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Minsk Charismatics on the verge of being forced underground

by Geraldine Fagan

Keston News Service (31.03.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (06.04.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - 'I wanted to sort this out in my own country, not send information abroad,' president of the Full Gospel Association of Belarus and pastor of Word of Faith congregation ALEKSANDR SAKOVICH lamented to Keston on 20 March, 'but our situation has become impossible.' Sakovich first joined an unregistered Pentecostal church in 1972, he told Keston, 'and the same things are happening here now as then.'

In recent years the Belarusian authorities have made it increasingly difficult for Full Gospel congregations to function. On 19 February 1999 A. RYABITSEVA, head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs section of Minsk City Executive Council (MCEC), pointed out to Sakovich that at a Word of Faith worship service on 31 January 'a public sermon by a citizen of Ukraine called "Sister Valentina"' took place in violation of Belarus's 1992 law on religion. In the case of similar violations in future, she warned, 'MCEC has the right to

request that the judicial bodies curtail the activity of your religious organisation.' A 26 March 1999 letter from chairman of Belarus' State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs ALEKSANDR BILYK similarly threatens general director of Minsk Car Factory VALENTIN GURINOVICH, whose palace of culture is rented by Word of Faith. 'On 31 January Pastor Sakhovich allowed a foreign citizen to preach,' Bilyk writes, '[she] made statements which ran against Article 16 of the Constitution of Belarus [which prohibits religious activity directed against the sovereignty and constitutional structure of Belarus]: "We will create a new Belarus, a new government.

God's people will work as our first ministers." MCEC has issued a written warning to Pastor Sakovich. In connection with the above, you are asked to take these circumstances into account when considering whether to offer the theatre hall of your palace of culture for rental to the religious community "Word of Faith".' So far the congregation has been able to continue the rental agreement.

The 800-strong congregation of another Full Gospel church in Minsk, New Life, currently meets in six sections, pastor VYACHESLAV GONCHARENKO told Keston on 19 March: 'After the presidential decree on meetings [No 36, 'On Certain Measures to Prevent Accidents During Mass Meetings'] we were refused at all palaces of culture and theatres.' Until December 1999, he said, the church had rented the palace of culture

attached to Minsk Tractor Factory in the Partisan Region of the city, 'the directors then warned us that this would no longer be possible.'

A resolution on administrative violations of the law dated 18 February 2000 and signed by A. GURINOVICH, assistant public prosecutor of Partisan Region, resolves that Goncharenko be prosecuted for violation of Decree 36.

As New Life community organised services for 'a large number of parishioners - up to 700', Gurinovich notes, in a place 'not specially designed for this purpose', permission from MCEC should have been sought for such gatherings from the moment that Decree 36 came into force, but New Life failed to obtain it.

Goncharenko related to Keston how he first learned of the attempt to prosecute him soon after Decree 36 was introduced. In late September, he said, he was called for a four-hour interrogation by a female assistant public prosecutor and a man who did not identify himself. According to Goncharenko, the pair accused him of being responsible for the onset of insanity in one of his parishioners, and pointed out that Goncharenko's father had been sentenced for the same reason: a member of an unregistered Pentecostal church, Goncharenko explained to Keston, his father had been imprisoned in 1961 under Article 222 of the Belarussian SSR Criminal Code ('Infringement of the Person and Rights of Citizens Under the Guise of Performing Religious Rituals'). They then accused him of inciting religious hatred, Goncharenko said, because in one of his sermons he had declared that Muslims would remain Muslims if Mohammed were to be found not to have lived, Buddhists would remain Buddhists if Buddha were to be found not to have lived, but Christians would disappear if Christ were to be found not to have lived because Christian teaching was centred upon the person of Christ: 'I had to account for this.' The pair threatened to try him in a closed court, Goncharenko told Keston, and only then accused him of gathering without the permission of MCEC in violation of Decree No 36. At

a subsequent court hearing with a lone judge, said Goncharenko, he and lawyer and New Life administrator VASSILI YUREYEVICH stated that changes in the law such as the introduction of Decree No 36 could not affect already existing agreements - including the rental contract with the car factory - and so the case collapsed.

That agreement at an end, New Life are now obliged to seek permission from MCEC before holding meetings, but this is being withheld. A request for permission to hold meetings in the Partisan Cinema from 1 January 2000 onwards was denied on 27 December 1999. In a letter of that date to Pastor Goncharenko assistant chairman of MCEC V. GURIN explains that 'the rental of cinemas for worship services is not possible as they have a different purpose (funktsionalnoye naznachenkiye).' A 4 February 2000 letter from assistant head of the administration of MCEC in Partisan Region A. FURSOV - without addressee but evidently directed to one or more administrators of public buildings - declares that in accordance with Article 23 of the Belarussian law on religion, 'services, religious rites and ceremonies are conducted in prayer houses and on the territory belonging to them, at pilgrimage sites, the institutions of religious organisations,

cemeteries, crematoria and the flats and houses of citizens'. The letter concludes: 'We therefore ask you to end rental agreements with religious organisations. We ask you to inform the administration of Partisan Region that these measures have been taken by 15 February 2000.'

Article 23 of the law on religion does indeed state that services may take place in private flats. However, according to Sakovich, Full Gospel communities are 'constantly being refused registration due to the new Civic Code', according to Article 272 of which 'the siting by the proprietor in the living space belonging to him of premises of businesses, institutions, organisations and their subdivisions is permitted only after it has been converted from living accommodation.' On 30 November Sakovich wrote to the Ministry of Justice asking whether an analogous article in the new Housing Code extended to religious organisations. He received the following reply from M.SUKHININ at the department for social organisations at the Ministry of Justice of Belarus on 17 December. 'In accordance with Article 8 of the Housing Code and Article 272 of the Civic Code, the use of living accommodation fit for residence for anything other than its intended purpose is not permitted.' In addition, the letter states that according to Article 16 of the law on religion, in order to obtain legal personality status the founders of a religious organisation must state the location (mesto nakhozheniya) or legal address where the proposed community is to conduct its activities, 'by which is understood the address of a cult building (church, prayer house, rented premises).' Newly-formed congregations are therefore unable to register using a home address - and those already registered under such an address must change it to either a church building or rented premises by 1 June 2001. In practice, according to Sakovich, the option of meeting in a church or prayer house is not viable as none of Belarus's 54 Full Gospel congregations has its own building: 'no one has been given permission to buy or build since President ALEKSANDR LUKASHENKO came to power.' On 19 March Keston asked Vassili Yureyevich whether it was the case that since Full Gospel congregations were apparently not permitted to meet in flats and were increasingly being denied access to rented premises, they would soon be unable to meet legally anywhere. 'Yes', he replied.