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## **No room at the cowshed for Minsk church**

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 News Service (16.12.2004)/HRWF (20.12.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A 600-strong charismatic congregation, which bought a cowshed on the outskirts of the Belarusian capital Minsk in 2002 in the hope that it could be rebuilt as a church, faces the prospect of the building's demolition after the municipal authorities repeatedly refused to allow it to be used for worship. New Life Church was recently refused re-registration under the repressive 2002 religion law, has been denied permission since September to rent premises for worship and has repeatedly been visited by police. Now its pastor and administrator face fines for organising unregistered worship. "This is all their fault," Aleksandr Kalinov of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 14 December. "They insist on trying to use the cowshed as a church - they refuse to find other premises."

Church administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 on 14 December that earlier that day the church had received a written warning from Nikolai Skipor, first deputy head of Minsk's Moscow district, which stated that any unauthorised repair work carried out by the church since it bought the cowshed would be demolished by local administration workers if not removed by 1 January. The letter, seen by Forum 18, also warns that the local administration will recover the cost of any such enforced demolition through the courts.

Since the church was banned from renting a house of culture for Sunday worship services in September, it has met in the cowshed. Each Sunday police have arrived to try to halt the services. On 7 November, the police summoned the OMON special riot police, but they reportedly first went to a nearby Orthodox church by mistake, arriving at the New Life church only after the service had finished and the congregation had dispersed.

Yurevich told Forum 18 that he was summoned on 13 December for sentencing under Article 167.1, Paragraph 2 of the administrative offences code, which punishes repeated violation of legislation on holding religious events with a maximum of 15 days in prison or a fine of 300 times the minimum wage (14,720 Norwegian kroner, 1,800 Euros or 2,400 US dollars).

However, he said he rejected the charges, telling the judge that the cowshed is the only place the church is able to meet given the refusal by local administrations in every district of Minsk to rent public facilities for services. Yurevich insisted to the judge that if he is punished all 600 church members should also be punished. After withdrawing for ten minutes, the judge returned to inform him that the hearing would resume on 27 December.

Also due for prosecution under the same article is the church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko. He told Forum 18 that no date has yet been set for him to be summoned before court.

Religious affairs official Kalinov rejected church accusations that the authorities are waging a campaign against them. He insisted that the administrative charges against the pastor and the church administrator are a matter for the courts. The telephone of Alla Ryabitseva, head of the religious affairs department of Minsk city administration who has also been involved in obstructing the church's activity, went unanswered on 14, 15 and 16 December.

After the congregation bought the disused cowshed, all official agencies approved its request to change the designated land usage except for the religious affairs department of Minsk city administration. The department arranged for the preliminary approval by Minsk's architecture committee for the site to be used as a place of worship to be revoked.

Without this approval, the church - which had previously held state registration for ten years - was refused compulsory re-registration under the 2002 religion law, the deadline for which expired on 16 November 2004. Kalinov explained to Forum 18 that the church's legal address was "inappropriate" and "not in accordance with regulations" since its building is a cowshed. "It isn't designed for use as a place of worship and doesn't have the appropriate facilities." He declined to say why the congregation cannot rebuild the cowshed to add the required facilities. He also declined to explain why an Orthodox community, by contrast, faces no obstruction in building a new church nearby.

The 2002 law bars the registration of religious communities using private homes or other unapproved properties as a legal address. Without such registration, religious communities are banned from meeting for worship or engaging in any communal activities, while leaders of unregistered congregations may be prosecuted.

Yurevich insisted to Forum 18 that New Life Church - which is a member of the charismatic Full Gospel Association - wants to be allowed to meet freely for worship and to register with the authorities to gain legal status, both of which are being denied them. "The authorities are trying to make us into criminals," he complained. "They won't allow us to fulfill our functions as a church."

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## Religious freedom survey

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 News Service (16.12.2004)/HRWF (20.12.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - In October this year, five days before parliamentary elections and a national referendum on whether he can stand for a third presidential term, Aleksandr Lukashenko met with the leader of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk. In a state report of the event, President Lukashenko maintained that "one of the proposals voiced by representatives of the political opposition and supported by some foreign activists is to narrow the sphere of activity of Orthodoxy in order to increase the influence of non-traditional confessions and various sects." According to the Belarusian president, "such anti-Slavic plans and aspirations are directed not only against the Orthodox Church but also against the state."

This differentiated approach towards the various confessions in Belarus informs the whole of the state's religious policy. While stating that "religions and confessions are equal before the law," Article 16 of the 1994 Belarusian Constitution also proclaims that state relations with religious organisations are regulated "taking into account their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural and state traditions of the Belarusian people." The preamble of the Belarusian 2002 religion law thus introduces a tiered set of relations with the republic's different confessions. The role of the Orthodox Church in the historical appearance and development of the spiritual, cultural and state tradition of the Belarusian people is recognised as "defining". The spiritual, cultural and historical role of the Catholic Church is simply recognised. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church, Judaism and Islam, in turn, are described as "indivisible from the shared history of the people of Belarus."

That the current situation rather than historical contribution has in fact shaped this paradigm is suggested by several significant omissions distortions. Priestless Old Believer communities were first established on Belarusian territory in the late seventeenth century. The Greek Catholic Church in Belarus was particularly influential from its foundation in 1596 until its prohibition in 1839. Dozens of Calvinist - rather than Lutheran - communities were established on Belarusian territory by the mid-seventeenth century. During the early medieval period, Christian activity in western areas of what is now Belarus appears to have been predominantly Catholic.

Fluctuations in religious policy due to the fleeting concerns of political expediency have been particularly apparent this year in the run-up both to parliamentary elections, the national referendum on 16 October and the deadline for compulsory re-registration of religious organisations on 16 November. Previously appearing prominently only with the Orthodox, President Lukashenko promised to assist and co-operate with the Catholic Church at a meeting with Catholic bishops on 21 October, "on condition that you are prepared to love Belarus as I do and fight for her territorial integrity and independence." Invited with representatives of the confessions listed in the 2002 law's preamble to an 11 November meeting with Vice-premier Vladimir Drazhin, the Old Believers in practice now appear to be counted among their number. Vice-premier Drazhin even heard Protestant leaders' concerns at a meeting also held on 11 November, reportedly scheduled at the request of the Belarusian president himself.

While the Belarusian Baptist Union initially vowed not to re-register as a central association under the 2002 religion law until every one of its affiliate congregations was re-registered, it reassessed this position after holding Sunday school camps and tent evangelisation events without obstruction during the summer of 2004. According to Protestant sources, this period of calm resulted from the fact that the state authorities could not afford to alienate Protestant voters in view of the impending elections and referendum, and wished to re-register as many religious organizations as possible in the belief that this would prove respect for religious freedom in Belarus. Representatives of several other confessions reported that the state authorities assisted them through the re-registration process, and many with registration under the old 1992 religion law were offered significant compromises. Thus, those with between ten and 20 members (rather than the new legal minimum of 20) were permitted to re-register, as were religious associations with no affiliate community functioning on Belarusian territory for more than 20 years (as is stipulated by the 2002 law). While the same law prohibits "regular or mass performance of religious rites" on residential premises, these were also accepted as legal addresses if they were detached houses meeting certain fire and sanitation requirements.

