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BELARUS: After church bulldozed, New Life Church faces liquidation

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

A Minsk court will decide in a case due to begin on 6 October whether the 31-year-old New Life Full Gospel Church will be stripped of its legal status and become illegal. If so, any activity it undertakes could risk up to a two-year jail term. The hearing comes 15 weeks after the regime bulldozed its place of worship. The Minsk city official who prepared the liquidation suit refused to comment. One year on from a suspicious minor fire, Saints Simon and Helena Catholic Church (Red Church) in central Minsk remains closed. The draft new Religion Law reached parliament on 29 September.

On the morning of 6 October, Judge Tatyana Doroshchenok of Minsk City Court is due to begin hearing the city administration's suit to liquidate Minsk's New Life Full Gospel Church. The hearing comes some 15 weeks after the regime bulldozed New Life's place of worship. If the liquidation suit succeeds, the nearly 31-year-old Church will be stripped of its legal existence and any activity it undertakes would risk possible imprisonment.

Any activity by unregistered or liquidated religious communities can lead to prosecution under Criminal Code Article 193-1. This 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 Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department Yekaterina Kaverina prepared the liquidation suit. When Forum 18 asked her why the authorities intend to liquidate the New Life Church community, she said "excuse me" and put the phone down (see below).

Kaverina insisted in her suit that the church failed to re-register by 2004 as required by the restrictive 2002 Religion Law and carried out activities beyond its statute by holding a summer camp for children. She also noted that courts can liquidate organisations conducting "propaganda of war or extremist activities" (see below).

In late August, two Minsk courts banned as "extremist" the Church's website, social media accounts and several YouTube videos featuring the Church's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko (see below).

Pastor Goncharenko insists that officials rejected the Church's 2004 re-registration application because they objected to its use of its place of worship (see below).

The Head of the Full Gospel Union (to which New Life Church belongs), Bishop Leonid Voronenko, wrote to the regime's senior religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak, and to the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee, Artyom Tsuran, requesting the withdrawal of the liquidation suit. He received no responses, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 (see below).

The Head of the Religious Affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office Andrey Aryaev refused to discuss New Life Church's problems. "I have no information," he told Forum 18 (see below).

One year on from the suspicious minor fire in a side room in September 2022, the iconic Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) in central Minsk remains closed. Officials closed the church for worship or any other activity after the fire. They claim the Church will be able to re-open after repairs. No evidence of any repairs is visible from outside (see below).

Asked when the alleged repairs are due to end and the Church handed back for worship, the spokesperson for Minsk-Mogilev Catholic Diocese Fr Yuri Sanko responded: "We don't have access to the Church, we don't know" (see below).

A court in the northern Vitebsk Region fined Orthodox Christian Nikolai Bondar for a pilgrimage without state permission. He is the sixteenth person known to have been fined under the administrative offence of "Violation of the procedure for organising or

conducting a mass event or demonstration" to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief since the beginning of 2022 (see below).

Natalya Kochanova, speaker of the upper chamber of the non freely elected parliament, the Council of the Republic, told its opening autumn session on 19 September that the regime's proposed new Religion Law was undergoing "corrections". The draft Law reached the lower chamber of parliament, the House of Representatives, on 29 September. The Honest People civil society group noted on 15 August that the new version constitutes "total over-control, morphing into complete prohibitions and restrictions" (see below).

Three United Nations Special Rapporteurs strongly criticised the draft Law in a 28 August letter to the regime. The regime has not responded to the UN (see below).

New Life: Years of state pressure

New Life Church was founded in Minsk in 1992, gaining state registration in December of that year. It is a member of the Full Gospel Union, headed by Bishop Leonid Voronenko.

The Church has been led since its foundation by Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko. The Soviet authorities jailed his father, Leonid Goncharenko, for five years in the 1960s for exercising freedom of religion or belief, before Vyacheslav was born.

The regime repeatedly refused to change the legal designation of New Life's church building – a former cowshed – into a place of worship. The Church staged several hunger strikes to defend its place of worship. The authorities eventually seized the building in February 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2639) and bulldozed it in June 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2841).

