

12 June 2023

BELARUS: Detained, fined for sharing faith on streets

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

On 2 June, a judge fined Vladimir Burshtyn – who is in his 70s – over a month's average pension for an outdoor meeting in Drogichin with fellow Baptists to share their faith. He intends to appeal against the fine, imposed in a court hearing fellow-Baptists were denied access to. Police held him overnight before the hearing, and Head of the local Ideology Department Svetlana Shchur insisted to Forum 18 that any event must have state permission. Elsewhere, for the first time since 1990 a Catholic Corpus Christi procession did not stop at Minsk's Red Church, which the regime closed in September 2022.

On 27 May, police stopped a group of Baptists with a musical group from sharing their faith in the town of Drogichin in the south-western Brest Region. On 1 June they summoned Vladimir Burshtyn – who is in his seventies – to the police station and held him overnight. The following day, a judge fined him the equivalent of just over a month's average pension for organising an illegal event. The judge held the closed hearing in the police station to prevent fellow-Baptists from attending.

"We thought the hearing would be open, but it was closed," a local Baptist told Forum 18. "It should have been open, but we weren't surprised that they would not let us attend" (see below).

Burshtyn intends to appeal against the fine to Brest Regional Court, the local Baptist told Forum 18. The Baptists are also gathering signatures on complaints to local, regional and national officials about the way Burshtyn and the other Baptists were treated (see below).

Burshtyn is a member of the Council of Churches Baptists, who do not seek state permission to exercise freedom of religion or belief.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Head of Drogichin Police Lt. Colonel Sergei Peryayev to ask why police had detained Burshtyn and held him for 24 hours (see below).

Judge Leonty Stankevich absolutely refused to give any comments when Forum 18 called Drogichin District Court. "The case is not closed, and the judge does not comment on such cases," the court secretary told Forum 18. She did not explain why Judge Stankevich decided to hold the hearing on Burshtyn's case not at the court but at the police station (see below).

Asked why preaching and singing in public places are illegal and require the authorities' approval, the Head of the Ideology Department of Drogichin District Executive Committee Svetlana Shchur insisted that according to the law any event should be coordinated with the local authorities.

"What does it have to do with religion?" Shchur told Forum 18. "Vladimir Burshtyn was together with a music band in a crowded public place. What if somebody collapsed in the street, or something else happened? They should have provided security and medical aid, according to the Mass Events Law" (see below).

Andrei Aryayev, the Head of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk, had put the phone down before Forum 18 could ask why Burshtyn was punished for sharing his faith on the streets (see below).

For the first time since 1990, the 11 June Corpus Christi procession in Minsk did not stop at the Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church). The regime ordered the prominent church closed following a small, suspicious fire in September 2022. The parish tried to get permission to hold a 2023 Easter service on 9 April in its own grounds, but was denied state permission for the Mass (see below).

When Forum 18 asked Aryayev of the Plenipotentiary's Office whether officials had instructed the Catholic leadership to amend the route to avoid the Red Church, he claimed: "I don't have such information." He then put the phone down (see below).

Fr Yuri Sanko, spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops' Conference, told Forum 18 that the amended Corpus Christi procession route

with no stop at the Red Church was the decision of the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese (see below).

Exiled Catholic journalist Maksim Hacak notes that any public activity is banned near the Red Church, including processions and prayers. "Therefore, the absence of a stop there fits into this ban," he told Forum 18. "Or the diocese itself decided not to anger the authorities and therefore did not even offer to stop there. In any case, this is a forced decision, with very little chance for an independent decision" (see below).

Asked when the authorities will allow the Red Church to reopen for worship, Fr Sanko responded: "This is not clear. Some kind of works are going on inside." He said the works are being carried out without any involvement from the church. "Our access to the church is barred. We can enter only by prior agreement and stating our reason" (see below).

Draft new Religion Law published

On 2 June, the regime made public on its legal website the draft of the proposed new Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2831), prepared by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) Aleksandr Rumak. The website said the draft Law was open for public comments from 5 to 15 June.

The proposed new Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2839) harshens the restrictive 2002 Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806), which human rights defenders at the time publicly condemned.

On 30 May, before publishing the draft of the proposed Law for public discussion, Plenipotentiary Rumak summoned the leaders of registered religious communities to present the text. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant leaders were among those present.

Detained, fined for sharing faith on streets

On 27 May, close to the Feast of the Ascension of Christ, Vladimir Burshtyn was among a group of Council of Churches Baptists who shared their faith on the street in Drogichin, a town in the south-western Brest Region. They brought with them a musical band.

Burshtyn – who is in his early 70s – had travelled to Drogichin from his home in the town of Malorita, 110 kms (70 miles) away.

Police soon intervened to halt the event and took Burshtyn to Drogichin police station in one car. They took the rest of the Baptists in another vehicle. All were questioned and then released.

On 31 May, Drogichin Police telephoned Burshtyn and ordered him to appear the following day. Police summoned him to the police station because he had been previously punished for organising unapproved events, a local Baptist told Forum 18 on 9 June.

On 1 June, Police drew up a record of an offence against him under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"), Part 1. Punishments for organising such events under Part 1 are a fine of up to 100 base units, or community service, or 15 days' imprisonment.

Police detained Burshtyn for 24 hours until the court hearing the next day. Forum 18 was unable to ask the Head of Drogichin Police, Lt. Colonel Sergei Peryayev, why police had detained Burshtyn and held him for 24 hours. His phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 5 and 8 June.

