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BELARUS: Third massive fine for organising religious worship

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The administrator of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church, Vasily Yurevich, has been fined a third time for leading unauthorised worship. The latest fine is the massive amount of 3,825,000 Belarusian roubles (11,645 Norwegian Kroner, 1,488 Euros or 1,780 US Dollars), which is well over 10 times the average monthly wage in Belarus. The official text of the local court decision, which has been seen by Forum 18, relies upon police testimony – which Yurevich and congregation members strongly dispute - identifying him as the organiser of a Sunday service "by his outward appearance." New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko – who has also been fined for unsanctioned worship – insisted that the church would continue to meet for worship. It has also been denied state permission to turn a disused cowshed it purchased into a church building, on the grounds that it is technically a cowshed. A number of other Protestant churches have also reported recent moves by state officials to limit their religious activity, on the basis of technical violations.

The administrator of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church, Vasily Yurevich, has been fined a third time the massive amount of 3,825,000 Belarusian Roubles (11,270 Norwegian Kroner, 1,434 Euros or 1,727 US Dollars) for leading unauthorised worship. The average wage in Belarus is estimated to be between 100 and 150 US Dollars per month. The official text of the 7 October local court decision, which has been seen by Forum 18 News Service, relies upon police testimony identifying him as the organiser of the congregation's 4 September Sunday service "by his outward appearance." Yurevich had argued that he was on leave at the time, did not enter the church building and was present only to talk to Mayor of Minsk Mikhail Pavlov if he accepted New Life's invitation to speak at the service about the city authorities' recent decision to confiscate the church's land (see F18News 1 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=640).

While meted out milder punishments, a number of other Protestant churches have also reported recent moves by state officials to limit their religious activity on the basis of technical violations (see eg. F18News 30 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664).

Yurevich has already been given two similarly massive fines for the same offence (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480 and 28 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=661), and was on this third occasion found guilty of violating the procedure for conducting religious gatherings as set out in the law on demonstrations, whose requirement of state permission for public meetings was extended in 1999 to religious organisations in instances where their gatherings are not held at specially designated religious buildings or sites.

In addition to being refused permission to rent public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk, New Life has been denied state permission to turn a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002 into a church building as well as to hold services there – on the grounds that it is technically a cowshed. Similar obstacles have not been placed by the authorities against an Orthodox community's use for worship of a disused railway carriage 500 metres (yards) away from the cowshed (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516).

The Administrative Violations Code holds the leader and/or organiser of religious meetings responsible for failing to observe the legal procedure for holding them. In this latest case, Judge Nadezhda Reutskaya accepted police officers' testimony that Yurevich must have been the organiser of the 4 September service because one policewoman "spoke to him as the person responsible," "people approached him, he greeted them and invited them to enter the church" and "his outward appearance differed from church members, who were simply dressed while he wore a suit." Although New Life lawyer Sergei Lukanin and a church member told Minsk's Moscow District Court that Yurevich was speaking to police and journalists outside the church and did not participate in the service, Judge Reutskaya ruled that there was no contradiction between the witness statements and that they all supported his conviction.

Yurevich, who has paid neither his first nor second fine, has told Forum 18 that New Life members formally decided on 21 November 2004 that they attend church services on their own initiative. He is currently preparing to file an appeal against the latest fine with Minsk City Court. Speaking to Radio Free Europe in the wake of the fine, New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko – who has also been fined for unapproved worship (see F18News 23 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=530) – insisted that the church would continue to meet for services at its former

cowshed. He also pointed out that the congregation was the first to encounter such difficulties: "We were the first to be thrown out of houses of culture. The authorities are banking upon dealing with us first in order to intimidate the rest."

This is not the only instance of a repeat fine been handed down to a church leader. In western Belarus, the pastor of a Pentecostal church in Kobrin (Brest region) was issued a second fine of 25,000 Belarusian roubles (74 Norwegian Kroner, 9 Euros or 11 US Dollars) on 17 October for not having a fire extinguisher of the correct capacity. "I was told I needed one holding 10 litres, whereas ours holds five or eight," Nikolai Radkovich commented to the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre. "But I believe the main reason for the visit was that our church is unregistered." Radkovich was fined almost two years ago for leading unregistered worship but encountering no subsequent restrictions (see F18News 12 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=212).

The Evangelical Belarus Information Centre also reported that in western Belarus the Brest congregation belonging to the Baptist Council of Churches, whose communities refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries, prevented the private building which they have used as a prayer house since 1990 from being sealed by the local authorities on 17 October. On 14 October the Baptist Council of Churches said that the owner of the building, Mariya Khotynyuk, reported that she was fined the equivalent of 24 US Dollars [51,569 Belarusian Roubles, 157 Norwegian Kroner, or 20 Euros] on 11 October after a health and safety inspector found the building to be in violation of sanitation regulations and prohibited its use.

Two Baptist Union congregations report some recent improvements in their situation, however. In Brest region, a church in Orekhovsky village founded three years ago by Baptist missionaries from nearby Divin village was finally registered by the local authorities on 28 August after reportedly being refused three times on the basis that "there are already so many Protestant churches."

On 9 September a second Baptist Union congregation was granted permission by Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] city authorities in north-east Belarus to turn the private building it uses for services into a prayer house, although subsequent reconstruction plans will still have to be approved by the relevant state departments.

The restrictive 2002 religion law permits worship only by registered religious organisations in either designated places of worship or venues which have been approved by the local state authorities.

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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