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BELARUS: Rent hikes, suspicious fire, enforced church closure, expulsion anniversary

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

The regime terminated unlimited, free of charge rental agreements with at least four Catholic churches still in state hands. It claimed that, in exchange for signing a new agreement to pay rent, the churches will eventually be allowed to resume using their historical buildings rent-free. "We were told that if we don't sign the new agreement, the church will be given to the museum .. while we'll be allowed to worship there only once a week," said a Catholic close to Corpus Christi Church in Nesvizh.

Some Catholic religious communities face problems using and reclaiming from the regime ownership of their historical places of worship, and the regime has recently terminated unlimited and free of charge rental agreements with at least four Catholic churches, Forum 18 has found. The regime has claimed to the churches that, in exchange for signing a new agreement to pay monthly rent for periods varying between 6 months and 5 years, at some point in the future the churches will be allowed to return to using their historical buildings rent-free.

A Catholic close to Corpus Christi Church in Nesvizh, says that the parish has to pay monthly rent for using the church for a year to ensure an agreement on free of charge usage in the future. "We were told that if we don't sign the new agreement, the church will be given to the museum which would charge an entrance fee, while we'll be allowed to worship there only once a week," the Catholic told Forum 18 (see below).

Local authorities set the monthly rent, but Forum 18 was unable to find out how they decide the amount they demand. Also, no written guarantees seem to exist that the regime will honour its promise to at some future point allow churches to return to using their own historical buildings rent-free (see below).

Officials seem unwilling to make public the conditions they have imposed on Catholic communities for using their own historical places of worship, including the Co-Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Stanislaus in Mogilev and the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary in Bobruisk. Svetlana Grinevetskaya of Bobruisk's Lenin District Executive Committee refused to explain why the Executive Committee is now charging rent or why the church cannot be returned to its original owner - the parish. "I do not know you and will not give you comments," she told Forum 18 before putting the phone down (see below).

Only a few historical places of worship – some but not all Catholic - remain in the state's possession, as communities did not request their return in the 1990s. Subsequently, many of these religious communities have repeatedly but unsuccessfully applied for ownership to be restored to them. In these cases, the state pays for continued maintenance of the building, and the religious community which uses the building pays an amount to the state as rent and for utility charges. There is no time limit for how long these agreements continue.

Minsk's Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) has been closed by the regime to Catholic parishioners who want to pray, and attend Mass and other religious services since a suspicious early-morning fire in September 2022. The authorities later cut off electricity, heating and running water in the adjacent priest's house (see below).

Andrei Aryayev of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs claimed to Forum 18 in January that the parish will again be allowed to use the Red Church "When repairs are finished", which he claimed would be "In the near future". Yekaterina Kaverina of Minsk City Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department insisted to Forum 18 on 6 March that repair works have already started. However, she could not say when the parish will be able to resume using its own Church for worship (see below).

Catholic journalist Maksim Hacak suggested to Forum 18 in August 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) that the authorities are not now willing to transfer ownership back as "it's always easier to blackmail the communities using property they do not own".

Many communities without formal places of worship find it impossible to get property redesignated so that it can legally be used for worship. Without a designated place of worship, the legal exercise of freedom of religion and belief requires advance state permission. Officials often refuse this permission. Protestant communities are among those which have found it impossible to get property redesignated so that it can be used for worship in line with the law.

One such Protestant Church is Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church. On 17 February, the Church marked two years since the authorities forcibly evicted it from its place of worship, which they never allowed to be redesignated for religious use. They subsequently banned the Church from meeting for worship in the church car park, fining church leaders. Yekaterina Kaverina of Minsk City Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department refused to respond when Forum 18 asked whether the authorities will compensate the Church for its building from which they evicted it (see below).

Members of the regime-supporting Belarusian Orthodox Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) could not remember any problems connected with paying rent for using historical buildings. For example, the Pinsk Diocese spokesperson told Forum 18 that churches owned by the state are given to parishes on a free of charge basis. "A local administration finances repair works, but the parish has to coordinate the works with the authorities," the spokesperson told Forum 18 on 24 February.

