

1 June 2010

BELARUS: "I'm depoliticised"

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

The head of the Belarusian capital Minsk's City Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Committee has denied to Forum 18 News Service that his action against the New Life Full Gospel Church is politically motivated. "I'm depoliticised," Aleksandr Borovikov insisted of his attempt to prosecute the church for alleged oil pollution, "I'm not part of any campaign against the church." Church members think the massive, disputed fine imposed on the church for environmental damage is part of the long-running state campaign against them. While concerned that grass being grown for a children's playground at the church might also cause environmental damage, Borovikov seemed unfazed when Forum 18 raised concerns about accumulated rubbish - including rotting vehicles and old washing machines - dumped within 500 metres of the church. Meanwhile, Pastor Vladimir Kochegur of New Life's sister church in Novogrudok has insisted that the fine imposed on him for religious activity at home was unjustified. "They claim I held a worship service late at night on 16 March, but there was no such meeting," he told Forum 18. In Brest Region, police and ideology officials have similarly moved against a Baptist street library for operating without state permission.

The head of Minsk City Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Committee has denied to Forum 18 News Service that his attempt to prosecute the New Life Full Gospel Church over alleged environmental damage is politically motivated. "I'm depoliticised," Aleksandr Borovikov insisted from the Belarusian capital on 28 May. "I'm not part of any campaign against the church." Church members believe the massive fine imposed on it, for environmental damage, is another example of selective application of the law in the long-running state campaign against them.

On 6 May a commission led by Borovikov again inspected the church site, claiming that grass being grown for a children's playground harmed the environment, New Life reported. The commission also complained about the car park and the track that leads to the public road – both of which pre-exist the church.

Borovikov brushed off suggestions that the alleged oil pollution which led to the fine might have occurred before the church owned the land. "It's not my competency to examine where any pollution came from," he told Forum 18.

Borovikov also seemed unconcerned about complaints by church members that his Committee has done nothing about accumulated rubbish – including rotting vehicles and old washing machines – dumped within 500 metres of the church. "Maybe this territory is outside the city limits," he suggested to Forum 18.

Meanwhile, Judge Oleg Klyuiko of Minsk City Economic Court has ordered that the suit seeking 262,798,725 Belarusian Roubles (523,380 Norwegian Kroner, 63,736 Euros or 91,887 US Dollars) from New Life for the alleged oil pollution should be postponed, the church stated on 27 May. The church's lawyer, Sergei Lukanin, told Forum 18 that environmental inspectors admitted to him "with a smile" that they had not undertaken the inspection at their own initiative but were "sent" to do so (see F18News 6 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1393).

The latest ruling came after Belarus' Supreme Court decided to take up the church's complaint against the original 25 February district court ruling, which found the church in violation of environmental regulations. The district court had imposed a fine of 8,750,000 Belarusian Roubles (17,490 Norwegian Kroner, 2,200 Euros or 2,936 US Dollars). New Life had unsuccessfully tried to challenge this ruling in Minsk City Court (see F18News 9 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1430).

State television labels New Life "a sect"

Church members also object to an interview on ONT state television - shown on the primetime 24 May evening news - in which German Lutheran pastor Thomas Gandow appeared to describe New Life Church as a "sect".

Church lawyer Lukanin told Forum 18 that he had subsequently asked Gandow about this, and the German pastor had responded that he did not know New Life Church and had not described it as a "sect".

According to Lukanin, the journalist who interviewed Gandow, Konstantin Gluboky, told him of an "order from higher up" not to

include a response from the church in his report. Gluboky denied this to Forum 18 on 28 May, however. The journalist confirmed that he had spoken at length to Lukanin when he first visited the church on 24 May, but claimed that the church's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko had refused to give an interview, telling him he was "fed up" with journalists. "And the leadership believed if we opened up this volcano [ie the long-running conflict over the church], we would never put the lid on it," Gluboky told Forum 18.

ONT's deputy news editor Olga Goncharek told Forum 18 that she had not been on duty on the evening of 24 May. However, after reviewing the news item she admitted that it was wrong that no response had been included from the church: "Of course, it was not pleasant for them." Yet she insisted that the issue of "destructive religious sects" – which she repeatedly declined to identify – was important in Belarus: "Naturally, if religious communities have state registration they are not sects," she maintained.

While New Life's re-registration application under the 2002 Religion Law was not granted, its registration has not been annulled. The Full Gospel Association and most of its affiliate communities were re-registered (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454).

State and Russian Orthodox officials on "sects" and "spiritual security"

Pastor Gandow was visiting Belarus for the first time, partly to speak at a 27 May conference held under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences and the Russian Orthodox Church at Zhirovitsy near Minsk, also attended by the State Plenipotentiary for Religious Affairs Leonid Gulyako. Conference speakers gave lectures on a variety of topics, including "The sphere of religious influence in the context of national security" and "The problem of spiritual security in post-Soviet society" (http://www.philosophy.by/obj/zhirovichi2010_schedule.pdf).

