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BELARUS: Pastor imprisoned for leading home worship

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

To Forum 18 News Service's knowledge, the ten-day prison term handed down on 3 March to Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of the Minsk-based Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church for conducting religious worship in his own home is the first time for some twenty years that religious worship has incurred a prison sentence on the territory of Belarus. "We expected that my father would be found guilty," the pastor's son Yaroslav Vyazovsky remarked on the day of the trial. "What we did not expect at all is the punishment for his 'crime'. This was a real shock to all of us who were present." The church tried and failed to get re-registration under Belarus' highly restrictive 2002 religion law, which in defiance of international human rights conventions bans all but occasional religious worship in private homes. District administration leaders sent officials several times to raid Vyazovsky's church "with the aim of exposing religious organisations without registration".

Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of the Minsk-based Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church was sentenced to ten days' imprisonment on 3 March for conducting religious worship in his own home, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "The accusations against him were that people were reading the Bible, praying and singing hymns in his house," Vladimir Bukanov, a fellow Reformed Baptist pastor who was at Friday's hearing, told Forum 18 later the same day. The judge at Partisan District Court gave no explanation for the sentence, he added, "only that it was not open to appeal." To Forum 18's knowledge, this is the first time since before the Soviet era of perestroika twenty years ago that religious worship has incurred a prison sentence on the territory of Belarus. The church was forced to hold its Sunday service on 5 March without its pastor.

"We expected that my father would be found guilty," Yaroslav Vyazovsky remarked in a message received by Forum 18 on the evening of 3 March. "What we did not expect at all is the punishment for his 'crime'. This was a real shock to all of us who were present."

According to Yaroslav Vyazovsky, some 25 Reformed Baptist pastors and church members attended the ninety-minute court hearing, which was followed by an hour's wait for the verdict and a further two hours' wait for it to be issued in written form. "From the court my father was taken straight to the police station and from there to jail. I had just enough time to go home and bring him warm clothes and some food."

Pastor Bukanov told Forum 18 on 6 March that, in what they intend to be a show of support for their pastor, all church members are planning to go en masse to greet Pastor Vyazovsky when he is released from prison about midday on Monday 13 March.

A combination of restrictions contained in the Administrative Violations Code and the 2002 Religion Law bans all but occasional and small-scale religious meetings in private homes, and religious activity outside designated houses of worship unless it has advance approval from the state authorities. A first offence is punishable by either a warning, a fine of between 20 and 150 times the minimum wage or three to 15 days' imprisonment. A repeat offence within one year is punishable by either a fine of between 150 and 300 times the minimum wage or ten to 15 days' imprisonment.

On 25 November 2005 Partisan District Court issued a warning to Pastor Vyazovsky following police check-ups on his home services on 26 May 2005 and 30 October 2005 (see F18News 15 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=705). An appeal against the court's decision was rejected by Minsk City Court on 10 January 2006.

Typically, first time offenders have been warned or handed down small fines (see F18News 20 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=87 and 26 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=263), although these have been rising more recently (see F18News 11 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=558 and 15 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=688). Those prosecuted a second time have so far received heavy fines rather than prison sentences (see F18News 28 September http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=661, 25 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676 and 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

On 22 February Pastor Vyazovsky described to Forum 18 how a local district official interrupted the Sunday service at his Minsk home on 5 February, attended by approximately 30 worshippers (see F18News 23 February 2006

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=734). Officially summoned to Partisan District Court at lunchtime on 22 February - the same day that the case against him was due to be heard - he explained that he was unable to attend and that the hearing was consequently postponed to 3 March.

On 23 February Pastor Vyazovsky sent Forum 18 copies of the court materials to be used in the 3 March hearing. These include two photographs of worship at his home and three witness statements, all dated 5 February.

In the first, Vyazovsky's neighbour from across the street, Natalya Konsichin, states: "As far as I know, there is a church in that house and on Sundays people gather there. I don't know exactly why they gather, whether they pray or sing hymns. The church doesn't bother us, we don't hear any loud noises from it."

The other, very similar statements are from the two state representatives who interrupted the 5 February service - local senior police officer Dmitri Lovkis and head of Partisan District's Social Protection Department, Vladimir Filipkov. According to these, the pair were sent on a "raid" [the English word is used] by the leadership of Partisan District "with the aim of exposing religious organisations without registration". In October 2005, recalls Lovkis, "we uncovered the fact that the owner of the said house [Georgi Vyazovsky] was organising and holding a religious gathering with prayers and hymns in a place not designed for the holding of religious gatherings, and without the relevant permission."

When the pair checked up on Vyazovsky's house on 5 February, according to Filipkov, "there were about 20 people present in the house, and a worship service with hymns was taking place. The hall where the people were located was equipped with benches for seating, a rostrum with a Christian cross and audio equipment. Vyazovsky was present at the service in person and was to be found in the hall, his son was behind the rostrum. Vyazovsky, seeing my presence, and also that I was taking photographs of the hall and those present, led me out of the hall."

Senior Lieutenant Lovkis did not enter the house. "In answer to my request to pass and see what was going on," he writes in his report to the local district police colonel, "[Vyazovsky] refused to let me into the hall, saying that he was not conducting a religious gathering and that his relatives were in the hall. After Filipkov said that he had gone into the hall, seen that a religious gathering was taking place and taken some photographs, Vyazovsky told us to leave his house."

Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church unsuccessfully sought independent re-registration under the restrictive 2002 religion law after previously being affiliated to the mainstream Baptist Union (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454 and 30 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664). (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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