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"We have Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims – all the others are sects"

Felix Corley

Forum 18 (11.11.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.11.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Deputy Chief of Minsk's Frunze District Police, Dinas Linkus, said he sent the local police officer to question the Kagramanyan family, who are Pentecostals, about their religious faith. "We had a request from the Culture Department of Minsk City Executive Committee several weeks ago to find out whether any religious activity was going on at this address, to establish whether a church was active there or not," he told Forum 18 News Service. "We have Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims – these are the religions. All the others are sects." Meanwhile Transfiguration Baptist Church in Vitebsk Region was fined for using a private house for religious worship, despite having official permission to do so. Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Smyk has been fined for refusing compulsory military service on religious grounds, but criminal charges against one other conscientious objector have been dropped.

At the request of Minsk City Executive Committee, local police in the capital Minsk visited the Kagramanyan family, who are Pentecostals, and asked intrusive questions about whether they use their home for worship, which church they attend and why they are

believers, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The Deputy Chief of Minsk's Frunze District Police with responsibility for public security, Dinas Linkus, insisted to Forum 18 that now the family has answered the questions, no further action will be taken.

Meanwhile, a Baptist congregation has been fined in Vitebsk Region, although administrative charges against the leader of another local Baptist congregation have been dropped. And Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Smyk, facing imprisonment for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of religious faith, has instead been fined.

Who ordered the police questioning and why?

Linkus, the Deputy Police Chief, told Forum 18 that he had ordered the 26 October visit by a local police officer to the home of the Kagramanyan family. "We had a request from the Culture Department of Minsk City Executive Committee several weeks ago to find out whether any religious activity was going on at this address, to establish whether a church was active there or not," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 11 November. "We have Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims – these are the religions. All the others are sects." He said the Culture Department maintains a record on each church.

Linkus said that no further police action is envisaged in the wake of the questioning of the family and their neighbours. "We just checked the address, that's all." He denied claims by the family that the local police officer asked intrusive questions about their faith and religious practice, and reports that neighbours were shocked by the police questions. "That's all made up. Don't believe everything you hear. No one complained to us about the visit."

Linkus insisted there was nothing special about the Culture Department's request, and said that his District Police gets "thousands" of such requests from various state agencies on many issues each year.

The Head of the Culture Department, Vladimir Karachevsky, told Forum 18 on 11 November that his Department handles ancient monuments and the like and has no connection with religious activity. Asked for clarification of who had ordered the police visit, Linkus told Forum 18 that he would answer no more questions, that he did not care what Forum 18 wrote, and would throw the Kagramanyan family out onto the street and give their flat to someone else.

Local police inspector Major Vladimir Filimonov of Minsk's Frunze District Police arrived at the family home at about 9pm on 26 October, Kristina Kagramanyan told Forum 18. "One of his first questions was 'What were you doing at New Life Church?' He asked my husband Armen if he serves there as a pastor, why he was there, what he does when he is there and how often he visits."

New Life Church has faced relentless state pressure over many years to oust it from the church building it legally acquired.

Armen Kagramanyan assists the pastor of New Generation Church in the town of Baranovichi [Baranavichy] south-west of Minsk, which belongs to the same Full Gospel Union as New Life. New Generation has faced repeated harassment, most recently a raid in June and a fine in July.

Major Filimonov – who Kristina Kagramanyan said was polite and appeared to be uncomfortable asking such questions – then moved on to more general questions, such as "Why are you a believer?". Filimonov wrote down the family's answers and insisted that Armen Kagramanyan sign the record. When Kristina Kagramanyan asked him why he needed the information, Filimonov said a new department had been set up in Frunze District police "on this question", but refused to say what the "question" was.

Deputy Police Chief Linkus denied to Forum 18 that any such department had been established, saying that the information had been passed on to the Culture Department.

"I asked the inspector if it was a crime to be a believer," Kristina Kagramanyan told Forum 18. "I believe they wanted us to understand that if my husband continues to believe as he believes, they will try to expel him from the country." Armen Kagramanyan, an ethnic Armenian from Nagorno-Karabakh in the south Caucasus, has lived in Belarus since 1991 but has no citizenship. She said he has a valid residence permit, but his repeated applications for Belarusian citizenship have been rejected without explanation.

Major Filimonov confirmed to Forum 18 on 10 November that he visited the Kagramanyan family in their home. "I was just fulfilling my duty in accordance with the instruction from the Executive Committee." He vehemently denied that he had asked the family or the neighbours any intrusive questions or that he had been aggressive. "The conversation took place in an excellent atmosphere and we parted amicably." He denied that he had described the family to neighbours as "sectarians".

Baptist church fined, charges against another dropped

Transfiguration Baptist Church in the village of Voropaevo in Postavy District of Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] Region has been fined for meeting for worship in its own building. The church was visited during a service on 22 September by Sergei Kiselev, the District inspector of the Department of State Control of Nature and Land Use. He drew up a record of an administrative offence, seen by Forum 18, alleging that the church was using the property for religious worship unlawfully.

The congregation was taken to Postavy District Court where, on 5 October, Judge Anna Romanovich found it guilty of violating Article 15.10 Part 3 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes using a plot of land not for its purpose with fines on legal entities of up to 100 times the minimum monthly wage. She fined the congregation the minimum fine of 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,446 Norwegian Kroner, 172 Euros or 258 US Dollars), the verdict reveals.

Pastor Aleksei Alshevsky told Forum 18 on 10 November that this represents three months' average wage locally. Unhappy with the ruling, the congregation challenged the fine at Vitebsk Regional Court, but on 28 October, Judge S. Ivanova upheld the fine.

Alshevsky complained of discrimination, pointing out that the Catholics and the Russian Orthodox both have churches locally, one of which is a former shop and the other an adapted private house. "Some Churches are privileged while the rest are fined," he told Forum 18.

In documents seen by Forum 18, Transfiguration Church – which is registered – was given permission to use their free-standing building by the local Executive Committee in 2004, 2005 and 2006. In a letter also seen by Forum 18, on 4 November Leonid Gulyako, the state Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs confirmed to the congregation that it can legally use its property for worship.

However, both courts ruled that when Pastor Alshevsky sold the building (for a nominal sum) to the congregation in 2005 for continuing use as a place of worship, the sale once more made the house a residential property for which the permission for use as a place of worship had lapsed.

Alshevsky says his congregation will complain about the court decisions to the Presidential Administration.

Marina Tsvilik, who works in Gulyako's office and who drafted the 4 November response, said that personally she feels some "understanding" for Alshevsky. "Let them come to us to resolve this," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 10 December. "There's always a legal way."

Asked why such a complex web of regulations exists over what properties can and cannot be used for religious worship and why religious believers are punished for meeting for worship when people who gather in homes to drink beer or watch football are not, Tsvilik responded: "It is a question of the Law." She insisted that the fines handed down on religious communities are for "various reasons".

Meanwhile, Postavy District Court told Forum 18 on 11 November that the administrative case against Council of Churches Baptist Sergei Dedovets for leading unregistered religious worship in a private home in Postavy was withdrawn "a month ago". "No offence had been committed," the court chancellery noted. "It was all thanks to the prayers of people around the world that the charges were dropped," members of his family told Forum 18 the same day.

The Council of Churches congregation was raided by a local ideology official, Anna Mukhlya, and a police officer during Sunday worship on 27 September, when the charges were lodged against Dedovets.

Unwilling to discuss why two churches in Postavy District were raided within days of each other in September and one punished was Alla Keizik, Deputy Head of the District Executive Committee who oversees social issues. "Dedovets wasn't fined, but he was warned he shouldn't hold religious services in a private home," she told Forum 18 from Postavy on 10 November. "Alshevsky violated the land use for the building."

Asked why these communities were being harassed merely for religious worship, Keizik put the phone down. Forum 18 was unable to ask her what had changed since 2005, when she had signed a letter approving the use of the church building for worship.

Conscientious objector sentenced

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Dmitry Smyk was found guilty at the Central District Court in the south-eastern town of Gomel [Homyel] on 6 November of refusing compulsory military service under Article 435 Part 1 of the Criminal Code. The verdict – seen by Forum 18 – notes that Judge Grigory Dmitrenko fined him 3,500,000 Belarusian Roubles (7,230 Norwegian Kroner, 862 Euros or 1,290 US Dollars). He was also ordered to pay 3,000 Roubles in court costs, banned from leaving the country, banned from travelling elsewhere in Belarus without prior notification and required to maintain good conduct. The maximum penalty under this Article is two years' imprisonment.

The verdict reveals that the court did not believe that Smyk's decision to "join the religiously inclined people" in October 2006 at the urging of his wife's stepfather was genuine. It pointed out that his own parents did not belong to such a group. "The reference by the accused to the absence in law of an alternative service, which allegedly prevents him from fulfilling his duty to the state, the court considers as his way of evading military service and evading criminal responsibility for this."

The court believed Smyk was merely trying to preserve "the comfort of his daily civilian life" and rejected his argument that serving – even without weapons – in a military unit would violate his conscientious beliefs. According to the verdict, the court believed that as the statute of the Jehovah's Witnesses does not specify that their members reject military service on religious grounds, such rejection cannot be a fundamental tenet of their faith.

Smyk rejects the court decision. "They said in court that I specially became a Jehovah's Witness to avoid military service, but that's not true," he told Forum 18 from Gomel on 11 November. "I didn't even know about the attitude to military service until after I joined." He said he is preparing to lodge an appeal to Gomel Regional Court.

The criminal sentence handed down to the 23-year-old Smyk is the first on a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector since 2000, Forum 18 notes.

Three other Jehovah's Witnesses – two of them also in Gomel – were also facing criminal prosecution. However, Smyk told Forum 18 that the prosecutor in Gomel has dropped charges against one of them, Aleksei Boinichev, saying no crime had been committed. "This is interesting, as he is in the same situation as me," Smyk told Forum 18. However, Boinichev will again be included in the spring 2010 call-up "and if he refuses he will again be charged".

Round-table postponed

Meanwhile, organisers have postponed a proposed roundtable in Minsk to discuss an alternative Religion Law, as they told Forum 18. The roundtable had been scheduled for 13 November, but was postponed because of the outbreak of the H1N1 virus.

Earlier plans to hold the roundtable had been obstructed by the Minsk City Executive Committee (see F18News 30 October 2009 <http://www.f18news.org>):

"To prevent them from continuing their worship service"

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (30.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.11.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Prosecutor who authorised a six-hour raid on a Protestant Sunday worship service in a private home in eastern Belarus has refused to explain why it happened. "It was an official action and I can't discuss it," Vitaly Kovalev, Prosecutor of the Chausy District, told Forum 18 News Service. He also refused to say what will be done with boxes of Bibles, Christian books and films confiscated during the raid, or whether the church's pastor, Irina Marshalkovskaya-Grik, will face further action. Anna Danisevich, an official of the district Ideology Department, led the raid with four police officers and three "witnesses" as some 20 church members were singing hymns. Danisevich denied the raid was a raid. "We acted strictly in accordance with the law. We live in a democratic state," she claimed. Asked why she and officials stayed at the house for six hours, she told Forum 18: "To prevent them from continuing their worship service." Meanwhile, the trial of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Dmitry Smyk is set to resume on 6 November. Also, a roundtable in Minsk to discuss the text of a new Religion Law proposed by human rights defenders is hoped to take place on 13 November, despite obstruction by the authorities.

Asked why she and four police officers spent six hours raiding a private house where a Full Gospel Protestant church was holding its Sunday worship on 25 October, Ideology Department official Anna Danisevich told Forum 18 News Service: "To prevent them from continuing their worship service. They have no right to meet." Despite this, she insisted: "We live in a democratic state." The church's pastor, Irina Marshalkovskaya-Grik, told Forum 18 the raid in the village of Gorbovichi in Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region left church members frightened and in tears.

