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BELARUS: Officials bar priest's return, church's registration

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

Senior state religious affairs official Leonid Gulyako without explanation rejected pleas from parishioners and the bishop for Polish Catholic priest Pawel Knurek to be allowed to return to work in Belarus. Also, a Minsk Pentecostal Church has been denied registration for the sixth time.

Belarus' senior state religious affairs official has rejected all appeals by the Catholic cathedral parish in Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] and the local bishop to allow their Polish Catholic priest to return to Belarus to resume his ministry there. Despite a petition from local Catholics with 616 signatures, submitted on 4 February, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako again rejected the calls to allow Fr Pawel Knurek to return to serve his parish.

In November 2018 Plenipotentiary Gulyako had refused the application from Bishop Oleg Butkevich for Fr Knurek to continue serving the Catholic community of the Merciful Jesus cathedral parish in Vitebsk. The priest had to leave Belarus after 15 years' ministry there (see below).

Plenipotentiary Gulyako followed his usual pattern when rejecting applications from local religious communities for invited foreign citizens to be allowed to conduct religious work in the country: he gave no reason for his rejection. Such decisions are entirely within Gulyako's power and are difficult to challenge (see below).

The Plenipotentiary's Office refused to discuss the rejection – or anything else – with Forum 18 (see below).

In January, Plenipotentiary Gulyako rejected the application by Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk for another Polish Catholic priest, Fr Sobieslaw Tomala, to continue to serve in his parish in Soligorsk in Minsk Region, where he had worked for 20 years. Gulyako changed his mind and allowed Fr Tomala to remain for a further six months after the Catholic community and others protested (see below).

"The authorities' decisions tie the hands of the Church," Vitebsk Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok told Forum 18. "Such pinpricks aimed at Catholic priests have a serious impact on the Church. How can a priest work if he is not sure about the future?" (see below).

Officials have also rejected the sixth registration application from the Pentecostal Your Will Be Done Church in Minsk since 2017. The latest rejection came after an official of the Administration's Ideology, Culture and Youth Department had called a potential landlord to warn it not to rent to the Church. Pastor Vyacheslav Novakovsky insisted that the Church will never give up attempts to register. "After each rejection we'll send a new application until our Church is registered," he told Forum 18 (see below).

An official from the Administration refused to tell Forum 18 if such a call had or had not been made, describing the question as "slanderous" (see below).

Meanwhile, the Baptist Union has been forced to cancel a planned festival it wished to hold in a Minsk stadium in May after officials failed to respond to its request for permission (see below).

Plenipotentiary Gulyako also rejected the Baptist Union's application for American preacher Franklin Graham to be allowed to attend and preach at the festival and at Minsk churches. Again, he gave no reasons for his rejection (see below).

Plenipotentiary's unchallenged power

The state maintains strict controls over foreign clergy. Under a January 2008 Council of Ministers Decree, amended in July 2010, stating the procedure for inviting foreigners for religious purposes (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997), a registered religious organisation should send an application for such permission a month in advance to the office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. This senior religious affairs official has sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by a foreign citizen is "necessary". He may refuse a foreign religious worker's permission for such work without

giving any reason. Only belief communities that have state permission to exist can issue invitations to foreigners to work with them.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako takes all decisions as to whether to grant or withhold permission for foreign citizens personally, officials told Forum 18 in 2018 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387). Such decisions are communicated directly to the religious leader who has applied to invite the foreigners.

A religious leader unhappy with such a denial could challenge the decision – like any other official decision – by lodging a case within a month in the courts (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387). Forum 18 is not aware of any such challenges in recent years.

If Plenipotentiary Gulyako grants such permission to conduct religious work, he also specifies the time for which such permission is valid (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387). The maximum time period is one year, but can often be as short as three months. This means that religious leaders seeking to renew such permission for foreign citizens have to lodge paperwork frequently, with no guarantee that Gulyako will approve their application, even if an individual has served in Belarus for many years.

If Gulyako grants such permission to a foreign citizen, the Regional Executive Committee's Ideology, Culture and Youth Department will then issue a certificate. This specifies in which single religious community the individual can work, and the exact dates for which permission is given (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387) (usually three months, six months or one year).

Orthodox priests also denied permission

Including Fr Knurek, five priests – two Orthodox priests from Russia and three Catholic priests from Poland – are known to have been denied permission to conduct religious work in Belarus in 2018.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako also denied state permission to Indian Catholic priest Fr James Manjackal for a short-term religious visit in August 2018. Grodno Diocese had invited him to conduct spiritual exercises in the village of Ross. In 2016 Gulyako similarly rejected an application for Fr Manjackal to visit Ross to lead spiritual exercises (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2194).

At least one Orthodox priest and at least four Catholic priests were denied state permissions to work as priests in Belarus in 2017, and in spring 2018 Plenipotentiary Gulyako also rejected two Orthodox priests from Russia invited by Archbishop Dimitry (Drozdov) of Vitebsk (http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387).