It should be noted that the 2002 law's preamble actually gives neither a positive nor negative evaluation of the historical role played by the confessions it mentions - which may reflect the at least lukewarm attitude towards religious faith held by many state officials in Belarus. President Lukashenko's support for the Belarusian Orthodox Church may likewise be largely symbolic - his pet construction project is after all for a new ice-hockey stadium in every regional centre rather than a new Orthodox cathedral, and Orthodox involvement in state institutions is reportedly low-level despite a series of co-operation agreements

between the Belarusian Orthodox Church and government ministries. In general, however, the authorities do honour a 12 June 2003 church-state concordat in which they guarantee the Belarusian Orthodox Church's "right of ecclesiastical jurisdiction on its canonical territory" and pledge "to fight jointly against pseudo-religious structures." In conjunction with the 2002 law's tiered model and other pieces of legislation, this works to create different categories of confession assigned spaces of varying size within the religious and public spheres, starting with the Belarusian Orthodox Church and finishing with those who are essentially underground. Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches were barred from re-registering without the consent of the local Belarusian Orthodox Church bishop, and thus effectively banned.

The "traditional" confessions of the 2002 law's preamble as well as several others have been encouraged or helped to register or re-register. However, this is not a guarantee of religious freedom. In March 2004 leaders of the main Protestant churches wrote to President Lukashenko seeking the removal of several provisions from the 2002 law, including those stipulating compulsory registration and a minimum of 20 members; limiting the area of a religious organisation's activity to the city, town or village where it is registered (or to a particular region in the case of an association); permitting only associations to found monastic communities, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, missions and educational institutions; prohibiting systematic home worship meetings; requiring state permission for outdoor events and barring a religious organisation from registering at a residential address. (In Belarus only the president, parliament, the Supreme Court, the Supreme Economic Court or the Council of Ministers may appeal to the Constitutional Court.) This appeal failed. While most religious organisations that have re-registered successfully - such as Muslims, Lutherans and Baha'is - admit to gathering at residential addresses without prosecution, failure to meet this and other of the law's requirements has prevented some religious organizations from qualifying for registration or re-registration and hence leading a fully open existence. Not meeting the minimum ten participants for a monastic community, for instance, only seven Roman Catholic convents and none of its five or six de facto monasteries exist officially. For the same reason, the Greek Catholic Church cannot found a monastery. (This is also impossible because the Church does not qualify to register a central association as its parishes have been established only within the past 15 years, and its leader is not a Belarusian citizen.) While all 15 of its parishes are fully re-registered, without a central association the Greek Catholic Church is also officially barred from founding its own media publications or inviting foreign citizens to Belarus in order to engage in religious activity.

Although four of its six communities in Belarus have also been re-registered, the Society for Krishna Consciousness does not qualify for a central association either and so cannot hire a public hall for or publicise lectures by visiting foreign teachers, or produce a publication in a circulation higher than 300 copies, as this would require the publication to be officially registered. Consistently refused permission to distribute literature in public on the grounds that the places selected are "inappropriate", the Society's members report frequent brief detentions and small fines (of about the equivalent of 137 Norwegian kroner, 16 Euros or 20 US dollars) if they continue to do so, or being ordered to leave a location if they do not have a registered community there.

Similarly, on the eve of a 10 October 2004 service in Dyatlovo (Grodno [Hrodna] region) as part of the "Belarus for Christ" car rally, the pastor of the local charismatic Light to the World Church reportedly received a telephone call from a local official warning him not to allow pastors from other areas to speak since Dyatlovo was "not the sphere of their activity."

According to the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, 2,677 of a possible 2,783 religious communities had successfully re-registered by the 2002 law's 16 November 2004 deadline, which number included 84 that reportedly requested "self-liquidation" for technical reasons. Having spoken with various religious representatives, Forum 18 finds this figure largely credible. In some cases, however, failure to meet the

strict criteria of the 2002 law has resulted in religious communities being refused re-registration and with it the right to function legally. Having lost their use of privately rented premises on the eve of the parliamentary elections (in which its pastor was standing), Word of Truth charismatic Full Gospel Church in Dzerzhinsk (Minsk region) was refused re-registration for correspondingly failing to provide a valid legal address. Repeatedly refused permission to rent premises in Minsk since 2003 (for example, for specifying "Sundays" rather than precise dates over a period requested), New Life charismatic Full Gospel congregation has also been denied permission to use its former farm building for services and so was similarly refused re-registration for lack of a valid legal address.

Like New Life, the Minsk Krishna Consciousness Society now faces prosecution for worship at an unapproved premises after being refused re-registration at an address that is technically residential. Two Reformed Baptist congregations have also been refused re-registration without explanation. While the outcome of their re-registration applications is not yet certain, Messianic Jewish and Calvinist congregations in Minsk also report difficulty in obtaining a valid legal address. (Similar to New Life but in a different Minsk district, the Calvinist church was earlier also refused rental for not specifying precise dates of its proposed meetings.) Five autonomous Baptist congregations in Brest region have also yet to hear of the result of their re-registration applications, in which they refused to accept the provision of the 2002 law restricting their activity to a particular location. Unlike the more established religious bodies, these churches do not have an umbrella association that would allow movement to different areas for mission.

In addition to the 2002 law, local and other restrictions combine to circumscribe the activity of registered religious organisations. As one Protestant source remarked to Forum 18, "we may not be persecuted, but you can create a legal basis which makes almost nothing possible." In addition to Article 25 of the 2002 law, which requires state permission for religious events outside purpose-built places of worship, the August 2003 law on demonstrations also requires prior state permission for public religious events, while a Minsk City Council ruling has barred religious events in cultural establishments since 1999. Elsewhere, local decrees ban the use of cinemas for religious events in Grodno city and the hire of public swimming pools for baptisms in Grodno region.

While Krishna devotees are allowed to hold processions at one location in Minsk, they also report having to pay fees equivalent to 682 Norwegian kroner, 79 Euros or 100 US dollars (i.e just under the average monthly salary) if these occur on a weekday or 2,046 Norwegian kroner, 237 Euros or 300 US dollars (i.e. over double the average monthly salary) if at a weekend, since the 2003 demonstrations law requires payment for the provision of emergency services during public events and cleaning up afterwards. In September 2004 a celebration at a privately hired function suite which Krishna devotees maintain was secular was broken up by police claiming it was religious and so required the state's permission.

In the same month, the Full Gospel charismatic Church of Jesus Christ and the Pentecostal New Testament and Hope of Salvation churches were told that they could not hold services at their premises in Minsk since they did not hold the necessary approval from the fire and sanitation authorities. In October 2004 the pastor of the registered Light to the World charismatic Full Gospel congregation pastor was fined 1,110 Norwegian kroner, 136 Euros or 174 US dollars (about 125% of the average monthly salary) for holding an unsanctioned religious meeting at his home. In July 2004 three Council of Churches Baptists were each fined 1,200 Norwegian kroner, 153 Euros or 175 US dollars for similarly violating regulations on holding religious events by singing hymns at a hospital in Gomel region without first obtaining the state's permission. For the same reason, members of a Council of Churches congregation in Lepel [Lyepyl'], Vitebsk [Vitsyebksk] region were detained five times in three months during 2004 for running a street library without permission, while one was allegedly beaten in police custody.

Under a new law governing tax on real estate that came into force in January 2004, Light of the Gospel Church in central Minsk was fined several million Belarusian roubles for offering its premises to other registered Baptist Union congregations without their own places of worship, and not paying the relevant fee. A million Belarusian roubles is about 2,820 Norwegian kroner, 345 Euros or 458 US dollars, or over three months' average earnings. Under the new legislation, tax must be paid if a legal personality rents its premises to another, even if free of charge.

State registration also fails to prevent religious organisations from being denounced by the state. An October 1997 analysis by specialists attached to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs determined that the Society for Krishna Consciousness was a "destructive totalitarian sect", while they concluded in March 2000 that a member congregation of the charismatic Full Gospel Association was a "neo-mystical religious-political destructive sect" whose growth posed "a significant threat to the individual, society and state" of Belarus. A 2002 state schoolbook teaches that Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses are "sects" encouraging fanaticism, that Krishna devotees need psychiatric help and that Orthodox worship results in a hypnotic state.

