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BELARUS: Officials threaten to liquidate Minsk's New Life Church

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

Minsk City Administration and local police have warned New Life Pentecostal Church that meetings for worship in the church car park are illegal and threatened to liquidate the Church in court. Liquidation would make any exercise of freedom of religion or belief illegal and punishable with up to a two-year jail term. The Church meets each Sunday in the car park after officials evicted it in February 2021 from the church building it bought in 2002. Officials refuse to explain why the Church cannot use its building.

For more than 18 months, Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church has met for worship each Sunday outdoors in the church car park, whatever the weather, since officials, police and bailiffs evicted it from its church building in February 2021. Now the city administration has again warned the Church that such meetings are illegal and threatened to seek the Church's liquidation in court. Liquidation would make any exercise of freedom of religion or belief illegal and subject to punishment.

Since January 2022, the newly-restored Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code once more punishes "organisation of or participation in activity by an unregistered political party, foundation, civil or religious organisation" with a fine or imprisonment for up to two years (see below).

The head of Minsk's Frunze District administration and the local head of Police repeatedly summoned the Church's Pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, in August. Both officials again warned him against holding meetings at the car park and threatened to initiate the procedure to liquidate New Life Church through the court (see below).

The Bishop of the Full Gospel Churches Union Leonid Voronenko initiated meetings with the city administration and with the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak (see below).

New Life Church – which was founded in 1992 – held its most recent Sunday service on 4 September, behind rather than in front of the church building. Like all its outdoor services, the Church live-streamed it on YouTube (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities will not allow New Life Church to use its own building again, offer another building or offer compensation. City, district and police officials could not be reached or would not answer questions (see below).

Asked why New Life Church's situation cannot be resolved given that officials themselves had evicted the community from its building, the Head of the Ideology Department of Minsk City Executive Committee, Olga Chemodanova, refused to comment. "Your question is posed incorrectly," she told Forum 18 (see below).

Asked whether he is afraid of the church liquidation as threatened, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18: "I think that our situation is not without God's miracle, as so many times the authorities came and threatened us, but our church is still functioning" (see below).

Meanwhile, police in the south-eastern city of Gomel summoned Living Faith Church Pastor Dmitri Podlobko and issued him with a second official warning, threatening him with possible criminal prosecution if he repeats the "offence" of conducting baptisms on his own property without permission. A court fined him two weeks' average wages for this in late July. (His assistant was also fined.) He will also have to meet the local police officer each month for the next year for a "preventive" conversation (see below).

In early August, a Gomel court similarly fined two members of another local Protestant community for holding public baptisms in early July without seeking state permission (see below).

Asked why police had taken action against communities holding baptisms locally, Head of Gomel District Police Captain Vasili Kravtsov absolutely refused to comment. "If you want to talk to me, come and see me in person," he told Forum 18 (see below).

In defiance of its international human rights obligations, Belarus has imposed a tight web of restrictions on exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612). All religious activity without state registration and outside state-approved venues is banned under the harsh 2002 Religion Law and punishable. Similarly, public meetings of any sort without permission are restricted.

Minsk: 2021 eviction

New Life Pentecostal Church was founded in 1992. It bought its building - a former cowshed in Frunze District on the western edge of Minsk – in 2002. The Church converted the building into its place of worship, turning it into a spacious, modern structure, but the authorities refused to change its legal designation as a cowshed.

The regime has repeatedly tried to evict the Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1339) and has refused to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to a place of worship, or to use it for meetings for worship.

Serious attempts to evict the Church came in June 2013 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1847), and in April 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284).

On 7 December 2020 the Enforcement Department of Minsk Executive Committee [the city administration] issued an eviction order requiring New Life Church to vacate its building by 31 December 2020. The Enforcement Department threatened to use force if New Life did not obey.

The Enforcement Department claimed it was executing an order of the Higher Economic Court in January 2009 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1244). An unsuccessful attempt to enforce this order took place in August 2009 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1339).