The Prosecutor who sanctioned the raid refused to explain why he authorised it. "It was an official action and I can't discuss it," Vitaly Kovalev, Prosecutor of the Chausy District, told Forum 18 on 28 October. He refused to say where the boxes of Bibles, Christian

books and films confiscated during the raid are being held or what will be done with them, or whether Pastor Marshalkovskaya-Grik will face further action.

Chausy District Ideology Department official Danisevich arrived at the private home accompanied by four police officers and three "witnesses" at about noon on 25 October, when about twenty church members were singing hymns, Marshalkovskaya-Grik told Forum 18 from Gorbovichi on 26 October.

The pastor complained that the Prosecutor's warrant authorising the "inspection" gave no reason. "They came in without my permission, turning off the electricity," she told Forum 18. "They photographed every room in the house." She said one of the rooms in the house was locked and she did not have the key, but police merely broke down the door.

Marshalkovskaya-Grik complained that each individual church member was questioned separately, with a 17-year-old girl questioned in a police car without her parents being present. When the pastor and several other church members refused to sign what the police described as "interrogation records", they threatened charges of "resisting the authorities", she said. Some church members were so intimidated by threats to oust them from their jobs or – if pensioners – to take away their homes that they signed.

Marshalkovskaya-Grik said that police confiscated eight boxes of Christian books, including New Testaments, and films.

Ideology official Danisevich denied categorically that the raid was a raid. "There were no threats, no interrogations – this was not a raid," she told Forum 18 from Chausy on 27 October. "All this was sanctioned by the District Prosecutor (..) We acted strictly in accordance with the law." She added that the church cannot hold religious meetings without state registration.

Under the 2002 Religious Law, all religious activity requires state approval.

Danisevich refused to tell Forum 18 why five officials and three witnesses were needed to raid a private home just because a religious meeting was underway. Asked why the officials left church members feeling frightened after six hours of interrogation, Danisevich responded: "Frightened? That's ridiculous. We're not here to make people frightened."

Asked repeatedly why eight boxes of books and films were confiscated, Danisevich refused to comment. She also refused to say where they are being held or whether they will be returned.

District Prosecutor Kovalev insisted to Forum 18 that if Marshalkovskaya-Grik is not happy with what happened, "she can complain". He then put the phone down.

Registration denials

Pastor Marshalkovskaya-Grik told Forum 18 that despite being refused state registration her congregation was not touched before the 25 October raid. "I don't want to hide," she insisted. "People know we meet."

She said the congregation's registration application of some four years ago was approved by Chausy District but vetoed by Mogilev Region. "The KGB went round all those who signed the registration application questioning them on what doctrine we believe. Some of the people didn't know exactly everything on doctrinal questions – it takes time for them to learn." She maintained officials used this as a pretext to deny registration.

Despite being denied registration, the district authorities told the church at the time that it could meet, Marshalkovskaya-Grik added. "But officials in the District Ideology Department have changed recently."

Conscientious objector's trial to continue

Meanwhile, the trial of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Dmitry Smyk – which began in the south-eastern town of Gomel [Homyel] on 8 October – is set to resume on 6 November. He told Forum 18 that ahead of the 29 October hearing scheduled at Gomel's Central District Court, the Jehovah's Witnesses submitted a document affirming that the group "helps people to understand their faith and the Bible" and does not order individuals what to do.

Smyk said that when he arrived at the courthouse on 29 October, Judge Grigory Dmitrenko came out and said he had received no letter from the Military Commissariat to say whether the army unit they were proposing to send him to "has the conditions for people who cannot serve for religious reasons". The Judge therefore set a new date of the afternoon of 6 November for the next hearing.

Smyk is being tried under Article 435 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes refusing the compulsory call-up to military service with a fine or imprisonment of up to two years. First time offenders can be absolved of criminal responsibility in the case of "serious circumstances". The first hearing was held on 8 October, with a second hearing eleven days later.

Smyk believes that the 6 November hearing might be the last, as trials should take place within a one-month period.

The prosecution of Smyk is the first known prosecution of a religious conscientious objector to compulsory military service in the past nine years. Several other Jehovah's Witnesses who have also refused compulsory military service on grounds of religious faith are being prosecuted, including Aleksei Boinichev and Aleksandr Belous, also from Gomel. Smyk reports that their cases are "quiet" at the moment.

Will roundtable on proposed new Religion Law be allowed?

A roundtable to discuss a proposed text for a new Religion Law billed as meeting Belarus' international human rights commitments could not go ahead due to obstruction from the authorities in the capital Minsk, organisers told Forum 18 on 30 October. They have set a new date of 13 November and arrangements are underway to hold the event in the Planeta Hotel, also in Minsk.

For Religious Freedom and the Legal Transformation Centre, two campaigning groups active against the current Religion Law - which seriously violates Belarus' international human rights commitments - drew up the text for an alternative Religion Law, which they would like to see discussed openly and taken up by politicians.

Plans to hold the roundtable on 27 October came to nothing as the two venues they approached refused to lease, at least one of them on direct orders from Minsk City Executive Committee. A director of the Johannes Rau International Education Centre – a joint German-Belarusian initiative – told Forum 18: "Unfortunately, the Minsk City authorities, one of the founders of our Centre, put a veto on this request".

Prosecutions of conscientious objectors resume

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (20.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (22.10.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - After a gap of some nine years, the criminal prosecution of those in Belarus who cannot perform compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience has resumed, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The trial of Jehovah's Witness Dmitry Smyk began in the south-eastern town of Gomel [Homyel] on 8 October and Forum 18 knows of two other religious conscientious objectors in the same town – Aleksei Boinichev and Aleksandr Belous - who are likely to face similar trials. All three have been banned from leaving the country while the cases proceed. Another case is reportedly likely in the western city of Grodno [Hrodna].

Igor Kupchin, Prosecutor of Gomel's Central District, who is conducting the case against Smyk in court, refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 20 October, including whether criminal cases have been launched against Boinichev and Belous in his District.

The prosecutions of the three Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors in Gomel come as the local authorities have raided the local community and fined two of its members. An official of the local Executive Committee issued the community an official warning in September, telling it verbally that if it commits any further violations of the law it will be banned in court.

Constitutional Court ruling that law should be changed ignored

Article 57 of Belarus' Constitution declares: "Defence of the Republic of Belarus is the obligation and sacred duty of a citizen of the Republic of Belarus. The procedure for undergoing military service, and the bases and conditions for exemption from military service or the substitution of it by an alternative are determined by law." Article 36 of the Law on Military Obligation and Military Service requires call-up commissions to offer alternative service.

In a key ruling of 26 May 2000 (decision R-98/2000), Belarus' Constitutional Court examined how Article 57 should be applied to those who seek to do alternative service "on religious grounds". It called for the "urgent" adoption of an Alternative Service Law or an amendment to the Law on Military Obligation and Military Service to introduce a mechanism for alternative service. It said that before such legal changes are made, the authorities must allow citizens to perform service "that does not violate their religious convictions". The Constitutional Court made no reference to refusing military service on non-religious conscientious grounds.

The right to refuse to perform military service is part of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion guaranteed in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Belarus ratified in 1976. This is clearly stated in General Comment 22 on Article 18 of the ICCPR, by the then United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee.

Despite Belarus' international human rights obligations, the Constitutional guarantees, and the 2000 Constitutional Court ruling, no mechanism for conducting alternative service has been introduced. Parliament most recently rejected a draft Law on alternative service in December 2004. All men between 18 and 27 (with a few exceptions or deferments on grounds of health or family circumstance) are required to do 12 or 18 months' military service.

However, no conscientious objectors are known to have been prosecuted since the Jehovah's Witness Valentin Gulai was given a suspended sentence in the south-eastern town of Rechytsa in 2000.

Oleg Gulak of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee told Forum 18 in March 2008 that in the absence of alternative military service, the Ministry of Defence struck a compromise whereby an estimated several dozen conscientious objectors serve in its transport division: "They don't have to swear an oath or bear arms – in effect they're just unpaid labourers".

Smyk's trial in Gomel

The trial of Jehovah's Witness Smyk began under Judge Grigory Dmitrenko at Central District Court in Gomel on 8 October and continued with a second hearing on 19 October, as Smyk told Forum 18. He is facing trial under Article 435 Part 1 of the Criminal Code, which punishes refusing the compulsory call-up to military service with a fine or imprisonment of up to two years. First time offenders can be absolved of criminal responsibility in the case of "serious circumstances".

"I told the call-up commission I wanted to do alternative service for religious reasons - such as in a hospital or on the streets," Smyk told Forum 18. "I have tried to abide by the Bible in all aspects of my life and act on its teachings that one shouldn't fight or teach to fight. I must serve only Jehovah."

The Gomel City Military Commissariat rejected his request for alternative service and passed on his case to the Prosecutor's Office. "I received a letter from the Military Commissariat outlining that while the Constitution allows for alternative service, they cannot offer it because no mechanism exists," Smyk told Forum 18. "So I have the right, but can't use it."

Smyk said that at the 19 October hearing, the court decided it needed to investigate whether his decision not to do military service was his own or taken by an organisation. "I don't understand this – it was my decision based on what it says in the Bible." He added that the Prosecutor Kupchin got representatives of the Military Commissariat to admit that they had not offered Smyk alternative service. "But he told the military to offer me some other service within the armed forces, such as in the railway troops, which is unacceptable to me."

Smyk said he does not know what to expect when the trial resumes on 29 October.

Smyk, who is 23 and married with a four-year-old daughter, said he had previously received the deferments for fathers of children under three when he was called to military service before. However, now his young daughter is over that age, the Gomel City Military Commissariat no longer gave a deferment.

Gomel prosecutors move against two further conscientious objectors

The two other Gomel-based Jehovah's Witnesses to have told the call-up commission they have refused military service – Boinichev and Belous – have had their cases handed over to the Prosecutor's Office and have been banned from leaving the country, Smyk told Forum 18.

In a 25 August letter seen by Forum 18, Colonel Igor Ivashkov, acting Gomel City Military Commissar, told Boinichev that his request for alternative service was again being rejected. Ivashkov recognised that the Law on Military Obligation and Military Service requires call-up commissions to offer alternative service. "However, at present with all the will in the world it is impossible to take this decision because of the absence

in the Republic of Belarus of a normative legal basis on the procedure for conducting alternative service," he told Boinichev.

Ivashkov wrote that he therefore has to be treated under Article 4 of the Law on Military Obligation and Military Service, which requires all men without regard to race or "attitude to religion" to meet the call-up demand. As Boinichev failed to turn up to conduct his military service, he was banned from leaving the country and his case passed to the Prosecutor's Office.

Ivashkov told Forum 18 on 20 October that he could not recall the individual letter to Boinichev – "I have thousands of pieces of paper that I sign" – and insisted that everything had been done in relation to those who refused military service in accordance with the law. Asked why action has been taken this year against three individuals in Gomel refusing military service on grounds of religious conscience when in the previous eight years no prosecutions are known to have taken place anywhere in Belarus, he responded: "Nothing has changed. We deal with each case as it comes up."

"They were not doing wrong – it's just our law"

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (19.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (20.10.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - As Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses have again faced fines for worship, officials have robustly defended their raids and fines on religious communities. They insisted to Forum 18 News Service that they are right to crack down on worshippers who meet in private homes in defiance of the country's repressive Religion Law. Campaigners for changes to this Law have also been denied permission to rent a conference centre in the capital Minsk for a roundtable meeting on 27 October. The centre told Forum 18 the ban was on instructions from the City Executive Committee.

In defiance of the country's international human rights commitments, Belarusian law bans all unregistered religious activity – including that of unregistered communities and unsanctioned public activity by registered communities. Religious organisations are kept under close surveillance by the KGB secret police, and officials often issue warnings for activity that they deem to be illegal. For two "offences", the registration body can apply for the court liquidation of a religious organisation, and may also halt the organisation's activity in the run-up to the court's decision. Fines on religious communities are frequent.