The same official school textbook asks schoolchildren to choose the "correct" definitions of "religion" from various options, including "a particular form of social consciousness in which dominant external forces are reflected in a fantastical way in a person's consciousness, and earthly forces take the form of the non-earthly" (correct), "a system of scientific knowledge concerning the salvation of mankind" (incorrect) and "teachings of the 'church fathers' which aim to substantiate the existence of God" (incorrect). In a section headed "Let's take note," five quotations on religious belief are printed, such as "To believe means to refuse to understand," and "Religion is a weakness..."

In a further testament to the lingering influence of militant atheism in the Belarusian state apparatus, an official religious studies textbook, intended for first-year college students, maintains that "religion does not teach a believer to strive to lead a dignified life, to fight for his freedom or against evil and oppression. This is all supposed to be performed for him by supernatural forces, above all, god. All that is left for the believer to do is to be his pathetic petitioner, to behave as a pauper or slave... Religion's promises to give a person everything that he seeks in it are but illusion and deception."

Following a section which considers atheism as "the highest form of free thought," the Chairman of the Expert Council attached to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Professor Anatoli Kruglov declares the Marxist-Leninist definition of freedom of conscience to be "authentic" (unlike that of "bourgeois ideology") and claims that, following the incorporation of this principle into Soviet legislation in 1918, "no religion was accorded any preference or subjected to any form of oppression" in Belarus.

While religious communities with re-registration thus face varying degrees of restriction and possibility, those without it are now entirely illegal. The number of unregistered communities appears to have grown in recent years. In 2003 several Protestant churches reported attempts by rural officials to pressurise those giving their personal details as part of registration applications for new communities into withdrawing their names. Pentecostal, charismatic Full Gospel and Greek Catholic representatives have also told Forum 18 that they have been unable to register new churches for several years. A reduction in registered religious communities is even reflected in official government figures: while 2,748 were registered in October 2001 and 2,863 in January 2004, there are now 2,677 out of a possible 2,783.

If unregistered communities do not lead an entirely underground existence, they are liable to prosecution. Orthodox congregations independent from the Moscow Patriarchate are barred from obtaining re-registration, although there is no corresponding provision in the law. While the discreet Catacomb Orthodox Church reports no obstruction, a parish of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox (People's) Church claims ever more frequent small fines

(of about 57 Norwegian kroner, 7 Euros or 9 US dollars) for holding services at a partly ruined church on the outskirts of Minsk. A priest of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad who oversees three parishes in Minsk and Minsk region reports as yet unsuccessful attempts by the local authorities to prosecute him for unregistered religious activity. An independent Orthodox parish in Pohranichny (Grodno region) has disbanded after its church was bulldozed in 2002 and its priest, Fr Yan Spasyuk, sought asylum in the United States.

Forum 18's previous survey a year ago in 2003 noted that six fines had been reported for unregistered worship meetings, usually in private homes, over the previous year. (A further three between March and May 2003 have since come to light). Most of these fined were congregations of the Council of Churches Baptists, who have refused on principle since 1961 to register with the state authorities in CIS countries. Since that survey, there have been a further six fines of their communities totalling 1,688 Norwegian kroner, 213 Euros or 250 US dollars, with other fines made handed down to a Baptist Union member for holding Bible study at his home in Grodno region (105 Norwegian kroner, 13 Euros or 15 US dollars) and an independent unregistered Pentecostal church in Brest region (142 Norwegian kroner, 17 Euros or 23 US dollars). The average monthly wage in Belarus is the equivalent of about 864 Norwegian kroner, 105 Euros or 139 US dollars.

One Pentecostal representative has told Forum 18 that such fines would happen "every day, but we leave quickly and quietly after home services." Most of the fines came in the wake of a December 2003 order issued, according to regional officials, by the Belarusian Ministry of Justice, which ordered them to halt "the illegal activity of members of unregistered Baptist organisations" belonging to the Council of Churches by 1 March 2004.

A key feature of Belarusian state religious policy making such actions possible is its extensive centralised network dealing with religious affairs, which remains more or less intact from the Soviet period. As well as a central committee in Minsk and one or two religious affairs officials per region, each district (approximately 20 per region) has a Department for Relations with Religious and Social Organisations and a Commission for Monitoring Compliance with Legislation on Religion. In April 2003 Baptist Union congregations in districts in Minsk region received similar demands for personal details of children and teachers of their Sunday schools, which they refused to provide. In October 2003 a district in Minsk region received a letter from a top religious affairs official accusing its Commission for Monitoring Compliance with Legislation on Religion of "not fully performing its function" and recommending increased monitoring of religious organisations, including regular visits, check-ups and conversations with their leaders.

On 17 August 2004 a local KGB secret police officer reportedly approached the pastor of the evangelical Salvation Church (Brest region), noting that the congregation contained many student members and their parents were complaining that they were being "zombified". After accusing the pastor of breaking the law by inciting religious hatred towards the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the secret policeman also allegedly told the pastor to speak in support of President Lukashenko during his next sermon and proposed that the pastor collaborate with the secret police.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## **Most - but not all – communities re-registered**

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 News Service (17.11.2004)/HRWF (17.11.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The bulk of re-registration denials under Belarus' obligatory state re-registration process have been mainly of Protestant churches, Forum 18 News

Service has found. But, contacted by Forum 18 shortly before the final day (Tuesday 16 November) of a two-year period for obligatory state re-registration under Belarus' restrictive 2002 religion law, representatives of almost all of the country's religious confessions report that their applications were largely successful - with some notable exceptions.

Offering some preliminary figures on 16 November but stressing that a little time remained for approximately 20 outstanding religious organisations to re-register, Aleksandr Kalinov of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 that "96.2 per cent" - or 2,678 out of 2,783 religious organisations - had successfully re-registered. Those which had not, he maintained, were either too small to qualify (the 2002 law stipulates a minimum of 20 members) or had voluntarily applied for liquidation: "We didn't set ourselves the aim of harming legal personalities," he claimed. Kalinov added that the final results would probably be released in two or three days' time.

After a slow start, state officials appear to have striven to re-register most religious organisations. While stressing that re-registration was not necessarily a guarantee of the right to worship freely, one Protestant source earlier suggested to Forum 18 that this would be the case: "They can reassure the West by saying, 'Just look how many organisations we have re-registered'." The 2002 religion law does not prescribe a compulsory liquidation procedure as a consequence of failing to re-register. However, repeated violations of its provisions - such as failure to re-register - may result in liquidation by court order, according to Article 23. On 16 November, Kalinov told Forum 18 that religious organisations which failed to re-register would be liquidated following the deadline.

Many members of Belarus' religious minorities fear that, after last month's referendum and parliamentary elections, and this month's re-registration deadline, the government will now harshly implement Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law. Under this law, all unregistered group religious activity is illegal.

Legal restrictions on public religious events also exist.

The preamble to the 2002 law gives special recognition to the Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Lutheran Church, Judaism and Islam. Speaking to Forum 18 in recent days, several religious leaders referred to an 11 November meeting attended by representatives of these confessions as well as the Old Believers, at which Vice-premier Vladimir Drazhin reportedly announced that their organisations had all successfully passed re-registration. Kalinov told Forum 18 that 1,256 Orthodox parishes had re-registered, while 11 would be liquidated by their own decision or because they had become monasteries. While he said that precise data would not be available from dioceses until the new year, Belarusian Orthodox Church press secretary Andrei Petrashkevich told Forum 18 that the handful of parishes which had failed to re-register had done so "for technical reasons", such as a change of location.

The True Orthodox Church was in 2003 effectively banned from re-registering. Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Christian communities could only gain state registration if they had the approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop. This non-legal, but state-enforced, requirement barred re-registration of the Russian True Orthodox Church, which comes under the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox (People's) Church and the catacomb True Orthodox communities.