On 17 February 2021, police and court bailiffs forcibly evicted New Life Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639). Some 30 bailiffs, police, and Housing Repairs and Utilities Association officials took part in the eviction. Bailiffs used an angle grinder to cut the door lock to gain entry.

Minsk: Warning, liquidation threats

Following the February 2021 eviction from its building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639), New Life Church in Frunze District of Minsk has continued to hold worship services for about one hour each Sunday outdoors in the church car park, whatever the weather. The church held its most recent Sunday service on 4 September, behind rather than in front of the church building. Like all its outdoor services, the Church live-streamed it on YouTube.

In an official letter on 1 August, seen by Forum 18, Artyom Tsuran, a Deputy Chair of Minsk City Executive Committee, warned the Church that it had broken the law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2764) by holding Sunday services in the church car park on 26 June and 24 July without official permission. It warned that if the "violation" is repeated within a year, the Plenipotentiary's Office could go to court to liquidate the Church, with a possible ban on its activity as the court considers the suit.

The Bishop of the Full Gospel Churches Union Leonid Voronenko initiated a meeting on 16 August with the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak.

Officials summoned the Church's Pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, for a "preventive conversation" with the Head of Frunze District Administration Sergei Shkudnev on 17 August.

Pastor Goncharenko admitted to Forum 18 that after these meetings the situation had not improved as he was summoned separately for further meetings, again with Shkudnev at Frunze District Administration on 23 August, and on 30 August with the Head of Frunze District Police Lieutenant-Colonel Aleksandr Polulekh. Both officials again warned Pastor Goncharenko against holding meetings at the car park and threatened to initiate the procedure to liquidate New Life Church through the court.

Liquidating the Church as a religious organisation would make any exercise of freedom of religion or belief by the Church illegal (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612).

On 22 January, amendments to the Criminal Code came into force which restored almost unchanged Article 193-1 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2764), which had been removed in July 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2507). The restored Article once more punishes "organisation of or participation in activity by an unregistered political party, foundation, civil or religious organisation" with a fine or imprisonment for up to two years.

"They tried to persuade me to take the legal way and rent another building," Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 on 31 August of the meetings with Shkudnev and Polulekh. "They explained that residents complain about our meetings and the authorities have to react."

On 24 August, Full Gospel Bishop Voronenko initiated a meeting at Minsk City Executive Committee with Tsuran to explain the

Church's position and try to find a solution. The official thanked the Bishop for the initiative but reproached New Life Church for not seeking dialogue with the authorities, Pastor Goncharenko reported on the New Life Church Telegram channel the same day.

The Church has always been in contact with the authorities, Pastor Goncharenko insisted to Forum 18. "For them dialogue is when we write letters and beg them, while none of the letters are answered positively," the pastor complained. He maintained that holding Sunday services is simply a part of the social and humanitarian activities the church is involved in.

Minsk: "Your question is posed incorrectly"

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the authorities will not allow New Life Church to use its own building again, offer another building or offer compensation.

Asked why New Life Church's situation cannot be resolved given that officials themselves had evicted the community from its building, the Head of the Ideology Department of Minsk City Executive Committee, Olga Chemodanova, refused to comment. "Your question is posed incorrectly, send me the list of questions officially and I will answer them," she told Forum 18 on 6 September.

The secretary refused to put Forum 18 through to the Head of Frunze District Administration Shkudnev. "He is busy at the meeting," she told Forum 18 on 6 September. She referred questions to the Ideology Department, but the phone went unanswered there each time Forum 18 called on 6 and 7 September.

Forum 18 tried to find out whether New Life Church's meetings had evoked complaints in the neighbourhood. However, the duty officer at Frunze District Police could not give any comments on 6 September and refused to transfer the call to his superior Lieutenant-Colonel Polulekh.

Pastor Goncharenko pointed out that a couple of times police officers came to them during the service asking to reduce the volume of the loudspeakers due to complaints from nearby residents. "We are always ready to respond to requests to keep the neighbouring residents comfortable," he told Forum 18. He noted that the police officers were always polite and respectful.

Minsk: "Emotionally we are attached to this place"

Pastor Goncharenko maintained that if the city needed their building they should be compensated by land or another building. "We have nowhere to go and emotionally we are attached to this place," he lamented to Forum 18. "The location is convenient for church members."

He also mentioned that the authorities are ready to allot a land plot only after paying 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). "We are not an industrial factory for whom this amount would also seem enormous, we do not produce anything. Our donations will not be enough to cover this land tax", Pastor Goncharenko commented to Forum 18.

Asked whether he is afraid of the church liquidation as threatened, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18: "I think that our situation is not without God's miracle, as so many times the authorities came and threatened us, but our church is still functioning."

New Life Church intends to write to the authorities asking them to return their church building, or at least to allow the Church to hold Sunday services in the car park, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18. He added that in over 20 years' service there, "so many miracles" had taken place that it could be considered "a place of pilgrimage". He pointed out that under Article 25 of the 2002 Religion Law, state permission is not required for meetings for worship held at a place of pilgrimage.

Gomel: Baptism fines, further warning

On 28 July, Gomel District Court fined the Pastor of Gomel's Living Faith Church Dmitri Podlobko 20 base units (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2764) or 640 Belarusian Roubles (two weeks' average wage) under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration") for holding baptisms in his garden on 9 July without the authorities' permission.

On 5 August, the same Judge at Gomel District Court also fined Pastor Podlobko's assistant under Administrative Code Article 24.23, Part 1. The Judge fined him 2 base units, 64 Belarusian Roubles, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Following the 28 July fine, police summoned Pastor Podlobko on 24 August and issued him with a second official warning, threatening him with possible criminal prosecution if he repeats the "offence". He will also have to meet the local police officer each month for the next year for a "preventive" conversation.

Pastor Podlobko complained that officers did not hand over any document. They simply read the warning to him and asked for his signature confirming that he was informed. "Probably I could have asked for a copy to be handed to me, but under the circumstances I did not do so," he told Forum 18 from Gomel on 26 August.

According to Article 37 of the 2002 Religion Law "if a violation is not eliminated within six months or is repeated within a year, the registration authority is entitled to file in court the request to liquidate the religious organisation. At the same time the registration authority has the right to take a decision to suspend the religious organisation's activities until the court's resolution."

Baptism by full body immersion is a key event for many Protestant congregations. If a church does not have its own baptistery, it will often hold the ceremony in a lake or river. The state considers any such public baptisms illegal unless it has given specific permission.

In separate hearings on 5 and 8 August, Judge Aleksandr Zinchuk of Gomel's Novobelitsky District Court similarly punished two pastors of another local Protestant community for holding public baptisms in early July without seeking state permission. Each was fined 20 base units, 640 Belarusian Roubles (two weeks' average wage) under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"), Part 2, according to the decisions seen by Forum 18. One of the pastors told the court that an Executive Committee official had told him in about 2018 that permission was not needed for such outdoor baptisms.

"For more than 20 years of my service, such permission was never sought," a member of the community told Forum 18 on 29 August. "But since the Bible teaches us to submit to any authority, we'll ask permission to hold baptisms in a public place next time."

Asked why police had taken action against communities holding baptisms locally, Head of Gomel District Police Captain Vasili Kravtsov absolutely refused to comment. "If you want to talk to me, come and see me in person," he told Forum 18 from Gomel on 7 September.

Forum 18 also called the Ideology Department of Gomel City Executive Committee on 7 September. Instead of putting it through to the relevant official, the secretary put the call on hold for more than five minutes.

Protestant Churches in other regions of Belarus are known to have conducted baptisms in summer 2022 in rivers or lakes. In one case in early September, a Church publicly baptised nearly 30 church members. Forum 18 is not aware that police intervened during or after any of these baptisms or that any individuals were fined away from Gomel. (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)

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