In September 2022, police banned New Life Church from meeting for worship in the car park (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2777) of the building, where the congregation had met for worship each Sunday whatever the weather after officials forcibly evicted it. Police detained the Church's pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and another pastor Antoni Bokun. A judge fined each two months' average wage for leading a Sunday service which police had observed.

In August 2023, 20 armed police officers from the Organised Crime and Corruption Department searched Pastor Goncharenko's home in Minsk. "Why did they even try to threaten me with the search in my house? I would have come if I had been asked," he insisted to Forum 18. The following day, a court then jailed him for 10 days and the Church's youth pastor for 5 days (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851). The jailing of Pastor Goncharenko appeared timed to prevent him taking part in the first of the court hearings to declare the Church's internet materials "extremist".

In August 2021, the regime issued a large tax demand. It renewed the demand in July 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851), lodging a case to court in September 2023 (see below).

New Life: Liquidation suit

On 15 September, Minsk City Executive Committee lodged the liquidation suit to Minsk City Court. The Church received the official notification signed by the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee Artyom Tsuran and a copy of the suit.

In the claim to the court (seen by Forum 18), Deputy Head of Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department Yekaterina Kaverina insists that the church failed to re-register in 2004 according to the 2002 Religion Law and carried out activities beyond its statute.

"In the result of the investigation conducted by Molodechno Investigation Committee of the road accident on 10 July involving children going on a trip organised by the community, it is detected that besides the statutory activities the community conducted activities non-compliant to the goals and subjects indicated in the statute," the suit claims.

Kaverina also cites Minsk's Central District Court decision of 23 August declaring some of the Church's information "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2855). She notes that under Article 23, Part 1 of the Religion Law, "a community can be liquidated based on a court decision in the following cases: propaganda of war or extremist activities; activities violating citizens' rights, freedom and legal interests, and preventing citizens from fulfilling their state, social, family duties or harming their health and morality".

Forum 18 asked Kaverina on 2 October why the authorities intend to liquidate the New Life Church community and whether any note will be taken of the considerable social work carried out by the Church. She said "excuse me" and then put the phone down.

The Head of the Religious Affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office Andrey Aryaev refused to discuss New Life Church's problems. "I have no information," he told Forum 18 on 29 September.

Pastor Goncharenko argues that the reasons are not strong enough to liquidate the community. He explained that initially the Church was registered at a different address, but when it applied for re-registration in 2004 with the former cowshed address, the authorities rejected the documents.

Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 on 2 October that the Church has hired lawyers to fight the liquidation suit, as well as the suit over land tax (see below), and is "ready for the struggle".

"I do not understand why officials brought up this issue now after almost 10 years," the Pastor told Forum 18. He also explained that the summer camp was initiated by volunteers and parents and the Church was not involved. He speculates that the authorities are seeking revenge on the Church for years of resistance, disobedience and for the hunger strike to try to defend its property.

Pastor Goncharenko maintained that officials know about the numerous social projects that the Church has carried out, as it sent reports regularly to the city's Moscow District Executive Committee. "Unfortunately, these days these things do not count. Denial of registration will block all the activities of the Church," he lamented to Forum 18.

The Head of the Full Gospel Union, Bishop Leonid Voronenko, wrote to the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Aleksandr Rumak, and to the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee, Artyom Tsuran, requesting the withdrawal of the liquidation suit, but received no responses, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18.

New Life: Court sets 6 October for liquidation suit hearing

Minsk City Court assigned the suit to liquidate New Life Church to Judge Tatyana Doroshchenok. She has set the hearing in the case for 9:30 am on 6 October, according to the 25 September notification to the Church seen by Forum 18.

It remains unclear if the hearing will be open or closed. "The notification of the hearing gives no information on this," a church member told Forum 18 on 3 October. "But the hearing in another case about the Church was declared closed before it started. So anything is possible." Forum 18 could not reach any court official on 3 October.

If the court liquidates the Church, any activity it undertakes would risk possible imprisonment.

Any activity by unregistered or liquidated religious communities can lead to prosecution under Criminal Code Article 193-1. This 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. Article 193-1 was removed from the Criminal Code in July 2019, but was restored almost unchanged in January 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2764).