A Minsk-based spokesperson for the Roman Catholic Church told Forum 18 that all its parishes - approximately 430 - had also re-registered, while Kalinov gave the figure of 428. A spokesperson for the 15 Greek Catholic (Eastern-rite) communities in Belarus similarly told Forum 18 that they had all re-registered successfully, as did Kalinov.

Fr Werner Bösiger of the controversial Latin-rite Society of St Pius X, founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, told Forum 18 that its two previously registered communities in Minsk had amalgamated and re-registered as one since they did not have more than 20 members each. Remarking that it was "not so complicated" for Catholics in Belarus, he added that this

community had managed to gain the authorities' approval to use a free-standing house as a legal address: "You just need to be a little bit flexible."

Petr Orlov, who heads 38 priestless Pomorye Old Believer communities in Belarus, told Forum 18 that they had all re-registered, while a spokesperson at the Old Believer church belonging to the Belokrinitsa Concord in the city of Gomel [Homyel'] said that it too had recently re-registered. Kalinov added that three Old Believer communities in Minsk, Brest and Vitebsk [Vitsyebk] regions would be liquidated by choice due to scant numbers.

According to Kalinov, 23 of 27 Muslim communities have re-registered, since the remaining four - two in Grodno [Hrodna] region, one in Minsk and one in Brest - had disbanded by themselves. Mufti Ismail Aleksandrovich of the Religious Association of Muslims in Belarus told Forum 18 that all 20 of his organisation's communities had re-registered.

Previously potentially affected by the law's provision preventing the use of residential premises as a legal address, he said that this had not been problematic in practice: "In some places the authorities helped us." Ismail Voronovich, the head of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Belarus, which is said to embrace some five communities, has so far been unavailable for comment.

Yuri Dorn, who heads the Judaic Religious Association, told Forum 18 that 14 of 15 of its communities had re-registered. The fifteenth, in Molodechno [Maladzyechna] (Minsk region), had failed to find a suitable legal address in time, he explained, but he was confident that it would be registered in the near future. Dorn thought that a further two Hassidic Jewish communities under the Union of Jewish Religious Communities of the Republic of Belarus had not managed to re-register for the same reason, but Eduard Parizh, who heads that organisation, has so far been unavailable for comment.

The chairman of the Religious Association of Progressive Jewish Communities, Yakov Basin told Forum 18 that 15 of its 16 member organisations had re-registered. The sixteenth, in Borisov (Minsk region), had no legal address, he explained, "but that was our fault - the problem was with the community itself." Kalinov maintained that a total of 36 Jewish religious organisations had re-registered – the exceptions being an Orthodox community in Brest and a Progressive community in Minsk.

Although he was unsure of the exact number, Vitali Sozinov of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Belarus confirmed that all – or approximately 11 - of its communities had re-registered. Kalinov said that 17 out of 19 Lutheran communities had re-registered, the exceptions being in Minsk and Mogilev.

More varied results emerge regarding the remaining Protestant and other confessions. Bishop Sergei Khomich of the Pentecostal Union told Forum 18 that some 480 of 490 Pentecostal communities had re-registered successfully. Kalinov of the State Committee put the figure at 462, adding that the remainder were too small and had voluntarily surrendered their legal personality status. Bishop Nikolai Sinkovets of the Baptist Union told Forum 18 that it was still too early to gauge how many of his organisation's 272 communities would be re-registered, "but it will be fewer than 272, as some won't pass". A member of an independent Baptist church in Brest told Forum 18 that it had filed for re-registration, but had not yet learnt the result. Kalinov said that 239 of 266 Baptist communities had re-registered, with the remainder due for liquidation with their full consent.

Aleksandr Sakovich, who heads the charismatic Full Gospel Churches Association, also told Forum 18 that it was too early to say how many of its 64 congregations would be re-registered, since many had submitted applications only recently. Kalinov told Forum 18 that 49 of 61 Full Gospel congregations had re-registered, maintaining that the remainder had either requested liquidation or were too small. Forum 18 has documented the difficulties experienced by some of the Full Gospel Association under the 2002 law, particularly as only

six of its congregations possess their own worship buildings. On 16 November the 500-strong New Life Full Gospel Church was reportedly refused re-registration in Minsk city. The Freedom of Conscience Information Centre told Forum 18 that district authorities rejected the church's use as a legal address of a building it had purchased over two years before while simultaneously denying permission for its renovation. As well as restrictions on buildings for worship, legal restrictions on public religious events also exist.

The non-denominational Church of Christ - unconnected, according to its Minsk pastor, with the controversial group of that name also known as the Boston Movement - has re-registered five of its six congregations, Pastor Konstantin Momatyuk told Forum 18. He explained that a member of the sixth, in Molodechno, had "walked off with the official church stamp", making re-registration impossible. While one Minsk congregation successfully re-registered at its own building, Momatyuk noted that this was without the right to conduct services there as it was technically still a residential address.

Minsk-based Pastor Nikolai Khaskin of the Zion-Jerusalem Messianic Jewish community told Forum 18 that it was having difficulties with re-registration due to the absence of a suitable legal address. A further two Messianic congregations in the capital have managed to re-register, he said.

Moisei Ostrovsky, who heads the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Belarus, told Forum 18 that 61 of its communities had been re-registered and a further nine registered anew. Pastor Aleksandr Timashev of the non-denominational Johanneskirche in Grodno city told Forum 18 that his church, the only such community in Belarus, had also re-registered. Kalinov confirmed that both these churches had fully re-registered.

Lyudmila Chizhmakova of the New Apostolic Church similarly reported that all 20 of its congregations had re-registered. While half of these have their own worship buildings, she said, the authorities permitted others to re-register at residential addresses if they were free-standing houses with specific approval from fire and sanitation officers, as one regional religious affairs official had maintained to Forum 18 last year. Kalinov also confirmed that this confession had fully re-registered.

A spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Minsk, Pavel Yadlovsky said that 25 of 26 communities had re-registered. A decision had not been received for the twenty-sixth, he said, but was confident that it would be positive. Kalinov maintained that all 26 had been re-registered. A spokesperson for the East European representation of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints told Forum 18 that in practice there were two rather than three Mormon communities in Minsk and that only these two had re-registered. This was similarly confirmed by Kalinov.

Of six Baha'i organisations, five have re-registered, Minsk community member Vasili Kislyak told Forum 18. The Baha'i organisation in Grodno voluntarily disbanded because it did not have ten members, he said. (Regional religious affairs officials earlier told Forum 18 that they would accept ten rather than 20 members for re-registration of an existing community, as this was the number required for initial registration under the 1992 religion law.) Although there are 12 people in the group, explained Kislyak, only nine are registered residents of Grodno city and some of them were too wary to provide their names for re-registration. He stressed, however, that there had been no state pressure and expected that the Grodno community would still be able to meet in small groups.

Sergei Malakhovsky of the Society for Krishna Consciousness told Forum 18 that four out of six of its communities had re-registered, the exceptions being in Bobruisk [Babruysk] (Mogilev [Mahilyow] region) and Minsk, where Forum 18 has already documented the community's problems in meeting the stipulations of the 2002 law.

Two Reformed Baptist churches previously registered with the Baptist Union have been refused re-registration, the pastor of one of them, Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky, told Forum 18.

Although his Minsk congregation applied and was rejected two months ago, it has still not been officially notified, he said, while a second community in Gatovo (Minsk region) was also refused without explanation: "They just returned the documents." After a check-up in October 2004, police officers tried to prosecute the Minsk congregation for meeting without state permission but failed due to procedural irregularities, Pastor Vyazovsky added. In his view the congregations have been refused re-registration because "we reject the close scrutiny of church life instigated by the 2002 law".

The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong, and close supervision by officials of religious communities is an integral part of central state policy.