Meanwhile, the trial of Dmitry Smyk, the first of several Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors set to face criminal prosecution for refusing compulsory military service, began in Gomel [Homyel] on 8 October. The next hearing is due on 29 October, he told Forum 18 on 19 October.

Fine imminent on Vitebsk Baptist?

A Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Postavy in Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] Region was raided by a local ideology official, Anna Mukhlya, and a police officer during Sunday worship on 27 September, local Baptists told Forum 18. The two accused the Baptists of violating the law by meeting for worship in a private home. However, the Baptists insisted to Forum 18 that Belarus' Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights all guarantee their right to practise their faith freely.

The following day, one of the Baptists, Sergei Dedovets, was summoned to the Postavy Regional Administration. There he was accused of violating Article 9.9 Part 1 of the

Administrative Violations Code, which punishes the creation or leadership of a religious organisation without state registration with a fine of up to 20 times the base unit for wages and state benefits. A statement was drawn up and handed to the local court for him to be punished.

Dedovets defended the congregation's decision to meet for worship without state registration, insisting that it has the right to do so and rejecting the state's demands. He told Forum 18 on 14 October that he was expecting to be summoned to court soon. The court told Forum 18 on 19 October that Judge Natalya Zhukova, who will hear the case, has not yet set a date for the hearing.

Mukhlya, an expert in the Ideology Department of the Regional Administration, defended her actions against the congregation. Asked on 15 October what the congregation was doing that was harmful to anyone, she told Forum 18: "They were not doing wrong – it's just our Law." She conceded that had the Baptists gathered merely to play chess or to discuss football, the authorities would not have taken action against them.

Mukhlya then complained that the Baptists had not only gathered for worship without registration in an unauthorised venue, but had distributed invitations to meetings around the town. She insisted that all Dedovets can do is meet for worship in his own home "in his own family". Asked whether he could invite any friends to join them she responded: "Friends Yes, but inviting anyone else – No." She refused to clarify what the difference was.

Fines and "final warning" to Gomel Jehovah's Witnesses

On 21 July some ten police officers and officials of the City Administration climbed over a fence to gain entry to a private home in Gomel where several dozen Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting. As the home owner was out, those present refused to open the door, whereupon the police called the Emergency Situations Ministry which broke down the door, causing what the Jehovah's Witnesses estimate to be some 2,000,000 Belarusian Roubles (4,090,000 Norwegian Kroner, 490 Euros or 735 US Dollars) of damage. Officers confiscated various items from those present.

One of those at the meeting, Yuri Reshetnikov, was found guilty of violating regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass events by Zheleznodorozhny District Court in Gomel on 12 August under Article 23.34 Part 2 of the Administrative Violations Code. He was fined 1,050,000 Belarusian Roubles (2,150 Norwegian Kroner, 258 Euros or 385 US Dollars). The Regional Court rejected his appeal on 9 September.

Also punished was the home owner, Stepan Lugovsky, who was found guilty of "using living premises not for their purpose" (Article 21.16 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code). He was fined 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,433 Norwegian Kroner, 172 Euros or 257 US Dollars).

In a 22 September "warning" to the registered Gomel Jehovah's Witness community, signed by Aleksandr Prusov of the Religious Affairs Department of Gomel Regional Executive Committee and seen by Forum 18, the raid is described as a "check-up on the activity" of the community. Prusov highlighted the fact that children were present and complained that the meeting violated the Demonstrations Law and the Religion Law. The Jehovah's Witnesses said he threatened orally that if another official warning is issued he will liquidate the community, which would make all its activity illegal.

The Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 of repeated refusals by state organisations in Gomel to rent premises for religious meetings. After ten years the City Executive Committee suddenly stopped renting the Palace of Culture to them in July 2008. They say other owners of suitable property make an oral agreement to rent

premises but then cancel the agreement once the Jehovah's Witnesses seek the Executive Committee's approval. Protestants in Grodno and Minsk report the same problem.

Prusov defended his actions. "Everything we did was in accordance with the law," he told Forum 18 on 16 October. "To hold such a meeting they need to warn the authorities in advance and take measures to guarantee the safety of those taking part." Asked why officials broke down the door, confiscated items from the home and fined two of those present, Prusov responded: "Citizens must obey the Law. They refused to open the door. They were hidden from the authorities – churches must be open to all." He conceded that the fine on Reshetnikov represented one or two months' wages locally.

Asked why the Jehovah's Witnesses have received repeated denials over their request to rent venues in the city for worship, Prusov responded: "That's not my decision."

Jehovah's Witnesses believe all the authorities' recent actions in the city are part of a long-running campaign to close them down. They cite a 5 August 2005 instruction from Colonel Grigory Shvab, the then head of the Protection Department of Gomel Regional Police – seen by Forum 18 – for all officers "to expose and crush all violations of the norms of current law of the Republic of Belarus by members of the Jehovah's Witness religious organisation".

Roundtable on restrictive Religion Law faces rental ban

The Centre for Legal Transformations and For Religious Freedom, two campaigning groups active against the current Religion Law, which seriously violates Belarus' international human rights commitments, have drawn up an alternative Religion Law that they would like to see discussed openly and taken up by politicians. The proposed draft is available in Russian on the Belarusian version of the <http://www.forreligiousfreedom.info> website, under 2009 News dated 09.10.2009 at http://www.forreligiousfreedom.info/news.php?subaction=showfull&id=1255115068&archive=&cnshow=news&start_from=&ucat=3&.

Both groups hoped to hold an open roundtable meeting to discuss their proposals with religious communities, civil society and any other interested figures in central Minsk on 27 October, organisers told Forum 18.

However, on 6 October the groups were denied permission to rent conference facilities at the Crowne Plaza Hotel's Business Centre. The organisers then approached the Johannes Rau International Education Centre, named after the late German President who was also a leading figure in his regional Protestant Church. The Centre is co-managed by a German foundation and Minsk City Executive Committee. But on 12 October, they were also denied permission to rent this venue.

"Unfortunately, the Minsk City authorities, one of the founders of our Centre, put a veto on this request," Andrea Sahm, one of the directors of the Centre, told Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 October. "And without this permission we do not have the right to offer rooms."

The For Religious Freedom group expressed disappointment over the Executive Committee's rental veto. Forum 18 was unable to find out why such a veto was imposed. Mikhail Titenkov, Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee with responsibility for ideological issues, was out, in a meeting or on the telephone each time Forum 18 called on 19 October. Telephones at the Ideology Department went unanswered the same day.

The telephone of Aleksandra Koryagina, who is in charge of booking conference rooms at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, also went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 19 October.

Belarusian authorities have long been hostile to civil society groups campaigning against the Religion Law, fining and firing from their work human rights defenders who collected the largest non-party political petition in Belarusian history. This petition – which gained 50,000 signatures and was 3,442 pages long – called for the Religion Law to be changed to conform with international human rights standards.

In contrast to the difficulty human rights defenders face in renting premises for the religious freedom roundtable, on 25 September Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill held a meeting in the House of the Republic in Minsk during his visit to the country. The Belarusian official media also noted that during a 14-15 October visit to Belarus, a group of rabbis from the United States, Israel and Britain were able to hold a meeting in the Belarus Cinema – a former synagogue – in the western city of Brest.

Earlier Jehovah's Witness fines

Raids and fines have occurred on other Jehovah's Witness meetings in recent months, particularly on the Memorial of Christ's death, the most important Jehovah's Witness commemoration of the year which fell on 9 April. Meetings in Shklov in Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region and Borisov [Barysaw] in Minsk Region were raided, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

In Shklov, two police officers and an Ideology Department official broke into a private home where eight Jehovah's Witnesses were holding the Memorial service. Officials confiscated religious literature. One of those present, Andrei Varaksa, was fined 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (2,865 Norwegian Kroner, 343 Euros or 513 US Dollars) for leading an unregistered religious organisation (Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code). Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that over the following few months, he was summoned several times by the KGB secret police and the local Administration, who warned him not to preach or meet local Jehovah's Witnesses. He was also threatened with criminal trial.

In Borisov, some ten police officers and local Administration officials broke down the door of a private home where some 80 Jehovah's Witnesses were holding their Memorial service. Officials confiscated religious literature without giving any documentation and recorded their raid on video. The home owner, Andrei Kuzin, was later fined 175,000 Belarusian Roubles (358 Norwegian Kroner, 43 Euros or 64 US Dollars) for violating Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code.

The Borisov Jehovah's Witness community has repeatedly been denied state registration as officials refused to allow a religious community to use a private home as a legal address or the same charter as they have used to gain registration in other locations.

On 26 July, some 20 KGB, police and local authority officials raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a private home in Kostyukovichy in Mogilev Region. When the home owner refused to let them in, the officials called the Emergency Situations Ministry, which conducted the break-in.

Vladimir Martynovsky, the religious affairs official at Mogilev Regional Executive Committee, claimed that he knew nothing about the 26 July raid in Kostyukovichy. "No-one has reported it to me," he told Forum 18 on 15 October. "But they're not registered there so they can't meet." He too conceded that the authorities would not interfere if the group of people had gathered to discuss chess or football. "That would be their business." Asked why gathering to discuss the Bible or for religious worship led to very different treatment, he responded: "There's a great difference – it's all in the Law." He refused to elaborate on why and how it was different.

Belarusian police fail to enter troubled Evangelical church

The New Life church used to be a livestock barn

RFE/RL (09.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (13.10.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Police in Minsk failed to enter the disputed building of the New Life Evangelical Church on September 8, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reports.

A guard at the church refused to let police inside the building and the officers left after a one-hour standoff.

The police had brought ambulances and firefighters with them.

Parishioners of the church have been spending days and nights in shifts inside the church since August 24 in an effort to keep the authorities from occupying and confiscating the building.

The building has been the legal property of the city authorities since August 24.

It used to be a barn for livestock during Soviet times but was privatized and turned into a place of worship by the New Life church in the early 1990s.

Minsk officials say the building was privatized illegally by the congregation.

The church's lawyer, Syarhey Lukanin, called the police's attempt to enter the church today "a provocation."

Jehovah's Witness charged for refusing to join army

RFE/RL (09.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (12.10.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A 23-year-old conscientious objector from the Belarusian city of Homel is standing trial for refusing to join the army, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reports.

Dzmitry Smyk, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was officially charged on October 8 with avoiding mandatory military service.

He told RFE/RL that his religious faith does not allow him to serve in the military, adding that he would be happy to serve in any other service as an alternative to the military.

"If I became a soldier that would break the oath I gave to almighty God; the Bible does not allow me to be a soldier, but that does not mean that I want to avoid service, I am ready to do anything else," he said in the Homel courtroom.

Smyk insists that according to the Belarusian Constitution he has the right to choose an alternative, noncombatant service.

The trial will continue on October 19.

EU Ambassadors meet Belarusian Christian leader over imminent Church destruction

CSW (26.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.08.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - European Ambassadors to Belarus met with the leader of New Life Church in Minsk this week to discuss recent threats by the government to confiscate and destroy one of the largest protestant churches in the country.

According to New Life Church representatives, EU officials from 15 member states and from the European Commission Delegation met with Pastor Slava Goncharenko in the French Embassy, who informed them that the community continues to resist government efforts to force them to sell their church building, despite an official notice ordering them to turn it over to the city government by last weekend.

The church has been in a long-running struggle with the government to keep its doors open.

Rev Stuart Windsor, CSW's National Director said: "This sad case represents the sorry state of religious freedom in Belarus. We urgently call on the European Union, having launched its Eastern Partnership initiative, to intervene on behalf of New Life Church Community and compel the Belarusian authorities to retract their decision, and to respect the religious liberty of all Belarusians throughout the country".

For further information or to arrange interviews please contact Theresa Malinowska, Press Officer at Christian Solidarity Worldwide on 020 8329 0045 / 078 2332 9663, email theresamalinowska@csw.org.uk or visit www.csw.org.uk.

