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BELARUS: Pastor jailed – to stop him attending "extremist materials" hearing?

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Since 11 July, Minsk's New Life Church faces multiple new regime investigations into a summer camp accident, a renewed massive tax demand it strongly disputes, a website ban, and a court case for publishing allegedly "extremist materials" protesting at election fraud and regime illegality among other things. The regime bulldozed its church building on 20 June. Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko has been jailed until 24 August, possibly to stop him participating in a 23 August "extremist materials" hearing that may be a prelude to the Church being forcibly closed.

Minsk's New Life Church organises camps for children every summer, and on 10 July a bus carrying 50 children overturned due to a poorly-maintained road. No serious injuries were reported, and parents have not made any complaints about the accident, the camps, or New Life Church and its leadership. On the same day, the state-controlled media Minsk Pravda published online a detailed report of the accident quoting the participants and the officials dealing with it. The article was written in neutral tones, without any criticism, stating that the reason for the accident was the poor quality of the road surface.

Yet the next day, Minsk Pravda published a totally different article, and almost immediately Minsk Prosecutor's Office started summoning people connected with the summer camp for questioning. The Prosecutor's Office refused to explain to Forum 18 why they were questioning a wide range of people about an accident which led to no complaints, and which state-controlled media has admitted was caused by a poorly-maintained road surface (see below).

On 3 August, Minsk's Oktyabrsky District Tax Office requested New Life's annual financial reports, as well as documents relating to the Excurs Trans Company which transported the children. The Tax Office also refused to explain to Forum 18 on 16 August why New Life documents relating to the transport company are being inspected. A Belarusian Protestant who knows the situation, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, commented to Forum 18 on 8 August that the road accident was being used as an excuse for the authorities to put pressure on the Church. "They found an excuse to set the ball rolling," he told Forum 18 (see below).

New Life Church has faced many years of regime pressure, building up to its February 2021 forcible eviction from its building, bans on it meeting outside, and the 20 June 2023 bulldozing of its building (see below).

The regime has used a variety of threats against New Life and other religious communities it dislikes, including an August 2021 tax demand for 458,918.22 Belarusian Roubles - equivalent to more than 25 years' average wages for someone in work. On 18 July 2023 the tax demand was renewed. Housing Repair and Utilities Association Deputy Head Nataliya Kalistratova refused to explain to Forum 18 why the 2021 tax claim is being renewed now (see below).

New Life's website was blocked without warning on 25 July. This is a tactic which the regime has used with the excuse of alleged "extremism" against many organisations. Minsk Prosecutor Oleg Lavrukhin banned the website for 6 months, accusing the Church of publishing "extremist" information and "building up threats to national security, which includes artificially whipping up tensions in society and inciting social hostility or discord through the dissemination of false information." Lavrukhin particularly objected to internet posts protesting against the 2020 fraudulent presidential election, regime violence against protestors, and the regime's violations of the rule of law (see below).

"The authorities themselves chose the quotations, but the posted information reflects the real situation in our country," a Belarusian human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 (see below).

On 4 August, the Minsk's Central District Court sent a notification to New Life of a 23 August court hearing to consider a suit lodged by the Minsk Prosecutor's First Deputy, Oleg Avdei, to declare two internet posts "extremist material" containing "deliberately false information on the political and social situation in the Republic of Belarus." Minsk Prosecutor's Office refused to explain to Forum 18 why New Life Church's website was blocked without warning, or discuss the court case (see below).

Human rights defender organisation Christian Vision told Forum 18 that they suspect that formally finding that the Church published allegedly "extremist materials" is a prelude to the Church being "legally" forcibly closed.

On 14 August, Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and Ilya Budai (his son-in-law and New Life's Youth Pastor) were arrested during a search of Pastor Goncharenko's house. Police wrongly claimed that Budai had sworn at police and waved his arms, a claim strongly contradicted by a witness. The search was conducted by a group of 20 armed police officers from the Organised Crime and Corruption Department. On 15 August, Pastor Goncharenko was sentenced to 10 days' jail, and Youth Pastor Budai was jailed for 5 days. Minsk District Court refused to explain to Forum 18 in what way Pastor Goncharenko disobeyed police, and why he was given such a disproportionate punishment of 10 days' jail (see below).