A member of another Reformed church, Aleksei Frolov, told Forum 18 that his Calvinist community in Minsk has not yet been re-registered, although it only recently applied. This community has also previously had difficulty holding events in the capital. Pastor Lyavon Lipen of a second, entirely separate, Calvinist community in Minsk told Forum 18 that it would not be re-registering as he considers the 2002 law discriminatory and anti-Christian. "The authorities didn't include Calvinists as historical in the law despite historical fact and they haven't returned our historical church buildings to us - if they ignore us, we'll ignore them."

Churches whose congregations belong to the Council of Churches Baptists refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in the CIS countries they operate.

The religion law envisages two levels of re-registration prior to the 16 November 2004 deadline. The individual local religious communities described so far must re-register with regional executive committees or, if applicable, Minsk City Council. Religious associations (obyedineniya), however - which must contain ten or more affiliate local communities, including one that has functioned in Belarus for at least 20 years - must re-register with the main government body dealing with religious organisations, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. Only these religious associations have the right to found monasteries, monastic communities, brotherhoods and sisterhoods, missions and religious educational institutions, which also have to re-register individually with the State Committee. Kalinov told Forum 18 that all those organizations liable for re-registration with the State Committee had done so successfully.

Certainly, no representative of a confession with a previously registered association reported difficulty re-registering it. Jewish leader Yakov Basin explained that the authorities had disregarded the provision stipulating that one community must have been active in Belarus for more than 20 years when re-registering existing associations. Currently without a central association even though they have sufficient communities, however, the Greek Catholics may have difficulties registering one in future due to the law's restrictions in this area. Without such an association, they do not officially have the right to found media organs or invite foreign personnel to engage in religious activity.

And while all 25 Orthodox monasteries and convents have re-registered, according to Church press secretary Aleksandr Pashkevich, re-registration of similar Roman Catholic institutions is "still ongoing", according to a Catholic spokesperson in Minsk. Although the Roman Catholic Church claims 357 monks and nuns in Belarus, only a handful of Catholic convents and no monasteries have previously obtained registration.

Forum 18 has been unable to locate representatives of the three remaining registered confessions: the First Christian Church, the Apostolic Faith Christians, and Oomoto (a faith often regarded as an offshoot of Shinto, founded in Japan in 1892).

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## Minsk Krishna society facing closure?

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 News Service (10.11.2004)/HRWF (15.11.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness fears that it will not be granted the necessary re-registration under Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law after a recent district court ruling declared worship services at its current legal address to be unlawful. "We are being forced down a blind alley," Sergei Malakhovsky of the Society remarked to Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 11 November. "The authorities don't allow us to meet on our own premises and don't allow us to go anywhere else either." Under the 2002 law, the deadline for compulsory re-registration for all religious organisations expires on 17 November. Unregistered religious activity is illegal.

Although the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness was legally registered at 11 Pavlov Street in 1992, subsequent legal additions place its right to worship in the two-storey building at that address in doubt. Thus, on 3 November Minsk's Central District Court issued an official warning to Society chairman Aleksandr Karzov for violating the legal procedure on religious events. On conducting a check-up at 11 Pavlov Street at 7.10 pm on 14 October, the court's decision noted, local police officer Yuri Nesterovich found Karzov conducting an evening service with approximately ten other persons "dressed in ritual clothing".

The court found that this constituted an administrative offence because, as specialist from Minsk's municipal Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Alla Martynova explained, 11 Pavlov Street has not been transferred from the state's catalogue of housing stock and is therefore legally a dwelling that cannot be considered to be specially designed for religious events. In accordance with Article 25 of the religion law, the verdict continued, worship meetings in such residential premises are permitted only if they are not "systematic" in character and follow a corresponding decision by the local state authorities.

Local police officer Nesterovich, however, pointed out to the court that the 14 October service at 11 Pavlov Street was the most recent such gathering to be held "systematically" at that address since 2002. "Permission had not been granted for the holding of religious events," he reportedly told the court, "and no one had applied for it."

This situation - similar to that of some Protestant congregations - makes re-registration problematic for the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness. In addition, Article 17 of the religion law states that a religious organization applying for re-registration must provide an official document certifying its right to be situated at the address indicated in its statutes, while Article 272 of the 1998 Civil Code does not allow an organisation to be sited in a dwelling unless it has been transformed into non-residential premises.

Malakhovsky admitted to Forum 18 that the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness has been reluctant to request formal permission to use its building for worship services in line with the most recent law. "We have been refused permission for anything at all over the past five years - to rent a hall, distribute literature or collect donations," he explained.

Illustrating how the Society now finds it impossible to obtain the use of premises outside 11 Pavlov Street, Malakhovsky described to Forum 18 how state representatives recently broke up a community celebration at a privately-hired function suite. On 11 September, he said, Krishna devotees and guests - including the Indian ambassador to Belarus -gathered at a restaurant belonging to a local factory "for a purely secular celebration" following a religious ceremony marking Krishna's birthday at 11 Pavlov Street.

During the celebration, however, some half a dozen police officers and local officials arrived at the restaurant, said Malakhovsky, and insisted that the event was a religious gathering for which official permission was required in accordance with the religion law. Threatening to call riot police, he continued, the state representatives obliged Society members and guests to leave the premises, and court warnings were subsequently issued to the directors of both the factory and the restaurant.

In the wake of these official warnings, Malakhovsky told Forum 18 that he now fears fines, closure of 11 Pavlov Street and prosecution of its Krishna devotee owner should the approximately 200 Society members who attend weekly worship services continue to practice their faith as a community.

An 8 October 1997 analysis by experts attached to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs declared the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness to be a "destructive totalitarian sect" and recommended its closure.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## Charismatic congregations barred from meeting

by Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 News Service (05.11.2004)/HRWF (06.11.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - While some representatives of the charismatic Full Gospel Association tell Forum 18 News Service that they have become optimistic in recent weeks that their churches will be re-registered under the 2002 Belarusian religion law, ongoing state obstruction to these communities' worship services would appear to render the receipt of legal status all but meaningless. Under the 2002 law, the deadline for compulsory re-registration for all religious organisations expires on 17 November 2004.

A 6 October decision by Frunze District Court in the Belarusian capital Minsk, for example, fined Pastor Andrei Sidor 380,000 Belarusian roubles (1,110 Norwegian kroner, 136 Euros or 174 US dollars) for "violating regulations on holding religious events" by conducting a two-hour worship service at his own home on Sunday, 19 September. The average monthly salary in Belarus is estimated to be around 303,000 Belarusian roubles (885 Norwegian kroner, 108 Euros, or 139 US Dollars).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 4 November, the head of the Full Gospel Association in Belarus, Aleksandr Sakovich, said that, after paying the fine, Pastor Sidor will still challenge the 6 October decision at a district court hearing in Minsk next week. He added that, even though Sidor's Light to the World congregation currently holds state registration, the home worship service could be considered a violation of Article 25 of the 2002 religion law, which states that religious services may take place on premises not specially designed for them only after a corresponding decision by the local state authorities. According to Sakovich, Sidor's local district executive committee has denied him permission to use his flat for services because he has likewise been unable to obtain the necessary approval from fire safety and sanitation officers. He added that another Minsk Full Gospel church, the 1000-strong New Life congregation, has nowhere to meet either because local fire safety and sanitation departments have similarly withheld their approval of a building recently purchased by the community.

New Life is cited with three other Minsk churches – the 500-strong Full Gospel Church of Jesus Christ and Pentecostal congregations New Testament" and Hope of Salvation – in a 14 September resolution by the city's Moscow District prohibiting them from holding worship

services. According to the document, a check-up on these organisations' premises revealed that "measures to provide medical services had not been taken" in addition to "insufficient public safety measures".

