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The Catholic Church in the crosshairs with the blacklisting of Fr. Vyacheslav Barok as an extremist

By Olga Karatch (Nash Dom/ Our House) for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (25.04.2025) - On April 16, 2025, Belarus' Ministry of Internal Affairs officially labeled Father Vyacheslav Barok, a Catholic priest from Rossony (Vitebsk Region), as an "extremist formation."

According to the ministry, this classification encompasses his personal online presence — including his YouTube channel, Telegram, Facebook page, and even his email address.

In other words, the *entire extremist group consists of one man*: a priest with a conscience.

Father Barok was first targeted in December 2020. He was arrested and sentenced to 10 days in jail for posting a poster by artist Vladimir Tsesler, which, authorities absurdly claimed, contained "Nazi symbols." He was then investigated by the Belarusian Investigative Committee for "extremist" content in his theological video blog, where he discussed Christian ethics and spoke out against state violence. In 2021, facing increasing threats, he was forced into exile.

His social media platforms were later declared "extremist materials." Now, the state has gone even further — effectively criminalizing his entire identity and presence.

The case of Father Barok is a stark illustration of how Belarusian authorities are weaponizing anti-extremism laws to silence dissenting voices, including religious leaders. It reflects a disturbing escalation: from punishing peaceful protest to criminalizing thought, faith, praying and speech.

The region of Vitebsk, where Father Barok is from — and where the human rights organisation **Our House** was also born — leads the region in the number of Catholic priests detained under politically motivated charges.

A Place of Sanctuary: The Church That Saved Thousands

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the world was unprepared for the sheer scale of the humanitarian disaster that followed. Millions fled across borders — cold, hungry, frightened. And in Warsaw, one Catholic church became a lighthouse of hope.

It was Father Vyacheslav Barok who opened the doors of the Catholic Church of the Three Crosses to Our House, offering us free space to create a humanitarian aid center for Ukrainian war refugees in the very heart of the city.

Thanks to his courage and solidarity, and with the essential support of the **International Society for Human Rights (IGFM – Wittlich)**, *Our House* was able to organize a large-scale humanitarian warehouse. Three massive humanitarian trucks — each carrying **18 tons** of essential aid — were sent by IGFM to that church. The supplies included clothing, hygiene products, shoes, blankets, children’s toys, food, medicine, and other vital items for survival.

But this was not just about logistics — it was about humanity in action.

In the first critical months of the war, **more than 10,000 Ukrainian refugees passed through our center**, many arriving straight from the border. They came on buses knowing that *this* was the place where they could get help — food, water, warm clothes, shelter, and emotional support.

Our House’s volunteers worked around the clock. They lifted boxes until their hands bled, they went days with almost no sleep, they fell from exhaustion — and they got up again. Because every refugee who entered the church deserved to be treated with dignity. Because no one else was doing what we were doing at that scale and with that speed.

We built a 24/7 humanitarian response operation inside a sacred space — with compassion, urgency, and a sense of moral duty that transcended borders and faiths.

We are deeply proud of what we achieved — and we know that none of it would have been possible without **Father Barok’s trust and bravery** and IGFM-Wittlich Solidarity in Action.

Today, the same priest who helped save thousands of war refugees is being labeled an extremist by the Belarusian regime.

We call on churches, international partners, and human rights defenders not to remain silent.

Persecuting a man of peace for his compassion is not justice — it is tyranny.

Solidarity is not a crime. Compassion is not extremism.

Former publication by HRWF about Fr Vyacheslav Barok

<https://hrwf.eu/belarus-a-catholic-priest-testified-at-the-european-parliament/>

More about Father Vyacheslav Barok

<https://charter97.org/en/news/2021/8/14/433142/>

<https://charter97.org/en/news/2021/7/12/429239/>

[Angelus News](#)

[Belarus2020.ChurchBy](#)

<https://www.golosameriki.com/a/myhotim-vytashit-stranu-iz-yami/6001972.html>

An overview of religious persecution and a call for the release of Fr. Okolotovich by *Nash Dom*

Nash Dom/ Our House (22.04.2025) – On the occasion of Easter, the Belarusian human rights NGO *Nash Dom* has addressed HRWF this overview of the increasingly deteriorating situation of freedom of religion or belief in Belarus and is calling upon the international community to ask for the immediate release of Fr Henry Okolotovich, a Catholic priest sentenced to 11 years in prison for high treason, a first since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Denial of Access to Political Prisoners for Clergy

Clergymen are regularly denied access to political prisoners, especially those in pre-trial detention. Visits are often permitted only after sentencing or refused entirely by court order — even in cases of serious spiritual need.

