FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

10 May 2022

BELARUS: First-ever Old Believer Church in Minsk "inexpedient"

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

After struggling since 1998 for a church, Minsk's Pomore Old Believers were in March 2022 denied building permission. Minsk District Executive Committee Head Vladimir Yurgevich claimed it was "inexpedient", and that completed building plans were not lodged by an August 2021 deadline. The community insists no such deadline was mentioned during meetings with officials in 2021 and 2022. They think officials consulted the Belarusian Orthodox Church before rejecting the plans. The regime often creates property problems for religious communities it dislikes.

After struggling since 1998 for a church building in the capital Minsk, the Pomore Old Believers were in March 2022 denied permission to build a church. Minsk District Executive Committee Chair Vladimir Yurgevich described the allocation of a plot of land to the Old Believers as "inexpedient" and said the community had failed to lodge completed building plans by an August 2021 deadline. The community insisted to Forum 18 that this was not mentioned in any meeting with officials in late 2021 and early 2022. They think that officials consulted the Belarusian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate before rejecting the plans.

Minsk Region Executive Committee issued the final rejection on 22 March, citing Yurgevich's rejection of 17 March (see below).

In 2012 the community had been assigned a land plot to build a church and bell tower in the village of Bolshoy Trostenets, on the south-eastern outskirts of Minsk. The village is in Minsk District of Minsk Region (see below).

After many struggles, in August 2021 a commission finally approved building the church and bell tower on the land allocated to the Minsk Pomore Old Believers by the local authorities. There then followed a series of back and forth exchanges between Minsk District Executive Committee Head Vladimir Yurgevich, Minsk Region Executive Committee Head Aleksandr Turchin, and the Old Believers (see below).

Yurgevich and Turchin broke the legal deadline for giving approval, and also demanded financial guarantees. The community gave these, but officials then claimed they were inadequate (see below).

The March rejection came despite support for building the church from the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak. He gave his support at an 11 February 2022 meeting with the Old Believer community, and followed this up with a letter to Minsk Region Executive Committee Head Turchin (see below).

According to an appeal published on the ruvera.ru Old Believer website, officials handed over the documents for final approval to the head of the Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Church in Belarus, Metropolitan Veniamin (Tupeko) (see below).

"There was just one signature left when we found out that it is the Orthodox Church which gives the last word," Deputy Head of the Council of Pomore Old Believers in neighbouring Russia, Aleksey Bezgodov, told Forum 18 on 21 April. He thinks that the signature was denied because Metropolitan Veniamin wants the community to join the Orthodox Church, as happened in 2002 with another Old Believer community in Minsk (see below).

The regime has in the past given the Belarusian Orthodox Church unwritten but real veto powers over a related religious group. Although based on Russian Orthodoxy, the Pomore Old Believers are independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, of which the Belarusian Orthodox Church is a part (see below).

Senior officials of Minsk Region Executive Committee and Minsk District Executive Committee refused to say why they denied the Old Believers permission to build the church, or whether the plans had been submitted to Metropolitan Veniamin. Lower level officials confirmed that the plans had been approved at a lower level and denied that the Belarusian Orthodox Church was blocking the Old Believers' church building (see below).

The Old Believer community in Minsk has to meet for worship in a converted house, or travel some distance to the nearest proper church (see below).

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2022

"For centuries the Old Believers were persecuted by the authorities and the Orthodox Church, and sacrificed their lives," Bezgodov commented. "Now it is insulting to ask the Orthodox Metropolitan for approval for building our church."

The Old Believers are a church based on Russian Orthodoxy which refused to accept the liturgical and governance reforms imposed upon the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century. Many Old Believer churches – including Pomore Old Believers – reject a priesthood and are led by lay people. They are independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, which the Belarusian Orthodox Church is part of.

Other religious communities have faced difficulties building or retaining places of worship. Minsk's New Life Full Gospel Church continues to meet in the car park outside its place of worship from which officials evicted it in February 2021 after repeatedly since 2002 using property problems to obstruct New Life's meetings for worship. The Church holds Sunday worship meetings outside – whether in snow, rain or sun – and livestreams them on the internet. Despite earlier threats, police have not intervened to stop or obstruct these outdoor meetings (see below).

