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BELARUS: Renewed pressure on charismatics

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

Active Protestant churches in Belarus are facing increased pressure, Forum 18 News Service notes. In response to the indefinite adjournment of a court case to decide the fate of their church building, the congregation of New Life Church in the capital Minsk has opted for civil disobedience. They are refusing to let state inspectors with the power to impose fines onto church property. With fire, electricity and other inspectors repeatedly but unsuccessfully trying to gain access to the church, its pastor is now threatened with a fine. An assistant public prosecutor has warned that, if the obstruction continues, "we could be talking about another form of punishment." The impasse appears to be due to the authorities' disarray over which state body should resolve the issue. A senior religious affairs official told Forum 18 that the Minsk city authorities are primarily responsible for New Life's situation, but Minsk's chief religious affairs official told Forum 18 that "I'm not responsible to them for anything!" A similar case appears to be developing in Baranovichi, where New Generation Church was recently fined for alleged incorrect land use.

Recent months have seen a marked rise in pressure on active Protestant churches, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "The authorities are showing heightened interest in sources of funds and also targeting church leaders who are regarded as having great influence – they don't like such people," one Protestant source told Forum 18.

One prominent church leader, the pastor of the 1,000-strong charismatic New Life Church, faces prosecution due to his congregation's decision not to allow state representatives onto the church's premises in the capital, Minsk. The assistant public prosecutor of the city's Moscow District, Dmitri Zyryanov, said on 5 February that he will press charges against Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko for not allowing fire inspectors inside the church, New Life member and lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 following the meeting. The maximum punishment for obstructing state inspectors is a fine of 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,760 Norwegian Kroner, 220 Euros or 325 US Dollars) – almost the average monthly wage – under Article 23, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code. Should the church carry on not admitting state inspectors, said Lukanin, the assistant public prosecutor warned that "we could be talking about another form of punishment."

New Life's members voted in April 2007 to start a civil disobedience campaign after the indefinite adjournment of the court case to decide the fate of the church. They voted not to allow state representatives with the authority to issue fines onto their property. After this vote all was quiet until November, Lukanin told Forum 18, since which time fire, water, electricity, Emergencies Department and tax inspectors have repeatedly but unsuccessfully tried to gain access to the church. Pastor Goncharenko received an initial public prosecutor warning for refusing to admit Emergencies Department representatives on 29 January 2008.

Minsk officials argue that New Life's building is legally a barn or cowshed, and have refused both to grant the congregation permission to use it for worship services and to change its designation to that of a house of worship (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516). New Life's continued use of the property – purchased in 2002 – has resulted in multiple large fines (see most recently F18News 17 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832).

Minsk City Executive Committee ordered the sale of the church's building and the cancellation of its land rights in August 2005 (see F18News 1 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=640). When its protracted court challenge against this decision failed, the church went on a high-profile hunger strike in October 2006. Within just two weeks Pastor Goncharenko was invited to see a top-ranking Presidential Administration official, Oleg Proleskovsky, who hinted that a legal resolution was possible (see F18News 20 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858). Although the Higher Economic Court began to consider New Life's case afresh in December 2006, it was adjourned indefinitely on 22 March 2007 (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966).

The latest escalation in New Life's stand-off with the Minsk authorities comes amid disarray over which state body should resolve the issue. In response to an enquiry sent by Pastor Goncharenko to Proleskovsky at the Presidential Administration in summer 2007, the church received a letter from Minsk City Executive Committee announcing the resumption of the Higher Economic Court case in September 2007. Visiting the court on 3 September, however, New Life lawyer Sergei Lukanin was told that its secretariat had received no such instruction from the judge presiding over the case, Yekaterina Karatkevich.

Referred to the Higher Economic Court's chancellery on 6 February, Forum 18 was told that it is unclear when New Life's case will

be resumed, and that there is no time limit.