Minsk: Suspicious Red Church fire, attempts to evict priest

Minsk's Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) has been closed by the regime to Catholic parishioners who want to pray, and attend Mass and other religious services there since an early-morning fire on 26 September 2022. The fire broke out in the sacristy, an annexe to the Red Church. The authorities immediately closed and sealed the Church.

Katolik.life noted on 27 September 2022 that two windows were found to have been broken at the entrance close to where the fire broke out, and that OMON riot police had closed off the square three hours before the fire.

Parishioners told Katolik.life that, according to the Church watchman, "before the smoke appeared in the church, a rumble was heard". The Investigative Committee arrived practically together with the Emergency Situations Ministry, which parishioners described as "strange and ambiguous" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2781).

Investigators took away computers and video surveillance recordings, Katolik.life also noted. (The equipment was returned on 25 January 2023 after repeated appeals by the parish.) The parish has not been given access to information about the course of the investigation. The parish has – without success - sent a request to the Investigative Committee to provide information on the results.

Both Moscow District Police and the Investigative Committee refused to discuss with Forum 18 the suspicious circumstances of the fire (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2781) and the progress of the investigation.

On 5 October 2022, Minsk Heritage, the building agency that has control of the Church, ordered the parish to remove all its property from the entire building by 12 October. Officials have given no timetable for the repairs they claim to be undertaking (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2781).

On 29 November 2022, Minsk Archdiocese appointed Fr Yuri Sanko as parish administrator to manage the construction works and to communicate with the authorities, while the parish priest Fr Vladislav Zavalnyuk works as the caretaker while the regime does not allow the Church to function. Many parishioners have continued to meet for worship in the priest's house next to the church.

The regime made unsuccessful attempts to evict parish priest Fr Zavalnyuk from his house by switching off the electricity and heating, and later cutting off running water. The authorities claimed that the parish house is connected to the church building where the utility lines were it claimed switched off.

Moscow District Administration's Emergency Situations Department also – allegedly for fire safety reasons - then ordered Fr Zavalnyuk to dismantle a fireplace in his house which he used for cooking, parish website chryvony.by stated.

Moscow District Administration's Emergency Situations Department did not answer its phone when Forum 18 called repeatedly on 6 and 7 March to ask why it was forcing Fr Zavalnyuk to live in such conditions.

The regime has also repeatedly rejected appeals over many years to hand the Church of Saints Simon and Helena back to the Catholic community. Minsk Heritage, an agency owned by the city administration, has been in dispute with the parish over large financial demands from the state (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) for building work it did not agree to and which it cannot afford. "Why should we pay the state 13,000 Belarusian Roubles a month to pray in our own church?" the then-parish priest Fr Stanislav Stanevsky asked independent news agency Naviny.by in July 2020. City officials refused to explain to Forum 18 the large sums they have demanded (see below).

Minsk: Why is regime still stopping Red Church parish using its own church?

In an 8 January letter to Sergei Aleinik, Foreign Minister (and former ambassador to the Vatican), parishioners wrote of the continuing enforced closure of Minsk's Red Church as causing "pain in their hearts".

Minsk Heritage, which has control of the Church, has allowed priests and some parishioners inside the church to inspect the damage only twice since the September 2022 suspicious fire. On 19 December 2022 the church was inspected by a number of Catholic clergy, including Apostolic Nuncio Ante Jozi?, Archbishop of Minsk-Mogilev Iosif Staneuski, Parish Administrator Yuri Sanko and parish priest Vladislav Zavalnyuk. On 14 February 2023 Minsk Heritage allowed a parish committee to go inside the church.

The priests and parishioner found that in the main part of the Church there is no sign of the fire and no smell of smoke, and that the sacristy is only slightly damaged. "It is warm in the church, the radiators are warm – while in all the letters received from the state institutions we were told that there was no heating," priests told chyrvony.by after the 19 December 2022 visit. The Church is "clean and warm with many fresh flowers, and is available for worship", they said.

The parish is ready to pay for the repair of the sacristy – even though it appears that it was not responsible for the fire.