Ban on Religious Literature in Detention

Detention centers routinely reject and return Bibles, prayer books, and other religious materials sent to prisoners. In some cases, entire shipments of religious texts have been returned without explanation.

Surveillance of Clergy and Cooperation with Security Services

KGB collects lists of "unreliable" clergy. Authorities monitor sermons, interrogate religious leaders and arrest clergy who pray for peace, against war and violence or express political opinions.

Religious Restrictions and Humiliation in Prison

Religious items such as crucifixes and rosaries are confiscated, despite being allowed by prison rules. Detainees have reported that crucifixes are violently torn from their necks during searches or upon arrival at detention centers.

Political prisoners are also denied the right to grieve lost relatives or attend funerals of close family members.

A Historic Precedent: The Conviction of Catholic Priest Henrikh Okolotovich under a "Capital Punishment" Article

On December 30, 2024, Catholic priest Fr. Henrikh (Henadz) Okolotovich, parish priest of St. Joseph's Church in Volozhin, was sentenced by the Minsk Regional Court to 11 years in a high-security penal colony. He was convicted of "high treason" under Article 356, Part 1 of the Belarusian Criminal Code — a charge that carries the death penalty in Belarus.

The trial was held behind closed doors, with no press, public, or Vatican representatives present. Neither bishops nor the Apostolic Nunciature attended the sentencing.

According to the religious news outlet *Katolik.life*, the case was built on unsubstantiated allegations that Fr. Okolotovich had passed secret information causing an estimated €1 million in damages to the state. No evidence of guilt was presented, and the priest pleaded not guilty.

Fr. Henrikh is one of Belarus' most respected Catholic clergy, born in the village of Novaya Mysh (Brest region). During the Soviet era, he studied theology in secret and was secretly ordained. Since the early 1980s he has played a pivotal role in reviving the Catholic Church in Belarus, especially in rural regions. He is known for preaching in the Belarusian language and for his deep commitment to national culture.

At the time of his trial, Fr. Henrikh was in critical health: he had suffered a heart attack, undergone surgery for cancer, and required continuous medical supervision. He had been held in KGB custody for over a year. Parishioners say the charges were based on mistranslated documents, threats, and coercion. In letters from detention, he wrote: *"I only ask for prayers. I am innocent."*

On This Holy Day, We Will Not Be Silent

We express our solidarity with Christians of all confessions in Belarus.

Freedom of conscience and belief is not a privilege — it is a fundamental human right. No one should be persecuted for praying, for calling for peace, for wearing a cross, for preaching, or for conducting a funeral for someone deemed "undesirable" by the regime.

Let the Light of the Resurrection shine through the darkness. Easter is about liberation — and the victory of good over evil.

With faith, hope, and solidarity,

The *Nash Dom/ Our House* Team

A Catholic priest sentenced to 11 years in prison for "espionage" for the Vatican and Poland

For the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union, a Catholic priest in Belarus has been sentenced to 11 years in prison for high treason — a charge that still carries the death penalty in Belarus.

HRWF with [SV TV](#) (08.04.2025) - In Belarus, **Catholic priest Henry (Gennady) Okolotovich** was sentenced to a long prison term for espionage in favor of the Vatican and Warsaw. The *Katolik* portal [writes](#) on this issue with reference to the words that the priest managed to communicate to visitors in the Minsk detention center.

The sentence was announced back in December, the day before the New Year. The Catholic priest was then sentenced to 11 years in a Belarusian colony and to pay one million euros in compensation for "causing damage to the state". Until today only the

article on which the priest was tried was known - "treason" (Article 356 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus). As in Russia, cases of this kind are classified in Belarus, journalists are not allowed to attend hearings, and lawyers are prohibited from commenting on the trial.

