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## BELARUS: Set-back in Religious Affairs Officials' Two-Year Plan

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

*Belarusian officials had a detailed plan for re-registering religious organisations under the 2002 religion law's two-year compulsory re-registration period, however they have "hardly re-registered anyone, not even the Orthodox", Forum 18 News Service has been told by a reliable source. It has been suggested to Forum 18 that officials, realising that the law "has not entirely been a success," are trying to water down the re-registration requirements. One source, stressing that re-registration is not a guarantee of the right to worship freely, has told Forum 18 that Belarusian authorities are keen to re-register as many religious organisations as possible so as to 'reassure the West by saying: "Just look how many organisations we have re-registered".'*

Officials in Belarus had a plan of which religious organisations to re-register in which month of the 2002 religion law's two-year compulsory re-registration period, one of the attendees at a 12 September meeting at the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk between regional religious affairs officials and representatives of religious organisations told Forum 18 News Service recently. According to the source, it transpired at the meeting that the Belarusian authorities have in fact "hardly re-registered anyone, not even the Orthodox. They thought that they had lots of work to do but it just turns out that no one is re-registering."

Repeatedly asked by Forum 18 how many religious organisations he had re-registered so far, the official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region would not give a precise figure. Vasili Marchenko did admit, however, that only a few of his region's 643 religious organisations – "Orthodox, some Pentecostals" – had re-registered. "They are only just putting in their papers," he remarked in his office on 16 September, "but I'm sure we will re-register them all by the end of the allotted two-year period [16 November 2004]." While he was speaking, his colleague Aleksandr Tsyrelchuk repeatedly held up the same re-registration application – from a community of Orthodox Jews in the town of Kobrin – to indicate that re-registration was indeed taking place.

The official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region, Nikolai Stepanenko, told Forum 18 on 23 September that of the 450 religious organisations in the region, he had so far re-registered 27, including Orthodox, Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals and one Jewish community. Stepanenko added that there were 198 Orthodox organisations in the region, which covers two Orthodox dioceses. However, the dean of the central district of Vitebsk city, Fr Aleksandr Rakhunok, maintained to Forum 18 on 23 September that 80 per cent of those in Vitebsk diocese had already re-registered and that all would have done so by 1 January 2004. According to the official website of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), Vitebsk diocese has 127 parishes, 6 brotherhoods and sisterhoods and 4 monasteries and convents.

Perhaps because the 2002 law "has not entirely been a success," religious affairs officials are already trying to get round it, the Pentecostal bishop of Vitebsk region, Arkadi Supronenko, suggested to Forum 18 on 22 September. According to the attendee at the 12 September Minsk meeting, government officials stated that they would re-register religious organisations with fewer than the 20 participants stipulated by the new law, but that this concession did not extend to new communities. This was confirmed to Forum 18 by both Vasili Marchenko and Nikolai Stepanenko, who added that monasteries and convents which had the necessary 10 participants when they first registered but whose numbers had since decreased would similarly be re-registered. "It's not their fault if they haven't grown," Marchenko remarked.

Arkadi Supronenko saw another sign that the new law was being softened in practice in the local assurances he had received from state officials that all religious organisations would be re-registered as long as they were not in blatant violation of its provisions. The Pentecostal bishop did not expect that fire and sanitary regulations, for example, would be cited as obstacles to re-registration, and pointed out that his communities' standard charter had already passed what he considered to be the crucial stage of approval by state authorities at district level.

While stressing that re-registration was not necessarily a guarantee of the right to worship freely, another Protestant source suggested to Forum 18 that the Belarusian authorities were indeed keen to re-register as many religious organisations as possible. "In their attempt to enter the European Union," he said, "they can reassure the West by saying: "Just look how many organisations we have re-registered."

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