Fines on religious activity continue as pastors complain to president of restrictions

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (25.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (26.08.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Authorities in the western Brest Region have continued their harassment of religious communities, local believers have told Forum 18 News Service. Two Protestant congregations in the town of Baranovichy [Baranavichy] were given large fines in July, while in early August police in the town of Malorita tried to have six Baptists punished under the Administrative Violations Code for singing hymns and giving out Christian literature on the street without state permission. However, in that case the judge threw out the accusation, insisting that singing hymns does not fall under the auspices of the Law on Meetings.

On 20 August, fifty Protestant pastors from across Belarus signed a letter to President Aleksandr Lukashenko defending the embattled New Life Full Gospel Church in the capital Minsk and complaining about long-standing restrictions on religious activity.

However, Forum 18 has been unable to discuss these complaints or the harassment in Brest Region with Leonid Gulyako, the government's Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. His assistant, who had told Forum 18 on 24 August that he was in an urgent meeting, told Forum 18 on 25 August that she would not put the call through and would not discuss the concerns raised by the pastors or the harassment in Brest Region with Forum 18. She then put the phone down.

Members of a variety of religious communities have been fined this year for religious activity the authorities regard as illegal. The highest fine so far was of 2,100,000 Belarusian Roubles (4,750 Norwegian Kroner, 533 Euros or 745 US Dollars), three months' average wages, handed down on Council of Churches Baptist Nikolai Poleshchuk in the town of Osipovichi in the eastern Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region in May.

Council of Churches Baptists refuse on principle to register their congregations with the state, insisting that registration should not be needed for religious worship. However, Belarus' highly restrictive Religion Law – in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments – makes registration compulsory before religious activity is legal. The law also restricts legal religious worship to state-approved premises and bans regular religious worship – whether by registered or unregistered congregations – in private homes.

The latest moves to punish peaceful religious activity come as the authorities prepare once again to try to confiscate from the New Life Full Gospel Church its place of worship in Minsk.

In their letter defending the New Life congregation, of which Forum 18 has seen the text, the fifty Protestant pastors also complained to President Lukashenko of tight restrictions on religious activity. "We don't understand why officials at various levels obstruct our activity, which we carry out on the basis of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus and current law," they wrote. They also expressed concern that many laws themselves unfairly restrict religious activity.

In particular, the pastors complain that "for various reasons", Protestant congregations are refused permission to build places of worship and are then denied permission to rent premises for worship. They say this has been going on for many years. The pastors complain of "humiliating surveillance" by the KGB secret police, and repeated punishments under the Administrative Violations Code. They claim that judges interpret the Code arbitrarily and often act under direct orders from the KGB and other state agencies.

Among the signatories to the letter are many pastors who have been punished or whose churches have been punished in recent years. Pastor Leonid Voronenko leads one of the two Protestant churches in Baranovichi fined in July and his church has faced harassment before. Pastor Boris Chernoglaz leads a Minsk Full Gospel congregation which has faced obstruction finding premises for worship.

Pastor Andrei Sidor has been fined for leading worship in his own home near Minsk. Pastor Dmitry Podlobko was given an official warning for holding services in a building he owns in Gomel [Homyel]. Pastor Antoni Bokun's church in Minsk has been raided by police and he has been fined and imprisoned for three days for leading worship. Minsk-based Pastor Ernst Sabilo – who spent 13 years in Soviet labour camps for his faith – has had his congregation liquidated in court.

Baranovichi Baptists fined

On 7 July, Judge Vasily Petriv of Baranovichi Town and District Court handed down massive fines on two members of a local Council of Churches Baptist congregation because it meets for worship in a private home, local Baptists and court officials told Forum 18. Stepan Paripa and Nikolai Pestak were found guilty of violating Article 21.16 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes "using living premises not for their purpose" with a fine on individuals of between ten and thirty base units. Each was fined twenty base units, 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,483 Norwegian Kroner, 173 Euros or 248 US Dollars).

Local Baptists say that Paripa and Pestak did not appeal against the fines, but they refused to pay them. "We believe they are not guilty of anything and so they have not paid," one church member told Forum 18 on 24 August from Baranovichi. The church member added that so far officials have taken no further action against Paripa and Pestak or the church. "All is quiet at the moment."

Court officials told Forum 18 on 24 August that Judge Petriv was away on leave, but insisted the fines had been handed down on the basis of documentary evidence. They said the two had forty days to pay the fines voluntarily. Failure to do so would lead to attempts by court executors to recover the money. Court officials confirmed that the fine on each amounted to about a month's average wages locally.

Church members say officials are trying to pressure the congregation to apply for registration, which they fear will bring with it state interference in the internal life of the congregation and restrictions on its activity. They point to Article 31 of Belarus' Constitution, which guarantees religious freedom to all without mentioning registration. "Registering a church and gaining legal status is the right of believers, not an obligation," church members maintain.

The latest trouble for the congregation began on 19 June, when local Ideology Department official Sergei Puzikov ordered an administrative case to be launched against the two. Paripa and Pestak were both fined on the same charge in December 2007.

Puzikov defends the decision to fine Paripa and Pestak. "They violated the Religion Law," he insisted to Forum 18 on 24 August. Told that the Baptists point to Article 31 of the Constitution, which makes no reference to state registration before religious activity can be undertaken, Puzikov responded: "In any country there is not only the Constitution, but individual laws." He refused to answer any further questions and put the phone down.

Another Baranovichi church loses appeal against fine

The fines on the two Baptists came one week before another Protestant church in the town was fined by the same court. The New Generation Full Gospel Church led by Pastor Voronenko was fined 350,000 Belarusian Roubles on 14 July for holding a Sunday morning prayer service on 21 June which the same Puzikov of the town's Executive Committee claimed was activity "not according to the statute" of the church.

The church appealed against the fine to Brest Regional Court. However, in a 20 August decision seen by Forum 18, Judge Anatoly Pastukhov rejected the appeal. The judge upheld the decision that the prayer service represented "activity outside the statute" but failed to explain why holding a Sunday morning prayer service was not in accordance with the church's statute.

Protestants told Forum 18 that the church has not paid the fine so far because the appeal has been underway and now intends to lodge a supervisory appeal against the decision. The church also complains that it was never given the written text of the 14 July court decision.

Baptists escape fine

Meanwhile, Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 that elsewhere in Brest Region, police attempts to have church members fined for singing hymns and offering Christian literature on the streets have been thrown out. They say that on 1 August, six church members were detained in the town of Malorita and taken to the police station. There police drew up an official record, declaring that the six had "sung Christian songs and

distributed Christian literature without having the permission for this from the organs of state power".

The Baptists noted that a large group of fellow church members attended the court hearing of the six on 7 August. Judge Pyotr Borichevsky told the six that the court would not hear the case as singing Christian songs does not fall under the purview of the Law on Meetings. He sent the official records back to the police and ended the case against the six.

The Baptists told Forum 18 that this is not the first time police in Malorita have moved against their members who have been singing and offering literature on the street.

Authorities prepare again to expel New Life church from its own building

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (24.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (25.08.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Officials have refused to explain why they will not let the church remain in its place of worship, why they have repeatedly refused the church's application to have the building redesignated as a place of worship and why the church's applications for registration as a religious organisation have been rejected three times since re-registration was required with the 2002 Religion Law.

Lukanin stressed that whether or not the church is thrown out of its building, it will continue to meet for worship. "It is a necessity of our faith," he told Forum 18.

The moves against the New Life Church come as religious communities in other parts of Belarus face continuing tight restrictions on their activities and fines for violating these restrictions. Two Protestant churches in the western town of Baranovichi have been fined since the beginning of July.

The latest expulsion threats

On 13 August, two court executors visited the church and tried to deliver an order to vacate their building within seven days in accordance with a Higher Economic Court decision from January 2009. However, church members refused to let them in.

The document – of which Forum 18 has seen a copy - was handed over on 14 August. It gave the church until 20 August to leave and informed church members that 37,581,476 Belarusian Roubles (79,924 Norwegian Kroner, 9,290 Euros or 13,300 US Dollars) was being sent in compensation. Church members insist this is far below the current market value of the building and have returned the funds, the third time they have done so.

The court executors followed up with a 21 August document – delivered to the home address of Lukanin's parents the following day and also seen by Forum 18 – instructing the church to hand over the building and unilaterally declaring that the building had been transferred to the Minsk Property Agency.

In response to the moves to seize the building, church members began a series of prayer and fasting meetings on 17 August which seem set to continue. "Several dozen church members are here at this moment praying," Lukanin told Forum 18. Several hundred people – many from other Protestant churches across Belarus – came to the earlier prayer meetings to show solidarity with church members.

On 18 August, the church's Pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, wrote to Presidential Administration Head of Ideology Natalya Petkevich, asking for her help for church members to enjoy their Constitutional right to religious freedom. Lukanin, the church's lawyer, told Forum 18 that no reply had been received by 24 August.

Fifty Protestant pastors from across Belarus signed a letter to President Aleksandr Lukashenko on 20 August expressing their support for the church and complaining of continuing tight restrictions on religious communities which prevent many Protestant congregations from renting, buying or building places of worship.

Anna Ekberg, Deputy Head of Mission of the Swedish Embassy in Minsk, told Forum 18 that the Embassy has invited church leaders to join the regular meeting of European Union ambassadors at the French Embassy on 25 August. "We've been following the New Life Church case and the situation has become more pressing recently," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 24 August. "We have invited the church leaders to give their view of the situation. We will also get information from the Belarusian authorities. We try to listen to all views."

Long campaign against New Life Church

Purchased in 2002, New Life's building - a spacious, modern barn-like structure on the edge of Minsk - is legally still a cowshed. The state authorities refuse to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to a house of worship, or to use it for services. The congregation's defiant worship at the building has resulted in multiple large fines in addition to its formal confiscation. The congregation has nowhere else to meet, having earlier been barred from public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk. It even toyed with the idea of keeping several cows at the church in order to nominally legitimise its position - but animal husbandry is now banned in Minsk.

New Life's stand-off with the state came to a head in October 2006, when the church exhausted the appeals procedure against a 17 August 2005 municipal instruction curtailing its land rights and ordering the sale of its building. The Minsk authorities dispatched a bulldozer with the apparent intention of demolishing the church. Congregation members and well-wishers embarked on a high-profile hunger strike in its defence.

After letters of support from all over the world began pouring in to President Lukashenko, Pastor Goncharenko was invited to see a top-ranking Presidential Administration official, Oleg Proleskovsky, who hinted that a legal resolution was possible. This was the reason New Life returned to the courts in December 2006. After more than two years of delays, however, the Higher Economic Court threw out its appeal on 13 January 2009, returning the church's battle to the beginning.

It is now evident that the Presidential Administration was simply looking to buy time. The Minsk authorities then demanded that New Life vacate its building by 1 June 2009, the latest excuse given being that a kindergarten is planned for the site - even though there is a suitable vacant plot of land next to the church. When the 1 June deadline expired, more than 500 church members and Christians from across Belarus came to the church resolved not to give up the building they had bought and restored with their own funds, time and hard work.

Who is behind the threatened expulsion of New Life church?

Lukanin believes that the KGB secret police is behind the long-running state campaign to oust the church from its property. "We believe the KGB is behind all this." He told Forum 18 that water board officials checking up on whether the building has been illegally connected to the water supply told church members privately that they had received a

letter from the KGB instructing them to take action against the church. He said church members have not seen the alleged letter and said church members are not aware that KGB officers have visited the church.

The duty officer at Minsk city and regional KGB – who would not give his name - refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 24 August or to put Forum 18 through to any officer who could do so. Asked for contact details of the head of Moscow District KGB, the duty officer responded: "He won't talk to you." However, after extensive consultation with colleagues, the duty officer insisted: "It is not we who are dealing with this – it's the city Executive Committee." Asked repeatedly whether the KGB was behind the moves to oust the New Life Church from its place of worship, he repeatedly responded: "No comment."