On 4 January 2023, Forum 18 asked Andrei Aryayev, the Head of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) in Minsk, when the Red Church parish will be allowed to use its building. He replied: "When repairs are finished." When Forum 18 asked when that would be, he replied: "In the near future." Aryayev refused to give any indication of the timescale, insisting this is a matter for Minsk City Executive Committee.

On 7 February, Minsk Heritage also refused to say when the Red Church parish will be allowed to use its own Church, and when repairs will be complete. The secretary of the Director of Minsk Heritage, Aleksandr Kokhan, refused to answer the questions and also refused to put Forum 18 through to Kokhan. "You should send us an official inquiry and we will answer," she claimed before hanging up.

The Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department, Yekaterina Kaverina, insisted to Forum 18 on 6 March that repair works on the Red Church have already started. However, she could not say when the Catholic parish will be able to resume using its own Church for worship. She refused to explain why electricity, heating and running water were cut off to the priest's house. "All the answers were given to the parish," she claimed.

In response to repeated appeals from the Red Church parish, the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee Artyom Tsuran replied to the parish in a letter dated 13 February (seen by Forum 18). Tsuran claimed that the ban on using the Church is imposed by Moscow District Emergency Situations Department. "These measures have been taken to ensure the safety of people coming to the church, and the preservation of this complex of buildings under state protection," Tsuran claimed.

Tsuran also claimed that as heating, electricity and water are (against the evidence of priests and parishioners) shut off in the building, "the fulfilment of obligations between the enterprise [Minsk Heritage] and the community under the free of charge rent agreement is impossible in these premises".

Minsk: Why can't parish own its own church?

Minsk Catholics have repeatedly asked the regime to return the Red Church to them. The Catholic parish built the Church in 1910, but it was confiscated during the Soviet period. The latest refusal was in June 2020. On 21 July 2020, Red Church parishioners launched a petition asking the Presidential Administration to return ownership (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) of the Red Church to the parish, and reiterating that the Church was built and owned by the parish. More than 5,000 people had signed within the first week.

On 4 January 2023, Aryayev of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806)' office refused to explain to Forum 18 why the Red Church and the other Catholic churches still in state hands cannot be handed back to their original owners. Arayayev insisted that "They have the right to use them," before putting the phone down.

Minsk Heritage on 7 February also would not explain why it is unilaterally imposing a large bill (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806), or refusing to return the Church built by Catholics to Catholics.

Nesvizh: "If we don't sign new agreement, church will be given to museum"

The authorities have imposed a new agreement requiring the Catholic parish to pay rent to use its Corpus Christi Church in the town of Nesvizh, 95 kms (60 miles) south west of Minsk. A person familiar with the situation told Forum 18 that the parish has been asked to pay Nesvizh Executive Committee a monthly rent for using the church for five years, to ensure free of charge use from sometime in the future.

"We were told that if we don't sign the new agreement, the church will be given to the museum which would charge an entrance fee, while we'll be allowed to worship there only once a week," a Catholic close to the parish told Forum 18 on 22 February. The parish has already asked Minsk Region Executive Committee to reduce the rent period to less than five years.

Corpus Christi Church is part of the Architectural, Residential and Cultural Complex of the Radziwill Family at Nesvizh, included in UNESCO's World Heritage List. In 1944, the church suffered war damage, but was restored by parishioners. In 1948 the Soviet authorities – which had annexed the area from Poland during the Second World War - allowed the parish to use the church free of charge without time limit.

The Catholic confirmed that restoration works ongoing in the church since 2011 are financed from the Republican and Minsk Region budgets. "I don't know when the repair works will be over, for this year we have funds, but I assure you that the church has never been closed for 400 years," the Catholic told Forum 18.

"Paying the first month is always hard," the Catholic commented. The Catholic has noticed that parishioners resent the new demand to pay rent. "It is not the state which built the church, and it is not the state which preserved and maintained it, so why should we pay now?"