A human rights defender suggested that the length of Pastor Goncharenko's imprisonment was dictated by the regime's wish to stop him attending the 23 August "extremist materials" hearing (see below).

Summer camp accident

New Life Church organises camps for children every summer. On 10 July, a bus carrying 50 children aged from 8 to 11 to the camp overturned near Lozovets village, about 90 kilometres (about 55 miles) north-west of Minsk. The accident happened on a poorly-maintained road because of its loose road surface. No serious injuries were reported, and parents have not made any complaints about the accident, the camps, or New Life Church and its leadership. On the same day, the state-controlled media Minsk Pravda published online a detailed report of the accident quoting the participants and the officials dealing with it. The article was written in neutral tones, without any criticism, stating that the reason for the accident was the poor quality of the road surface.

The next day, 11 July, Minsk Pravda published a totally different article. This criticised New Life Church and its summer camps, and made a variety of allegations about the Church's leader Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and his running of the camp.

Almost immediately, Minsk Prosecutor's Office started summoning people connected with the summer camp for questioning. This includes Church members, parents of children, and employees of Excurs Trans Company (which transported the children to the summer camp).

Minsk Prosecutor's Office on 8 August refused to explain to Forum 18 why they were questioning a wide range of people about an accident which led to no complaints, and which state-controlled media has admitted was caused by a poorly-maintained road surface. The official Forum 18 spoke to refused to give her name, and after talking to her superiors refused to explain the situation and said: "The only way to get comments is to write an official enquiry, we do not give comments on the phone."

On 3 August, Minsk's Oktyabrsky District Tax Office requested New Life's annual financial reports, as well as documents relating to the Excurs Trans Company which transported the children to the summer camp. (Belarusians have told Forum 18 that this often happens when road accidents involving organisations happen.) On 10 August, New Life's chief accountant was summoned to the Tax Office to be questioned about the documents which were provided.

Tax Office inspector Veronika Sunelik refused to explain to Forum 18 on 16 August why New Life documents relating to the transport company are being inspected. "We are not authorised to discuss anything on the phone," she answered before putting the phone down.

A Belarusian Protestant who knows the situation, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, commented to Forum 18 on 8 August that the road accident was being used as an excuse for the authorities to put pressure on the Church. "They found an excuse to set the ball rolling," he told Forum 18.

Years of regime pressure

New Life Church, bought its building - a former cowshed on the western edge of Minsk - in 2002. The Church converted the building into its place of worship, turning it into a spacious, modern structure, but the regime refused to change its legal designation as a cowshed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806). This is in contrast to a disused railway carriage 500 metres from New Life's building which was without regime obstruction used from January 2001 by a Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) community. That community has now built a church, also without any regime obstruction.

The regime repeatedly tried to evict New Life Church from 2009 onwards, and on 17 February 2021 30 police and court bailiffs forcibly evicted New Life from its building, using an angle grinder to cut the door lock to gain entry. The bailiff's enforcement order was signed by Aleksey Petrukovich, and he refused to explain to Forum 18 why the eviction happened and why force was used.

One New Life Church member suspected that the reason for the sudden eviction was that New Life recorded and on 21 November 2020 posted on its YouTube channel a video by church members protesting against the regime's violence against protestors objecting to election fraud (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806).

After being expelled from its own place of worship, New Life Church held its worship services in the car park outside each Sunday, whatever the weather. Minsk City Executive Committee, subsequently rejected all New Life Church's attempts to seek permission to hold meetings either in the car park, or to have their church building returned to them, and threatened to liquidate the Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806).

New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko was detained and fined in September 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"). Pastor Antoni Bokun of Minsk's John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, who regularly supported New Life Church, was similarly detained and fined.