However, the deputy spokesperson for the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Archpriest Yevgeny Gromyko, could not recall any recent cases when their foreign priests were denied permission to conduct religious work. "As you know our Metropolitan Pavel is a Russian citizen and the foreign priests we invite are only Russian," he told Forum 18 on 20 February 2019. "Usually they don't have difficulty getting permission because they are foreign."

Official ends Catholic priest's 15 years' ministry in Belarus

Polish Catholic priest Fr Pawel Knurek had served in parishes in Belarus for 15 years at the invitation of local Catholic bishops. He had most recently served at the cathedral parish of the Merciful Jesus in the north-eastern city of Vitebsk. The church is the cathedral for Vitebsk Diocese.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako refused Bishop Oleg Butkevich's request to extend Fr Knurek's permission to continue religious service in November 2018 and the priest had to leave Belarus.

Bishop Butkevich continued to press Plenipotentiary Gulyako to change his mind and allow Fr Knurek to return to serve in Belarus. However, on 13 January 2019 Bishop Butkevich received a further rejection from the Plenipotentiary's Office.

Local Catholics launched an online petition to Plenipotentiary Gulyako on 20 January, asking him to explain the reasons of the denial and to grant permission to Fr Knurek to return to his congregation.

"It is impossible to say how upset we are," the Catholics stated in the petition. "Fr Pawel Knurek is our spiritual Father and what children should feel when they are parted from their Father is known to everybody. Despair, confusion and helplessness." The petition was submitted to Plenipotentiary Gulyako on 4 February, and gained 616 signatures - 300 of them on the first day the petition was open for signatures.

In his letter of 4 February, seen by Forum 18, Gulyako confirmed his previous decision without any explanation: "Based on the Law, the Plenipotentiary has the right to give no reasons of the denial to this priest." The Church received Gulyako's response on 8 February.

"Local Catholics were offended by the officials' approach to their needs, which they absolutely ignore," Vitebsk Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok told Forum 18 on 14 February. He thinks that the authorities create an illusion of pretending to stand for the rights of the Church.

Fr Barok stated that the Diocese is finding it hard to replace Fr Knurek as, apart from saying Mass, he also visited hospitals and educational institutions. In 2014, Fr Knurek was appointed exorcist of Vitebsk Diocese. "He worked hard, and his work deserves respect," Fr Barok told Forum 18.

Fr Barok said the cathedral parish is large and needs at least two priests: "There is one priest left and the Bishop himself has to say Mass, replacing Fr Knurek."

In recent years Plenipotentiary Gulyako has repeatedly accused foreign Catholic priests of violating the law, including allegedly by speeding, involvement in political activity, and poor command of the Belarusian language (http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387).

In their petition, the Vitebsk parishioners highlighted that Fr Knurek spoke excellent Belarusian, knew and understood Belarusian culture and took their problems seriously.

Asked whether Fr Knurek violated any laws, Fr Barok responded: "It is possible to find faults with anybody, but if there are any, let's make them public and take steps. If the authorities refuse to make them public, then they have nothing to say about it."

Forum 18 called the Plenipotentiary's Office on 14 February, but the official - who did not to give his name - refused to comment. Fr Barok assured Forum 18 that the Catholics intend to appeal to the Presidential Administration.

Earlier Polish Catholic priest rejection overturned..

At the beginning of 2019, Plenipotentiary Gulyako banned another Polish Catholic priest, Fr Sobieslaw Tomala, from continuing to serve in St Francis Church in Soligorsk in Minsk Diocese beyond 31 January.

After more than 300 people signed a petition calling for Fr Tomala to be allowed to remain, Plenipotentiary Gulyako changed his decision and extended the permission for six months, Catholic spokesperson Fr Yuri Sanko told Nasha Niva newspaper on 23 January.

Fr Tomala, a Franciscan, has served in the parish for 20 years and helped build the parish church.

..but application for Russian Catholic priest turned down again

Meanwhile, the status of a Catholic priest from Russia, Fr Klemens Werth, has not changed. Since 2016 he has been waiting for permission to be able to conduct religious work while building a church for the parish of St Vladislav in one of the outer districts of Vitebsk, where he is supposed to be the senior priest (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2237).

He currently has permission only to build a church. "I am supposed to serve in this church, but so far I cannot work in it as a priest," he told Forum 18 on 25 April 2018 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2387).

Fr Barok told Forum 18 that Bishop Butkevich's application for state permission for Fr Werth to work as a priest was again declined. Fr Barok considers that with the state-recognised status of priest, Fr Werth would have made more progress on the construction of St Vladislav's Church in Bilevo.

"The authorities' decisions tie the hands of the Church," Fr Barok observed. "Such pinpricks aimed at Catholic priests have a serious impact on the Church. How can a priest work if he is not sure about the future?"

