

BELARUS: Criminal cases against exiled religious freedom defenders

Police launched criminal cases against two more religious freedom defenders who live outside Belarus: Sergiy Melyanets in January, and Natallia Vasilevich in April. Protestant preacher Melyanets attended court to pray for those on trial until he too was arrested and given short-term detention. Orthodox theologian Vasilevich is moderator of Christian Vision, founded in 2020 to document freedom of religion or belief violations and which the KGB declared "extremist". Investigators refused to explain what criminal charges they face, why, and whether they are suspects or have had charges formally laid against them. Police investigators have launched at least two criminal cases in 2026 against religious freedom defenders who live outside Belarus. Police launched criminal cases in January against Protestant Christian Sergiy Melyanets and in April against Orthodox Christian Natallia Vasilevich. Both were added to Russia's Federal Wanted List at the request of Belarus. Investigators refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions as to what criminal charges they face, why, and whether they are suspects or have had charges formally laid against them.



Sergiy Melyanets, February 2021

Svaboda.org (RFE/RL)

Forum 18 called the number listed on Melyanets' record. The man who answered the phone – who did not identify himself – asked who was calling. When Forum 18 explained and asked why Minsk City Police are looking for Melyanets and what criminal charges he is being investigated under, the man put the phone down. "Why did they put my number there? I'm not the investigator," the man who answered the phone listed for Vasilevich's criminal case told Forum 18 (see below).

Melyanets, a Protestant preacher who fled Belarus in 2024 after a short-term jailing, regularly attended trials of opposition activists to give prayerful support. "After 2020, I asked myself: how can I help people who are in prison?" he noted after he fled. "I could write letters - I wrote, I could deliver things - I delivered. But I also realised that I could do more. I started visiting courts so that people who were there because of repression could feel supported, see that they were being prayed for, that they were being remembered" (see below).

Vasilevich, an Orthodox theologian who has not visited Belarus since 2020, is moderator of the Christian Vision group. Human rights defenders from various Christian Churches across Belarus formed the group in September 2020, amid protests against the falsified presidential elections, to document violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights (see below).

The regime blocked access in Belarus to Christian Vision's website and banned its social media sites as "extremist". In 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. The Interior Ministry added the group to its list of "extremist" organisations days later (see below).

If Melyanets or Vasilevich are caught in Belarus, arrive in Belarus or are caught in states that are friendly to Belarus (such as Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan), they risk immediate arrest (and immediate transfer to Belarus) as investigators complete any criminal case (see below).

Both Melyanets and Vasilevich separately told Forum 18 that they have had no official notification of the criminal cases against them. Melyanets suspected that a case might have been launched as in January police started summoning his parents for interrogation. "Questions were mostly about me and what I am up to." He believes the criminal charges relate to alleged support for "extremist groups", such as interviews he has given to independent media that the regime has declared "extremist" (see below).

Asked why he thinks the regime is seeking to bring criminal charges against him, Melyanets told Forum 18: "They want me and my family to be in fear. But I continue to do what my Christian conscience leads me to do" (see below).

Vasilevich says she has no information on why the criminal case was launched against her. "Maybe it's because of Christians Against War – they lodged the case two weeks after Russia declared the group a 'foreign agent'." She insists that her work with Christian Vision and Christians Against War is her "theological statement" (see below).

Another of the founders of Christian Vision, Dzmitry Korneyenko, has been wanted by Vitebsk Regional Police since July 2024 on charges of "supporting extremist activity". Two Catholic priests now also in exile - Vyacheslav Barok and Andrei Vashchuk – and Orthodox priest Fr Georgy Roi, as well as Catholic layman Pyotr Rudkovsky, were declared wanted earlier (see below).

Forum 18 called Deputy Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Sergei Gerasimenya in Minsk on 18 August. Before it could ask him any questions about the criminal cases against religious freedom defenders or anything else, he said: "I will give no commentaries." He then put the phone down.

Meanwhile, in late 2025, in the first known such case, Belarus extradited a Jehovah's Witness back to Russia (where Jehovah's Witnesses are banned) to face criminal charges for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief there. Earlier the Belarusian

authorities had refused the individual's asylum request. Jehovah's Witnesses expressed concern to Forum 18 about this apparent change of approach from the Belarusian authorities to Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia (see below).

