

22 June 2023

BELARUS: Bulldozers destroy Minsk church

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

Evicted from its church building in February 2021, banned from meeting for worship in the church car park, Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church has now seen its church bulldozed. The bulldozing – ordered by Capital Construction Management Company, owned by Minsk City Executive Committee – began on 20 June, within a day reducing much of the building to rubble. The Company, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, and Minsk City Executive Committee would not explain why New Life's church building – which it bought in 2002 – was destroyed.

On 20 June, the regime brought in bulldozers to start the destruction of New Life Pentecostal Church in the capital Minsk. By later in the day, much of the building was reduced to rubble. The decision to bulldoze the building – from which the Church was evicted in February 2021 - came from Capital Construction Management Company, which is owned by Minsk City Executive Committee.

In a 20 June video address outside the destroyed building, the Church's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko described the destruction as "flagrant lawlessness". "God sees everything," he added, "and he sees today our suffering, our grief, our pain. He sees likewise today the mockery of wicked people. He sees their blasphemy" (see below).

The Union of Full Gospel Churches - to which New Life belongs - condemned the destruction. "This action deeply offended the feelings of believers," the head of the Union Bishop Leonid Voronenko and the Union leadership wrote in a 22 June statement. "We believe that state services should seek forgiveness from New Life Church's members for the destruction of their place of worship, provide a plot of land for the construction of a house of prayer, lease premises for the Church to hold worship services during the construction period, and deal with the wickedness that has been committed."

The regime has since 2002 repeatedly denied New Life Church's requests for permission to change the official designation of the former cowshed it bought that year into a place of worship. This was in contrast to a disused railway carriage 500 metres from New Life's building which was without regime obstruction used from January 2001 by a community of the regime-supporting Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). That community has now built a church, also without any regime obstruction (see below).

Forum 18 called the Head Office of Capital Construction Management Company on 22 June to find out why they demolished the building. The secretary answered nervously: "It's not a question to us, maybe it concerns the [company's] district division." The Deputy Director of Frunze District Capital Construction Management Company, Aleksandr Korzhanevsky, told Forum 18 that the New Life Church building is not a property they have responsibility for (see below).

Andrei Aryayev, the Head of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, absolutely refused to discuss the demolition of New Life Church. "I won't give any comments, ask Minsk City Executive Committee," he told Forum 18 before putting the phone down (see below).

The secretary of the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee Aryom Tsuran refused to direct the call and recommended to call the press service. Ilona Illarionova from the Press Service told Forum 18 that she did not know about New Life Church and promised to collect information later. Neither the Head of the Ideology Department of Minsk City Executive Committee, Olga Chemodanova, nor the Ideology Coordination Section answered their phones when Forum 18 called (see below).

New Life Church has long faced state pressure. In February 2021, police and bailiffs forcibly expelled the community from its church. The Church thinks this may be due to a video it posted online protesting against regime election fraud and violence. In September 2022, officials banned the church from meeting for worship in the car park and fined two pastors for leading open-air worship meetings (see below).

Since being banned from meeting for worship in the grounds of its own church, New Life Church has had to meet online and for in-person meetings borrow the building of the Protestant God's Grace Church in Minsk (see below).

New Life Church has been seeking a building to rent for worship meetings. However, it has been denied permission to rent buildings - even by organisations recommended to the Church by Minsk City Executive Committee officials, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum

18. Officials advised the Church to hold meetings in the cultural centre of Minsk Car Factory. "But they told us that there was no possibility to host us and refused to give a written denial." He noted that local authorities do not encourage organisations to rent premises for religious meetings (see below).

Pastor Goncharenko thinks that buying a new building is not possible. "No-one will sell us a religious building, and religious communities are not allowed to have regular religious meetings in a non-religious building," he commented bitterly (see below).

Rather than seeking meetings with officials, New Life Church is planning to send an open letter to the government setting out the facts. "All our meetings with officials ended up with them twisting whatever we said," Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18. "They always try to find some trick even in our humanitarian and social projects" (see below).

After the destruction of New Life Church, human rights defenders and others drew parallels with another place of worship in the city that officials have closed, the Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church). Officials closed the church for worship or any other activity after a suspicious minor fire in September 2022 (see below).

"I hope that at least they will not think of demolishing the Red Church in the same way," exiled Orthodox Christian and human rights defender Natallia Vasilevich noted on Telegram on 21 June (see below).

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 has appealed against the fine, imposed in a court hearing fellow-Baptists were denied access to (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2838). 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.

On 2 June, the regime made public the draft of the proposed new Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2839), prepared by the chief state religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak. The proposed new Law harshens the restrictive 2002 Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806), which human rights defenders at the time publicly condemned.