In July, Malorita District Prosecutor Fyodor Mikhovich in the south-western Brest Region summoned Council of Churches Baptist Vladimir Burshtyn. The Prosecutor threatened him with criminal prosecution for "Incitement of racial, ethnic, religious or other social hatred or discord" if he continues to share his faith in public. He had been fined in June just over a month's average pension for singing, sharing his faith and offering Christian literature to passers-by with fellow Baptists in Drogichin.

At least seven individuals in 2022 (including Pastor Goncharenko) and at least nine in 2023 are known to have been fined under Administrative Code Article 24.23 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2831) ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration") for exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission. Of those fined, 15 are Protestant. The most recent fine – in September 2023 – was of an Orthodox Christian (see below).

Asked what church members will do if New Life Church is liquidated, Pastor Goncharenko remarked that some who are not ready to cope with the situation now attend other churches, but for many the ties formed over years are not easy to break.

New Life: Tax demand reaches court

Minsk's Housing Repair and Utilities Association - which claims ownership of New Life's seized church building – issued a tax demand in August 2021 for 458,918.22 Belarusian Roubles - equivalent to more than 25 years' average wages for someone in work. On 18 July 2023 the tax demand was renewed. Housing Repair and Utilities Association Deputy Head Nataliya Kalistratova refused to explain to Forum 18 why the 2021 tax claim was being renewed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851).

The Housing Repair and Utilities Association lodged a suit against the Church to Minsk Economic Court demanding compensation for land tax which it claims now amounts to 460,862 Belarusian Roubles.

At the initial hearing on 11 September, Judge Katrin Drozdovskaya suspended consideration of the suit, asking the parties to provide more information and documents, the secretary of Minsk Economic Court told Forum 18 on 29 September.

"The Housing Repair and Utilities Association was asked to present the documents confirming its payment of the rent, and we were asked to show the documents proving ownership of the property," Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18.

Red Church: Closed for one year - so far

One year on from the suspicious minor fire in a side room in September 2022, the iconic Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) in central Minsk remains closed. Officials closed the church for worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2781) or any other activity after the fire.

Minsk Heritage, the building agency that has control of the Church, claimed that after the fire the electricity, heating and water supply were not functioning, and therefore it "cannot fulfil the lessor's obligations" and sealed the building.

In October 2022, the authorities cut off electricity, heating and water supply in the priest's house also, trying to force the head priest Fr Vladislav Zavalnyuk to vacate the building. However, Fr Zavalnyuk chose to stay in his home, working as a caretaker.

In the wake of the 2022 fire, officials insisted that after repair works were finished the Church would be re-opened.

Following the report of a group of priests who were allowed to come inside the Church in December 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2815), the damaged area was insignificant, the building had heating and electricity but there were no signs of repair works.

Red Church: Praying for the Church's reopening

The spokesperson for Minsk-Mogilev Catholic Diocese Fr Yuri Sanko told Forum 18 from Minsk on 2 October 2023 "The owner is conducting repairs." Asked when the alleged repairs are due to end and the Church handed back for worship, he responded: "We don't have access to the Church, we don't know."

However, a source who wished to stay anonymous recently visited the closed Red Church and confirmed to Forum 18 on 2 October that they saw no works going on inside. Asked if praying on the grounds outside the church is allowed, the individual remarked that a couple of people were praying but had not heard of any disturbance from the authorities. The individual also noted that Fr Zavalnyuk processes with the Cross around the Church every day, praying for its re-opening.

The katolik.life website maintains that Fr Zavalnyuk lives in the priest's house, which is still cut off from utilities, but remains a shelter for those who want to pray.

Parishioners say they are given only the "formal" reasons as to why the Church remains closed and no information on its condition. "Probably, the superior clergy have been privately informed of some demands, but neither the parishioners, nor the priest have any information," the katolik.life website quoted parishioners on 25 September. They said officials had taken Fr Zavalnyuk's computer, but "found nothing" on it. "No political statements were preached from the pulpit."

The parishioners added: "There's a feeling that the incident was prepared in advance, and everything was agreed ahead of time. It is only because a group of church members and priests did not give up that the priest's house was saved. The believers stay strong and pray."

After a year of the church closure, parishioners tried to arrange a meeting with officials of Presidential Administration, but were told that the meeting is "not expedient".

The parish had earlier disputes with Minsk Heritage over large financial demands for rent and compensation for building work expenses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2591) which were not agreed with the church council.