Belarusian and Russian Wanted Lists



Interior Ministry, Minsk, 3 January 2022

Red Black Cat [[CC BY-SA 4.0](#)]

The Belarusian Interior Ministry's Wanted List on its website does not appear to include individuals wanted on criminal charges which arise from their religious freedom, human rights or opposition political activity.

Belarus – as well as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – routinely shares with Russia information on those wanted on criminal charges.

The criminal cases launched in Belarus in January against Sergiy Melyanets and in April against Natallia Vasilevich became known in August when the Russian independent news outlet Sota [published online](#) the entries on Russia's Federal Wanted List. (Russia has declared the Lithuania-based Sota an "undesirable organisation".)

Russia's Federal Wanted List has [long included individuals sought for exercising freedom of religion or belief](#). These include: opponents of Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds; Muslim Nursi readers from Russia; Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia, as well as from Russian-occupied Crimea; and people wanted by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Religious freedom group Christian Vision targeted

Police and the KGB secret police have particularly targeted the group [Christian Vision](#). At least two of its founders face criminal cases (see below). It appears that Police in Vitebsk Region are leading the prosecutions, possibly because this is the home region of one of its founders, Dzmitry Korneyenko.

Human rights defenders from various Christian Churches across Belarus formed Christian Vision 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 registered, under the name Christian Vision for Belarus, in Lithuania in December 2021.)

In 2023 and 2024, the regime blocked access in Belarus to Christian Vision's website and banned its social media sites as "extremist". One court decision was issued in Grodno Region, the rest in Vitebsk Region.

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 and Natallia Harkovich, as well as 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 2025.

In April 2025, police raided the homes of three of Korneyenko's relatives, 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.

Activists of Christian Vision established Christians Against War shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. On its main website, Christian Vision [lists the aims of Christians Against War](#) as "cooperation with Ukrainian Christians and churches, as well as with Russian anti-war Christian activists for promoting a just peace, stopping Russian aggression against Ukraine, formulating a common Christian position about war and anti-war activities, documenting the reactions of churches and church leaders to the war, monitoring persecutions for anti-war and pro-Ukrainian views, [and] assisting the Christians who suffered from such persecution".

On 27 March 2026, the Russian Justice Ministry added the Christians Against War project to its [register of "foreign agents"](#).

Vasilevich: Vitebsk Regional Police launch criminal case in April



Natallia Vasilevich, September 2024

Conference of European Churches

Officials launched a criminal case in April against Natallia Vasilevich (in Russian Natalya Stepanovna Vasilevich, born 15 March 1982), a Belarusian citizen who has lived outside the

country since 2015 and last visited Belarus in 2020. She is an Orthodox Christian theologian and moderator of the Christian Vision group.

The status of the criminal case remains unclear. It is not known if Vasilevich is a suspect or whether charges have been formally instituted against her.

As of 18 August, Vasilevich does not appear on the Belarusian Interior Ministry's Wanted List on its website.

However, on 13 April, Russia added Vasilevich to its [Federal Wanted List](#) at the request of Belarus. If she is caught in Belarus, arrives in Belarus or is caught in states that are friendly to Belarus (such as Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan), she risks immediate arrest (and immediate transfer to Belarus) as investigators complete any criminal case.

The Russian Wanted List record says that the criminal investigation against Vasilevich is being undertaken by Vitebsk Regional Police. It gives a contact number for those with information.

Forum 18 called the number listed on Vasilevich's record to ask why Vitebsk Regional Police are looking for her and what criminal charges she is being investigated under. "You should ask the people who put her on the wanted list," the man - who did not identify himself - told Forum 18 on 14 August. Told that the record gives his number for those with information, the man responded: "Why did they put my number there? I'm not the investigator." He then put the phone down.

"In principle, it's not surprising," Vasilevich [noted on her Telegram channel on 13 August](#). "It was expected, and it doesn't even really stir up any emotions."

Vasilevich told Forum 18 that she has had no official notification of the criminal case against her. She only found out about it when colleagues searched the Russian Wanted List as published by Sota in August.

"I don't know which Criminal Code Article they are using, whether I'm a suspect or I've been charged, what has caused this and why Vitebsk Regional Police are conducting the investigation," Vasilevich told Forum 18 on 18 August. "Maybe it's because of Christians Against War – they lodged the case two weeks after Russia declared the group a 'foreign agent'."

Vasilevich insists that her work with Christian Vision and Christians Against War is her "theological statement".