At a 19 September 2007 round table of Belarus' religious leaders, Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets reportedly said that Higher Economic Court Chairman Viktor Kamenkov believes the issue should be resolved outside the courts, and then told the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs to deal with it. On a 26 September visit to the church, Plenipotentiary Leonid Gulyako reportedly stated: "I consider it my professional duty to come and see what sort of a building this is, what condition it is in. I see that the building has been put in order and favourable conditions have been created for people to be in it" (see F18News 29 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1025).

However, at a 21 January 2008 meeting with Protestant leaders, Gulyako of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs reportedly said that, since they had initiated it, the Minsk authorities should find a resolution to New Life's predicament, and that he would not take part in it.

Contacting Vice-premier Kosinets regarding the 19 September round table, his assistant directed Forum 18 to Gulyako (see F18News 1 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1027). Told that he was busy on 6 February, Forum 18 was referred to Leonid Gulyako's assistant, Vladimir Lameko.

Asked who should deal with New Life's situation, Lameko replied that his department is waiting for a decision by the Higher Economic Court. Asked who was responsible for relations with the church in the meantime, he responded that, since New Life is located on the territory of Minsk city, the municipal authorities "need to find a consensus in the first instance." Agreeing that they had not done so, the issue had consequently gone to court "just like in any other country," Lameko maintained. He stopped short of saying that his own republic-level religious affairs body had nothing to do with New Life's situation, however. As things had "gone beyond the city level," he pointed out, Leonid Gulyako has met with representatives of the church.

"Ask them. What's bothering you about it?" Alla Ryabitseva, Minsk city's senior religious affairs official, told Forum 18 when asked who should deal with New Life on 6 February. "Nothing bothers me about it except one thing – they are occupying that building illegally." Was her department responsible for relations with the church, Forum 18 asked? "I'm not responsible to them for anything!" she retorted. Forum 18 suggested that Gulyako's State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs might in that case be responsible. "Why don't you ask them?" said Ryabitseva again, and slammed the phone down.

In what could turn into a similar case, the charismatic New Generation church in Baranovichi [Baranavichy] (Brest Region) was fined 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,760 Norwegian Kroner, 220 Euros or 325 US Dollars) – almost the average monthly wage - for incorrect land use on 30 January. Pastor Leonid Voronenko of New Generation told Forum 18 on 6 February that the church is still trying to negotiate with the authorities, and has not yet paid the fine.

Although the 150-strong church requested renewal of its land rental contract a month before its end-December 2007 expiry, the state has yet to respond, Voronenko explained. Legally it should have done so within one calendar month.

As the position of religious affairs specialist at Baranovichi's Ideological Department is currently vacant, its head is dealing with religious matters, Forum 18 was told on 6 February. Repeatedly maintaining that she was unaware of the recent fine, however, Tatyana Zhidko said she could not explain what was wrong with New Generation's activity. "All I can say is that our relations with them are conducted strictly within the framework of the law," she remarked.

Local judge Oksana Kusheva initially threw out the charges against New Generation, telling Baranovichi's land and construction department to take the case materials away for more thorough examination. The church had produced state responses to its requests for permission to rent a building elsewhere in the town which maintained that, as it had bought its own building, it should meet there (see F18News 11 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1070).

The authorities have already rebuked the church for not using its building – purchased in 1997 – according to its official designation of warehouse. "We have asked them several times for permission to change it to an administrative or religious building," Voronenko told Forum 18, "but they refuse."

In correspondence seen by Forum 18, successive chairmen of Baranovichi Municipal Executive Committee insist that conversion of the building is "inexpedient" and "without basis" (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

"It's very like our case," Lukanin of New Life Church and New Generation's lawyer remarked to Forum 18 on 5 February. "They started finding fault with the plot of land and went on to demand that we give up the church building."

The Belarusian state tends to regard Protestant communities particularly negatively. It views them both as ideologically and spiritually damaging (see 8 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=824) and as the major source of religious-political dissent (see 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880). Dissent, however, is not limited to Protestants, as Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants have joined together in a nationwide campaign gathering signatures to

call for a change to Belarus' restrictive Religion Law (see F18News 16 May 2007
>http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957).(END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at
<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

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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