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BELARUS: Liquidated church pledges to continue services

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

Pastor Ernst Sabilo – who spent 13 years in Soviet labour camps for his faith – has pledged that the Belarusian Evangelical Church he leads in the capital Minsk will continue to meet for worship despite the liquidation of its legal status by the city court on 20 September. Belarus' restrictive 2002 religion law bans unregistered religious activity. "They could fine us for gathering – but we have no other option," Sabilo told Forum 18 News Service. The liquidation came a month after the same court liquidated a Calvinist church. A whole range of other religious communities which failed to gain re-registration by the deadline remain in legal uncertainty, Forum 18 has found. The pastor of a Protestant church in Minsk region denied re-registration and ordered to "liquidate itself" told Forum 18 he is optimistic a new registration application will be successful.

The pastor of the Minsk-based Belarusian Evangelical Church, whose legal status was liquidated by Minsk City Court on 20 September, has pledged that his church will continue to meet for worship, despite the fact that the country's restrictive 2002 religion law declares that without state registration religious communities may not operate legally. "They could fine us for gathering – but we have no other option," Pastor Ernst Sabilo told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 27 September. "I didn't have good relations with the Soviet authorities either." He said he intends to appeal the court decision to the Supreme Court. The liquidation came one month after the same court deprived the Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Church of its legal status.

Under the 2002 Religion Law, religious communities which held state registration prior to the law's adoption were obliged to bring their activities in line with it and re-register by 16 November 2004. Many other religious communities which failed to gain re-registration by the deadline have been left without legal status, Forum 18 has found.

Pastor Sabilo – who spent 13 years in a Soviet prison camp after being convicted in 1951 for "speaking about my religious convictions and the political injustice of Soviet power" – has tried in vain to re-register his church. An 18 July hearing at Minsk City Court adjourned the liquidation of the church for two months when it emerged that the city's executive committee had insufficiently assisted the 60-strong Belarusian-speaking community to re-register (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619). This apparent concern for the church turned out to be false, however, Pastor Sabilo told Forum 18. "They deceived me - when I rang the court the following week the judge said that the authorities were not actually obliged to do anything at all."

The reason for the church's liquidation – its lack of state-approved, non-residential worship premises as required by the 2002 law – proved insurmountable, he said. "We put adverts explaining our predicament in the newspapers but no one responded." The church now faces court fees of 127,500 Belarusian roubles (376 Norwegian kroner, 48 Euros or 58 US dollars), Sabilo told Forum 18. "That's more than half my pension."

Similarly continuing to meet "underground" in the wake of its 22 August liquidation is the Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Church, its pastor told Forum 18 on 27 September. "It's dangerous as they could levy fines as high as 2000 US dollars [13,086 Norwegian kroner or 1,663 Euros]," remarked Lyavon Lipen. "We don't have that sort of money." The small Calvinist community refused to re-register, he said, "because we decided it was better for religious freedom not to recognise this [2002] law. Perhaps they would like us to re-register and sit quietly so that outsiders would see that Calvinists had accepted the law and assume everything was alright." In particular, he pointed to the law's failure to mention Calvinism despite its strong historical impact upon Belarus (see F18News 31 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=172). "They are consciously trying to destroy the Reformed Church as testimony to the Western culture of Belarus."

To Forum 18's knowledge, these two religious organisations are the first to lose their legal right to function against their wishes. Following last year's deadline for re-registration, a small number of communities belonging to a wide range of confessions – including Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Baha'i – were considered by the authorities to have "self-liquidated". This was indeed the case as far as Forum 18 could discern (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454 and 1 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=465). Several which did not manage to re-register before the deadline or which were initially refused have since done so (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=558 and 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560).

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While being denied re-registration – commonly due to the great difficulty in finding state-approved, non-residential worship premises – several other communities have not yet been liquidated, including the embattled charismatic New Life Church in Minsk. The pastor of Word of Truth, another charismatic church in the Full Gospel Association to be refused re-registration under the 2002 religion law, told Forum 18 on 29 September that his local district executive committee in Dzerzhinsk, in Minsk region, had insisted a month ago that the church "liquidate itself". Instead, the 40-strong community submitted a second re-registration application at regional level, said Nikolai Kozel. He expects to receive a response soon, and is optimistic that it would be positive. "We have found a valid legal address – all our papers are in order."

Similarly denied re-registration, the independent Minsk-based Ark Pentecostal Church has also yet to be liquidated, Ira Tankhilevich of the 200-strong community told Forum 18 on 29 September. "The church has not been closed down but we can't operate officially." She pointed out that it can take the tax authorities approximately three years to liquidate commercial organisations, however. "It doesn't happen that quickly."

Having rejected their registration applications, the state authorities have not yet filed for the liquidation of the two Reformed Baptist churches in Belarus either, the pastor of the community in Gatovo in Minsk region told Forum 18 on 29 September. Vladimir Bukanov did point out, however, that Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of the Minsk community was currently being challenged by the executive committee in the city's Partisan District over the residential building it uses for worship. "If you fit in with their law the authorities will register you," Bukanov remarked to Forum 18. "But it means that they can demand documents which have no place in a church, like a complaints and suggestions book or health and safety records. We don't want to be controlled like a shop or restaurant."

Also denied re-registration following last year's deadline (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=558), representatives of the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness were not available for comment when Forum 18 called.

Several communities belonging to the charismatic Embassy of God Church, based in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, are similarly unable to register or re-register in Belarus (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619). A small Minsk-based Buddhist group is in the same position, but has so far been able to meet without obstruction (see F18News 25 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=498).

A Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR - which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate) priest was subject to four lengthy "discussions" about his unregistered religious activity near Minsk earlier this year (see F18News 6 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=577). ROCOR has not been able to register its three parishes in Belarus, as the state grants legal status to Orthodox communities only if they have the approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop (see F18News 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177).

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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