The Catholic noted, however, that the authorities do not charge for electricity at the higher rate for legal entities. The parish pays at the lower rate levied on religious organisations, which is much closer to the rate paid by individuals.

Forum 18 was unable to find out why the church is being charged the monthly rent and why the parish cannot own its own church. The head of the Ideology Department of Nesvizh Executive Committee, Lyudmila Vitko, put the phone down when Forum 18 called on 23 February.

The Head of the State Property Registration Department of Minsk Region Executive Committee, Aleksandr Semenkevich, explained to Forum 18 on 7 March that his Department merely registers religious buildings but does not own them.

Bobruisk: Rent now, free of charge usage later?

Catholics in the south-eastern town of Bobruisk are trying to restore the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, which was built in 1903. It was confiscated during the Soviet period, and in the 1960s its bell tower was demolished to be replaced by a five-storey modern building attached to and across the Church's entrance.

A joint stock company owned the Soviet-era five-storey building, while the city Executive Committee owns the church building. They have taken no action to stop water flooding the basement, or to restore the Church to its historical appearance (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591).

In 2018 the Soviet-era five-storey building was taken over by the city Executive Committee which owns the church building. Parishioners wanted to acquire the Soviet building and restore the entire church but, as parish priest Fr Andrei Yarkovets told the local news agency Commercial Courier in March 2019, the parish was worried that it could not afford the costs involved. He insisted that the authorities should pay for the demolition of the 1960s building.

"The last time negotiations with the authorities took place was in 2019, and since then there's no movement," a parishioner who wished to be anonymous told Forum 18 in July 2020 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591).

Since January 2023, the Catholic parish has been paying rent for using their Church for a six-month period with the promise of then getting five years of free of charge usage.

The Vicar General of Minsk-Mogilev diocese, Fr Aleksandr Yashevsky, says that the church will remain the property of the city and the parish will pay rent. "Our next step will be to apply for the ownership of the church building, which was constructed and restored by the Catholics," he told the Polish-based broadcaster Belsat on 21 January.

Svetlana Grinevetskaya, Economic Affairs Manager of Bobruisk's Lenin District Executive Committee, refused to explain why the Executive Committee is now charging rent or why the church cannot be returned to its original owner - the parish. "I do not know you and will not give you comments," she told Forum 18 on 24 February before putting the phone down.

Mogilev: Rent now, free of charge usage later?

The state owns the Catholic Co-Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Stanislaus in the eastern city of Mogilev. Fr Yuri Sanko of the Catholic Bishops' Conference told Forum 18 in 2020 that the parish pays Mogilev Executive Committee utilities charges and a nominal rent (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591). He also stated that the parish finances all restoration works.

After paying the rent for a year, the parish community has been promised a five-year agreement to use the Cathedral free of charge.

The phones of the Deputy Head of the Ideology and Youth Department of Mogilev City Executive Committee, Irina Stolyarova, and of the Head of the Department's Ideology Section, Oleg Koropov, went unanswered when Forum 18 called on 6 and 7 March to find out whether the Executive Committee gave the church a written promise that it would be able to use the Cathedral free of charge after the parish has completed the rental period.

Minsk: "Exactly two years ago .. we were forcibly evicted from our church building"

Minsk City Executive Committee refuses to return the church building seized from the city's New Life Pentecostal Church or allow the Church to meet for worship in the car park. The Church continues to hold meetings online or in other churches' premises.

"Exactly two years ago (17 February 2021) we were forcibly evicted from our church building," the Church wrote on its Telegram channel on 17 February. "Looking back, I want to thank God, He did not leave us, but on the contrary was with us and strengthened us."

The Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department, Yekaterina Kaverina, refused to respond when Forum 18 asked on 6 March whether the authorities will compensate New Life Church for its building from which they evicted it in February 2021.

On 25 September 2022, police banned New Life Church from meeting for Sunday worship in the car park (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777) of the building from which officials forcibly evicted it in February 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639). Police detained the Church's pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and another pastor Antoni Bokun. A judge fined each two months' average wage for leading the 18 September 2022 service in the church's car park (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777) which police had observed. (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=2806)

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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