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BELARUS: Autonomous congregations out in the cold

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Religious communities that choose to function independently face particularly acute restrictions, Forum 18 News Service has found, with some being arbitrarily denied the registration necessary to be able to function and barred from renting anywhere to meet legally. One independent Baptist church in the capital Minsk was forced to go underground after being refused registration. It had been told it would get registration if it joined the country's main Baptist union. The KGB secret police continues to monitor that church and other religious communities. A Messianic Jewish congregation finally gained registration in March only after it joined the Baptist union and changed its name so that its Messianic Jewish affiliation was no longer obvious. Pastor Nikolai Khaskin told Forum 18 "we had to be flexible".

While it is more difficult for religious communities to obtain compulsory registration in Minsk than in the Belarusian provinces, the situation appears particularly acute for those preferring to remain independent of the country's centrally registered denominational unions, Forum 18 News Service has found. Autonomous congregations have been arbitrarily denied registration and can find it difficult to rent premises under the tight state controls in place on where religious organisations can meet.

Originally registered in 1995, the autonomous Ark Pentecostal Church was refused re-registration following the Religion Law's November 2004 deadline as it was unable to find worship premises in Minsk, its pastor, Konstantin Tankhilevich, told Forum 18 on 5 May. After sending out "a huge number" of official requests to landlords over a period of 18 months, he said, the church received only three positive responses which were nevertheless rejected by the state authorities due to fire or sanitation considerations: "They never cite religious convictions." The 200-strong congregation is consequently now unable to gather together, evangelise or invite foreign citizens for religious work, Tankhilevich complained. "Our work is completely paralysed." Founded in 1994 by Swedish missionaries, Ark prefers to remain outside the main Pentecostal union.

An American member of a small, recently-formed autonomous Baptist congregation in Minsk told Forum 18 on 5 May that, while the official reasons given for its initial registration refusal were minor details in its application, the church was told that it would pass if it joined the country's main Baptist union: "For reasons of control, I think." The source explained that this is not an option for the congregation due to its understanding of Jesus Christ as the sole head of the Church, and was also sharply critical of a centrally registered union's ability to hold the property of individual member congregations and to replace their pastors.

The church effectively now has underground status as a result. After KGB secret police officers turned up at the address submitted in its registration application ("They were hoping to nail us, but we weren't there"), the congregation has not met in the same place twice in a row for some four months in order to avoid being fined for illegal home worship, the source told Forum 18. It is also unable to distribute literature or invitations: "Everything is word of mouth."

According to a source associated with a now re-registered independent Baptist church in Ratomka (Minsk region), a further problem for autonomous religious organisations is that they do not have the right to invite foreign citizens to engage in religious activity under Article 20 of the 2002 religion law.

The source recently described to Forum 18 how KGB officers arrived at this church during a service in December 2004 at which two US citizens were filling in for the local pastor, who had been invited to a Baptist Union member church on that day. Once it was determined that the pair had been invited to Belarus by an organisation unconnected with the church, they and the organisation concerned were reportedly fined a total of 450 dollars. The source suggested that an informer must have been planted in the congregation for this to happen, since the local pastor had announced in advance when the two Americans would preach, and the KGB officers immediately picked out both them and the piano player for questioning – who that day was a Belarusian but is usually an American.

After months of negotiation with Minsk's religious affairs officials, two Minsk-based churches that filed applications before the Religion Law's November 2004 deadline have finally received re-registration, however. Pastor Nikolai Khaskin's Messianic Jewish congregation was re-registered at the beginning of March, he told Forum 18 on 15 April, "but we had to be flexible." The church, previously called Zion-Jerusalem and registered independently, submitted its application as a member congregation of the main Baptist union due to the difficulties of remaining autonomous under the 2002 law.

Khaskin remarked to Forum 18 that the church was told by officials that it would definitely pass if it did not include the Hebrew as well as the Russian for "sanctification" in its new title, evidently so that its Messianic Jewish identity would not be immediately apparent. In addition to this change, "we had to redraft quite a lot of documents three or four times," he added, even though the church's lawyer was sure its application was in order.

Despite concerns over Minsk's municipal rulings preventing religious organisations from hiring cultural establishments for worship (see F18News 8 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=156), Sanctification Church was able to re-register at the cultural institution it currently rents for services since it is owned by a social organisation rather than the state, Khaskin told Forum 18. He added, however, that the local district authority at first refused to grant the church the permission to use the premises required by the 2002 religion law.

Minsk Reformed Church has also recently received re-registration, Aleksei Frolov of the congregation informed Forum 18 on 21 April. Membership of a centrally registered union is not an option for this church as there are only a few Calvinist congregations in Belarus.

Several sources have told Forum 18 that a frequent barrier to securing rented premises in Minsk – and hence compulsory registration – is the Soviet-style practice of "telephone law". When a religious community finds available premises and cites the address in its registration application to the local district administration, the landlord typically withdraws agreement citing "pressure from above". One source described to Forum 18 how, after submitting a re-registration application in this way, his community's chosen landlord received an intimidating anonymous telephone call claiming that the religious organisation was a sect that practised child abuse. As the local district administration subsequently denied all involvement, he said, it is impossible to prove that the state is responsible. "It's like a suitcase with a false bottom."

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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