Officials gave only 10 days for comments, which Minsk's Lawtrend Centre for Legal Transformation criticised given the "exceptional significance of the draft Law for religious and social life". The proposed new Law is due to be considered by the non-freely elected Parliament in September (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2839).

New Life: Years of state pressure

The Minsk authorities have long exerted pressure on New Life Pentecostal Church, which has been functioning since 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 repeatedly denied the Church's requests to change its legal designation as a cowshed.

This was in contrast to a disused railway carriage (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) 500 metres from New Life's building which was without regime obstruction used from January 2001 by a community of the regime-supporting Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). That community has now built a church, also without any regime obstruction.

The regime repeatedly tried to evict New Life Church from 2009 onwards, and on 17 February 2021 30 police and court bailiffs forcibly evicted New Life from its building, using an angle grinder to cut the door lock to gain entry. The bailiff's enforcement order was signed by Aleksey Petrukovich, and he refused to explain to Forum 18 why the eviction happened and why force was used.

One New Life Church member suspected that the reason for the sudden eviction was that New Life recorded and on 21 November 2020 posted on its YouTube channel a video by church members protesting against the regime's violence against protestors objecting to election fraud (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806).

"We had just one day to remove our property before the [February 2021] eviction, and we were not allowed to take many things that belonged to the church and could be used in another building," New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko complained to Forum 18 on 21 June 2023. "These included radiators, doors, and electrical equipment." The excuse Capital Construction Management Company gave for this was that removing this church equipment would make the building "non-functional".

After being expelled from its own place of worship, New Life Church held its worship services in the car park outside each Sunday, whatever the weather. Minsk City Executive Committee subsequently rejected all New Life Church's attempts to seek permission to hold meetings either in the car park, or to have their church building returned to them, and threatened to liquidate the Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806).

Pastor Goncharenko was detained and fined in September 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"). Pastor

Antoni Bokun of Minsk's John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, who regularly supported New Life Church, was similarly detained and fined.

On 25 September 2022, police banned the Church's Sunday meeting for worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) held outdoors in its car park, threatening to detain anyone who did not leave. This forced New Life to halt the in-person worship meetings it had held in the church car park every Sunday, whatever the weather, since the February 2021 forcible eviction.

Since being banned from meeting for worship in the grounds of its own church, New Life Church has had to meet online and for in-person meetings borrow the building of the Protestant God's Grace Church in Minsk.

New Life: Destruction

After the eviction of the Church from its building in February 2021, Minsk City Executive Committee handed New Life's church building to Capital Construction Management Company, which the Executive Committee owns, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 on 21 June 2023. Minsk City Executive Committee claimed it planned to house some of its organisations there.

Initially the company posted guards to protect the building. However, the guard post was later removed and the empty building suffered attacks from people seeking valuables to steal, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18.

On 20 June 2023, without any public announcement, Capital Construction Management Company sent bulldozers to destroy New Life's church building. By later in the day, much of the building was reduced to rubble.

In a 20 June video address outside the destroyed building, posted on the Church's Telegram channel, Pastor Goncharenko described the destruction as "flagrant lawlessness". "God sees everything," he added, "and he sees today our suffering, our grief, our pain. He sees likewise today the mockery of wicked people. He sees their blasphemy." He warned that God would not leave unpunished those who attack "what is sacred".

Forum 18 called the Head Office of Capital Construction Management Company on 22 June to find out why the company allowed the building to deteriorate, did not allow New Life Church to remove its property, and eventually demolished the building. The secretary answered nervously: "It's not a question to us, maybe it concerns the [company's] district division."

The Deputy Director of Frunze District Capital Construction Management Company, Aleksandr Korzhanevsky, told Forum 18 on 22 June that the New Life Church building is not a property they have responsibility for.

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), absolutely refused to discuss the demolition of New Life Church. "I won't give any comments, ask Minsk City Executive Committee," he told Forum 18 on 21 June before putting the phone down.

Forum 18 called the Head of the Ideology Department of Minsk City Executive Committee, Olga Chemodanova, to find out why New Life Church was neither given a new place for worship nor compensated for being forcibly evicted from its own property. She did not answer her phone whenever Forum 18 called on 21 June. The Ideology Coordination Section also did not answer their phones when Forum 18 called the same day.

The secretary of the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee Aryom Tsuran refused to direct the call on 22 June and recommended to call the press service. Ilona Illarionova from the Press Service told Forum 18 that she did not know about New Life Church and promised to collect information later. "I have no information about the situation. I will ask my colleagues who are involved in this," she told Forum 18. She did not answer her phone when Forum 18 called later in the day.