Natalya Vasilevich, a Minsk-based commentator on church affairs and editor of the Tsarkva website <http://churchby.info>, told Forum 18 of her concern about the promotion of such ideas. "There's a very simple logic – we have our own culture and way of life, and we have enemies," she told Forum 18 on 28 May. "Different religious movements exist that don't work for us." She said advocates of such ideas use "pseudo-scientific papers" to legitimise their policy in the religious sphere.

Vasilevich lamented state television's frequent references to "sects", which she said creates an atmosphere of suspicion around some religious communities. While at the SS Cyril and Methodius Lectures organised by the Russian Orthodox Church in late May, she said several other attendees interviewed by state television had complained to her that it had asked them about "sects" in Belarus and how they should be combated.

Fined for service that never was?

Meanwhile, Vladimir Kochegur, pastor of the registered New Generation Full Gospel Church in Novogrudok, in Grodno [Hrodna] Region, has insisted that the fine imposed on him for allegedly making a lot of noise late at night while holding a religious meeting in his private flat was unjustified. "They claim I held a worship service late at night on 16 March, but there was no such meeting," he told Forum 18 from Novogrudok on 27 May. "This case was fabricated under the direction of the local administration and the KGB secret police." He denied that his family or visitors made any excessive noise that disturbed neighbours in their block of flats.

Judge Valery Romanovsky of Novogrudok District Court ruled on 14 May that Pastor Kochegur had violated Article 25 of the Religion Law, which requires permission for religious events away from a registered religious venue, and Article 5 of the Law on Mass Events, which similarly requires such permission. He thus punished Kochegur under Article 23.34, Part 2 of the Administrative Violations Code ("violating regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass events"), according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. He was fined 20 times the base unit, or 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,528 Norwegian Kroner, 192 Euros, or 234 US Dollars).

The verdict cites a fellow-resident of the block, Zinaida Shlyakhtyuk, as complaining at the trial that "sounds of religious songs and sermons" emanated from Kochegur's flat "which disturbed her from resting". It said she had called in the District Police, which had presented the case to court. Another resident said she had heard from Shlyakhtyuk that religious meetings were taking place there and this disturbed her.

German Oleinikov, head of the District Police who presented the case to court, declined absolutely to discuss the matter. "I can't say more than is in the verdict," he told Forum 18 from Novogrudok on 25 May. He declined to say why, even had Kochegur been holding religious meetings in his flat, there was anything wrong with it. He also declined to say whether the same measures would have been taken against a group of friends gathering in a flat to play cards or watch a football match on television.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Shlyakhtyuk, who is director of the town's State Commercial and Economic College, and who Kochegur claimed had been told about the religious meetings by the town Executive Committee. The woman who answered the phone on 28 May said Shlyakhtyuk was away on holiday. However, she appeared familiar with the case. "She lives on the fourth floor and the pastor on the fifth," she told Forum 18. "But it's an issue between them."

Both Ivan Grin, chief specialist at the town Executive Committee's Ideology Department, and Department head Aleksandr Gundar

refused to tell Forum 18 on 28 May whether they have any complaints against Pastor Kochegur or his church. But they insisted they did not have any involvement in the court case and described it as a private dispute between two people.

"I can't speak for other agencies, but as far as I know the Executive Committee took no measures," Grin told Forum 18. Gundar insisted that all cases are dealt with under the law. Both said Shlyakhtyuk is not a state official and that they have no connection with her.

Pastor Kochegur told Forum 18 he lodged an appeal to Grodno Regional Court on 24 May and that the appeal hearing is set for 10 June.

In the latest such move to prosecute unapproved religious activity, Baptists Andrei Plaksin, Sergei Shubich and Nina Vasyuk were operating a Christian street library in Drogichin [Dragichyn] (Brest Region) on 23 May when a local police officer and two ideology officials approached, the Baptist Council of Churches reported on 29 May. One ideology official filmed the library with his mobile telephone before Andrei Plaksin was arrested and detained at a local police station, where a protocol was drawn up accusing him of violating Article 23.34, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code ("violating regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass events"). When Sergei Shubich went to the police station to enquire about Plaksin some time later, a similar protocol was drawn up against him.

Fine for illegal meeting overturned

Elsewhere Vasili Poluyanov, Jehovah's Witness leader in the town of Bobruisk in Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region, has had a fine for leading a religious meeting overturned. On 6 May Judge Nikolai Gladky of Mogilev Regional Court upheld Poluyanov's appeal against the fine, arguing that the original investigation which claimed to prove his guilt was "incomplete and unobjective", according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. His fine of 175,000 Belarusian Roubles (349 Norwegian Kroner, 44 Euros or 59 US Dollars) was annulled. The judge ruled that the case is to be abandoned as three months has already elapsed since the alleged offence.

Trouble for Poluyanov began on 31 January, when a commission of police and local Ideology Department officials raided a private home in Bobruisk at the request of a local resident to verify whether a Jehovah's Witness conference then underway was legal. The officials insisted that as the meeting was taking place away from the registered legal address of the Bobruisk Jehovah's Witness community, it was illegal.

On 26 March Bobruisk Court found Poluyanov guilty of violating Article 9.9, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code ("activity by a religious organisation not in accordance with its [registered] statutes") and handed down the fine (see F18News 9 April 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1430). (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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY