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BELARUS: Why can't derelict church be relocated for worship?

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Officials in the Belarusian capital have refused to allow a derelict historic Pomore Old Believer church to be transferred from a remote northern village where no local Old Believers remain to serve the community in Minsk. Community leader Aleksandr Belov told Forum 18 News Service the relocation would give the Minsk community an affordable yet dignified place of worship, and at the same time preserve a part of their treasured heritage. He says the church is significant for them because "this is the church where our community has prayed". Despite repeated calls, Forum 18 could not reach officials of the city Architecture Department, or the senior city religious affairs official. However, in a letter seen by Forum 18, the Architecture Department's First Deputy Head, Aleksei Martynov, told the community that given that the church has to suit its environment, "we consider it inexpedient to transfer the wooden church to the urban environment of a big city like Minsk".

For six years the community of Pomore Old Believers in Belarus has been struggling to relocate from a small village on the border with Lithuania a historic wooden church which has fallen into disrepair as no local Old Believer community remains. The community wants to move it to the capital Minsk, where the community has no proper church and meets in a converted house. Yet the city authorities will not allow it. "I guess this is part of the state policy concerning our religious affiliation and because this is the capital," the community's leader Aleksandr Belov explained to Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 9 February. He believes the relocation would give the community an affordable yet dignified place of worship in the capital, and at the same time preserve a part of their treasured heritage. "Our historic church has significance for us because this is the church where our community has prayed." The Minsk community says it would struggle to afford to build a new church.

The Minsk congregation of Pomore Old Believers has had state registration since 2003. The private house where it meets for worship holds about 50 people in two large rooms, while many more than that turn up on major festivals. The nearest proper church is 75 kms (45 miles) away in the town of Borisov [Barysaw]. The Pomore Old Believers have about 20 churches in Belarus and the others face no problems, Belov noted.

Religious communities which do not have a building which they have long used for worship often face bureaucratic hurdles to finding a building to buy or rent, or land to build a new place of worship. In one high-profile case, the New Life Pentecostal church in Minsk has been refused permission to change the designated use of the former cowshed they bought in 2002 and renovated as a church. Officials have repeatedly tried to seize the building and imposed fines for alleged environmental damage which church members refuse to pay (see F18News 10 November 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1509).

Why can't community move historic church?

The Old Believers could find the money to move their historic church from Leshchinovo in Ostrovets District of Grodno [Hrodna] Region to Minsk. The wooden church was erected in the 18th century and by 1910, after numerous reconstructions, gained its present appearance. The church has been vacant for 20 years, ever since the borders with Lithuania – where almost the entire local Old Believer community lives - became much tighter. The community is concerned that its historic heritage is deteriorating.

Although only a few kilometres (miles) away from the church on the other side of the border, the Lithuanian Old Believers cannot cross the border directly. They have to travel 130 kms (80 miles) via the nearest border crossing-point. They have to obtain a visa, which is not easy, and wait at customs for up to three hours. Although a simplified procedure is provided for them once a year on the feast of Trinity, no one enjoys it as it requires confirmation of having relations in Belarus. This is impossible, as the people are coming to commemorate their dead relatives. According to Belov, the border crossing arrangements are not targeted at them because of their belief - these are the usual procedures for European Union citizens visiting Belarus.

The Culture Department of Ostrovets District Executive Committee shares the community's concern. Yelena Kardis, its specialist in historical and cultural preservation, confirmed the poor condition of the church. According to the 2006 law on the preservation of historic and cultural valuables, the owner (the Old Believer community) has the right to claim funds from the budget to maintain the building. Kardis told Forum 18 on 18 January that the community could possibly try to claim the funds, but since the church was going to be moved the decision rests with the Minsk City Architecture Department. She added that if the owners of the church fail to maintain it in proper condition, they could be liable to a considerable fine, though she specified no amount.

Why aren't wooden churches allowed in a city?

The decision of the Minsk City Architecture Department is contradictory. While considering the possibility to give land for the Old Believers to build a new church in Minsk, it refused permission to transfer the old church there. Given that the church has to suit its environment, "we consider it inexpedient to transfer the wooden church to the urban environment of a big city like Minsk," according to a 12 October 2010 letter signed by the Architecture Department's First Deputy Head, Aleksei Martynov, seen by Forum 18.

Repeatedly between 17 January to 4 February, Forum 18 tried to put the question of moving the church to a better location to a specialist in historic building development at Minsk City Architecture Department, Aleksandr Andronchik, but he was not available for comment. Attempts during the same period to contact the Head of Minsk City's Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Alla Ryabitseva, were equally unsuccessful. She did not answer her phone even though her secretary confirmed that she was in the office.