In February, the Humanitarian Activity Department of the Presidential Administration did not allow a Catholic parish of Minsk Diocese to use funds sent by sponsors abroad to restore its historical church, which had been used as a children's music school in the Soviet period. Such permission is needed before a recipient can use money or humanitarian aid sent from abroad (see below).

Asked why his Department had rejected such donated funds, the Head of the Humanitarian Activity Department Igor Kudrevich claimed that such denials are extremely rare. Referring to a 2020 Decree on Foreign Humanitarian Aid, he explained that donations are prohibited if they are intended to support terrorist activities, political parties, referendums, elections, demonstrations, protests or propaganda. "Building churches is a good cause, we do not mind it," he claimed to Forum 18 (see below).

In January, the Humanitarian Activity Department refused to allow a Protestant Church in Vitebsk Region to get a shipment of humanitarian aid (including wheelchairs, clothes, footwear and furniture) sent from Europe. "If they only told us what is wrong, we would know what to do," a church member told Forum 18 (see below).

All the people associated with foreign aid asked Forum 18 not to identify them, for fear of state reprisals for publicly discussing the issue (see below).

Minsk Old Believer community: 1998 registration, yet still no church building allowed

The Old Believers in Minsk registered their community's statute in June 1998. Minsk City Executive Committee officially registered the community in 2002.

There has never been an Old Believer church building in Minsk, even though the community has expanded rapidly since 2002. It has to meet in a converted house or go to the nearest Old Believer churches in the town of Borisov [Barysaw], 75 kms (45 miles) away, or in Vilnius in neighbouring Lithuania.

Part of the Minsk Old Believer community, led by Vyacheslav Klementyev, joined the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in 2002. This meant that those who remained had to in February 2003 register a new, independent Pomore Old Believer community named after the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In 2005 the Pomore Old Believers began attempts to relocate to Minsk a historic wooden church from the small village of Leshchinovo in Ostrovets District of Grodno Region on the border with Lithuania. The church had fallen into disrepair as no local Old Believer community remains. However, in 2010 the city authorities refused permission with the excuse (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1540) that "we consider it inexpedient to transfer the wooden church to the urban environment of a big city like Minsk". No explanation was given for this claim, despite repeated questions by the community and Forum 18.

At a meeting with the community in 2012, the then Head of Minsk Regional Executive Committee Boris Batura approved the granting of a land plot for a new church in the capital. In 2016, the then Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako gave his backing. In August 2017 officials approved the site in Bolshoy Trostenets.

In August 2019, Minsk District Executive Committee extended the deadline for the Minsk Pomore Old Believers to complete the project until August 2021. However, the coronavirus pandemic delayed the drawing up of architectural plans. The community commissioned plans for the church and bell tower at the Bolshoy Trostenets site.

Plans, financial guarantees – then rejection and large debt

In August 2021, a commission finally approved building the church and bell tower on the land allocated to the Minsk Pomore Old Believers by the local authorities. The commission decision was sent for approval to Minsk District Executive Committee Head Vladimir Yurgevich. He needed to approve before the decision was to be sent on to the Head of Minsk Region Executive Committee

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2022

Aleksandr Turchin.

However, despite a legal deadline of a maximum of three weeks for the decision to be approved, and repeated meetings by Old Believers with officials at the District and Regional level, Yurgevich and Turchin failed to give their approval.

On 13 October 2021, Yurgevich of Minsk District Executive Committee insisted that the community provide guarantees that it had enough money to complete the building within two years. The community provided these written guarantees. Yurgevich then told the community to talk to Turchin of Minsk Region Executive Committee.

At a 17 November 2021 meeting, Turchin promised to approve the plans if the community again provided written guarantees that it had funding to complete the project within two years. The community submitted these on 1 December.

On 12 January 2022, Yurgevich of Minsk District Executive Committee told the community that the Region Executive Committee had ruled that its financial guarantees were inadequate. He asked for further guarantees, which the community provided on 25 January. On 7 February the community also sent the guarantees to Turchin of Minsk Region Executive Committee.