State religious affairs officials would not comment or were unavailable for comment on 24 August. The assistant to Leonid Gulyako, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, told Forum 18 that her boss was "in an urgent meeting on an ongoing issue", but denied that the meeting was about the New Life Church. She insisted that "this is not a question for Leonid Gulyako" but for the Minsk city religious affairs official Alla Ryabitseva. "The church can keep cows but cannot pray there," she said. "The state treats all religious organisations the same and supports all at state level, provided they obey the law. If they break the law they will be punished."

On 15 July Gulyako had told a press conference that he supported moves to confiscate the church building.

Reached on 24 August, Ryabitseva put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 had introduced itself and asked about the New Life Church.

Equally unwilling to explain why the church cannot retain and use for worship a building it bought with its own funds was Galina Kovalenko, head of the Ideology Department of Minsk's Moscow District Executive Committee. Like other officials, she claimed that the decision to expel the church merely reflects the implementation of the Law. "All is being done in accordance with the law," she told Forum 18 on 24 August, before putting the phone down.

Igor Kudrevich, First Deputy Head of Moscow District Executive Committee, also insisted all is being done in accordance with the Law. But he told Forum 18 his administration has "no role" in the issue. "It is not within our competence."

Christian group in Belarus told to leave its church

RFE/ RL (14.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (15.08.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - An evangelical Christian group in Minsk called The New Life has been asked to leave its church, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reports.

City officials visited the church, telling the congregation's leadership that the church building should be vacated by August 19.

The building is an old barn in the Minsk suburbs that was used by farmers as shelter for their livestock in the Soviet-era.

In the last three years the congregation has been fighting to preserve their building, which local authorities say was "illegally privatized by the church in the 1990s."

Church fined for activity "not according to its statute"

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (16.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (17.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A registered Protestant congregation in western Belarus has been fined for activity which officials claim was "not according to its statute," local Protestants told Forum 18 News Service. The church held a special prayer service in its registered building, which church members insist was within its statute. Trouble for the New Generation Church began when Baranovichi local Ideology Department officials saw posters in the town advertising the service. One official and two "witnesses" arrived at the church 30 minutes before the service, but left 10 minutes before it began without witnessing it. The official, Sergei Puzikov of the Ideology Department, refused to explain to Forum 18 what activity was outside the church's statute, as did the Department's head. In defiance of international human rights standards, Belarus bans all unregistered religious activity – including both unregistered communities and unregistered activity by registered communities. Religious activity is kept under close surveillance by the KGB secret police, and officials often issue warnings for activity they claim is illegal. Two such warnings can lead to a religious organisation being closed down.

A registered Protestant congregation in the western Brest Region of Belarus was fined on 14 July, for activity which officials claim to be "not according to its statute," local Protestants have told Forum 18 News Service. Officials objected to a special Sunday morning prayer service at the New Generation Full Gospel Church in the western town of Baranovichi [Baranavichy], which church members insist fell inside the list of activities in their statute.

In defiance of the country's international human rights commitments, Belarusian law bans all unregistered religious activity – including both unregistered communities and unregistered activity by registered communities. Religious organisations are kept under close surveillance by the KGB secret police, and officials often issue warnings for activity that they deem to be illegal. For two "offences", the registration body can apply to a court to have a religious organisation liquidated, and also has the power to halt the organisation's activity in the run-up to the court's decision.

Just such a warning was issued to the New Testament Pentecostal Church in Minsk in late May, after it invited a visiting Ukrainian pastor to preach at one service without specific state approval.

Officials may complain about any activity religious organisations undertake that is not specifically listed within organisations' statutes, which have to be approved at the time registration is granted. This allows officials wide scope for questioning the legality of any religious activity they do not like, especially if it takes place outside a religious organisation's registered legal address.

Marina Tsvilik of the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs said she was not familiar with the fine imposed on the Baranovichi church, but said she would be "surprised" if they had been fined merely for holding a prayer service in their own church building. "I don't see any violation in this," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 July.

Ideology Department targets New Generation

Trouble for the New Generation Church began when Baranovichi local Ideology Department officials saw posters the church had placed around the town, to advertise a special service on 21 June to pray for protection against evil in individuals' lives.

Sergei Puzikov, the chief specialist of the Ideology Department of Baranovichi Executive Committee, arrived at the church together with two "witnesses" half an hour before the service was due to begin, church members told Forum 18. Puzikov drew up an official record of what he claimed was an administrative violation. He and the two witnesses left after 20 minutes, before the service had even begun.

The official record, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, notes that the advertisement indicated that the service would take place and that the service was a violation of Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Violations. "Such forms of activity are not the activity as in the statute of the New Generation religious community of Full Gospel Christians," it records.

Article 9.9 Part 1 punishes "creation of a religious organisation or leadership of it without registration under the established procedure or activity of a religious organisation outside the statute".

On 14 July, Judge Oksana Sarakhman of Baranovichi Town and District Court found that the New Generation Church had violated Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Code of Administrative Violations. The judge handed down the maximum fine under this Article of 10 base units or 350,000 Belarusian Roubles (786 Norwegian Kroner, 87 Euros or 122 US Dollars).

Are churches banned from holding prayer services?

Church members insisted to Forum 18 that a prayer service is within the terms of the church's statute. They told Forum 18 that the statute describes the church's basic religious activity as "religious services, prayer meetings, religious rites, rituals and ceremonies." Church members noted that many religious communities conduct activities that are not specifically identified in their statutes. These often only describe their activity as religious services and rites, without identifying the exact forms of services and rites used.

Church members also pointed out that Puzikov of the Ideology Department and the two "witnesses" had not witnessed the prayer service, as they had left ten minutes before it started and only had information about it from the advertisements.

Puzikov refused to explain to Forum 18 why he and the Court regarded the nature of the service as being "not in accordance with the statute". He claimed from Baranovichi on 15 July that the country's Law on State Service banned him from speaking to the media without permission from his superiors.

Puzikov's boss, the head of the Ideology Department Tatyana Zhidko, refused absolutely to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 16 July. Asked what activity the church had conducted that was not included in its statute, she responded firmly and repeatedly: "I have no information at all about this – ask the Court." Asked how a prayer service in a church's own premises could constitute activity outside its statute, she repeated her response. When Forum 18 pointed out that Puzikov, who had determined that a "violation" had taken place, was an official of her department, she put the phone down.

No other Ideology Department official would explain to Forum 18 why holding a religious prayer service was outside the terms of the church's statute.

Church members told Forum 18 that they have not yet received the Court's written verdict, but say they intend to challenge the fine at Brest Regional Court.

New Generation's earlier problems

New Generation Church – which is led by Pastor Leonid Voronenko – has faced earlier pressure from the authorities over alleged incorrect land use, and the presence of a visiting foreign pastor.

Activity "outside the statute" punished

The authorities have frequently used very tight definitions of what constitutes activity within the terms of a religious organisation's statute to restrict peaceful religious activity. Organisations registered as social, rather than religious, can be deemed to be acting illegally if they allow any religious activity

A rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts in the eastern city of Mogilev [Mahilyow] run by a Belarusian Christian social organisation, Cliff House, was raided in March by a local Ideology Department official accompanied by police officers. They accused the organisation of conducting "illegal" religious activity. In May, Lyudmila Batyuk, the co-ordinator of the programme, was fined 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (315 Norwegian Kroner, 35 Euros or 50 US Dollars) under Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code for conducting unregistered religious activity.

Irina Batishcheva, the head of the District Executive Committee's Ideology Department who led the raid, refused to discuss the case with Forum 18.

Similarly, Catholic priests and nuns involved in prominent social activity have been expelled from the country.

Foreign pastor banned from preaching, church warned it may be closed

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (15.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Belarus has warned a church in the capital Minsk that it could be closed after a foreign pastor preached at a worship service, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Pastor Boris Grisenko, a Ukrainian, was also fined. Alla Ryabitseva, head of the city's Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, claimed to Forum 18 that "I have been to the United States. Visitors to the country can't just go and speak at a religious service without permission." District police chief Viktor Pravilo refused to say how he had found out that a foreigner was preaching in the New Testament Pentecostal Church, religious communities having long complained to Forum 18 of KGB secret police surveillance. Asked whether the police did not have more important matters to deal with than a foreigner preaching at a religious service, Pravilo put the phone down. Foreigners engaged in religious activity have long been a target of state hostility, along with their Belarusian co-religionists. Catholic priests and nuns have regularly been expelled, but the authorities today (15 July) announced that they had completed the draft text of a Concordat. It is unknown whether this will address violations of freedom of religion or belief.

Officials in Belarus' capital Minsk have warned a church in the city, the New Testament Pentecostal Church, that it could be closed down, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The warning by religious affairs officials was given after a visiting pastor from neighbouring Ukraine, Boris Grisenko, came to preach. Grisenko was fined for religious activity without state permission. Foreigners engaged in religious activity – however brief it is – have long been a target of state hostility, along with their Belarusian co-religionists.

Bishop Sergei Tsvor, deputy head of the Pentecostal Union to which the Minsk congregation belongs, condemned the authorities' latest attack on freedom of religion or belief. "I don't need permission from the authorities to speak at a service or a conference in Russia, Ukraine, Poland or Germany – I've done so many times," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 July. "But here we have a law that bans foreigners from such participation. I regret that the law exists – it is a violation of our rights."

Alla Ryabitseva, head of the Minsk city Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, defended the moves to punish the Minsk church, including the threat to ban it if it conducts the same "violation" again. "I have been to the United States. Visitors to the country can't just go and speak at a religious service without permission," she claimed to Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 July.

Strict control is imposed on all religious activity, as was seen in the recent case of a registered Pentecostal church fined after officials claimed it was carrying out activity "not according to its statute".

Minsk warning

The New Testament Church in Minsk's Zavodsky District received an official warning after Pastor Grisenko, who leads a Messianic Jewish Congregation in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, spoke at one of the Minsk church's services on the evening of 21 May. Grisenko, as a Ukrainian citizen, does not need a visa to visit Belarus. However, officials insisted in their written warning to the church that Grisenko did not have "the appropriate permission for the aim of engaging in religious activity".

Grisenko was summoned and accused of violating Article 23.55 Part 1 Point 1 of the Code of Administrative Violations for participating as a foreigner in religious activity without permission. He was fined 105,000 Belarusian Roubles (236 Norwegian Kroner, 26 Euros or 37 US Dollars).

"Pastor Grisenko was due to speak at a Messianic Jewish congregation that Saturday [23 May], but because he was banned from preaching was unable to do so," Bishop Tsvor of the Pentecostal Union told Forum 18.

The official warning, of which Forum 18 has send a copy, was prepared by Ryabitseva of the Minsk city Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, and signed by the deputy head of Minsk City Executive Committee responsible for the Department, Mikhail Titenkov.

The official warning cited information from Zavodsky District police chief Viktor Pravilo that the church had violated the law by allowing a foreign citizen to preach without permission. The warning said this meant the church was violating its own statute, which notes that it abides by the law.

The City Executive Committee, which had registered the church, warned the New Testament church that "if the given violation is committed again within a year, the registering body would have the right to go to court with an application to liquidate the religious organisation. The registering body would also have the right to decide on the halting of the activity of the religious organisation until the court issues a decision."

Police chief Pravilo insisted that Grisenko needed a visa and needed to be registered, but refused to discuss the case. "I don't know who you are," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 July. Asked how the police had learnt that a foreign citizen was preaching in the church, he responded: "It's a secret." Asked whether the police did not have more important matters to deal with than a foreign citizen preaching during a religious service, Pravilo put the phone down.

Religious communities have often complained about police and KGB secret police surveillance of religious worship and activity. The KGB maintains very strict surveillance of religious communities, as in the case of a Catholic priest prosecuted for saying one mass outside his parish.

Asked by Forum 18 whether the fine on the visiting pastor and the threat to liquidate the New Testament Church did not violate the rights of church members, Ryabitseva of the Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs responded: "All the reasons are given in the official warning. We as state officials merely carry out the law. They violated the law." Asked who might have suffered from a sermon by a foreign citizen in a religious community's service, she responded: "We don't evaluate who suffers from the law."

Tight restrictions on foreigners

Forum 18 knows of 31 foreign religious workers – Catholics, Protestants and Jews – banned from working with local religious communities since 2004. The most recent were two Danish citizens, Erling Laursen and Rolf Bergen, given deportation orders in February for taking part in worship services in Gomel's [Homyel] charismatic Living Faith Church.

Catholic religious work permission problems

The Catholic Church in particular has faced difficulty getting permission for foreign Catholic priests and nuns to work in Belarus. They make up some two-thirds of the 31 foreign religious workers banned since 2004. Many have been summarily expelled or had their religious work permission renewals rejected in recent years. Priests and nuns engaged in tackling social issues, such as alcoholism, in a very public manner appear to be particular targets for expulsion.

Four Polish Catholic priests as well as three nuns had their permission to continue religious work in Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese and Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese revoked at the end of December 2008.

Parishioners in Borisov [Barysaw] of Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, one of the expelled priests who left the country in December 2008, have pressed officials for his return. In a 6 April letter to parishioners seen by Forum 18, Gulyako's deputy Vladimir Lameko insisted that the "position" of the Office over Fr Grygorcewicz's expulsion had already been explained to them and that "changing our view is not possible".

Fr Grygorcewicz had helped organise a Christian music festival, arranged by Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, which was banned by the authorities 10 minutes before it started.

In another new development, Belarus has completed the draft text of a Concordat with the Holy See. The state Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, announced this at a press conference in Minsk on 15 July. The Interfax and Itar-Tass news agencies reported him as saying that the draft text had been prepared by the Foreign Ministry and his Office.

The Apostolic Nunciature in Minsk declined to comment to Forum 18 on 15 July on Gulyako's remarks.

It remains unclear if a Concordat will halt Belarus's continuing violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief of Catholics and others in the country. The Vatican has not criticised these violations, apparently trusting in the possibility of a Concordat and even a papal visit to Belarus. On the contrary, the Holy See's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, conveyed the thanks of Pope Benedict XVI "for the religious liberty that Belarus enjoys" during a June 2008 visit to Minsk, also telling a press conference that the

2002 Law was "a good law reflecting the necessary protection and respect for the rights of the five main confessions traditional to Belarus." On 27 April 2009 Pope Benedict received President Aleksandr Lukashenko.

Largest fine yet for unregistered religious activity

By Felix Corley,

Forum 18 (11.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (17.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – A court in the town of Osipovichi in the eastern Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region has handed down the biggest fine known so far to Forum 18 News Service for religious activity in Belarus the government does not like. On 28 May local Baptist Nikolai Poleshchuk was fined the equivalent of almost three months' average salary and another Baptist received a warning for running a Christian street library, local Baptists told Forum 18. However, Belarus' Supreme Court has amended an earlier court decision to destroy Bibles and New Testaments confiscated from Poleshchuk – they have been handed to the state instead. The fine and confiscations come as the authorities in the capital Minsk step up pressure to try to force the New Life charismatic church from its building.

The fine imposed on Poleshchuk was 2,100,000 Belarusian Roubles (4,750 Norwegian Kroner, 533 Euros or 745 US Dollars). Local Baptists estimate the fine to be equivalent to nearly three months' average wages for those in the town who have work.

The fine is three times the previous highest fine known to Forum 18, imposed on fellow-Baptist Vladimir Burshtyn in June 2008 for preaching on the streets in the town of Ushachi (Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] Region).

Poleshchuk and Burshtyn are members of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse to accept state registration in any of the former Soviet republics where they operate.

Heavy fine, literature confiscation and warning

The trial of Poleshchuk and fellow-Baptist Yevgeni Yegorov began at Osipovichi Administrative Court on 27 May. The two were tried on charges of violating Article 23.34 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes "violation of the procedure for organising or conducting mass events or pickets".

On 28 May the Judge imposed the fine on Poleshchuk and an official warning to Yegorov. Poleshchuk's fine was stated to be high because of three earlier administrative warnings against him. In addition, Christian books confiscated from him were ordered to be handed to the Commission for Work with Confiscated Property at the town's Executive Committee.

"Court officials were very polite but at the end of the day the Judge deferred the decision to the following day," a local Baptist who attended the hearing told Forum 18 on 5 June. "They were clearly waiting for someone to tell them what punishment to hand down."

Reached on 8 June, neither the Court's Chancellery nor its Deputy Head, Judge Galina Shitina, admitted to Forum 18 that the trial had taken place. They also would not confirm what Article of the Administrative Violations Code the two Baptists had been prosecuted under. "We don't give out such information by telephone," both declared. Judge Shitina refused to discuss why the Baptists had been prosecuted.

Equally unwilling to discuss the case was Anna Zemlyanukhina, the head of Osipovichi District Ideology Department. "I don't have information on such a big fine," she told Forum 18 from the town on 10 June. "You will have to ask the court. But I don't see any questions about it." She said Poleshchuk had not appealed to her in the wake of the court ruling.

Asked whether it is right or wrong for religious believers to be punished for their peaceful religious activity, given that religious freedom is guaranteed in the Constitution, Zemlyanukhina responded: "I know my Constitution and human rights. It is all in accordance with the law."

She refused to say what the Commission for Work with Confiscated Property intends to do with the confiscated books, but denied that they would be destroyed. Asked her attitude to the official destruction of religious books, given the March court ruling against Poleshchuk, she responded: "What would any normal person answer about that?"

Zemlyanukhina said the Commission is headed by the Executive Committee's first deputy head, Vasili Petrovsky. Forum 18 was unable to reach Petrovsky on 10 June to find out what the Commission will do with the books confiscated from Poleshchuk.

Court ordered book destruction overturned?

Poleshchuk has long run a Christian street library with fellow Baptists in Osipovichi. In January, Poleshchuk and another Baptist were approached by Zemlyanukhina, who told them they had no right to run a Christian street library as their church is unregistered, and called the police. Poleshchuk faced a hearing on 4 March at Osipovichi Administrative Court, which gave him an official warning and ordered that the confiscated Christian literature should be destroyed.

Poleshchuk appealed against the ruling to Mogilev Regional Court, but that upheld the original decision on 31 March, court officials told Forum 18 on 8 June.

However, both the local Baptists and Judge Shitina told Forum 18 that Poleshchuk appealed further to the Supreme Court, which overturned the destruction order. It ruled that the books should be handed to the state instead. "We're pleased that at least they are not going to destroy the books, even if they won't hand them back," Baptists told Forum 18.

Sergei Lukanin, the lawyer for the New Life Church in Minsk and a campaigner for religious freedom, says he is not aware of court orders in Belarus to destroy bona fide religious literature. "I have heard only of genuinely extremist literature being ordered destroyed by the court," he told Forum 18 on 10 June. He said he is not surprised that the March order to destroy books confiscated from Poleshchuk – of which he was unaware until Forum 18 told him – was overturned.

New Life resists latest expulsion order

The latest trouble for the New Life Church in Minsk's Moscow District – which the authorities have long been trying to oust from the building they bought in 2002 – came on 22 May, when the church received an instruction to vacate the building by 1 June. The Church has for some years been in a high-profile struggle with the authorities to establish its legal right to use its own building as a house of worship.

The latest letter from the authorities, dated 14 May and which Forum 18 has seen, was from Dmitry Shashok, the head of the Property Maintenance and Repair Department (PMRD) of the Moscow District. The letter said the Church had lost all the legal cases it had brought and concluded by threatening that in the case of "wilful failure" to carry out

the instruction, his office "will be forced to take measures to resolve this question in accordance with the current legal procedure".

Lukanin, the Church's lawyer, told Forum 18 on 29 May that the Church would not be vacating the building, as they think the authorities' moves against them are not justified.

Told the same day that church members had pledged not to vacate the building they own, Shashok insisted to Forum 18 that his Department was fulfilling a decision lawfully reached by the city authorities. He said it was "not persecution". Told that the Church had lawfully bought their building, he told Forum 18: "You don't have the full information."

Asked what he would do once the 1 June deadline had passed, Shashok insisted: "No one will send in the bulldozers. We're not the kind of state which sends in bulldozers. We'll resolve this in a civilised way - on a state level." Asked specifically what would happen, he said he would pass the issue to a "higher level". Reached again on 10 June, Shashok refused to talk to Forum 18 and put the phone down.

More than 500 church members and other Christians from across Belarus came to the church on 1 June. They resolved not to give up the building they had bought and restored with their own funds, time and hard work.

After a further meeting on 5 June the Church wrote to the Deputy Mayor of Minsk not only rejecting the attempt to expel them, but also asking for extra land to be allocated for a Bible College and a rehabilitation centre. On 9 June, the Church received a letter from the Deputy Head of Minsk Executive Committee, Nikolai Ladutko. He insisted the Church's land is needed for a new residential district and asked the Church to reconsider an offer of another plot of land some distance away.

Lukanin, the church's lawyer, insisted to Forum 18 on 10 June that the city's plan for the district where the Church is located leaves plenty of room for the proposed kindergarten as well as the Church. However, the authorities propose to build kindergarten on the same site as the Church. "Why can't they build the kindergarten next door, where nothing is planned? They don't have real plans to build new flats round here. All they want to do is destroy our church."

A disused railway carriage is located 500 metres (yards) away from New Life's building and this is used by a Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) community, without the authorities raising any questions about its legal status or use as a place of worship. One official told Forum 18 in 2005 that an Orthodox church was planned to be built as part of the new suburb.

Lukanin also dismissed the level of compensation the church has been offered for losing its building – 37,500,000 Belarusian Roubles (84,370 Norwegian Kroner, 9,470 Euros, or 13,290 US Dollars). "This is far, far below what the building is worth or what it would cost us to build an equivalent church," he complained to Forum 18.

Forum 18 repeatedly tried to reach Ladutko at the city Executive Committee on 10 June. He was either out or, on the occasion when his voice could be heard in the background, his staff told Forum 18 he was just leaving the office.

Christian project co-ordinator fined

Meanwhile, the co-ordinator of a rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts in Mogilev run by a Belarusian Christian social organisation, Cliff House, has been fined, Protestants told Forum 18. On 11 May Judge Irina Teplova of the city's October District Court fined Lyudmila Batyuk 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (315 Norwegian Kroner, 35

Euros, or 50 US Dollars) under Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code for conducting unregistered religious activity.

Accompanied by police officers, Irina Batishcheva, the head of October District Executive Committee's Ideology Department, raided an 11 March Cliff House session at a private house in the city, accusing the organisation of conducting "illegal" religious activity. Batishcheva refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18.

Belarus Evangelical church faces imminent eviction by security forces

Authorities claim the property was not zoned for religious use

BosNewsLife (03.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (08.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - There was uncertainty about the future of one of the largest evangelical churches in Belarus Tuesday, June 2, after authorities ordered it to abandon its building in the capital Minsk.

New Life Church confirmed that it received a letter from the Property Maintenance and Repair Department (PMRD) of the Moscow District of Minsk demanding that the church leaves its current complex not later than Monday, June 1 or face forcible eviction.

The church needs to undertake necessary measures not later than June 1, 2009 to transfer the legal documents for its building and sign the deal of the building's transfer and also vacate it, the letter said. In case the church does not, the Department will have to undertake necessary measures to settle the case in accordance to the current legislation.

In an interview, the head of PMRD's legal department, Ludmila Bulyga, suggested that the eviction could be carried out by security forces. They (the church) need to vacate the building and the land since it was never zoned for religious usage. The court's ruling will be carried out by the court's officers, who have the full right to use law-enforcing agencies, she said.