"It's ridiculous – police and medical teams should supposedly be on standby, but that doesn't happen at theatre performances, for instance," Pastor Boris Chernoglaz of the Church of Jesus Christ remarked to Forum 18 on 4 November. Currently, he said, his congregation and New Life cannot obtain permission to rent a hall anywhere in the city: "The authorities know that it is a serious trial for a church not to be able to gather together, that's why they do this." He added, however, that the two communities are preparing a court challenge to fight Minsk's Moscow District ban.

According to Aleksandr Sakovich, securing worship premises is currently the main difficulty for Full Gospel churches in Belarus. While there was a hitch with re-registration in mid-October 2004 – when Minsk district authorities denied re-registration to Pastor Sidor's church and refused even to accept applications from the Church of Jesus Christ, Word of Faith and Life in Abundance congregations – local state officials have since accepted the necessary documents, he told Forum 18. Both he and Pastor Chernoglaz expressed confidence that they would be re-registered by the deadline.

One difficulty posed by the 2002 religion law, however, is that a community applying for re-registration must provide an official document certifying its right to be situated at the location indicated in its statutes. (Article 17) This is further complicated by the fact that the Belarusian Civil Code prohibits the siting of an organisation in a dwelling which is still used as living quarters. (Article 272)

On 4 November Yuri Novitsky, a member of the 40-strong "Word of Truth" Full Gospel congregation in Dzerzhinsk, Minsk region, confirmed to Forum 18 that this had now become an issue for his church as it gathered the necessary documentation for re-registration. On 5 October – the eve of nationwide parliamentary elections in which the congregation's pastor, Nikolai Kozel, was standing as a candidate – the church lost the use of premises belonging to a local factory, he said. Novitsky emphasised that, although the congregation's contract had expired some weeks before, no questions were raised by the municipal authorities until the day before the elections. "The landlord said he couldn't have any further agreement with us because he didn't want problems," he told Forum 18.

Many members of Belarus' religious minorities fear that, after the 17 October referendum and parliamentary elections, the government will now harshly implement Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law. Under this law, all religious activity by unregistered religious communities is illegal and legal restrictions on public religious events also exist. The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## **Two Mormons expelled for "illegal missionary activity"**

AP (25.10.2004)/HRWF (26.10.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Authorities expelled two U.S. citizens for what they said was "illegal missionary activity," the Belarusian security agency said Monday.

The two were identified as Mormons who came to work with an international humanitarian organization called "Sofia" in the eastern Belarusian town of Mogilyev, said the security service, known by its acronym, KGB. Their names were not given.

The KGB said the two were expelled because they were conducting "illegal missionary activity" and because The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - the formal name for the Mormon church - was not registered in the Mogilyev region.

"The U.S. citizens were involved in disseminating Mormon religious teachings among the population, conducting meetings, handing out literature," the KGB said.

Two years ago, President Alexander Lukashenko pushed through what many critics call the most restrictive religion law in Europe. The law banned organized prayer by religious communities of fewer than 20 citizens and prohibiting religions that have been represented in Belarus for less than 20 years from publishing literature or setting up missions.

The law appeared to be an attempt to end the inroads minority religions, especially evangelical Protestants, have made in Belarus - even though opinion polls indicate that 80 percent of the population consider themselves Orthodox.

In January last year, a Minsk court warned the presbyter of the Renaissance Baptist Community for holding a prayer meeting with 70 worshippers in his home. And in June 2003, a Pentecostalist preacher was fined \$35 for holding a prayer meeting in a village.

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## **Police deny beating Baptist and religious minorities fear fresh repression**

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 News Service (20.10.2004)/HRWF (21.10.2004) – Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The police chief in the town of Lepel [Lyepyel'] in Vitebsk [Vitsyeb'sk] region north east of the capital Minsk has angrily denied Baptist accusations that one of his officers beat local Baptist Andrei Fokin at the police station on 2 October. "That did not happen," Anatoli Shivilo claimed to Forum 18 News Service from his office in Lepel on 20 October. "I conducted a verification of the claims and nothing confirms that he was beaten." Baptists have told Forum 18 that after his detention for running a street library in the town with fellow Baptist Yuri Fedoruk, Fokin was taken to the police station where he was beaten by Captain Igor Karaga. Forum 18 has been unable to reach Captain Karaga on 20 October.

Equally adamant that no-one had been beaten was Lepel administration head Pyotr Shikshnyan. "They've been feeding you disinformation," he claimed to Forum 18 from his office in Lepel on 20 October. "If Fokin says he's been beaten he should get a doctor's expert opinion and complain formally. It's just a fairy-tale." Yet he seemed remarkably well informed about the beating, which he claimed had not taken place. He also complained that the two men had sung hymns in the police station after their detention on 2 October.

However, he did not deny that the police had repeatedly detained Fokin and Fedoruk, telling Forum 18 that police had explained to them each time why they had been detained.

The two Baptists have long been conducting a street library ministry in Lepel, setting up a small table on the street, singing hymns and offering passers-by Christian literature. Baptist sources told Forum 18 on 10 October that five times in the past three months they have been taken to the police station. "Not once was a record of their detention drawn up," the Baptists complained. "Most of the time the police officers didn't give their names and behaved rudely, accompanying their actions with bad language."

The Baptists reported that on 2 October Fokin and Fedoruk were manning their street library as usual when the wife of the local Orthodox priest - who they say had long tried to obstruct their work - and her son phoned the police, who arrived and took the two men to the police station.

After Fokin and Fedoruk began singing hymns as they were waiting, they claim that Captain Karaga grabbed Fokin "in anger", took him upstairs and started to beat him.

Fedoruk tried to get close to the door leading up the stairs to hear what was happening to his friend but another officer moved him away. Fedoruk then contacted their pastors and other fellow Baptists, who started to telephone the police station to demand that the two men be freed. However, the duty officer N. Fedosenok denied that the two men were being held.

They were later released.

The following day, a Sunday, the two men again took their library to the streets and again the priest's wife called the police. The Baptists say that the Orthodox priest himself was also there. The police arrived and confiscated the books, but allowed the two Baptists to continue talking to the people who had gathered. Fokin and Fedoruk are members of a congregation that is part of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in CIS countries.

Police chief Shivlo - who admitted that he knew Fokin personally - insisted to Forum 18 that the Baptists can only conduct such street library work in accordance with the religion law and other regulations. "They must get permission for any such activity," he declared. He refused to discuss with Forum 18 why literature had been confiscated from them and why they had been taken to the police station five times in the past three months.

Lepel administrative head Shikshnyan likewise complained that the Baptists were violating regulations, by standing on the street to conduct their library ministry. "They were obstructing the cars and pedestrians trying to go past," he told Forum 18. "Let them come here to the town administration and apply and we will assign them a specific location." At the same time he claimed that there are "no restrictions" on religious life in Belarus.

Many members of Belarus' religious minorities fear that, now the government of President Aleksandr Lukashenko has achieved what it regards as a successful result to both the referendum and parliamentary elections on 17 October, government attention might turn to implementing Belarus' repressive religion law. Under Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law, all religious activity by unregistered religious communities is illegal and official restrictions on public religious events also exist. The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong, and close supervision by officials of religious communities is an integral part of central state policy.

The government claims that 77.3 per cent of voters backed a constitutional amendment allowing President Lukashenko to seek a third term in office, and no opposition candidates were elected to parliament. The results of both votes are very strongly disputed inside and outside Belarus. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which refused to monitor the referendum, has criticised the election for "unrestrained bias and unregulated intrusion into polling stations." Endorsing this view, the European Union has described the process as having fallen "short from being free and fair," and is said to be considering imposing sanctions on Belarus.