On 25 September 2022, police banned the Church's Sunday meeting for worship held outdoors (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) in its car park, threatening to detain anyone who did not leave. This forced New Life to halt the in-person worship meetings it had held in the church car park every Sunday, whatever the weather, since the February 2021 forcible eviction. The Church continues to hold meetings online or in other churches' premises.

On 20 June 2023, New Life's church building was bulldozed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2841). The bulldozing – ordered by Capital Construction Management Company, owned by Minsk City Executive Committee – within a day reducing much of the building to rubble. Neither Capital Construction, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, nor Minsk City Executive Committee would explain to New Life or Forum 18 why New Life's church building was destroyed.

Tax demand renewed

The regime has used a variety of threats against New Life and other religious communities it dislikes, including an August 2021 tax demand for 458,918.22 Belarusian Roubles (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2682). According to state figures, this is equivalent to more than 25 years' average wages for someone in work.

On 18 July 2023, New Life received an official letter (seen by Forum 18) renewing the tax demand. It was signed by Moscow District's Housing Repairs and Utilities Association Deputy Director Nataliya Kalistratova, claiming that "until the moment of forced eviction (17.02.2021) the Housing Repairs and Utilities Association has been bearing expenses on land and property taxes and on the permanent non-residential building depreciation." In the claim the authorities threaten to apply to the economic court if the debts are not paid.

Under the Presidential Decree on Tax Exemption of Religious Organisations of 1 December 2005, New Life Church is not subject to land and property taxes. However, this privilege does not extend to the Housing Repairs and Utilities Association, to which the city administration handed the Church's land in 2005 and its building in 2009. The Housing Repairs and Utilities Association shifted the burden of taxation to the Church, sending eviction demands to the economic courts (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284).

Housing Repair and Utilities Association Deputy Head Kalistratova refused on 15 August 2023 to explain to Forum 18 why the 2021 tax claim is being renewed now. "If you want to get comments please come to us, and the Director will consider if it is possible to answer your questions," she told Forum 18.

Website blocked without warning, "extremist material" allegations

New Life's website was blocked without warning on 25 July. This is a tactic which the regime has used with the excuse of alleged "extremism" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) against many organisations.

New Life was without warning sent a document (seen by Forum 18) signed by Minsk Prosecutor Oleg Lavrukhin on 25 July, which bans the website for 6 months. He accuses the Church of publishing "extremist" information and "building up threats to national security, which includes artificially whipping up tensions in society and inciting social hostility or discord through the dissemination of false information".

Prosecutor Lavrukhin alleges that internet posts on New Life Church's website are not in line with Belarus' National Security Concept. This, Lavrukhin claims, guarantees constitutional rights, freedoms, and a high quality of life for citizens. As the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: Policy Guidance (<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/2/429389.pdf>) notes, but Lavrukhin does not, in international law "national security" is not a legitimate ground to limit the freedom of religion or belief.

The Justification of the regime's restrictive draft new Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2839) states that liquidation of a religious community could happen for – among other reasons - "failure of their activity to be in accord with the basic directions of internal and external policy, the conception of national security." The draft makes extensive use of alleged "extremism" as an excuse to restrict human rights.

Lavrukhin goes on to claim that the National Security Concept forbids New Life website content which describes the existence of "a misanthropic system", citizens' sufferings from "a harsh policy" as a result of which "many are imprisoned" on political grounds, and "unlawful court decisions". Lavrukhin also objects to a 17 August 2020 "Prayer for Belarus" meeting without state permission, at which church members "appealed to the authorities to repent of cruelty and deceit taking place in governmental executive bodies".

Prosecutor Lavrukhin's document also quotes a post published on 17 November 2020 relating to protests against election fraud in the 2020 presidential election. The post describes "unprecedented use of violence against civilians, actions to intimidate the population, distortion of reality and lies, lack of justice, and trampling on the memory of those killed during the use of force by law enforcement authorities".

Lavrukhin also objects to a speech by Pastor Goncharenko on Sunday 25 June 2021, when he described "the lawlessness reigning in society" and condemned the illegal expulsion of New Life from its building.