It is also important to note that Lukashenko has launched a harsh campaign against lawyers who plan to help "extremists and opponents". According to [Viasna's investigation](#), since the fall of 2020, Belarusian security forces [have arrested](#) more than 20 lawyers who were engaged in the cases of "opponents of the regime" and have deprived them of their licenses. The total number of lawyers who left the profession under pressure from the regime exceeds a hundred.

As it turned out now, Fr. Okolotovich was accused of "*espionage in favor of Poland and the Vatican*". He considers the sentence a "*gross provocation*" and an attack against the entire Catholic Church in Belarus. He separately emphasizes that the charges against him were based on indirect testimonies and that the investigation failed to provide any evidence of espionage.

The meaning of one of the documents that were translated from a foreign language (presumably Polish) was distorted during the translation, he said.

According to him, "*there is not a word of truth, not a single fact denouncing him of espionage, and the whole accusation is built on lies, threats and blackmail*". The priest stressed that out of dozens of witnesses, including officials and military personnel, no one gave a "compromising testimony" against him," the portal writes.

He also noted that priests are persecuted to silence the Catholic Church.

More reading

<https://katolik.life/bel/news/sotsium/item/5683-sudzyats-ne-myane-a-ves-kastsjol-u-belarusi-ksjondz-akalatovich-adznachy-65-goddze-i-perada-vestku-z-za-krata.html>

<https://svtv.org/news/2025-04-08/bieloruskogho-katolichieskogho-sviashchiennika-prigovorili/>

<https://www.pap.pl/ru/russian/news/beloruskiy-katolicheskiy-svyaschennik-prigovoren-k-11-godam-lisheniya-svobody-za>

<https://www.dw.com/ru/v-belarusi-ksendza-vpervye-posle-raspada-sssr-prigovorili-k-turemnomu-sroku/a-71188717>

https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/2449951/ksiondz-genrih-okolotovich-prigovorion-sudom-v-minske-k-11-godam-kolonii?srsId=AfmBOorskzLFh7S4fXRTg6hBmygoB57hfg_hF3gDipGjCZ11SMBAM16o

<https://news.zerkalo.io/life/87303.html>

<https://ru.krymr.com/a/news-belarus-ksendz-srok-gosizmena/33258427.html>

<https://ru.belsat.eu/83660784/v-minske-za-izmenu-gosudarstvu-nachnut-sudit-ottsa-genriha-okolotovicha>

<https://dron.media/v-bielarusi-katolichieskogho-sviashchiennika-prighovorili-k-11-ghodam-zakliucheniia-za-izmienu-rodinie/>

<https://bgmedia.site/society/svyashhennika-genriha-okolotovicha-skoro-nachnut-sudit/>

<https://brest-region.by/interesnoe/katolicheskij-svyashhennik-v-belarusi-prigovoren-k-11-godam-zaklyucheniya-za-gosizmenu.html>

Catholic priest in Belarus sentenced to 11 years as crackdown on dissent continues

By Yuras Karmanau

[AP](#) (01.01.2025) — A Catholic priest in Belarus on Monday was convicted on charges of high treason for criticizing the government and handed an 11-year sentence, in the first case of politically-driven charges against Catholic clergy since Belarus became independent in the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

The conviction and sentencing of Rev. Henry Okolotovich comes as Belarusian authorities have intensified their [sweeping crackdown](#) on dissent ahead of the Jan. 26 presidential election that is all but certain to hand [authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko](#) a seventh term in office.

The Viasna Human Rights Center said Okolotovich, 64, rejected the treason charges. The group has listed him among 1,265 political prisoners in the country.

“For the first time since the fall of the Communist regime, a Catholic priest in Belarus was convicted on criminal charges that are leveled against political prisoners,” said Viasna’s representative Pavel Sapelka. “The harsh sentence is intended to intimidate and silence hundreds of other priests ahead of January’s presidential election.”

Okolotovich, who has been in custody since November 2023, was diagnosed with cancer and underwent surgery just before his arrest. The priest from the town of Valozhyn in western Belarus, who was critical of the government in his sermons, has been held incommunicado, with prison officials turning down warm clothing and food sent to him.