions about why Tikhanovsky was denied access to a priest in the nearly three years he was held at the prison or to put Forum 18 through to another official who would be able to respond. "I don't have this information and am not authorised to answer," the official told Forum 18 on 10 July. "Apply in writing in the prescribed way." He then put the phone down.

"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 told Forum 18 in January (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2952).

The regime arrested Yermashuk (<https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/vadzim-ermaszuk>) 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.

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."

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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