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BELARUS: Final warning for Minsk charismatic church?

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

State authorities in Minsk, Belarus' capital, have given the charismatic New Life Church a second official warning under the religion law, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Under the law, two official warnings are sufficient grounds for banning the church. The latest warning states that the church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, organised and held "prayer readings and sermons on premises not specially designed for the holding of religious events" without corresponding permission from the [state] administration. The church is appealing against this, arguing that the court hearing was accompanied by procedural violations so it cannot be grounds for either an official warning or liquidation. Procedural violations included insufficient time to prepare a defence due to delivery of the court summons on the eve of the midday hearing, and admission of only seven out of 100 defence witnesses due to the small size of the courtroom – and only after the verdict was announced. The official warning was issued after Pastor Goncharenko's conviction for "illegal" religious activity and a fine imposed on him of 30 times the monthly minimum wage.

The state authorities in Minsk now have sufficient means to ban the Belarusian capital's charismatic New Life Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On 4 April Minsk city administration gave the church a second official warning under the 2002 Belarusian religion law, which states that two official warnings constitute grounds to file for the court liquidation of a religious organisation.

The latest warning, a copy of which has been received by Forum 18, notes that the church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, "committed violations of the established procedure for organising and holding religious events at 12.00 hours on 23 January 2005 and approximately 12.00 hours on 20 February 2005, manifested in the organisation and holding of meetings with prayer readings and sermons on premises not specially designed for the holding of religious events" without corresponding permission from the [state] administration at the moment of the [police] check-ups." The warning is issued in connection with Goncharenko's subsequent prosecution and fine on 22 March, vice-chairman of Minsk city administration Mikhail Petrushin explains in the document (see F18News 23 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=530).

New Life Church intends to appeal against the 22 March ruling and fine of 720,000 Belarusian roubles (approximately 2,090 Norwegian kroner, 255 Euros or 330 US dollars). This fine is the equivalent of 30 times the minimum monthly wage, which the court demanded should be paid by 6 April 2005. A statement on the church's website argues that, since the court hearing against Pastor Goncharenko was accompanied by procedural violations, it cannot serve as grounds for either an official warning or liquidation. The website details these violations, including insufficient time to prepare a defence due to delivery of the court summons on the eve of the midday hearing, and admission of only seven out of 100 defence witnesses due to the small size of the courtroom – and only after the judge had announced the verdict.

Refused rental of premises by every district administration in Minsk before September 2004, New Life congregation has since been meeting for worship at a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002. The Minsk city authorities have denied the church permission to use this building for worship, to reconstruct it as a prayer house and to register at its address (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454 and 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477). Under the restrictive 2002 religion law, all religious events require state permission, unless held at a purpose-built house of worship.

Minsk city administration first gave New Life an official warning on 30 December 2004 (see F18News 25 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=498), after church administrator Vasily Yurevich was fined 150 times the minimum monthly wage on 28 December 2004 for organising religious services at the cowshed without state permission (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480). While New Life members argued that no one could be considered the organiser of their meetings since "each person attends of their own initiative and free will," the procuracy maintained that there were "no grounds" to doubt the testimonies of three police officers that resulted in Yurevich's prosecution.

State officials at various levels have repeatedly told Forum 18 that New Life's predicament is "all their fault," that they cannot register or worship at the cowshed because "you can only keep cows in a cowshed," and that they cannot reconstruct the building either, due to the absence of a prayer house in municipal plans to develop the area already approved by President Aleksandr Lukashenko. A disused railway carriage 500 metres (yards) away from the New Life cowshed is used by an Orthodox community, and one official told Forum 18 that an Orthodox church would be built as part of the new suburb (see F18News 16 December 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477, 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516 and 16 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=525).

A March 2000 analysis of one of New Life's sister congregations by an expert at the Belarusian State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs concludes that it is a "neo-mystical religious-political destructive sect" whose growth poses "a significant threat to the individual, society and state" (see F18News 4 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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