MOUNTING CONCERN

Human rights groups have expressed concerns about the situation, saying it could mark another stage in alleged wide spread persecution of devoted Christians in the former Soviet republic.

The events... are likely to have a major impact on religious freedom throughout Belarus, said Stuart Windsor, National Director of Britain-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide. If New Life Church is forced to shut its doors, the hundreds of other churches across the country who have been denied the right to register will have real reason to fear the same fate, Windsor warned.

The CSW official urged the European Union to intervene at a time when it just launched its Eastern Partnership initiative which is meant to promote respect for human rights in countries including Belarus. The EU, he said, should make it absolutely clear that the religious liberty of the members of New Life Church must be defended and upheld.

New Life Church, which comprises over a thousand active members, has been the target of repeated government fines and attempts to shut it down since it was established in the early 1990s, according to local Christians.

LEGAL BATTLE

The latest ruling comes as part of a legal battle with the Minsk City Executive Committee which has been ongoing since 2005 after the church purchases a former cowshed to accommodate its growing congregation.

In addition, recent aid from the Netherlands was halted by authorities, the church said. In 2006, thousands of Belarusian Christians of different denominations across the country joined members of New Life Church in a hunger strike which lasted 23 days and resulted in hospitalization of several people involved in the hunger strike.

It comes amid international concerns over the policies of President Aleksandr Lukashenko who critics say has steadily consolidated his power through authoritarian means.

Critics link the reported crackdown on New Life and other evangelical groups to government restrictions on freedom of religion as well as limitations on freedom of speech and the press and demonstrations. Lukashenko has denied wrongdoing.

- Source / Full Story: Belarus Evangelical Church Faces Imminent Eviction By Security Forces, Stefan J. Bos, Chief International Correspondent BosNewsLife, June 2, 2009 — Posted at Religion News Blog by permission.

Ideology official targets rehabilitation programme

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 (30.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (31.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Belarusian Christian rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts run by a registered social organisation, Cliff House, has been targeted by an ideology official, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Irina Batishcheva, head of a district Ideology Department in Mogilev, has twice led police raids on Cliff House sessions escorted by police, most recently when five participants were singing Christian songs before drinking tea. "Some people got afraid after the first police visit and stopped coming," Cliff House's co-ordinator, Lyudmila Batyuk, told Forum 18. A local court has so far refused to prosecute Batyuk for leading an unregistered religious organisation. Asked by Forum 18 about her visits to Cliff House, Batishcheva insisted, "I will not comment on my actions." Belarus tries to enforce strict segregation of religious and social activity, with religious believers complaining to Forum 18 that they are barred from speaking publicly on general social issues.

A rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts run by a Belarusian Christian social organisation, Cliff House, has become the target of an ideology official in the eastern city of Mogilev [Mahilyow], Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "Some people got afraid after the first police visit and stopped coming," the programme's co-ordinator, Lyudmila Batyuk, told Forum 18 from Mogilev on 23 March.

Belarus tries to enforce strict segregation of religious and social activity. Religious believers have complained to Forum 18 that they are barred from speaking publicly on general social issues. One Polish Catholic priest thinks he was expelled from Belarus partly due to his involvement in alcohol rehabilitation programmes. Another was apparently expelled because he made public comments on Belarusian social problems when in Poland.

Irina Batishcheva, the head of October District Executive Committee's Ideology Department in Mogilev, interrupted an 11 March Cliff House session at a private house in

the city, Batyuk told Forum 18. Its five participants were singing Christian songs and were just about to drink tea: "We always sing as it raises people's spirits." The state representatives questioned those present and noted down the songs' lyrics, as well as several titles of religious books in the room, said Batyuk; "books I read but don't use in consultations."

Stressing that she wished to be law-abiding, Batyuk then asked Batishcheva what offence she had committed. The ideology official maintained she was conducting unregistered religious activity, the Cliff House representative told Forum 18. Under the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, religious communities must register with the state.

The 11 March incident came after October District Court rejected as incomplete prosecution materials relating to a similar raid on 28 January. On that occasion Batishcheva, another official and two police officers explained they were responding to a complaint about "a sect doing unregistered religious activity," Batyuk told Forum 18. The ten participants in that session were then taken to a local police station for questioning.

"I will not comment on my actions," Irina Batishcheva insisted when asked by Forum 18 on 25 March why she had made the visits to Cliff House. Asked further questions, the ideology official simply repeated this response.

Registered as a social organisation in Minsk in 2006, Cliff House's aims include "the affirmation of traditional Christian moral norms in personal, family and public life." While its charter activity extends across Belarus, the organisation currently operates in some eight cities.

During the two years since Cliff House's programme began in Mogilev, some 10 to 15 people have fully recovered from addictions, Batyuk told Forum 18. Participants meet at a private house in the city belonging to Batyuk, as her organisation cannot afford to rent premises. While not fully constructed, the first floor is complete except for central heating, she said.

Cliff House follows a ten-step rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts similar to the Twelve-step Programme devised by Alcoholics Anonymous. Instead of a non-specific deity as the facilitator of recovery, however, "we speak about the importance of Jesus and how only He can help," Batyuk explained to Forum 18. The programme was devised by a rehabilitation centre attached to the large Kiev-based charismatic Embassy of God Church, of which Batyuk is a member.

A supporter of the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution, Embassy of God's Nigerian pastor, Sunday Adelaja, was barred from Russia in 2006. A church representative has maintained to Forum 18 that Pastor Adelaja is not barred from Belarus, although he has not visited in recent years.

Embassy of God members in Belarus have transferred the public expression of their faith to the social sphere as the authorities refuse to register their churches, Batyuk told Forum 18.

While seven Embassy of God churches - including those in Brest, Gomel [Homyel], Minsk, Rechitsa [Rechytsa] (Gomel Region), Slonim and Soligorsk - managed to re-register under the 2002 Law, a further eight formed since the Law came into force have been unable to register, their co-ordinator Natalya Komovskaya confirmed to Forum 18 from the south-eastern regional centre of Gomel [Homyel] on 25 March.

Unregistered religious communities may encounter state harassment, increasingly by officials in charge of enforcing ideology. In the latest, 20 March incident, an ideology official in Bobruisk (Mogilev Region) told a local Embassy of God pastor who

unsuccessfully sought registration that his community would have "big problems" if it continued to meet for worship, according to Komovskaya.

Also on 20 March, six Baptists who were singing hymns and offering Christian books to passers-by in the western town of Shchuchin in Grodno [Hrodna] Region were detained by police, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 29 March. "People were listening to the singing with pleasure and took the Word of God as a gift," they said. "The joy of the spiritual work was destroyed by the arrival of a unit of the police." They said a police inspector ordered them to put away the small table and books immediately and come with them to the police station.

Police drew up records on all six men and confiscated all the Christian literature. "They gave them copies of the records and the record on the confiscation of the literature," the Baptists noted, "but didn't say if they'll be returned after they're examined. The reason for all this was that the church is not registered." The Baptists, who were then freed, belong to the Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to seek state registration.

Charismatic church's fight pushed back to square one

By Geraldine Fagan

Forum 18 (26.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Members of Minsk's charismatic New Life Church have vowed to fight on to retain their building after the Higher Economic Court threw out their appeal against moves to seize it. The state argues that the building is a cowshed and is not being used for its legal purpose, despite church attempts to have its usage changed. As the court decision comes into force immediately, the Minsk authorities have the right to demand the building "at any moment", church member and lawyer Sergei Lukanin pointed out to Forum 18 News Service. He said the church has been "deceived" as it only went to court after it was advised to do so by a senior Presidential Administration official. Another official there, Lyudmila Vorovka, refused to discuss the court decision. "The court decides this [issue], not us," she told Forum 18. Meanwhile, a Baptist leader Aleksandr Yermalitsky was fined on 8 January for hosting "a religious event at which the Bible was read" at his home, while other Baptists running street libraries have had literature confiscated and received court warnings for "singing songs of a Christian nature without permission". Catholics told Forum 18 there has been no progress in having the recent ban on seven Polish priests and nuns overturned.

After more than two years of delays, the Higher Economic Court on 13 January threw out an appeal by the Minsk-based New Life Church against state moves to seize its building. "The authorities have deceived us yet again," church lawyer and member Sergei Lukanin commented to Forum 18 News Service on 22 January. A senior presidential administration official had suggested the church go to court in the first place. The Presidential Administration has no response to the decision, Lyudmila Vorovka, an official dealing with religious affairs there, told Forum 18 on 22 January. A spokesperson for the Higher Economic Court refused to comment to Forum 18 the same day, even to confirm the decision.

The latest ruling takes New Life's position back to October 2006, when the Minsk authorities dispatched a bulldozer with the apparent intention of razing the charismatic congregation's building, and the church embarked on a high-profile hunger strike in its defence.

The verdict also suggests that the government's underlying policy of containment towards religious communities has not changed, even while it has made fewer moves to restrict religious activity during recent efforts to forge ties with the European Union.

As the Higher Economic Court's decision comes into force immediately, the Minsk authorities have the right to demand the building "at any moment", Lukanin pointed out to Forum 18. But if they do, he said, church members have decided they will refuse to give it up: "We won't submit." No move has been made against the church since the verdict.

On 22 January New Life returned to the state the money it received for its building in its forced sale.

The appeal to which the 13 January verdict relates was originally lodged in December 2006, and challenged Minsk City Executive Committee's 17 August 2005 instruction curtailing New Life's land rights and ordering the sale of its building. The instruction was based upon the church's alleged violation of the Land Code, which states that rights to land may be curtailed if it is not used according to its designation (Article 49, Part 4).

Purchased in 2002, New Life's building – a spacious, modern barn-like structure on the edge of Minsk – is legally still a cowshed. The state authorities refuse to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to a house of worship, or to use it for services. The congregation's defiant worship at the building has resulted in multiple large fines in addition to its formal confiscation.

The congregation has nowhere else to meet, having been barred from public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk. It toyed with the idea of keeping several cows at the church, but animal husbandry is now banned in Minsk.

By the time of the October 2006 hunger strike, New Life had already exhausted the appeals procedure. But after letters of support from all over the world began pouring in to President Aleksandr Lukashenko, the church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, was invited to see a top-ranking presidential administration official, Oleg Proleskovsky, who hinted that a legal resolution was possible.

This was the reason the church returned to the courts in December 2006, Lukanin, the lawyer, explained to Forum 18. "It wasn't our initiative, it was due to [Proleskovsky's] advice to resolve our problem that way – we assumed positively." New Life now intends to take its appeal higher, he added. "Although we know that the decision wasn't taken in the courtroom, or even the courthouse. It was a political decision taken in the presidential administration, and until the position there changes, nothing will happen in the courts."

Proleskovsky's telephone went unanswered on 22 January. His assistant had previously referred Forum 18 to Lyudmila Vorovka, whose brief at the presidential administration includes religious affairs.

Vorovka refused to comment on the court decision on 22 January, even after Forum 18 explained that it was only due to her colleague Proleskovsky's advice that New Life had lodged the appeal at all. "The court decides this [issue], not us," she replied when Forum 18 asked whether the presidential administration would take measures to resolve the church's problems. "We can't interfere with the decision of the court."

Minsk's senior religious affairs official has staunchly defended the city's actions against New Life to Forum 18.

Meanwhile, the state authorities continue to target the activity of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse compulsory state registration on theological grounds. On 11 January, two of its members operating a Christian street library in Osipovichi [Asipovichy] (Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region) were approached by Anna Zemlyanukhina, who heads the local district Ideology Department. Arguing that the church is unregistered and does not have state permission to run such a library, Zemlyanukhina ordered the literature's removal, according to a 24 January Council of Churches statement. When the Baptists refused to comply, she called the police, who detained the pair and confiscated their literature and a "Christian Library" sign.

