

3 November 2006

BELARUS: Court to review charismatic church's case

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Belarusian authorities are giving contradictory signals about their attitude towards the embattled New Life Church in the capital Minsk, Forum 18 News Service has found. In an indication that the authorities may be about to reverse their position, Higher Economic Court chairman Viktor Kamenkov has cancelled an earlier Minsk City Economic Court decision against New Life and called for the case to be heard again. A new hearing has been set for tomorrow (Saturday 4 November) at the Higher Economic Court. Kamenkov's latest actions follow a high profile campaign by New Life - including a hunger strike and international protests - and a senior state official urging New Life's Pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, to appeal again to the Higher Economic Court. But in a contradictory signal, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence has published a prominent attack on New Life, claiming - amongst other highly contestable statements - that "neo-Protestant sects" are a threat to national security. Two nights after the Defence Ministry made its attack, graffiti reading "No to totalitarian sects!" was daubed on the wall of New Life's building.

Belarus' state authorities have given another indication that they may be about to reverse their position towards the embattled Minsk-based New Life Church, Forum 18 News Service has found. In a 26 October 2006 letter - a copy of which has been seen by Forum 18 - Higher Economic Court chairman Viktor Kamenkov cancels Minsk City Economic Court's 27 October 2005 decision against New Life and calls for the case to be heard again. A new hearing has been set for tomorrow (Saturday 4 November) at the Higher Economic Court.

The 27 October 2005 Minsk City Economic Court verdict rejected New Life's call for the city Executive Committee's 17 August 2005 decision, curtailing the church's land rights and forcing the sale of its building, to be declared invalid (see F18News 7 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=700).

In his 26 October letter to New Life, Higher Economic Court Chairman Viktor Kamenkov calls for the new hearing to give a legal evaluation of relevant state departments' failure "to take into account the aims of New Life's registered statutes in allocating land to the religious community." Kamenkov also calls for legal evaluation of "subsequent written responses on the issue of approving construction of objects of social significance on the plot of land." He also declares that a new hearing should review New Life's view that its land has been confiscated without warning, in violation of the Land Code.

In a separate procedure, New Life member and lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 on 1 November, the Cassation Committee of the Higher Economic Court will on 16 November again consider New Life's suit calling for the Minsk authorities to approve the construction of a house of worship on the site of the church's building, which is technically a disused cowshed.

The hunger-strike begun by New Life members and supporters in protest at the state's actions has been suspended in view of these developments, Lukanin confirmed to Forum 18. According to the church's website, the hunger-strike will resume if its demands are not met.

New Life's high-profile public protests have continued in recent weeks. On 21 October approximately 2,000 Belarusians took part in a approved demonstration in Minsk. "To keep silent is to consent to lawlessness. We will not keep silent!" Belarusian Pastor Leonid Voronenko of Baranovichi's [Baranavichy's] New Generation charismatic church told the demonstration, while Pastor Aleksandr Purshaga of the Emmanuel Pentecostal Church in Russia's capital Moscow declared: "We stand with you today because there is no division into countries and continents in the church of Jesus Christ." Both churches have encountered state obstruction in their respective countries (see F18News 18 April http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=762 & 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856 for New Generation Church's problems in Belarus, and 13 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=583 & 20 February 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=730 for Emmanuel's problems in Russia).

Several prominent public figures have visited New Life Church to express their solidarity with its hunger-strikers, including former presidential opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich on 23 October and Christian musician Aleksandr Patlis on 24 October (see F18News 20 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=842). On 2 November the church was simultaneously visited - at their own initiative, according to New Life's website - by diplomats from the Minsk embassies of France, the Czech Republic, Germany, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the USA.

Approximately 50 Belarusian churches have been directly involved in New Life's protests, Sergei Lukanin of New Life told Forum 18. He estimated that the church has received more than 200 letters of support from around the world in recent weeks, "and 2000 letters of protest were sent to the presidential administration from Finland alone." On 1 November approximately 100 members of Latvia's New Generation charismatic church held an approved three-hour demonstration outside the Belarusian embassy in Latvia's capital Riga.

A possible change of heart by the government became apparent on 17 October, when New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko was invited to see Oleg Proleskovsky, head of the Main Ideological Department within the Presidential Administration. During the 15-minute meeting, Lukanin told Forum 18, the senior state official maintained that President Aleksandr Lukashenko was aware of New Life's situation, regarding them as "a normal church in need of assistance." Explaining that a solution was not possible outside the court system, however, Proleskovsky then reportedly suggested that New Life turn to Belarus' Higher Economic Court. When Pastor Goncharenko replied that the Court had already rejected the church's appeals, continued Lukanin, Proleskovsky repeated his "strong recommendation" that it try again (see F18News 20 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858).

