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BELARUS: Fate of unregistered religious communities still uncertain

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs has claimed that "over 99 per cent" of religious communities have re-registered under the repressive 2002 religion law, but some have undergone what the State Committee calls "self-liquidation". Forum 18 News Service notes that re-registered religious organisations have also essentially agreed to abide by harsh restrictions, such as one rejected by Baptists in Brest who do not agree with Article 14 of the law, which restricts a religious organisation to only functioning where it is registered. A charismatic church has received an official refusal as its premises have not been approved by the emergency services. One Messianic Jewish community told Forum 18 that city authorities are disputing its right to rent premises, claiming that rental of the premises concerned is prohibited. Religious groups can be liquidated if a public event they organise causes any harm to the "public interest", even alleged disruption to public transport. Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches were effectively banned from re-registering.

At a press conference held in Minsk on 30 November, officials of the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs announced the final results of two-year compulsory re-registration under the republic's 2002 religion law. The re-registration process itself, they maintained, had "positive influenced the activity of religious organisations and assisted both further development of church-state relations and respect for citizens' rights to freedom of conscience and belief."

According to the State Committee's official press release received by Forum 18 News Service, the total number of local religious organisations that passed re-registration was 2,677 out of a possible 2,783. While 106 communities therefore failed to obtain re-registration, the State Committee claims that the level of re-registration across Belarus was "over 99 per cent" by including 84 of their number since they reportedly voluntarily submitted applications for liquidation. Such requests for "self-liquidation", states the press release, were "motivated by the de facto disintegration of the religious organisation before the start of the re-registration process due to believers moving to another place of residence or to the founders of a religious organisation ceasing to participate in its activity."

Thus, since they either re-registered or requested "self-liquidation", the State Committee claims that the Belarusian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Old Believer, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, New Apostolic, Judaic and Muslim confessions all fully re-registered. (According to the Committee's criteria, the Church of Christ, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, commonly known as the Mormons) and Latin-rite Catholics also fully re-registered, but they are not mentioned.) Of the 84 local religious communities that reportedly requested liquidation, the press release mentions 61 by confession – 11 Orthodox, three Old Believer, four Roman Catholic, 17 Baptist and 26 Pentecostal. Of the remaining 23, State Committee official Aleksandr Kalinov accounted for 19 when providing Forum 18 with preliminary figures on 16 November – eight Full Gospel, four Muslim, two Jewish, two Lutheran, one Church of Christ, one Baha'i and one LDS Church.

For Aleksandr Kalinov and religious representatives' explanations of why some communities from the confessions mentioned above did not re-register, see F18News 17 November http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454 and 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463. The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186), and close supervision by officials of religious communities is an integral part of central state policy (see F18News 9 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=248).

According to the State Committee's 30 November press release, 22 religious communities are not re-registered to date. It claims that five do not have a valid legal address, two have less than minimum membership, six do not have statutes corresponding to the requirements of the 2002 religion law, four did not apply, three are still being considered and two no longer exist. From information obtained so far from state and religious representatives in Belarus, Forum 18 calculates these 22 to include ten Baptist, three Full Gospel, two Pentecostal, two Calvinist, one Messianic Jewish and two Krishna Consciousness communities.

Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches were in 2003 effectively banned from re-registering (see F18News 2 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=23 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=24, as well as 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 22 November, the general secretary to the Belarusian Baptist Union said that all of his organisation's member communities that wished to re-register had done so, "whether with or without difficulty". Viktor Kryuchko also claimed that the Union did not compile data, so he was unable to tell Forum 18 even approximately how many had not wished to re-register. However, he stressed that if these communities encountered state harassment, the Union would intercede for them and publicise details.

Two of the Baptist communities without re-registration are the pair in Minsk region which sought to re-register as Reformed Baptists (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454). Others, as Kryuchko pointed out, are independent.

One such church is the autonomous registered Baptist church on Fortechnaya Street in the western city of Brest. Contacted by Forum 18 on 18 November, its principal pastor Viktor Zdanevich said that, while the community has yet to receive any formal response to its re-registration application, its members do not agree with Article 14 of the 2002 religion law, which states that a religious organisation may function only within the limit of the territory upon which it is registered – in this case, the city of Brest. Pastor Zdanevich explained to Forum 18 that his church has declined to compromise with this provision in its re-registration application, and is simply holding special daily prayer services for a positive outcome to the situation. A further four autonomous registered Baptist congregations in Brest region are in a similar position, he added. (For more on Fortechnaya Street Baptist Church, see F18News 13 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=162).

Forum 18 notes that, while those religious organisations which have successfully re-registered retain their legal personality status, they have essentially agreed to abide by the 2002 law's harsh restrictions on religious activity, such as the one rejected by the Brest Baptists. Under the law, all unregistered group religious activity is illegal (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=154).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 1 December, the head of the charismatic Full Gospel Association said that three of its communities have not passed re-registration. Aleksandr Sakovich explained that a congregation in Dzerzhinsk (Minsk region) has received an official refusal on the grounds that its worship premises have not been approved by the emergency services, one in Borisov [Barysaw] (Minsk region) has yet to hear, while New Life Church in Minsk city has received an oral refusal. (See F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454) He added that further liquidations would be accounted for by the fact that four Full Gospel congregations had left the Association and registered anew.

Bishop Sergei Khomich of the Belarusian Pentecostal Union told Forum 18 on 22 November that all of the 482 congregations in his organisation that wished to re-register had done so. The small number that had not, he said, had dwindled to fewer than ten members due to village depopulation. (While the 2002 religion law stipulates a minimum of 20 members, regional religious affairs officials earlier told Forum 18 that they would accept ten members for the re-registration of an existing community, as this was the number required for initial registration under the 1992 religion law.) Bishop Khomich did not know whether they would be able to continue religious activity.

The Presbyterian of the Calvinist Minsk Reformed Church, Aleksei Frolov, told Forum 18 on 22 November that his congregation was still in the process of re-registration.

Minsk-based Pastor Nikolai Khaskin of the Zion-Jerusalem Messianic Jewish community told Forum 18 on 24 November that the city authorities are disputing the congregation's right to rent premises belonging to a social organisation, maintaining that this is prohibited under municipal rulings preventing religious organisations from hiring cultural establishments for worship (See F18News 8 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=156). Khaskin argues that this does not affect private property, and added that his community's re-registration application could still be under consideration for several weeks.

Legal restrictions on public religious events exist in Belarus and religious groups can be liquidated (and therefore made illegal) if an event they organise causes any harm to the "public interest", even alleged disruption to public transport (see F18News 1 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=131).

Also speaking to Forum 18 on 22 November, Sergei Malakhovsky of the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness said that the preliminary stage of his community's court appeal against its re-registration refusal (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463) would be on 7 December, when its representatives will meet the judge who will preside over the case. Meanwhile, he added, Minsk City Council representatives have suggested that the community rent office accommodation so as to re-register and preserve its legal personality status. "But that isn't viable because we wouldn't be able to meet there," Malakhovsky remarked, "and we would still lose the building into which we have sunk all our funds." (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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