

Belarus: severe sentence imposed on Catholic priest

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On 30 December 2024, a court in Minsk sentenced Father Henryk Okolotowicz to 11 years in a high-security penal colony. The trial was held behind closed doors; information about the verdict reached the media through unofficial channels. At present, we only know that the priest was arrested in November 2023 and charged with 'state treason'. During the investigation, he steadfastly denied the allegations levelled against him.

The conviction of Father Okolotowicz reflects the regime's longstanding anti-church policy, which has been systematically enforced for over a decade. These repressive actions also carry an anti-Polish undertone, as they predominantly target Catholic clergy from Poland or the Polish minority in Belarus. Their pastoral work is often seen as serving the interests of Poland, which allegedly seeks to reclaim territories that previously belonged to the Second Polish Republic.

Commentary

- **The regime's primary objective concerning the Catholic Church is its complete depolonisation.** During the Soviet era, the majority of Catholic clergy in Belarus were ethnic Poles, born either locally or in Poland. While the government has tolerated the Church's activities (currently, there are about 500 parishes nationwide) it has simultaneously sought to tighten its control. This approach became significantly more radical following 2020, as part of a broader crackdown on the domestic political opposition, civil society, independent media as well as Polish minority organisations and educational institutions. In 2012, there were 152 Polish priests serving in Belarus; however, by 2019, this number had dropped dramatically to 87. In 2020, it fell further to fewer than 70, accounting for only 15% of all Catholic clergy in the country. In subsequent years, more than a dozen Polish priests were forced to leave Belarus, fearing imprisonment. Among them were Andrzej Bulczak from the parish in Pastavy and Paweł Lemech who served in Shumilina – both faced trials for alleged 'extremist activities'. Belarusian-born priests of Polish descent, including Okolotowicz, have also been subjected to repression. According to estimates from the international organisation Aid to the Church in Need (Kirche in Not), ten Belarusian priests were arrested in 2023 alone. This ranked Belarus second only to Nicaragua in the number of priests persecuted that year.
- **Belarus has been tightening its repressive legal and organisational framework for religious structures.** The January 2024 amendment to the law 'On freedom of conscience and religious organisations' requires all religious communities and

associations to reapply for registration. In practice, each parish is required to obtain individual approval to maintain its operations. This verification process, expected to be completed by mid-year, may serve as a tool to restrict the activities of both the Catholic Church and Protestant communities (see [‘Towards a totalitarian state. Belarus cracks down on religious organisations’](#)). A notable precedent was the October 2022 decision to close the historically and religiously significant Church of Saints Simon and Helena in Minsk under the pretext of necessary renovations. Similarly, in November 2024, the seminary in Pinsk reportedly suspended its activities, possibly due to the re-registration process, leaving the seminary in Grodno as the sole institution providing formation for aspiring priests.

- **The lengthy prison term for Father Okolotowicz can be attributed to the regime’s anti-Polish stance.** This is also the first sentence of this kind imposed on a priest in independent Belarus. Henryk Okolotowicz, aged 64 and born near Baranavichy, was ordained in 1984 in secret due to the Soviet government’s anti-church policy. From the very beginning of his priesthood, he was recognised as a staunch advocate for religious freedom and historical truth. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, he was penalised 30 times, including for holding a mass in 1984 at Katyn to honour the murdered Polish officers. An independent and principled figure, Okolotowicz openly criticised Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime, often expressing these views in his sermons, which likely contributed to his arrest. His conviction also serves to discipline Belarusian Catholic clergy and suppress the dwindling number of priests regarded by the regime as defiant. Okolotowicz is the second prominent member of the Polish minority, following journalist and activist Andrzej Poczobut, to be sentenced for actively advocating for the community’s causes. This development further underscores the Belarusian government’s unwillingness to engage in dialogue with Poland, escalating the already severe crisis in bilateral relations.