Until New Life received confirmation on 28 October that the Higher Economic Court would re-examine its earlier decisions against the church, however, there was little indication that state representatives were preparing to alter their position. A 23 October written warning from Minsk's Municipal Economic Court informed Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko that he could be fined 6,200,000 Belarusian Roubles (18,687 Norwegian Kroner, 2,267 Euros, or 2,896 US Dollars) for failing to comply with its decisions. It also stated that costs totalling 310,000 Belarusian Roubles (934 Norwegian Kroner, 113 Euros, or 145 US Dollars) incurred by the forced sale of New Life's building would be withdrawn from the church's bank account.

By 26 October, the hunger-strikers had gone 21 days without food, and several were obliged to end their fast and seek hospital treatment. On the same day a group of hunger-strikers' relatives tried to meet with the vice-chairman of Minsk City Executive Committee, Mikhail Titenkov. While talking to his secretary via an internal telephone in the foyer of the Committee's offices, according to New Life's website, they were approached by a religious affairs and second official. Speaking with this pair, the relatives were then surrounded by people in plain clothes and pushed outside onto the street. Svetlana Matskevich, the wife of hunger-striker Vladimir Matskevich, was reportedly forced into a police car and taken to a local police station for identification. On 27 October she was fined 155,000 Belarusian Roubles (467 Norwegian Kroner, 57 Euros, or 72 US Dollars) for alleged "insubordination to the lawful actions of a police officer." Approximately 100 members of churches and social organisations attended the local court hearing.

However, opposition to New Life has suddenly appeared from the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, Sergei Lukanin noted. On 30 October the Ministry's military newspaper, "For the Glory of the Motherland", published a lengthy article on its first page attacking the church, which is a member of the charismatic Full Gospel Association.

Contrasting Full Gospel churches with "real Protestants – Lutherans, Anglicans and Calvinists," the article claims that "the Full Gospel sect is a crude magical occult system making broad use of psychological manipulation and mind control. They hold to a false teaching directed at the personal wealth of their pastors (â€) many Full Gospel believers suffer from depression and attempted suicides are frequent among them, as is supported by international statistics." Journalist Vladimir Kozhevnikov even claims that Orthodox monks who collect donations on Russian streets are actually Full Gospel believers in disguise.

Most significantly, however, the article maintains that "neo-Protestant sects" are a threat to national security. "Renowned for constant conflict with the authorities and violation of the law," it claims, they support the political opposition [an activity which the state media portrays as bordering upon criminal]: "It is unsurprising that Full Gospel prayer meetings are very similar to opposition demonstrations – they have the same intonation, the same hypocritical-demagogic phraseology, the same audience." In conclusion, states Kozhevnikov, "neo-Protestantism strives to alter public consciousness to the extent that it will be easier to break up the state if necessary. If one person believes one thing, a second something else, if there is no Orthodox unity, this task becomes easier. Neo-Protestantism (â€) threatens the very existence of the Belarusian nation, its psychological health, its security."

Two nights after this article was published, Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18, graffiti reading "No to totalitarian sects!" was daubed on the wall of New Life's building.

Arguing that New Life's building is legally a cowshed, Minsk officials have refused to grant the 1000-strong congregation permission to use it for services. The state authorities simultaneously refuse to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to that of a house of worship. Minsk's top religious affairs official - Alla Ryabitseva - has claimed to Forum 18 that this is impossible due to the city Development Plan (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516). However, an official in charge of executing the Development Plan recently told a Minsk court that it was technically possible to site a house of worship for New Life "anywhere in the city", but that this depended upon permission from the religious affairs department (see F18News 28 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=819).

New Life has been worshipping at its disused cowshed ever since being barred from renting a local house of culture in September

2004. As church administrator Vasili Yurevich told public prosecution officials in December 2004, the congregation was earlier refused requests to rent other public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477). The church's continued use of its building for services has resulted in multiple large fines (see most recently F18News 17 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832), in addition to the authorities' decision to confiscate the building.

Many other religious communities also face state pressure against their activities. These include other Protestants (see eg. F18News 31 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=863 and 28 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=847), Catholics (see eg. F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849), Orthodox Christians (see F18News 26 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=862), Jews (see F18News 13 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=798) and Hare Krishna devotees (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856). (END)

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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