Fr Barok added that there is a shortage of priests in Vitebsk Diocese. Though the number of local priests is increasing, there are still 40 foreign priests working in the diocese. However, the authorities have not approved any new foreign priests since 2016.

Pentecostal Church's sixth registration denial

Officials have rejected for the sixth time a registration application from the Pentecostal Your Will Be Done Church in the capital Minsk, led by Pastor Vyacheslav Novakovsky. Officials of Minsk's Frunze District Administration returned his 28 January application after an official of the Administration's Ideology, Culture and Youth Department had called a potential landlord to warn it not to rent to the Church, Pastor Novakovsky told Forum 18 on 28 February. This pressure on a landlord also happened during the Church's second application 2018, when officials also claimed as a reason for rejecting the application that the Church's beliefs are "previously unknown in Belarus" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2237).

The Your Will Be Done Church, previously a member congregation of the Pentecostal Union, has been trying to get the compulsory state registration since 2017, but they are facing resistance from the authorities (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2436), who find various reasons for rejection. The community do not meet for worship for fear of punishment.

Many other religious communities are denied state permission to exist, and in October 2018 the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern "about undue restrictions on the exercise of the freedom of religion, such as the mandatory registration of religious communities, the alleged repeated denial of registration to some religious communities and the permission required by foreign citizens to participate in religious activities".

In its Concluding Observations, adopted on 25 October (CCPR/C/BLR/CO/5), the Human Rights Committee called for "repealing the requirement of mandatory State registration of religious communities" and an end to other restrictions on the exercise of human rights including freedom of religion and belief (<http://undocs.org/CCPR/C/BLR/CO/5>).

International human rights law does not allow states to insist upon state permission for people to exercise human rights, for example by meeting together for worship or founding and running a belief community (see the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities ()).

Yelena Leleko, deputy head of the Ideology, Culture and Youth Department, refused absolutely to say whether her Department had or had not called the potential landlord. "Do you have evidence or are you spreading slander?" she asked Forum 18 on 6 March 2019. "There was an official application and an official response. Don't call again to ask such slanderous questions."

The 11 January rejection letter to the fifth application, signed by Vitaly Brel, deputy head of Minsk's Moscow District Administration, says it was rejected because the landlord revoked the guarantee letter which allows the church to use the legal address for registration.

Novakovsky insisted to Forum 18 that the landlord there was intimidated after the visit of an Executive Committee Ideology Department official. He accused such officials of abusing their power and exceeding their authority.

Brel's telephone at Minsk's Moscow District Administration went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 6 March.

Pastor Novakovsky insisted that the Church will never give up attempts to register. "After each rejection we'll send a new application until our Church is registered," he told Forum 18.

Baptist conference cancelled, visiting American preacher rejected

The Baptist Union announced on its website on 12 January that the authorities had not yet approved its application to stage an International Festival of Hope on 4-5 May. It called a day of prayer and fasting for 20 January. In a further announcement on 18 February, the Baptist Union said it was "obliged to halt preparations" for the event, but would resume them if officials changed their mind and granted permission.

"The Presidential Administration should have given us an answer by 12 February, otherwise not enough time was left for preparations," the Bishop of the Baptist Union for Minsk Region, Leonid Mikhovich, told Forum 18 on 24 February. He insisted that the Baptists will not abandon the idea of holding the Festival. He pointed out that they had not faced problems with mass events before, though the number of participants did not exceed 700 people.

Bishop Mikhovich said that the Baptist Union had planned to hold the event together with the US-based Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the Pentecostals, inviting about 10,000 participants.

"The first letter was sent to the President on 10 May 2018 and until now we have had no clear official response, despite our numerous appeals to the Sports Committee, Minsk Executive Committee and the Plenipotentiary's Office," Mikhovich complained.

The Baptist Union applied for permission to hold the event in one of the largest Minsk stadiums, Chizhovka Arena, which can host 10,000 people. However, the Sports Committee rejected the application, referring to preparations for European games scheduled for 21-30 June. The Baptists were instead offered a community centre which can host only 700 people. "Most of the time we received answers about nothing," the Bishop told Forum 18.

Bishop Mikhovich said the letter from Plenipotentiary Gulyako referred to the Orthodox Church which is against this event.

However, asked why no decision was given to the Baptist Union, a Plenipotentiary Office's official - who did not give his name - absolutely refused to comment. "We have no information about the Festival," he told Forum 18 on 24 February before putting the phone down.

In his letter of 20 December 2018 to the Baptist Union, seen by Forum 18, Plenipotentiary Gulyako also denied permission to conduct religious work to American citizen Franklin Graham (a son of the late Billy Graham), one of the planned speakers at the festival. The Baptist Union had also asked for permission for Graham to conduct religious work at churches in Minsk. Again Gulyako gave no reason for his rejection. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus
(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>).

For more background, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351).

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