Under the religion law, a two year deadline for re-registering religious communities expires on 16 November 2004, and those who fail to gain re-registration by then risk losing any property they own. The most recent religious leader to criticise the religion law is Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek of Minsk-Mohilev. "Unfortunately this law brings with it, in some respects,

restrictions on religious activities," he told the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, just ahead of his 90th birthday on 21 October. "Thus the registration of parish communities is prescribed, as is a visa requirement for priests from abroad. They have to renew their residence permits every year and recently the arrival from abroad of priests has almost come to a standstill. This law appears to normalise relations between the State and the Church, but does it in a way that suits the State, not the Church."

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## **Baptist pastors fined**

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 (03.02.2004) / HRWF Int. (04.02.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Baptist pastor Viktor Yevtyukhov was fined 82,500 Belarusian roubles (275 Norwegian kroner, 35 Euros or 40 US dollars) on 5 December 2003 for heading an unregistered congregation in the village of Zamoshye, Gomel (Homyel') region, the International Union of Baptist Churches informed Forum 18 News Service on 25 January. The average annual salary in Belarus is estimated to be 128 US dollars (885 Norwegian kroner, 102 Euros, or 276,857 Belarusian roubles).

Oleg Kurnosov, the Union's pastor in the town of Dubrovno (Dubrowna), Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk) region, was similarly fined 16,500 Belarusian roubles (55 Norwegian kroner, 7 Euros or 8 US dollars) on 23 December, according to a 9 January statement also received by Forum 18. Pastor Oleg was conducting evening worship in his own home on 21 November when a local police officer, district executive committee official and district architect reportedly arrived at the house and demanded that he remove a "Prayer House" sign from its exterior wall. According to the Baptists' report, the pastor refused to comply, arguing that, even though it hung on a private house, the sign simply served as an invitation to all who wished to attend services.

On 21 April 2003 the International Union of Baptist Churches related how a municipal official and district police officer visited the Sunday morning service of its Vitebsk city congregation on 2 March and fined Pastor Konstantin Yeremeyev 25,000 Belarusian roubles (83 Norwegian kroner, 10 Euros or 12 US dollars) for failing to register his congregation.

All three pastors were fined under Article 193 of the Belarusian administrative offences code, which punishes "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 17 January, a spokeswoman for the Moscow-based Union remarked that the recent incidents in Belarus "seem to be to do with" the republic's 2002 law on religion, which states categorically that registration is compulsory for all religious communities.

Originally formed in 1961, the International Union of Baptist Churches adheres to a rigid principle of separation of church and state, according to which none of its current 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union are registered. The Union spokeswoman explained to Forum 18 that all these congregations would have to be able to evangelise completely freely throughout the former Soviet Union before their ruling body would agree to state registration.

Speaking to Forum 18 in Vitebsk on 23 September 2003, the region's official in charge of religious affairs confirmed that the unregistered activity of the Union of Baptist Churches

was illegal in Belarus. "I tried to talk to them, but they have existed like that for three decades," Nikolai Stepanenko lamented. While they thus appear to be outside the law, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk numbers the Union's communities in Belarus at 29.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## **Jews fail to recover synagogues or prevent their destruction**

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 (29.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (30.01.2003) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) -- Publicly accusing President Aleksandr Lukashenko of "personal responsibility for the destruction of Jewish holy sites" in Belarus, Yakov Gutman was first detained by police and then hospitalised with a suspected heart attack on 21 January, he told Forum 18 News Service. Following his analogous protest in front of the presidential administration building in Minsk on 14 January, Gutman was also detained by police and given a court warning for holding an unsanctioned picket.

Speaking to Forum 18 from Minsk on 25 January, the chairman of the World Association of Belarusian Jewry explained that the state authorities permitted the demolition of a nineteenth-century former synagogue in 2001 to make way for an elite housing complex. The planned construction of a multi-storey car park at another site in central Minsk will render impossible the reconstruction of a sixteenth-century stone synagogue demolished in the late 1960s, he added, while Jewish cemeteries have been razed by the local authorities in the cities of Grodno (Hrodna) and Mozyr (Gomel [Homyel'] region) in recent years.

In a response to a query by a group of Belarusian parliamentary deputies, the republic's Ministry of Justice confirmed on 2 October 2002 that the nineteenth-century former synagogue building was a listed heritage monument. On 18 December 2002, however, the Committee for State Control stated that its Expert Commission had decided to annul this status on the grounds that the building had been a Jewish prayer school rather than a synagogue, and that only its shell had survived the Second World War. The vice-chairman of Minsk City Council announced open tender for the construction of the multi-storey car park adjacent to the site of the sixteenth-century synagogue due to heavy traffic in the area, the Committee added.

Gutman argues that the nineteenth-century former synagogue should have been protected and the sixteenth-century synagogue restored under Article 26 of the 1992 Law on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Heritage, which states that only the Belarusian Council of Ministers is entitled to remove a monument from the heritage list, and only in cases when it has been destroyed by a natural disaster or accident and is impossible to reconstruct.

Just nine out of 92 historical synagogues in Belarus have been returned to believers since 1991, according to the chairman of the Judaic Religious Association in Belarus. While Yuri Dorn told Forum 18 on 21 January that six of these had been returned to his organisation's communities in Minsk, Vitebsk (Vitsyebk), Pinsk (Brest region), Kalinkovichi (Kalinkavichy) (Gomel region), and Borisov (Minsk region), he described the destruction of the nineteenth-century former synagogue in Minsk as "terrible" and the general restitution situation as "very worrying" due to the state's failure to introduce a relevant law. Pointing out that the new 2002 religion law stipulates that religious organisations do not have priority in cases when a former worship building is currently used for culture or sport (Article 30), Dorn

remarked that "most former synagogues come into that category - so the authorities usually refuse our requests and refer to that provision."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 22 January, chairman of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Belarus, Eduard Parizh, confirmed that his organisation, which contains 15 Hassidic communities, has recovered three former synagogues in the cities of Minsk, Bobruisk (Minsk region) and Grodno. To date, he said, no more have been returned precisely due to Article 30 of the 2002 religion law. Asked about the demolition of the nineteenth-century former synagogue in Minsk, Parizh commented that the destruction of every former synagogue was "grievous" because it made it potentially more difficult for Jews to follow their religious traditions. Not permitted to use transport to attend a synagogue on the sabbath, he pointed out, Jews hardly wish to walk for two or three hours to the nearest one, "so the more synagogues preserved, the better." Currently, said Parizh, his organisation's only synagogue in Minsk has to cater to several thousand worshippers at major festivals.

On 21 January the head of the republic's third major Jewish religious organisation, Yakov Basin, told Forum 18 that his Religious Association of Progressive Jewish Communities has 16 communities in 13 Belarusian cities, but is without a single synagogue. "The state told us that we are not legal heirs to any historical synagogues because reform Judaism is not traditional in Belarus," he explained. Basin added that his organisation asked to put a memorial on the site of the former sixteenth-century synagogue in Minsk, but has yet to receive an answer from the authorities.

On 27 January the chairman of the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Stanislav Buko, confirmed that Belarus had no law on restitution before informing Forum 18 that he would issue a written answer to a question relating to the Jews' property difficulties within ten days.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## **Krishna devotees under pressure**

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 (27.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (03.02.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) -- Incidents in which Krishna devotees are briefly detained for distributing religious literature occur two or three times a week in Belarus, according to the head of their Minsk community, Sergei Malakhovsky. Annual requests for permission to distribute religious literature at various sites receive the same brief response from each of the Belarusian capital's nine administrative districts, he told Forum 18 News Service: "The location is deemed inappropriate."

Their action consequently rendered illegal, Malakhovsky continued on 25 January, Krishna devotees are regularly detained briefly by local police, less frequently fined up to 20 US Dollars (= 43,330 Belarusian Roubles, 137 Norwegian Kroner, or 16 Euros) or, if they are Russian citizens, ordered to leave Belarus. In accordance with the republic's 2002 law on religion, Krishna devotees have the right - if they obtain permission - to distribute religious literature only within the limits of the cities where they are currently registered: Minsk, Grodno (Hrodna), Gomel (Homyel'), Brest, Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk) and Bobruisk (Babruysk). If they attempt to distribute it elsewhere, remarked Malakhovsky, they are commonly ordered to leave town by police.