Drogichin District Court scheduled Burshtyn's hearing for 10 am on 2 June, and officers took him to the court. However, the judge later rescheduled the hearing for 5 pm that day. The closed trial then went ahead earlier, not at the court but at the police station.

Judge Leonty Stankevich handed down a fine of 15 base units, 555 Belarusian Roubles. This is equivalent to just over a month's average pension or about two weeks' average wage. More than 20 local Baptists waited for Burshtyn outside the police station to welcome him once he was released.

"We thought the hearing would be open, but it was closed," the local Baptist told Forum 18. "It should have been open, but we weren't surprised that they would not let us attend."

Burshtyn intends to appeal against his fine to Brest Regional Court, the local Baptist told Forum 18. "We are also collecting signatures from believers on three petitions, to the local court and police, as well as to Brest and Minsk."

Judge Stankevich absolutely refused to give any comments when Forum 18 called Drogichin District Court. "The case is not closed, and the judge does not comment on such cases," the court secretary told Forum 18 on 9 June. She confirmed that Judge Stankevich had decided to hold the hearing on Burshtyn's case not at the court but at the police station. She did not explain why.

"What does it have to do with religion?"

Asked why preaching and singing in public places are illegal and require the authorities' approval, the Head of the Ideology Department of Drogichin District Executive Committee Svetlana Shchur insisted that according to the law any event must have the permission of local authorities and must be arranged with them.

"What does it have to do with religion?" Shchur told Forum 18 on 5 June. "Vladimir Burshtyn was together with a music band in a crowded public place. What if somebody collapsed in the street, or something else happened? They should have provided security and medical aid, according to the Mass Events Law."

Shchur appears to have been referring to the January 2019 Council of Ministers Decree No. 49 ("On the procedure of payment for public security provided by police, for healthcare services, for cleaning a venue after a public event"). The Decree imposes further conditions related to the Mass Events Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) by setting varying event fees to be paid to state agencies depending on the number of participants. It requires that all permitted public event organisers - including of religious events – must both agree event fees with the police, state healthcare, and cleaning services, and also pay these fees in advance.

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, had put the phone down on 12 June before Forum 18 could ask why Burshtyn was punished for sharing his faith on the streets.

In 2008, a court fined Burshtyn (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1147) the equivalent of more than two months' average wages for sharing his faith outside a market in the town of Ushachi in Vitebsk Region. At the time, his fine was the highest handed down to a member of the Baptist Council of Churches. In 2005, an administrative commission fined him for leading his unregistered congregation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=713) in Malorita.

The authorities consider sharing faith or talking about religion to passers-by as mass events which are illegal unless individuals have gained prior state approval.

On 15 April, the day before Orthodox Christian Easter, police arrested seven young Protestants from several churches who were talking about their faith with passers-by in central Minsk and took them handcuffed to the police station. A court fined each about two months' average wages (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2831).

In 2022, courts used Administrative Code Article 24.23, Part 1 to punish three Protestant pastors in Gomel for holding outdoor baptisms, and two Protestant pastors in Minsk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777) for leading worship in the car park of the confiscated New Life Pentecostal Church.

No stop for Corpus Christi procession at closed Minsk church

Catholics were able to hold customary street processions in June. Processions were held on 4 June to mark Trinity Sunday, including in Mogilev, Brest and Pinsk. Processions were held on 8 and 11 June to mark the festival of Corpus Christi, including in Minsk, Grodno, Vitebsk, Smorgon and Gomel. Such processions stop at altars set up specially outside Catholic churches.

For the first time, the 11 June Corpus Christi procession in Minsk did not stop at the Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church), the katolik.life website noted the same day.

The parish of Saints Simon and Helena tried to get permission to hold an 2023 Easter service on 9 April in its own grounds by the forcibly closed Red Church, but was denied state permission for the Mass (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2831).

On 9 May, when the amended route for the Minsk Corpus Christi procession was set out, the Red Church parish stated that their Church would no longer be included. "Unfortunately, for the first time in 33 years [since 1990], an altar has not been planned near our shrine, which requires special attention and prayer," the parish noted on its website.

Asked whether officials had instructed the Catholic leadership to amend the route to avoid the Red Church, 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, told Forum 18 on 12 June: "I don't have such information." He then put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Fr Yuri Sanko, spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops' Conference, told Forum 18 that the amended route with no stop at the Red Church was the decision of the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese.

"If the diocese decided so, then the question arises: why and for what purpose?" exiled Catholic journalist Maksim Hacak told

Forum 18 on 12 June. "At the same time, we know that any public activity is banned near the Red Church, including processions and prayers. Therefore, the absence of a stop there fits into this ban. Or the diocese itself decided not to anger the authorities and therefore did not even offer to stop there. In any case, this is a forced decision, with very little chance for an independent decision."

The regime closed the Church to Catholic parishioners who want to pray, and attend Mass and other religious services since a suspicious early-morning fire (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2815) in September 2022. The authorities later cut off electricity, heating and running water in the adjacent priest's house.

Aryayev told Forum 18 in January (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2815) that repairs would be completed and the church reopened for worship "In the near future".

Asked when the authorities will allow the Red Church to reopen for worship, Fr Sanko responded: "This is not clear. Some kind of works are going on inside." He said the works are being carried out without any involvement from the church. "Our access to the church is barred. We can enter only by prior agreement and stating our reason."

In February 2021, the regime forcibly expelled Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church from its place of worship. In September 2022, police banned the church from meeting for Sunday worship in the church car park (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777). 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777) in the church's car park 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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