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Conscientious objectors and deserters: Facing repression and resistance

By Olga Karatch, human rights defender in Belarus (*)

HRWF (24.10.2024) - Belarusian conscientious objectors and deserters face severe repression for refusing to serve in the military or attempting to evade conscription. Despite these challenges, many continue to resist. This report outlines the situation for conscientious objectors and deserters in Belarus, focusing on the legal framework, army conditions, consequences for refusal, and the international response.

Legal Framework and Military Service

In Belarus, military service is mandatory for all men aged 18 to 27 who are registered in the military and not in the reserves. Conscription occurs twice per year, with about 10,000 young men called up each time. Those with a higher education serve for one year, while those without serve for one and a half years.

The Belarusian army comprises approximately **48,000 soldiers** and **12,000 border guards**. The country maintains a significant military force to exert control over its population.

Consequences for Conscientious Objectors and Deserters

Refusal to serve in the Belarusian army carries severe legal consequences. Under the criminal code, conscientious objectors can face fines, imprisonment, and, in extreme cases, the death penalty for desertion under the charge of "high treason." Objectors may also be sentenced to up to **five years in prison**.

Additionally, **extremist Telegram channels** that offer support to conscientious objectors have been targeted by the government, and their administrators and participants are often charged with **extremism**, carrying a penalty of **up to seven years in prison**.

The Belarusian government actively criminalizes those who try to avoid military service, often subjecting them to **public trials** designed to intimidate others. These trials are often broadcasted, serving as a warning to anyone considering conscientious objection.

The Belarusian regime has labelled "Our House" as an extremist organisation, and many Telegram channels that support conscientious objectors have been classified as extremist. The editors of these channels face up to 7 years in prison in Belarus. Olga Karach was recognised as a terrorist and sentenced in absentia to 12 years in prison for her activities.

Employment and Military Service

In Belarus, **proof of military service** is required for **any job**. This means that every Belarusian must show their **military ticket** when applying for employment. Without this document, objectors are excluded from the formal job market and are often forced into illegal or informal work.

Conditions in the Belarusian Army

The conditions within the Belarusian army are harsh, with practices resembling imprisonment. Soldiers endure physical and psychological abuse, such as hazing and punishment, which includes **leg blows** and **neck strikes**. Soldiers may be confined to **solitary confinement** for up to **15 days** for infractions like using a personal mobile phone. Additionally, **every day**, soldiers are **required to watch state propaganda**. This exposure to state-controlled media is meant to break their will and reinforce loyalty to the regime.

The harsh conditions, including the constant threat of punishment and brainwashing through propaganda, create an environment where individual resistance is crushed, and soldiers are left with little autonomy.

Military Academy and Forced Labor

Graduates of the **Military Academy** in Belarus are subjected to forced labor if they refuse to serve in the army. Those who graduate from the academy but refuse to fulfill their military obligations may be compelled to **perform forced labor** for at least five years. Additionally, they face **heavy financial penalties**, which can range from **25,000 to 30,000 euros** for refusing military service. This system further traps objectors in a cycle of repression and financial hardship.

International Challenges and Lack of Safe Haven

Conscientious objectors from Belarus who attempt to flee the country face significant obstacles in neighboring states. While many seek refuge in **Lithuania**, they are often **deported back to Belarus** as Lithuania considers them a national security threat. Similarly, **Russia, Turkey, and Kazakhstan** do not offer proper asylum, often returning objectors to Belarus due to diplomatic pressure or lack of appropriate legal protections. This places many conscientious objectors in a cycle of fear, unable to find a safe place to live without the constant threat of persecution.

Conclusion

The repression faced by Belarusian conscientious objectors and deserters underscores broader issues of human rights violations and the suppression of freedom of conscience in Belarus. Despite the intense pressure, these individuals continue to resist, choosing peace over war, at great personal risk. The international community must continue to push for the recognition of conscientious objection as a human right and ensure that those fleeing persecution are granted asylum and protection.