Also in Mogilev Region, a court in Bobruisk fined Aleksandr Yermalitsky 175,000 Belarusian Roubles (445 Norwegian Kroner, 50 Euros or 65 US Dollars) on 8 January after he hosted "a religious event at which the Bible was read" at his home on 5 December, the Council of Churches reported. The 5 December home worship service was visited by three officials of the local district Ideology Department, a police officer and KGB officer, who asked why the Baptists were meeting without state registration and why there were children present without their parents.

On 20 December 15 Baptists running a street library in Kobrin (Brest Region) were detained by police and referred to Kobrin District Court for "singing songs of a Christian nature without permission from Kobrin District Executive Committee," the Council of Churches reported on 2 January. The group was issued an official warning – but not fined – by the court on 6 January, a Baptist representative in Kobrin told Forum 18 on 21 January.

Police in Kobrin earlier detained the Baptists, confiscated their literature and told them "to clear off".

On 15 January the European Parliament passed a resolution calling upon Belarus "to respect freedom of religion." The state authorities are "denying a growing number of Protestant and Roman Catholic priests and nuns the right to practice a preaching and teaching ministry," it noted.

Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, until the end of December 2008 a Catholic parish priest in Borisov [Barysaw] (Minsk Region), told Forum 18 from Poland on 23 January that the presidential administration still has until 10 February to respond to a letter from parishioners asking why he is not allowed to work in Belarus: "So we are waiting."

Fr Grygorcewicz was one of four Polish Catholic priests as well as three nuns who had their permission to continue religious work in Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese and Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese revoked at the end of December. The bans brought to 29 the number of foreign religious workers - including Protestants and Jews as well as Catholics - banned from working with local religious communities since 2004. For Catholics in Borisov, it is the second time in recent years that their parish priest has been ousted.

Fr Yan Kuchynski, the dean of Grodno's Catholic cathedral, told Forum 18 on 23 January that he had no news concerning his Church's attempts to return to Belarus the three priests from that Diocese barred at the end of 2008. Likewise the chancellor of the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese, Fr Yuri Kasabutsky, told Forum 18 from Minsk on 26 January that he was unaware of any progress in seeking the return of the three Polish nuns and one priest to the Archdiocese

'The views of the parishioners are nothing to us'

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (07.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (12.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The Catholic Church in Belarus has appealed for the state to rescind its ban on four priests and three nuns working in the country, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. One of the priests, Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, was told that he was being expelled for arranging a banned Christian music festival. Like his colleagues, Fr Grygorcewicz was active in serving the people of his parish, arranging for a sports pitch for local children to be built, providing humanitarian aid in the area, promoting ecumenical activity among the town's Christian churches, and lecturing in the Belarusian State University. One of the many parishioners and students who have protested against the bans, Lena Okolovicz, told Forum 18 that it is "absurd" that foreigners need special permission from the state before they can conduct religious work in the country. "I think believers should take the decision over which priest should serve where, not the state." But Mikhail Rybakov of the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 that "the views of the parishioners are nothing to us."

As the Catholic Archdiocese of Minsk-Mohilov [Mahilov] insists it will work to bring back the foreign priest and three nuns banned from continuing their religious work in the country from the end of December 2008, officials have dismissed Catholic concerns over the bans to Forum 18 News Service. "If the Diocese wants them to return then they should apply," Mikhail Rybakov, the spokesperson for the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, told Forum 18 from the capital Minsk on 6 January. "Nothing prevents [Archbishop Tadeusz] Kondrusievicz coming here to resolve this issue." Rybakov refused to acknowledge that the Archbishop had already applied for the four to be allowed to remain. Asked whether the Office would give the necessary permission for the four if Archbishop Kondrusievicz applies yet again, Rybakov declared: "I can't say."

Rybakov scorned protests by parishioners of ousted priest Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz. "The views of the parishioners are nothing to us – he was invited by the Archdiocese, not by the parishioners." He said that if it needs to, there is nothing to stop the Catholic Church inviting another foreign priest to take Fr Grygorcewicz's place. "Why can't the Church accept another priest? I see nothing wrong in that."

Asked repeatedly why Fr Grygorcewicz cannot remain, given that he is the choice of the parish and the Archdiocese, Rybakov avoided answering. "Everything was done in accordance with the law," he kept insisting.

Rybakov refused to explain to Forum 18 why it was the role of the state to choose which religious leaders are acceptable or unacceptable. But he stressed that if those banned return to Belarus and conduct religious activity without state permission they will be punished under the Criminal Code.

Fr Aleksandr Amialchenia of the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese rejected Rybakov's comments as "at the very least irresponsible". He insisted that Archbishop Kondrusievicz had "more than once" appealed to the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in recent weeks for the priest and three nuns to have their permission extended. "He did this both before the Plenipotentiary's official reply and afterwards," Fr Amialchenia told Forum 18 from Minsk on 7 January.

He said that Fr Grygorcewicz's documents will again be lodged as soon as the January 2009 holiday for Orthodox Christmas is over. As for the three nuns, he said the Plenipotentiary had verbally "insisted" that the Archdiocese not raise their cases. "Otherwise the attitude to the presence of foreign nuns in Belarus would become even harsher," he reported.

The three Polish nuns who were also refused an extension to their permission to conduct religious work after the end of December 2008 were all working in parishes in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese. Sister Malgorzata Zarek was working in Nesvezh, Sister Antonina Bigaj in Svir and Sister Katarzyna Cheldt in Novy Sverchen. Fr Amialchenia told Forum 18 that all three nuns had left Belarus by 1 January.

Fr Amialchenia said that Archbishop Kondrusievicz is doing all he can to have the priest and nuns returned to their work and to prevent further such "incidents". "The reason officials gave – in writing - was the small number of faithful in the parishes where they were serving," Fr Amialchenia told Forum 18, an assertion the Church rejects.

As well as the priest and three nuns in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese, three Polish Catholic priests in the Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese in western Belarus also had their permission to continue religious work in the country revoked at the end of December. The three are Fr Jan Bronowski, Fr Jan Skonieczny, and Fr Andrzej Krawczyk. Marina Tsvilik of the Office of the Plenipotentiary told Forum 18 it was because they did not know the state languages, Russian and Belarusian.

The bans brought to 29 the number of foreign religious workers – including Protestants and Jews as well as Catholics - banned from working with local religious communities since 2004.

Rybakov of the Office of the Plenipotentiary insisted to Forum 18 that the state makes no distinctions between different religious communities. However, he was not able to recall any foreign Orthodox priests who had been banned from conducting religious work in Belarus.

Fr Grygorcewicz, assistant priest at the Nativity of the Virgin Mary parish in the town of Borisov [Barysaw] for the past three years, was told verbally that his permission to conduct religious work both there and in the small town of Okolovo some 70 kms (45 miles) north of Borisov would not be extended after its expiry at the end of December 2008. "Nothing was in writing," he told Forum 18 from Warsaw on 6 January. "I broke no laws, but they thought I was too active. It is a violation of human rights."

Fr Grygorcewicz said that another priest has had to be assigned from Minsk temporarily to serve at the Okolovo parish, where there is no resident priest. He said he had collected money to build a new church there to replace the one destroyed during the Soviet period. He added that the local authorities had provided a former shop for the small parish to use for worship.

In Borisov Fr Grygorcewicz arranged for a sports pitch for local children to be built, helped provide humanitarian aid as far as the authorities allow it and promoted ecumenical activity among the town's Christian churches.

Catholic priests and nuns previously expelled from Belarus have also been involved in social care and ecumenical activity.

As well as serving in the parishes in Borisov and Okolovo, Fr Grygorcewicz taught part-time for the past two years at the SS. Methodius and Cyril Theological Institute at the Belarusian State University in Minsk. In approving this part-time work at the request of Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret, the Plenipotentiary Leonid Gulyako made clear that this permission did not extend to allowing Fr Grygorcewicz to conduct any religious activity within the city of Minsk. Foreign religious workers are only allowed to conduct religious activity in the locations for which they are approved.

Fr Grygorcewicz said that when he asked the senior religious affairs official for Minsk Region, Leonid Parkhimovich, in late December why his permission to continue his

pastoral work was not being extended, the official told him verbally that it was because of a Christian music festival he had planned to hold in his church in September 2008. The festival was cancelled by state officials minutes before it was due to begin.

Parkhimovich's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 5 and 6 January, while 7 January is a public holiday. No other official was prepared to explain to Forum 18 who had taken the decision to ban Fr Grygorcewicz from further religious work. Aleksandr Myadeltsov, the main specialist on religious organisations within the Ideology Department of Borisov Executive Committee, told Forum 18 on 6 January that the decision not to extend Fr Grygorcewicz's permission for religious work was "not in our competence".

Myadeltsov said permission to conduct religious work locally is signed by the head of the Executive Committee, but "the decision is taken by the Office of the Plenipotentiary in Minsk". He referred all further enquiries to Valentina Shutko, deputy head of the Executive Committee with responsibility for social issues. However, reached the same day she refused to discuss anything with Forum 18, referring all questions to the Office of the Plenipotentiary in Minsk.

Rybakov of the Office of the Plenipotentiary in Minsk said the decision over Fr Grygorcewicz – as with all such cases – was taken locally.

Although not required to leave Belarus, Fr Grygorcewicz said that he chose to do so and returned to Poland on 30 December.

Fr Grygorcewicz insisted to Forum 18 that he would like to return to his parishes and says he will wait in Warsaw for a new invitation to conduct religious work which would then allow him to apply for a new visa as well.

Fr Grygorcewicz pointed out that his parents – who are both now dead – were born before the Second World War to the west of Minsk in territory that is now in Belarus. "That's why I'm committed to the country," he told Forum 18. "I want to get Belarusian citizenship." He said he had begun the process of collecting documents from archives proving that his parents had been born locally.

Fr Grygorcewicz enjoys vocal backing from his parishioners in Borisov, as well as from staff and students at the university. "All parishioners are awaiting his return," parishioner Lena Okolovicz told Forum 18 from Borisov on 7 January. "The respect Fr Zbigniew has could only inspire delight among the population." She said some 430 parishioners have signed a petition calling for him to be allowed to resume his work.

Okolovicz said that parishioners had appealed to Borisov Executive Committee, the Office of the Plenipotentiary and to the Presidential Administration in Minsk. "When we went to the Presidential Administration, officials told us a commission would meet and consider our petition," Okolovicz reported. She said a group of nine had also gone to visit Shutko at the Executive Committee on 29 December and she had told them if Fr Grygorcewicz came for an "audience" the issue could be resolved. "He went, but there was no result."

Myadeltsov of the Executive Committee acknowledged that parishioners had presented an appeal for Fr Grygorcewicz's return. "It is being considered and they will get an answer," he told Forum 18. Asked if the answer will be positive he responded: "I don't know."

Catholic parishioner Okolovicz told Forum 18 she believes it is "absurd" that foreigners need special permission from the state before they can conduct religious work in the country. "I think believers should take the decision over which priest should serve where, not the state."

Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns – also working in Grodno Diocese - were forced out of the country at the end of 2006, apparently because of their high levels of religious activity, including youth and alcohol rehabilitation meetings open to all. A petition and other campaigns by local Catholics failed to get the decisions overturned. At the end of 2005, two Catholic parish priests working in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese did not have their annual visas renewed and were thus forced to return to their native Poland.

Another priest, Fr Grzegorz Chudek, had to leave Belarus at the end of 2007, apparently due to his discussion of Belarus' social problems in the Polish press.

A January 2008 Council of Ministers decree imposed tighter restrictions on inviting foreign religious workers to the country. The Office of the Plenipotentiary was given sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by foreign citizens is necessary. The decree specified that only registered religious associations have the right to invite foreign religious workers. These consist of ten or more communities, at least one of which must have functioned in Belarus for 20 years. Applicants have to attest the knowledge of Belarusian and Russian for most of those they invite.