The authorities absolutely refuse to give any comments on why the church is closed and when it will be re-opened for Mass and other activities.

The secretary of Minsk Heritage Director Aleksandr Kokhan declined to discuss anything. "I cannot comment, please send us an official letter with your questions," she told Forum 18 on 29 September.

The Deputy Plenipotentiary Sergey Gerasimenya refused to answer when the Red Church will be returned to the parish or comment on the progress of repair works when Forum 18 called on 2 October. "If you are not officially accredited in Belarus, I am unable to give any comments your questions."

Higher fine for unapproved pilgrimage than for domestic violence

The sixteenth person known to have been fined for a religious event without state permission since the beginning of 2022 is Orthodox Christian Nikolai Bondar, a pensioner from Beshenkovichi in Vitebsk region.

On 17 July, police stopped a group of 15 Orthodox Christians in a small village in Grodno Region. The group were on a pilgrimage of 800 kms from Polotsk to Grodno from 18 June until 21 July, praying for peace and love between all nations.

Police stopped the pilgrimage after someone lodged a complaint, Bondar told Forum 18 on 1 October. Police then drew up a record of an offence against him and handed it to court. After identity checks, police allowed the group to continue and finish the pilgrimage.

Bondar explained that he could not get the official permission required for any public events as he applied for it too late. He insisted that officials at Vitebsk Region Executive Committee are "always very supportive and understanding" and added: "This was the first time for 20 years when we had such an incident."

On 15 September, Judge Yekaterina Matskevich of Beshenkovichi District Court found Bondar guilty under Administrative Code Article 24.23, Part 2 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"), according to the decision seen by Forum 18. She fined him 20 base units, 740 Belarusian Roubles, equivalent to about one month's average pension.

A court elsewhere in Belarus in September fined a man who had subjected his wife to serious violent domestic abuse needing medical attention to a fine of just 10 base units, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. This was half the fine handed to Bondar for leading an unapproved religious event.

Bondar told Forum 18 that he paid the fine with the help of the parish. "Even the judge said that with all her understanding, she cannot ignore the record," Bondar commented to Forum 18.

Draft new Religion Law, after "corrections", now in parliament

The regime's new Religion Law was among six draft new Laws proposed by the government which were undergoing "corrections" before being presented to parliament, Natalya Kochanova, speaker of the upper chamber of the non freely elected parliament, the Council of the Republic, told its opening autumn session on 19 September.

The proposed new Law was prepared by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak. If adopted in the version made public in June, the new Law would continue and even increase many of the restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2854). It would also require all registered religious communities to gain re-registration within a year if they wish to continue to function.

The draft Law - now titled "on amendments to laws on questions of the activity of religious organisations" - was presented to the lower chamber of parliament, the House of Representatives, on 29 September, according to its website. The draft Law has been assigned to the Human Rights, Ethnic Relations and the Media Commission, with deputy Lyudmila Zdorikova overseeing its adoption. No date has yet been set for the first reading. The text is not available, so it is not clear what laws other than the Religion Law might be amended.

Human Rights defenders have criticised the draft new Law. "The Lukashenko regime has also now increased control over religion," the Honest People civil society group noted on 15 August (https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv-UXMvKius/?img_index=1). "An entire law was rewritten for this purpose." The group said that, according to the draft text made public in June, the new version constitutes "total over-control, morphing into complete prohibitions and restrictions".

(A Vitebsk court banned Honest People's website and social media pages as "extremist" on 22 February 2022, with a further ban by a Mogilev court on 17 October 2022.)

On 28 August 2023, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs wrote to the Belarusian regime expressing concerns over many provisions of the proposed new Law (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28342>) that "would fail to meet Belarus' obligations under international human rights law". Concerns focused on even tighter registration requirements and increased monitoring and surveillance of religious organisations.

The Rapporteurs - Anaïs Marin (Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus), Clement Nyaletsossi Voule (Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association) and Nazila Ghanea (Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief) - urged the regime to "review and reconsider certain key aspects of the law to ensure that it complies with Belarus' international human rights law obligations". They urged it not to "rush the process" of adopting the draft Law.

As of 3 October, the UN website records no response to the Rapporteurs' letter from the Belarusian government. (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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