When on 11 February the Old Believer community met the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak, he supported building the church. He followed this up on 18 February with a letter to the Head of Minsk Region Executive Committee Turchin.

However, on 17 March, Minsk District Executive Committee Chair Yurgevich rejected the Old Believer application to build a church. He described the allocation of a plot of land to the community as "inexpedient" and said the community had failed to lodge completed plans by an August 2021 deadline. The community insisted to Forum 18 that officials never told them of this deadline in any of their meetings in late 2021 and early 2022.

Minsk Region Executive Committee issued the final rejection on 22 March 2022. The letter cited the rejection five days earlier by Minsk District Executive Committee.

The community has already paid 70,000 Belarusian Roubles "collected by parishioners" to the architects, and now owes them a further 50,000 Belarusian Roubles, community members told Forum 18.

Did Minsk Region Head – or Orthodox Church - block church construction?

According to an appeal published on the ruvera.ru Old Believer website, officials handed over the documents for final approval for construction of a church for Minsk's Old Believer community to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus, Metropolitan Veniamin (Tupeko).

"There was just one signature left when we found out that it is the Orthodox Church which gives the last word," Deputy Head of the Council of Pomore Old Believers in neighbouring Russia, Aleksey Bezgodov, told Forum 18 on 21 April. He thinks that the signature was denied because Metropolitan Veniamin wants the community to join the Orthodox Church, as happened in 2002 with another Old Believer community in Minsk.

Officials in Minsk gave permission to the Old Believer community which reunited with the Moscow Patriarchate permission to build a new church in the city's Lenin District. Metropolitan Veniamin blessed the foundations of St Elijah's Church on 2 August 2021, according to the Belarusian Orthodox Church website.

The regime has in the past given the Belarusian Orthodox Church unwritten but real veto powers (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=177) over a related religious group. Although based on Russian Orthodoxy, the Pomore Old Believers are independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, of which the Belarusian Orthodox Church is a part.

Forum 18 was unable to find out the reasons for the denial of a church for the Pomore Old Believer community and whether the Head of Minsk Region Executive Committee Aleksandr Turchin asked Metropolitan Veniamin to approve the construction of the church. Turchin's secretary refused to give any comments or to transfer the call to her superior on 20 April. She referred Forum 18 to the press secretary Inna Korolyonok. However, she told Forum 18 that she could find no information about this issue.

Forum 18 called the Russian Orthodox Minsk Diocese Chancellery on 4 April, but the secretary refused to give any comments.

The Deputy Head of the Ideology Department of Minsk District Executive Committee, Zhanna Ramanovich, confirmed that it had approved the Pomore Old Believers' request for land allocation. "If you are talking about the Pomore Old Believers, we never handed over any documents to the Belarusian Orthodox Church [for approval]," she claimed to Forum 18 on 4 April.

The Head of the Ideology Chief Department of Minsk Region Executive Committee, Aleksandr Ilyasevich, similarly denied passing any documentation to Metropolitan Veniamin of the Orthodox Church. "Why should a decision on constructing an Old Believer

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2022

church building be forwarded to the Orthodox Church?" he told Forum 18 on 4 April. "These are different confessions! I have not even heard of this."

Many Old Believer communities from Russia sent letters to the authorities in Minsk protesting against the decision to send the application to the Orthodox for approval, Bezgodov told Forum 18. "The message from the Orthodox authorities is: if you want a church building, join us."

Regime creates property problems for religious communities it dislikes

The regime often creates property problems to exert pressure against religious communities it dislikes.

From 2002 onwards, New Life Full Gospel Church has faced repeated obstruction and police raids (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639) in using a former cowshed it owns as its place of worship. A disused railway carriage was located 500 metres (yards) from New Life's building and this was used from January 2001 by a Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) community, without the regime raising any questions about the railway carriage's legal status or use as a place of worship. The railway carriage site now has an Orthodox church consecrated in 2013.

New Life Church, however, was evicted by police and bailiffs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639) on 17 February 2021, and has been forced to meet in the car park outside its place of worship ever since.

Each Sunday since being evicted, New Life has met for an hour-long outdoor and livestreamed service in the church car park, including in snow, rain or sun. The Church now brings in a coach to hold Sunday school for children.

In July and August 2021, officials threatened New Life Church with administrative and criminal charges (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2682) if it continued to meet in the car park. However, so far officials or police have not intervened to obstruct or prevent the Sunday outdoor meetings for worship.

The authorities have not offered New Life Church a plot of land for constructing a new church building, while proposed alternative venues were either too small, too remote, or too expensive. "We do not give up our building and continue praying, as only God can save us," New Life Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko told Forum 18 from Minsk on 5 May 2022. "Worshipping in the car park is part of our declaration that we do not agree."

The authorities also demand that New Life Church pay the land tax for the whole period while the Church used its building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2682), in the amount of 458,918.22 Belarusian Roubles (1,600,000 Norwegian Kroner, 155,000 Euros or 180,000 US Dollars). This is, according to state figures, equivalent to more than 25 years' average wage for someone in work. Unless the Church pays this sum, the authorities will not allow it to build a new place of worship.

"We are told: if you want a new building, you have to pay and later the formalities will be sorted out," Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18. "But we were deceived so many times, so we trust only God to solve the situation." He insists that tax payment is the responsibly of the Housing Repairs and Utilities Association, as religious organisations are not subject to land and property taxes. "Give us the building back and there will be no need to pay," he added.

Despite a petition to the Presidential Administration, the authorities refused to hand over the Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) in central Minsk back to Church ownership, and the building continues to belong to the building agency Minsk Heritage.

The regime claimed in December 2019 that the Church owed more than 160,000 Belarusian Roubles (585,000 Norwegian Kroner, 55,000 Euros, or 65,000 US Dollars) for restoration work and tax (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591). The Church was not consulted about the "restoration" work, and it has not addressed serious maintenance issues the Church has long pointed out. The regime also demanded just under 13,000 Belarusian Roubles (47,500 Norwegian Kroner, 4,500 Euros, or 5,300 US Dollars) a month as rent.

People associated with the Red Church think that it would take them at least 75 years to pay the authorities the current amount they are demanding. "It looks like the state without asking the parish decided to give us a large debt, and now demands that we pay them," Catholics told Forum 18

The parish did not pay the debt, hoping to resolve the issue by negotiation. However, by May 2021 the debt Minsk Heritage was demanding from the parish had risen to 350,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,200,000 Norwegian Kroner, 118,000 Euros, or 140,000 US Dollars), Euroradio.fm noted on 12 May 2021. This is, according to state figures, equivalent to about 20 years' average wage for someone in work.

By then, the parish had collected two cardboard boxes containing 20,000 signatures on a petition (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2682) to the Presidential Administration calling for the building to be handed over

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2022 - Page 4/6

to Church ownership

All this is done despite a 2005 Presidential Decree exempting registered religious organisations from tax (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2682). The state rents historical religious buildings it owns to religious organisations, requiring them to pay for the land and buildings they use.

Foreign aid to restore church blocked

The regime strictly controls gifts of money and humanitarian aid from abroad, including for religious organisations, making them register such donations with the authorities depending on the size of the funds. Any donations must be checked by the Presidential Administration's Humanitarian Activity Department (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639) and approved by the president.

In February, the Humanitarian Activity Department did not allow a Catholic parish of Minsk Diocese to use funds sent by sponsors abroad to restore its historical church, which had been used as a children's music school in the Soviet period. The regime returned the church to the Catholics in the 1990s. The parish began restoration works two years ago. The sponsors from abroad designated three quarters of their donation for the reconstruction of the church.

The parish had been allowed to receive funding donated from abroad before, people associated with the Church told Forum 18 on 25 April, but this time the Humanitarian Activity Department refused to allow the donation without any explanation. They added that local people also donate money, and the parish will renovate the church anyway.