(*) She is the founder and director of the civil rights movement "Nash Dom", or "Our House".

Conservative anti-Putin Orthodox group raided

Persecuted in Russia, devotees of the "Russian Orthodox Church – Tsarist Empire" may now be banned in Belarus too.

by Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (20.09.2024) - The Main Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee of Belarus [announced](#) earlier this month that it had started a criminal case

against the Belarusian branch of the “Russian Orthodox Church – Tsarist Empire” (ROC-CI).

The “Belarusian cell of the international cult” was raided by the officers of the Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Belarusian Metropolitan of ROC-CI was detained.

The ROC-CI is actually part of a broader network of groups with at least ten thousand followers in Russia and adjacent nations. These groups share a nationalist perspective on Russian history, a reverence for the last Tsar, Nicholas II Romanov (whom the mainline Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Kirill has canonized), and a recognition of Stalin’s role in Russia’s prominence. Despite their alignment with some of Kirill’s views, they are mistrustful of Putin’s government and, notably, resisted vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the war against Ukraine began, they refused conscription and destroyed their passports and IDs—not out of support for Ukrainian independence, as they see Ukraine as part of Russia, but because they don’t view Putin’s government as legitimate. They anticipate the return of the monarchy in Russia, with some groups claiming their leaders have Romanov lineage and should be the new Tsars.

Despite gaining thousands of followers, the “Tsarist” communities did not receive much public attention until 2017 when the film “Matilda” was released. This movie narrated the story of the renowned Polish-Russian ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska, suggesting that she had a three-year romantic involvement with the future Tsar Nicholas II before he married the future Empress Alexandra. The film emphasized that this relationship was not purely platonic. Given that premarital sex is considered sinful by the Orthodox Church, conservative Orthodox groups demanded the movie be banned for showing disrespect to a canonized saint.

The “Tsarist” groups became well-known protesters against “Matilda” and gained national attention when joined by then Duma member from Russian-occupied Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaya. It was revealed that Poklonskaya followed Archimandrite Sergiy Romanov from Yekaterinburg, a leading figure of the Tsarebozhniki (Tsar-worshippers) movement. The issue extended to Poklonskaya’s assertion that anyone who went to watch “Matilda,” including top Russian political leaders, should be excommunicated. Previously a senior prosecutor in the office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine and having defected to Russia in 2014, Poklonskaya was lionized by Putin’s United Russia party. Regardless of “Matilda,” she has been named an advisor to the Prosecutor General of Russia following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Her spiritual mentor, Sergiy Romanov, had a less fortunate outcome. Following his campaign against Patriarch Kirill and the government for closing churches during the pandemic, claiming COVID-19 was a Western invention, his convent was raided in December 2020. The archimandrite was arrested and, in November 2021, sentenced to three and a half years in prison.

However, this did not mark the demise of the Tsarebozhniki movement. Numerous factions existed within a loosely connected network, with the group under the leadership of “Zosima” Sergei Vlasov in Ulyanovsk Oblast gaining significant popularity due to effective social media strategies. Estimates indicated that Vlasov’s online following reached as many as 150,000 people, although the number of active Tsarebozhniki

adherents across various groups dwindled to approximately 10,000 following Romanov's arrest.

Vlasov is undeniably a contentious figure. He was ordained as a bishop by a Cyprus faction of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (a breakaway group not in communion with Moscow's Russian Orthodox Church) and was even crowned Tsar of Russia.

Sergiy Romanov and Vlasov are former convicts who served sentences for major offenses before embracing conservative Christianity. Although critics use this against them, they argue that they are part of an old Orthodox tradition of criminals-turned-saints, inspired by Saint Moises the Ethiopian. Moises was a leader of bandits and murderers in 4th-century Egypt who converted, becoming an ascetic monk and priest.

