

3 June 2003

BELARUS: Pentecostal evangelist to challenge fine

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

After a night-time visit by two police officers and a religious affairs official to an address rented by the Pentecostal Union in Zheludok, local evangelist Mikhail Balyk was fined 13 US dollars for allegedly conducting worship services in the town. Balyk told Forum 18 News Service that no worship services were taking place at the address cited - a domestic residence - and is preparing to appeal. His lawyer Dina Shavtsova told Forum 18 that unregistered religious organisations are often fined in this way, up to a maximum of 35 dollars. The main victims are small, established groups in rural areas.

A Pentecostal evangelist is refusing to pay a fine for allegedly conducting worship services in the town of Zheludok, in the western Grodno region. Mikhail Balyk, who rejects the accusation, was nevertheless fined 26,600 Belarusian roubles (85 Norwegian kroner, 11 Euros or 13 US dollars) on 27 May by the administrative commission of the Molodechno municipal administration. Balyk told Forum 18 News Service from Grodno on 2 June that no worship services were taking place at the address cited - a domestic residence. He is preparing to lodge an appeal and has until 6 June to do so.

At 1 am on a night in early May, the Minsk-based Freedom of Conscience Information Centre told Forum 18, two police officers and a local administration official dealing with religious affairs visited a Zheludok address rented by the Grodno regional branch of the Pentecostal Union and drew up a protocol against Balyk for conducting illegal worship services.

A 20 May document issued by the municipal administration specifically accused him of "organising and conducting evangelisation meetings and other religious ceremonies every Sunday between 2 and 3 pm" at an address in the town. The document (of which Forum 18 has received a copy) states that such activity constitutes a violation of Article 193 of the administrative offences code.

This article specifies that "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure, or the organisation and conducting by the leaders and members of this organisation of children's and youth meetings, as well as work, literary and other circles bearing no relation to the exercise of the religion, attracts the imposition of a fine of up to five times the minimum wage."

"There is a vicious circle in our legislation," Balyk told Forum 18. According to the new law on religion, "you can register and so function legally only once your religious organisation has 20 members," he explained, but under the administrative code "you can't start a religious organisation without registering it".

The state authorities committed a number of procedural violations in drawing up the protocol against Balyk, his lawyer Dina Shavtsova claims. She told Forum 18 from the capital Minsk on 2 June that the police approached the young evangelist on a Friday, not at the time of the illegal activity of which he is accused, and thus have no proof that he created or led an unregistered religious organisation. Balyk added that a protocol should be drawn up in a person's presence after he has given a statement, which did not take place in his case.

Shavtsova told Forum 18 that unregistered religious organisations are often fined in this way, up to a maximum sum of 35 dollars. The main victims are small, established groups in rural areas, she said, and confirmed that the new religion law did not oblige local authorities to re-register local religious organisations, even if they are affiliated to a religious organisation that has re-registered on the republican level.

Balyk's official position is as an evangelist with the Grodno regional branch of the Pentecostal Union, which has recently passed re-registration on the republican level, as the chairman of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, Stanislav Buko, confirmed to Forum 18 on 28 May.

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