"The authorities themselves chose the quotations, but the posted information reflects the real situation in our country (<https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/belarus>)," a Belarusian human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 15 August 2023. They added that the development of the situation is unpredictable, and depends on the authorities.

"Extremist materials" court hearing

On 4 August, Minsk's Central District Court sent a notification to New Life of a 23 August court hearing to consider a suit lodged by the Minsk Prosecutor's First Deputy, Oleg Avdei. This demands that two internet posts be declared "extremist material" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) containing "deliberately false information on the political and social situation in the Republic of Belarus." These are:

- a video posted on YouTube by New Life on 21 November 2020 protesting against the regime's violence against protestors objecting to election fraud (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806). One New Life Church member suspected that this was the reason for the sudden eviction of the Church from its building;

- and an Instagram post on 17 August 2020 quoted by Prosecutor Lavrukhin: "Prayer for Belarus. On 16 August after the morning worship service the New Life Church congregation came outside making up a prayer chain and holding the Bible in their hands. As Christians we condemn the recent violence and cruelty and appeal to the authorities to repent."

Minsk Prosecutor's Office on 8 August refused to explain to Forum 18 why New Life Church's website was blocked without warning, or discuss the court case. The official Forum 18 spoke to refused to give her name, and after talking to her superiors refused to explain the situation and said: "The only way to get comments is to write an official enquiry, we do not give comments on the phone."

Human rights defender organisation Christian Vision (<https://belarus2020.churchby.info>) told Forum 18 that they suspect that formally finding that the Church published allegedly "extremist materials" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) is a prelude to the Church being "legally" forcibly closed.

Pastor and Youth Pastor jailed – to keep Pastor out of court hearing?

On 14 August, Pastor Goncharenko and Ilya Budai (his son-in-law and New Life's Youth Pastor) were arrested during a search of Pastor Goncharenko's house. The search was conducted by a group of 20 armed police officers from the Organised Crime and Corruption Department. There were so many armed officers as the regime feared the congregation would support their pastor, a human rights defender who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 on 15 August.

Police claimed that during the search Budai swore at police and waved his arms. However, this claim was strongly contradicted by a witness who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals.

Andrei Ananenko, the Head of Minsk Police Organised Crime and Corruption Department, did not answer his phone whenever Forum 18 called on 16 August.

On 15 August Judge Aleksandr Shevtsov of Minsk District Court found Pastor Goncharenko guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 24.3 ("Failure to submit to a legal instruction or demand by an official carrying out their official duties") and punished him with 10 days' imprisonment until 24 August. Ilya Budai was accused of violating Administrative Code Article 19.1 ("Disorderly conduct") and imprisoned for 5 days.

The human rights defender suggested that the length of Pastor Goncharenko's imprisonment was dictated by the regime's wish to stop him attending the 23 August "extremist materials" hearing.

Minsk District Court refused on 16 August to explain to Forum 18 in what way Pastor Goncharenko disobeyed police, and why he was given such a disproportionate punishment of 10 days' jail. The official Forum 18 spoke to refused to give her name or connect Forum 18 with Judge Shevtsov. "We give information only to those involved in the case," she claimed.

Catholic Cathedral raided, priests beaten up

Minsk's Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary was raided on the evening of 13 July, Christian Vision reported. The raid and search was connected with catechist instructor Uladzislau Beladzed, who was jailed in unclear circumstances on 31 May.

"Police demanded that priests who were in the Cathedral in the sacristy unblock their mobile phones. Those who refused to do so were beaten up," exiled Catholic journalist Maksim Hacek told Forum 18 on 10 August. One priest suffered a bruised face, Belsat reported on 21 July.

The Ideology Department of Minsk Executive Committee on 14 August refused to discuss the raid and attack on priests with Forum 18. The official Forum 18 spoke to refused to give her name. "You need to write an official enquiry so that we could pass your questions over to a specialist who knows this issue well," she told Forum 18. Minsk Police Press Service did not answer their phones when Forum 18 called repeatedly on 15 August.

Police had previously raided the Cathedral on 4 July 2021 when the congregation sang the hymn Mighty God (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2674), which the regime has banned. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=16>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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