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BELARUS: Foreign pastor banned from preaching, church warned it may be closed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Belarus has warned a church in the capital Minsk that it could be closed after a foreign pastor preached at a worship service, Forum 18 News Service has learned. Pastor Boris Grisenko, a Ukrainian, was also fined. Alla Ryabitseva, head of the city's Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, claimed to Forum 18 that "I have been to the United States. Visitors to the country can't just go and speak at a religious service without permission." District police chief Viktor Pravilo refused to say how he had found out that a foreigner was preaching in the New Testament Pentecostal Church, religious communities having long complained to Forum 18 of KGB secret police surveillance. Asked whether the police did not have more important matters to deal with than a foreigner preaching at a religious service, Pravilo put the phone down. Foreigners engaged in religious activity have long been a target of state hostility, along with their Belarusian co-religionists. Catholic priests and nuns have regularly been expelled, but the authorities today (15 July) announced that they had completed the draft text of a Concordat. It is unknown whether this will address violations of freedom of religion or belief.

Officials in Belarus' capital Minsk have warned a church in the city, the New Testament Pentecostal Church, that it could be closed down, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The warning by religious affairs officials was given after a visiting pastor from neighbouring Ukraine, Boris Grisenko, came to preach. Grisenko was fined for religious activity without state permission. Foreigners engaged in religious activity – however brief it is – have long been a target of state hostility, along with their Belarusian co-religionists.

Bishop Sergei Tsvor, deputy head of the Pentecostal Union to which the Minsk congregation belongs, condemned the authorities' latest attack on freedom of religion or belief. "I don't need permission from the authorities to speak at a service or a conference in Russia, Ukraine, Poland or Germany – I've done so many times," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 July. "But here we have a law that bans foreigners from such participation. I regret that the law exists – it is a violation of our rights."

Alla Ryabitseva, head of the Minsk city Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, defended the moves to punish the Minsk church, including the threat to ban it if it conducts the same "violation" again. "I have been to the United States. Visitors to the country can't just go and speak at a religious service without permission," she claimed to Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 July.

Strict control is imposed on all religious activity, as was seen in the recent case of a registered Pentecostal church fined after officials claimed it was carrying out activity "not according to its statute" (see F18News 16 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1327).

Minsk warning

The New Testament Church in Minsk's Zavodsky District received an official warning after Pastor Grisenko, who leads a Messianic Jewish Congregation in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, spoke at one of the Minsk church's services on the evening of 21 May. Grisenko, as a Ukrainian citizen, does not need a visa to visit Belarus. However, officials insisted in their written warning to the church that Grisenko did not have "the appropriate permission for the aim of engaging in religious activity".

Grisenko was summoned and accused of violating Article 23.55 Part 1 Point 1 of the Code of Administrative Violations for participating as a foreigner in religious activity without permission. He was fined 105,000 Belarusian Roubles (236 Norwegian Kroner, 26 Euros or 37 US Dollars).

"Pastor Grisenko was due to speak at a Messianic Jewish congregation that Saturday [23 May], but because he was banned from preaching was unable to do so," Bishop Tsvor of the Pentecostal Union told Forum 18.

The official warning, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy, was prepared by Ryabitseva of the Minsk city Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, and signed by the deputy head of Minsk City Executive Committee responsible for the Department, Mikhail Titenkov.

The official warning cited information from Zavodsky District police chief Viktor Pravilo that the church had violated the law by allowing a foreign citizen to preach without permission. The warning said this meant the church was violating its own statute, which notes that it abides by the law.

The City Executive Committee, which had registered the church, warned the New Testament church that "if the given violation is committed again within a year, the registering body would have the right to go to court with an application to liquidate the religious organisation. The registering body would also have the right to decide on the halting of the activity of the religious organisation until the court issues a decision."

Police chief Pravilo insisted that Grisenko needed a visa and needed to be registered, but refused to discuss the case. "I don't know who you are," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 15 July. Asked how the police had learnt that a foreign citizen was preaching in the church, he responded: "It's a secret." Asked whether the police did not have more important matters to deal with than a foreign citizen preaching during a religious service, Pravilo put the phone down.

Religious communities have often complained about police and KGB secret police surveillance of religious worship and activity. The KGB maintains very strict surveillance of religious communities, as in the case of a Catholic priest prosecuted for saying one mass outside his parish (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849).

Asked by Forum 18 whether the fine on the visiting pastor and the threat to liquidate the New Testament Church did not violate the rights of church members, Ryabitseva of the Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs responded: "All the reasons are given in the official warning. We as state officials merely carry out the law. They violated the law." Asked who might have suffered from a sermon by a foreign citizen in a religious community's service, she responded: "We don't evaluate who suffers from the law."

Tight restrictions on foreigners

Forum 18 knows of 31 foreign religious workers – Catholics, Protestants and Jews – banned from working with local religious communities since 2004. The most recent were two Danish citizens, Erling Laursen and Rolf Bergen, given deportation orders in February for taking part in worship services in Gomel's [Homyel] charismatic Living Faith Church (see F18News 11 February 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1253).

Catholic religious work permission problems

The Catholic Church in particular has faced difficulty getting permission for foreign Catholic priests and nuns to work in Belarus. They make up some two-thirds of the 31 foreign religious workers banned since 2004. Many have been summarily expelled or had their religious work permission renewals rejected in recent years. Priests and nuns engaged in tackling social issues, such as alcoholism, in a very public manner appear to be particular targets for expulsion.

Four Polish Catholic priests as well as three nuns had their permission to continue religious work in Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese and Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese revoked at the end of December 2008 (see F18News 26 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1244).

Parishioners in Borisov [Barysaw] of Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, one of the expelled priests who left the country in December 2008, have pressed officials for his return (see F18News 7 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1237). In a 6 April letter to parishioners seen by Forum 18, Gulyako's deputy Vladimir Lameko insisted that the "position" of the Office over Fr Grygorcewicz's expulsion had already been explained to them and that "changing our view is not possible".

Fr Grygorcewicz had helped organise a Christian music festival, arranged by Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, which was banned by the authorities 10 minutes before it started (see F18News 25 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1193).

In another new development, Belarus has completed the draft text of a Concordat with the Holy See. The state Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, announced this at a press conference in Minsk on 15 July. The Interfax and Itar-Tass news agencies reported him as saying that the draft text had been prepared by the Foreign Ministry and his Office.

The Apostolic Nunciature in Minsk declined to comment to Forum 18 on 15 July on Gulyako's remarks.

It remains unclear if a Concordat will halt Belarus's continuing violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief of Catholics and others in the country. The Vatican has not criticised these violations, apparently trusting in the possibility of a Concordat and even a papal visit to Belarus. On the contrary, the Holy See's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, conveyed the thanks of Pope Benedict XVI "for the religious liberty that Belarus enjoys" during a June 2008 visit to Minsk, also telling a press conference that the 2002 Law was "a good law reflecting the necessary protection and respect for the rights of the five main confessions traditional to Belarus." On 27 April 2009 Pope Benedict received President Aleksandr Lukashenko (see F18News 11 June 2009

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1311). (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1311.

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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