The leader of the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness also told Forum 18 that its members are permitted to hold religious processions only in an isolated location in the Belarusian capital, for which the municipal authorities charge 100 US Dollars (if on a weekday) [= 216,652 Belarusian Roubles, 682 Norwegian Kroner, or 79 Euros] or 300 US Dollars (if at a weekend) [= 650,001 Belarusian Roubles, 2,046 Norwegian Kroner, or 237 Euros] for related police, health and sanitation arrangements. So far, however, police have turned a blind eye to the small, unsanctioned summer processions through central Minsk streets which the community holds instead, he remarked.

Malakhovsky confirmed to Forum 18 that the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Belarus has asked the United Nations Human Rights Committee to evaluate the legality of the state authorities' refusal to register the organisation at the republican level under the previous law on religion. Krishna devotees in Belarus are unable to meet the present law's conditions for this status, he explained, since they do not have at least 10 communities including a minimum of one which has been in existence for 20 years or more. Under the same law, the group's existing communities do not have the right..to invite foreign spiritual leaders or create their own media publications as a result. While their foreign spiritual leaders are able to visit Belarus informally, said Malakhovsky, "we can't rent a public hall for their lectures or publicise the visits in any way." The 500 active Krishna devotees in Minsk currently produce only 300 copies of a religious publication for internal use, he said, since a higher circulation is subject to state registration.

Due to difficulties acquiring a valid legal address, Malakhovsky said that the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Belarus has so far applied to re-register only three of its communities under the 2002 religion law. While those in Grodno and Gomel have already re-registered successfully, he said, those in Brest simply had their documents returned to them and were denied further explanation. On 27 January, Forum 18 sought confirmation from the official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region, Vasili Marchenko, who maintained that the Brest Hare Krishna community had not been denied re-registration and that he had not received any such application: "We have no problem with Krishna devotees." Unable to locate Sergei Malakhovsky, Forum 18 was told later the same day by another devotee in Minsk that the Brest community's re-registration documents had been returned to them without explanation within the past few weeks. When devotees asked officials what was wrong with the application, he said, they were reportedly told that the Council for Religious Affairs was "not a consultative organ."

Commenting that Forum 18 had previously distorted information that he had provided, the chairman of the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Stanislav Buko, stated on 27 January that he would issue a written answer to a question relating to the Krishna devotees' situation in the republic within ten days. In October 1997 the committee's Expert Council - of which Buko is not a member - issued an analysis of the activity of the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness which concluded that the organisation was a "destructive totalitarian sect infringing personality, health, citizens' rights and the national security of the Republic of Belarus."

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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## **Colossal" "unjust" fine for "illegal" worship**

by Felix Corley

Forum 18 (29.12.2004) / HRWF Int. (02.01.2005) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) -- Members of the 600-strong charismatic New Life Church in the capital Minsk have rejected as "unjust" the massive fine handed down to church administrator Vasily Yurevich on 28 December on charges of organising an "illegal" service on property

the church owns. Yurevich was fined 150 times the minimum monthly wage under Article 167.1, paragraph 2 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes the repeated violation of regulations governing religious services and other large meetings. "I was a believer during the Communist period and, sad to say, even then the fines for worshipping God were much less than now," Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko – who also faces imminent punishment on the same charges – told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 29 December. "Just see how harsh the judges are today."

Three police officers from the city's Moscow district where the New Life church is located testified against Yurevich in hearings which began on 13 December, as did a culture official from the district administration and A. Martynova of the city branch of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. Moscow district court fined Yurevich 3,200,000 Belarusian roubles (8,935 Norwegian kroner, 1,080 Euros or 1,470 US dollars). Pastor Goncharenko estimated that the average wage in Belarus is between 100 and 150 US dollars per month. "Vasily has a wife and three children to support. This is a colossal amount of money."

Pastor Goncharenko said that as soon as the court's written judgment is issued – which is expected on 30 December – Yurevich will lodge an appeal against the fine. "He didn't organise the service, so the court was wrong to fine him for this," Goncharenko declared. "Plus he has been fined as though he has already been punished under this article, which is not true. This is another violation."

The fine came exactly two weeks after the church received written confirmation that its re-registration application had been rejected, rendering all its public activity illegal and subject to punishment. "These lawsuits and the refusal to register the New Life church is the idea of the government's religion committee to deprive the church of its land using all possible means, liquidate the church and artificially make believers look like criminals," Yurevich told Forum 18. He believes the campaign was initiated by Alla Ryabitseva, head of the religion committee for Minsk city. Her telephone at the city administration went unanswered on 29 December.

Although a number of religious leaders have been fined in Belarus this year, such fines were generally much smaller, being around 20 US dollars each. However, in October, Pastor Andrei Sidor of the registered Light to the World charismatic Full Gospel congregation in Minsk was fined about five weeks' average wages (1,110 Norwegian kroner, 136 Euros or 174 US dollars) for holding an unsanctioned religious meeting at his home. Three members of a Council of Churches Baptist church, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in CIS countries, were each fined 380,000 Belarusian roubles (1,200 Norwegian kroner, 153 Euros or 175 US dollars), about 20 times the minimum wage, for singing hymns at a hospital in Gomel [Homyel'] region without first obtaining state permission.

Nina Gordeyuk, deputy head of the Minsk Moscow district administration, said she was not aware of the fine on Yurevich, but vehemently denied suggestions that the authorities are waging a campaign against the church. "We're defending the law, which specifies who has the right to meet for worship and where," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 29 December. "Our law doesn't allow believers to meet for worship if the building is not registered as a place of worship. Their building is registered as a cowshed."

Gordeyuk – who told Forum 18 she is a Catholic - insisted that the authorities would take the same action regardless of the religious affiliation of the community. "Even if they were Orthodox they would face the same action."

Despite this, church members have told Forum 18 they intend to continue meeting for worship. They report that some 400 children attended a Christmas service on 25 December, when western-confession Christians (but not Orthodox Christians) in Belarus celebrate Christmas Day.

Pastor Goncharenko maintains that since September – when the church was effectively denied the right to meet legally for worship – services have not been organised. "We no longer have organised services as we have no opportunity to hold them legally," he told Forum 18. "I told the believers that they can come to our church if they wish. And they do come to worship God on the property they bought with their own money. Services are spontaneous. You can't say anyone organises them. They take place whether I or Vasily are there or not."

While Yurevich was brought before the court for allegedly organising a service on 7 November, Pastor Goncharenko faces punishment for allegedly organising a service on 31 October, a charge he too rejects. The Minsk Moscow district court has already held several hearings on his case, most recently on 28 December, but again the case was adjourned. "They gave no new date but told me they will summon me," he told Forum 18.

Meanwhile, church members have vowed to protect their church with their own bodies if necessary if the authorities go ahead with their threat to demolish it. On 14 December, the church received a written warning from Nikolai Skipor, first deputy head of Moscow district administration, that any unauthorised repair work carried out by the congregation since it bought the cowshed in 2002 would be demolished by local administration workers if not removed by 1 January. The letter, seen by Forum 18, also warned that the local administration will recover the cost of any such enforced demolition through the courts.

Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 that the fire service has also begun looking for alleged violations of safety regulations in the church. "They have come twice already this month, just looking for excuses to close us down," he maintained. "They've warned us that this is wrong and that. They even telephoned again this morning."

But the pastor insists the congregation is not intimidated by the authorities. "We're ready for everything. We will stand up for our rights to worship God. This is all we want to do, and God will defend us."

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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