Although they are monarchists with extravagant claims for their leaders, the Tsarebozhniki's ideology is not vastly different from Patriarch Kirill's. The main distinction is that they reject Kirill's authority and oppose Putin. They face arrest and prosecution as "extremists" and "Ukrainian agents" both in Russia and Belarus. However, if they supported Putin and his war in Ukraine, instead of being arrested, perhaps they would be rewarded with high positions, like Poklonskaya. Any toxicity in their beliefs in fact stems from Kirill himself.

Lukashenko attacks religious organizations, broadens grounds for their banning

by [Maria Yeryoma](#)



Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko ([Wikimedia](#))

[The Kyiv Independent](#) (12.01.2024) - Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko enacts restrictive religious law, mandating re-registration of every religious organization in the country and broadening grounds for their banning.

Belarus refuses to let OSCE observe parliamentary elections, citing alleged "dominance of Western representatives in OSCE missions" and sanctions policies.

Belarus and Sweden recall their emissaries in a diplomatic clash due to the appointment of a Swedish special envoy to the exiled Belarusian democratic movement.

Lukashenko signs a bill granting former Belarusian presidents immunity from prosecution.

A Belarusian woman charged with spying on the Belarusian diaspora in Poland for the Belarusian KGB faces up to 10 years in prison.

The European Commission urges Big Tech companies to support Belarusian independent media, citing concerns over search engines' wrongful compliance with the Lukashenko regime's censorship laws.

Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko has signed into effect a new law on religious groups that requires all denominations to reapply for state registration and introduces more grounds for their banning, his press service **reported** on Jan 3.

The law **requires** all religious organizations to undergo re-registration within a year or risk being banned.

The authorities also reserve the right to deny re-registration and have broadened the list of grounds for banning a religious group. Among the reasons listed are actions that do not comply with Belarus' domestic and foreign policy or "civil harmony," activities aimed at "discrediting the state," so-called "extremist activities," and "humiliating national honor and dignity," which includes "insulting officials."

Only citizens permanently residing in Belarus retain the right to lead a religious group. Clerics labeled by the authorities as "extremists" or "terrorists" – a term often used by Belarusian authorities to refer to those who do not support Lukashenko's regime – are prohibited from holding leadership positions.

The use of any symbols other than religious ones is completely banned during religious services.

The law also lifts restrictions on involving children in religious activities against their will and without the approval of their caregivers, paving the way for further indoctrination in schools **initiated** in 2021 by the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has described the law as a setback to religious freedoms in the country and **called** on U.S. President Joe Biden and the U.S. Congress to hold Belarus accountable for human rights violations.

"Instead of repealing its highly restrictive religion law enacted over two decades ago, which did not meet international human rights standards, Belarusian officials have doubled down and implemented a more repressive religion law that grants the government unbridled control over religious communities and their affairs," **said** USCIRF Chair Abraham Cooper.

The introduction of **similar re-registration requirements** for political parties in 2023 led to the banning of all but three out of the country's 15 political parties. The remaining three parties have declared their absolute loyalty to the regime.

As of Jan. 1, 2023, Belarus had 3,590 registered **religious organizations**. The majority of them belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center **study**, 73% of Belarusians consider themselves Orthodox Christians, 12% belong to the Catholic Church, and the remaining 6% are members of the 23 other confessions registered in Belarus.

During the anti-government protests in Belarus in 2020, Catholic and Protestant churches actively opposed police brutality and gave shelter to protesters, while the Orthodox Church routinely congratulated Lukashenko on his fraudulent victory.

The church also dismissed priests supporting the protests and banned the singing of "Mahutny Bozha" (Almighty God), a secular "prayer" hymn for Belarus that had been sung for years in churches and during the protests.

The Belarusian regime also targeted religious leaders for supporting the protests. According to Christian Vision, an interfaith Christian group, around 60 religious leaders have been persecuted by the state. Twenty-two religious leaders have been subjected to legal or criminal proceedings, Christian Vision says.

More reading

[Officials warn clergy not to violate strict state restrictions](#) (4 January 2024)

[Repressive new Religion Law imposes compulsory re-registration](#) (11 January 2024)