According to Belov, who met Ryabitseva on 5 January, "her attitude was not hostile but there is no positive decision either". In response to the Old Believers' application, Minskgrado Development Agency sent proposals for the location of a possible new church to the Minsk Architecture Department months ago, but there was no reaction. "Though officials keep suspending their decision, we'll get our own way with God's help. Sooner or later they will get tired of dragging their feet," Belov believes. Meanwhile, he tries to raise funds for the new church and keeps paying visits to officials and bombarding them with requests.

Is a church a museum exhibit?

Instead, the Minsk City Architecture Department offered the Old Believers the opportunity to move their historic church to the museum of folk architecture in the village of Stochitsy in Minsk Region at the community's expense. The church would be available for worship, but only within the working hours of the museum, which are from 10 am to 4 pm every day except Mondays. Since services are conducted at 7 am, with some night services on major religious holidays, community members would be denied access to the church to hold such services outside normal museum hours. The community would still be responsible for maintaining the building. These conditions are unacceptable for the community.

What about building a new church?

Despite their lack of funds, the Old Believers have also enquired about permission to build a new church. They first applied for permission in 2008 and submitted a construction plan, but their request was ignored, Belov told Forum 18.

However, their second application in 2010 finally elicited a response from the Executive Committee's Architecture Department. "More than once, Minsk City Executive Committee has considered the possibility of giving land to the congregation of Old Believers for construction of a new building," declares the 12 October 2010 letter signed by Martynov of the Architecture Department.

However, Belov remains sceptical about such promises. "These are only words. Giving a plot of land doesn't mean permission to build a church." According to the December 2007 Presidential Decree on the Seizure and Allocation of Land, which came into force in 2008, once a plot of land is allocated, a religious community needs to submit a guarantee that it has enough funds to complete construction work. Belov complains that in their case they are asked to prove they have the entire money first.

The current law makes the project unachievable since the community does not have enough money. According to Belov, 15 per cent of the predetermined value is to be paid to get permission to start construction work. "This is huge money."

Yet Belov is not giving up. "Besides the financial guarantee there are so many documents to be prepared that it will take us a long time, but we will try to do our best." The new church will be small and made of brick to be in line with Minsk's architecture. Officials give no recommendations on how the church should look, Belov noted.

Stolen icons not returned

Another issue concerning all Old Believer churches in Belarus is the restitution of stolen valuables. Belarus has no such law. "Any normal person would want it," Belov remarks bitterly. He suspects that some recovered Old Believer icons are in state hands. He points out that it is easy to recognise Old Believer icons by their distinctive traditional style of painting and decorations.

Stolen icons are rarely returned to Old Believers even if they are recovered. Only once were such icons returned to them, when thieves in Bobruisk were detained and the icons were given back to the church. Most times they are not found. More often they are confiscated by the State Customs Committee and given to museums or Moscow Patriarchate churches through the Expert Commission for Distributing Historic and Cultural Valuables working under the Minsk Department of Culture.

Deputy Head of the Expert Commission, Aleksandr Lenkov, confirmed to Forum 18 on 1 February that the Commission handles

items confiscated by the customs at the border. He said his Commission's experts assess the condition and value of the items first and then the Commission contacts museums in Belarus offering them the valuables. Asked about returning the valuables to the churches where they historically belong, the official said that he had not witnessed any case like this. "Ancient cultural valuables require special temperature and humidity conditions which the churches cannot provide," he insisted to Forum 18. "We don't want to lose them." Lenkov pointed out that to his knowledge the Commission has not been working for a year. He suggests that nothing remains to distribute.

The Customs Committee's Department of Contraband Control refused to give Forum 18 any information by telephone on 31 January.

The Head of the Old Belarusian Arts Department in the National Museum, Yelena Karpenko, says her museum has about 100 icons in store waiting for the exhibition of Belorussian icons planned for 2013-4. Karpenko used to be a member of the Expert Commission. "Last time I was invited to the meeting of the Commission was four years ago," she complained to Forum 18 from Minsk on 28 January. "For me it's confusing why the Commission is not functioning now and what is happening with the confiscated valuables."

According to Belov, all the ancient icons in the church are registered in the museum. He agrees that the icons are a national legacy but would like to see them returned to the community. "Their intended purpose is to be in the church and to be prayed to," he told Forum 18. (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>.

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