Vasilevich says she has no idea of the impact of the criminal case against her. "It means I won't be able to travel to countries that are friendly to Belarus and Russia that could arrest and extradite me," she noted.

Melyanets: Minsk City Police launch criminal case in January



Church members try to salvage church equipment, New Life Church, Minsk, 17 February 2021

Sergiy Melyanets [[CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)]

Officials launched a criminal case in January against Sergiy Vasilevich Melyanets (born 23 August 1980), a Belarusian citizen who has lived outside the country since 2024. When he was in Belarus he was a member of a Protestant Church in the capital Minsk and a preacher.

The status of the criminal case remains unclear. It is not known if Melyanets is a suspect or whether charges have been formally instituted against him.

In 2021, Melyanets supported Minsk's New Life Full Gospel Church. On 17 February 2021, he witnessed police and court bailiffs forcibly evicting the Church from the building it had used since 2002. Some 30 bailiffs, police, and Housing Repairs and Utilities Association officials took part in the eviction. Bailiffs used an angle grinder to cut the door lock to gain entry. "I am indignant. This is a hostile takeover of church property with the excuse of official papers," he [told Forum 18 the following day](#).

Melyanets prayed outside Minsk District Police Detention Centre in August 2023 while New Life Church's Pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko [was held there](#).

Melyanets tried to attend the hearing at Minsk's Central District Court on 23 August 2023 when the Judge found two posts by New Life Church "extremist". He [noted on his Facebook page](#) how "convenient" for the authorities it was that Pastor Goncharenko had been jailed, preventing his presence in court for the hearing. "In addition, they declared the hearing closed so that no 'unwanted' person could slip in and hear what the comrade judge was spouting."

Melyanets attended hearings at Minsk Courts in October and December 2023 when Judges [ordered the liquidation of New Life Church](#).

Officials arrested Melyanets on 19 March 2024, at Minsk City Court, where the case of journalist Igor Korney was being heard. Melyanets had come to the hearing to offer prayerful support to Korney. The court initially sentenced Melyanets to 13 days' administrative detention, followed by another 12 days, after which he was released. He then fled to Poland with his family.

"I went to court to support and pray for my brother in Christ, Igor," Melyanets [told the human rights group Viasna \(Spring\) on 24 April 2024](#) after he had fled Belarus. "I was worried about him. Although we didn't know each other well, we had only met a couple of times, I knew he was a Catholic and that he was going through a hard time. I knew he was

alone, and I wanted my presence to somehow cheer him up. I also wanted to find out what he was being accused of and tell his family about it."

Melyanets later explained his motivation to Christian Vision. "After 2020, I asked myself: how can I help people who are in prison?" he [told the group on 11 August 2024](#). "I could write letters - I wrote, I could deliver things - I delivered. But I also realised that I could do more. I started visiting courts so that people who were there because of repression could feel supported, see that they were being prayed for, that they were being remembered. I did this for three years until I was arrested myself."

As of 18 August, Melyanets does not appear on the Belarusian Interior Ministry's Wanted List on its website.

However, on 26 January, Russia added Melyanets to its [Federal Wanted List](#) at the request of Belarus. If he is caught in Belarus, arrives in Belarus or is caught in states that are friendly to Belarus (such as Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan), he risks immediate arrest (and immediate transfer to Belarus) as investigators complete any criminal case.

The Russian Wanted List record says that the criminal investigation against Melyanets is being undertaken by Minsk City Police. It gives a contact number for those with information.

Forum 18 called the number listed on Melyanets' record. The man who answered the phone – who did not identify himself - asked who was calling. When Forum 18 explained and asked why Minsk City Police are looking for Melyanets and what criminal charges he is being investigated under, the man put the phone down.

"No one has sent me any official notification that I am under criminal investigation," Melyanets told Forum 18 on 17 August. "But in January they started summoning my parents for interrogation. Questions were mostly about me and what I am up to."

Melyanets believes the criminal charges relate to alleged support for "extremist groups", such as interviews he has given to independent media that the regime has declared "extremist".

Although Minsk City Police are listed as leading the investigation, Melyanets believes that investigators at Vitebsk Regional Police are investigating him. "Minsk might have sent my case to Vitebsk because they are overloaded, or because they are uniting Christian cases there."

Asked why he thinks the regime is seeking to bring criminal charges against him, Melyanets told Forum 18: "They want me and my family to be in fear. But I continue to do what my Christian conscience leads me to do."

Korneyenko: Criminal case lodged in 2024



Dzmitry Korneyenko at church stall, Vitebsk

Dzmitry Korneyenko

Dzmitry Korneyenko (in Russian Dmitry Viktorovich Korneyenko, born 5 November 1983) is an Orthodox Christian and a Belarusian citizen who has lived outside the country since 2021. He is among the Christians from various Churches who formed Christian Vision in September 2020 and is an administrator of the group. Vitebsk Regional Police have been investigating him on criminal charges since July 2024.

Police are investigating Korneyenko under Criminal Code Article 361-4 ("Supporting extremist activity"). First offences under this Article carry a maximum punishment of 6 years' imprisonment, with or without a fine. The prosecution relates to a 2022 interview he gave from Odesa, where he was then living, to Polish broadcaster Belsat about the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the people of Odesa. Belarus has declared Belsat an "extremist organisation".

As of 18 August 2026, Korneyenko does not appear on the Belarusian Interior Ministry's Wanted List on its website.

However, on 16 July 2024, Russia added Korneyenko to its [Federal Wanted List](#) at the request of Belarus. If he is caught in Belarus, arrives in Belarus or is caught in states that are friendly to Belarus (such as Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan), he risks immediate arrest (and immediate transfer to Belarus) as investigators complete any criminal case.

The Russian Wanted List record says that the criminal investigation against Korneyenko is being undertaken by Vitebsk Regional Police. It gives a contact number for those with information.

Forum 18 called the number listed on Korneyenko's record. The man who answered one of the phones – who did not identify himself - responded on 14 August: "I don't know who you are." He then put the phone down. The other two phones listed on the record went unanswered.

On 2 April, Zheleznodorozhny District Court in Vitebsk [declared "extremist"](#) Korneyenko's page on the Russian social media site VKontakte.

Earlier criminal cases for exercising freedom of religion or belief



Fr Vyacheslav Barok

Svaboda.org (RFE/RL)

Russia's Federal Wanted List includes four other individuals wanted on criminal charges in Belarus [to punish their exercise of freedom of religion or belief](#).

- 1) Vyacheslav Zygmundovich Borok (Barok) (born 6 January 1975). Catholic priest Fr Barok was [charged in July 2021](#) for his opposition to election fraud and regime violence, and fled to neighbouring Poland. He has been wanted by Vitebsk Regional Police since 10 February 2023.
- 2) Yury Vyacheslavovich Roi (born 19 December 1978). Belarusian Orthodox priest Fr Georgi Roi, who [left Belarus in 2023](#). He has been wanted by Grodno Regional Police since 11 April 2024.
- 3) Pyotr Yanovich Rudkovsky (born 27 July 1978), a Catholic layperson and [regular commentator on Vatican Radio's Belarusian Service](#). He has been wanted by Minsk Regional Police since 27 September 2021.
- 4) Andrei Nikolayevich Voshchuk (Vashchuk) (born 25 October 1984), a Catholic priest from Vitebsk [jailed in 2022](#) for a total of 30 days. He left Belarus in August 2022. He has been wanted by Vitebsk Regional Police since 24 October 2022.

Others on Russia's Wanted List at request of Belarus

Russia has placed thousands of individuals on its Federal Wanted List at the request of Belarus. As well as those the regime is seeking to punish for exercising freedom of religion or belief, many others are being sought [for human rights work](#) or for political opposition. Some of these are priests or pastors, or active members of religious communities.

"In total, by our estimates, at least two dozen believers from Belarus - including several clergy members of various denominations - are wanted by Russia on political grounds," Christian Vision [noted on Telegram on 13 August](#).

Belarus deports Jehovah's Witness back to Russia

Belarus has previously granted asylum to several Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia and rejected Russian extradition requests. Russia [banned all Jehovah's Witness communities and activities in 2017](#) as "extremist" and has prosecuted many individuals. Belarus has not

banned Jehovah's Witnesses.

However, in late 2025, in the first known such case, Belarus extradited a Jehovah's Witness back to Russia to face criminal charges for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief there. Earlier in the year the Belarusian authorities had refused the individual's asylum request and rejected the individual's appeals against the refusal.

Jehovah's Witnesses expressed concern to Forum 18 about this apparent change of approach from the Belarusian authorities to Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia. (END)

[More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus](#)

For background information, see [Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey](#)

Forum 18's [compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\) freedom of religion or belief commitments](#)

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