Forum 18 was unable to get comments from the Architecture Committee on the reasons of demolishing the church building and any further plans, as the secretary refused to direct the call her superiors. "We do not give comments on the phone," she told Forum 18 on 22 June before putting the phone down.

New Life: What now for Church?

Since September 2022 (when the Church was banned from meeting in its own church grounds), New Life Church has been seeking a building to rent for worship meetings. However, it has been denied permission to rent buildings - even by organisations recommended to the Church by Minsk City Executive Committee officials, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18.

For example, officials advised the Church to hold meetings in the cultural centre of Minsk Car Factory (MAZ). "Though it is too far from our convenient location, we went there," Goncharenko told Forum 18. "But they told us that there was no possibility to host us and refused to give a written denial." He noted that local authorities do not encourage organisations to rent premises for religious meetings.

Pastor Goncharenko thinks that buying a new building is not possible. "No-one will sell us a religious building, and religious communities are not allowed to have regular religious meetings in a non-religious building," he commented bitterly.

Pastor Goncharenko pointed out that, in any of the Church's activities, including over social projects, state institutions unrelated to ideology are normally cooperative, but when it comes to gaining approval from state bodies that control religious activity, "all we get is restrictions and denials".

If the draft new Religion Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2839) is adopted in its current form, the Church is likely to face complications with the re-registration process which will be imposed on all registered religious communities, Pastor Goncharenko added. "The current law makes our life hard, and the new version will make it even more complicated, not only in terms of re-registration," he complained to Forum 18.

Rather than seeking meetings with officials, New Life Church is planning to send an open letter to the government setting out the facts. "All our meetings with officials ended up with them twisting whatever we said," Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18. "They always try to find some trick even in our humanitarian and social projects."

"I hope that at least they will not think of demolishing the Red Church in the same way"

After the destruction of Minsk's New Life Church, human rights defenders and others drew parallels with another place of worship in Minsk that regime officials have closed, the Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church).

"I hope that at least they will not think of demolishing the Red Church in the same way," exiled Orthodox Christian and human rights defender Natallia Vasilevich noted on Telegram on 21 June.

The Red Church – like other Catholic communities whose church building is still owned by the regime – remain vulnerable to regime pressure, initially through repeated refusals to return it to the community (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2815) and demands for payment of a massive "rental" charge (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) with a similarly large charge for building work the parish never agreed to.

Other Catholic churches have also faced regime pressure to pay "rent" for their own churches (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2815) after the regime stopped rent-free agreements with the parishes.

Regime pressure on the Red Church parish has increased following the regime's September 2022 forcible expulsion of the parish from its own church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2781) after a suspicious minor fire, blocking Catholic parishioners who want to pray, and attend Mass and other religious services.

In April 2023 officials denied the Red Church parish permission to hold an April 2023 Easter Mass (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2831) in church grounds. A diocesan Corpus Christi procession around Minsk churches on 11 June did not stop at the Red Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2838) for the first time since 1990.

When 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), whether officials had ordered the Catholic leadership to change the Corpus Christi procession route to avoid the Red Church, he claimed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2838): "I don't have such information." He then put the phone down.

"To our great regret, the believers of our parish this year were deprived of the opportunity to welcome Jesus Christ at our church," the parish noted on its website on 13 June. "All the parishioners experienced pain and sadness."

Parish priest Fr Vladislav Zavalnyuk decided to process round the church with the sacrament "in order to intercede with our Saviour Jesus Christ, who has been humiliated and expelled from his home for almost 9 months", with the prayer "that the stony hearts that keep the temple of God closed will be shaken as soon as possible".

Two parishioners who were returning from the Corpus Christi procession happened to see Fr Zavalnyuk as he knelt in prayer outside the doors of the church. "We understood that this man wanted to bring a part of the holiday here, to the closed doors of his sanctuary," they wrote in a message quoted on the parish website. "The holiday that the church was deprived of today."

Years of state pressure, expulsions from church buildings

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806). Officials often refuse this permission.

Communities like New Life Church and the Red Church parish in Minsk - which officials have expelled from their places of worship – can only meet for worship or exercise freedom of religion or belief in other ways in borrowed premises of other registered religious communities.

Protestant communities – such as Minsk's New Life Church - have generally found it impossible to get property redesignated so that it can be used for worship in line with the law. Orthodox and Catholic communities are less affected, partly because they are more likely to occupy designated historically preserved places of worship. In the 1990s, many such places of worship confiscated in the Soviet era were returned to their original community owners – if the communities were registered - at the request of communities. (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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