Asked why his Department had rejected such donated funds, the Head of the Humanitarian Activity Department Igor Kudrevich claimed to Forum 18 on 27 April that such denials are extremely rare.

Referring to a Decree on Foreign Humanitarian Aid dated 25 May 2020, Kudrevich explained that donations are prohibited if they are intended to support terrorist activities, political parties, referendums, elections, demonstrations, protests or propaganda. "Building churches is a good cause, we do not mind it," he claimed to Forum 18.

The Humanitarian Aid Decree contains a list of designations of humanitarian support, mainly for social or health-oriented purposes, which can be approved. Such donations are tax free. However, decisions on donations for other purposes are handed to a special commission. If the decision is negative, the humanitarian support is either returned to the sponsor or can be used in accordance with approved purposes, though it then becomes subject to a tax deduction of 13 per cent. Recipients can use humanitarian support only after completion of all approval formalities.

Foreign aid for other purposes blocked

In January, the Humanitarian Activity Department refused to allow a Protestant Church in Vitebsk Region to get a shipment of humanitarian aid (including wheelchairs, clothes, footwear and furniture) sent from elsewhere in Europe.

The cargo arrived on 20 September 2021, but the Humanitarian Activity Department rejected all attempts to get it approved. The third denial came in February 2022 on the last day of the allowed storage period. After that, the regime ordered the humanitarian aid to be sent back at the expense of the church.

A church member who wished to be unnamed said that the goods are still stored under seal at a warehouse. "We are small in numbers and cannot afford to send the container back, as it would cost more than 1,000 Euros," the church member told Forum 18 on 25 April. The church member noted that many people are waiting for the goods, including handicapped people, elderly veterans, hospitals and single mothers.

The Humanitarian Activity Department did not explain the reasons for the denial. "If they only told us what is wrong, we would know what to do," the church member told Forum 18. Sanctions have now made it difficult or impossible to return the humanitarian aid back to the sponsors. The church member regretted that if the problem is not solved, the procedure requires that the goods be destroyed.

"So far everything is quiet, as if they [Humanitarian Activity Department] have forgotten about it," the church member told Forum 18.

The Head of the Humanitarian Activity Department, Igor Kudrevich, explained to Forum 18 that second-hand wheelchairs and other goods are not allowed to be brought to Belarus. "This is not us - these are the requirements of the Health Ministry," he commented to Forum 18.

A specialist involved in charity activities explained that if humanitarian aid contains second-hand rehabilitation devices and medical equipment, additional certification with the Centre of Expertise is required to obtain permission to use it. "This service is fee-based

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2022

and needs a lot of additional documents," the specialist told Forum 18 on 27 April.

In February 2021, the Humanitarian Activity Department blocked a Charity related to a religious organisation from receiving humanitarian aid from abroad. The Charity confirmed to Forum 18 that sometimes it faces denials in gaining approval from the regime, but mainly because of misunderstanding. "There are many nuances which you have to take into consideration," it told Forum 18 on 27 April.

The Charity recounted to Forum 18 that to get a foreign donation approved and exempted from tax, it is necessary to explain how it will be effectively used to the benefit of local people. The Charity added that sometimes the recipients of humanitarian support face difficulties, because although the funds or goods were approved for distribution they remained tax-deductible and the charity has to inform the Tax Office of each recipient.

All the people associated with foreign aid asked Forum 18 not to identify them, for fear of state reprisals for publicly discussing the issue. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=16)

For background information, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612)

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

Follow us on Twitter @Forum_18 (https://twitter.com/forum_18)

Follow us on Facebook @Forum18NewsService (https://www.facebook.com/Forum18NewsService)

Follow us on Telegram @Forum18NewsService (https://t.me/s/forum18newsservice)

All Forum 18 material may be referred to, quoted from, or republished in full, if Forum 18 is credited as the source.

All photographs that are not Forum 18's copyright are attributed to the copyright owner. If you reuse any photographs from Forum 18's website, you must seek permission for any reuse from the copyright owner or abide by the copyright terms the copyright owner has chosen.

© Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved. ISSN 1504-2855.

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY