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BELARUS: Government to make U-turn on charismatic church?

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

Belarusian authorities may be preparing to reverse their position towards New Life Church in the capital Minsk, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A senior state official has stated that President Aleksandr Lukashenko was aware of New Life's situation, regarding them as "a normal church in need of assistance." The official then made a "strong recommendation" to New Life's Pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, that the church try another appeal to the Higher Economic Court. New Life has now done this, but the church's lawyer, Sergei Lukanin, stressed to Forum 18 that the congregation will continue public protests until it has the legal return of its land and building and the right to worship there. Previous state promises to resolve the situation have been broken. New Life's high-profile public protests over the past two weeks – including hunger strikes throughout Belarus, daily services, and international support - appear to be responsible for the president's sudden attention. New Life has been fined for meeting, as have other churches in Belarus - such as a Baptist church in Minsk, which was fined this month.

Belarusian state authorities may be preparing to reverse their position towards the embattled New Life Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Speaking from Minsk on 18 October, however, lawyer and church member Sergei Lukanin stressed that the 1000-strong congregation intends to continue various forms of public protest until its demands – the legal return of its land and building and the right to worship there – are met.

A possible change of heart by the government became apparent on 17 October, when New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko was invited to see Oleg Proleskovsky, head of the Main Ideological Department within the Presidential Administration. During the 15-minute meeting, Lukanin told Forum 18, the senior state official maintained that President Aleksandr Lukashenko was aware of New Life's situation, regarding them as "a normal church in need of assistance." Explaining that a solution was not possible outside the court system, however, Proleskovsky then reportedly suggested that New Life turn to Belarus' Higher Economic Court. When Pastor Goncharenko replied that the Court had already rejected the church's appeals, continued Lukanin, Proleskovsky repeated his "strong recommendation" that it try again.

On 18 October, said Lukanin, New Life therefore formally asked the Higher Economic Court to overturn Minsk City Executive Committee's 17 August 2005 decision curtailing the church's land rights and ordering the forced sale of its building.

The church's intention to continue its protest, despite the meeting with Oleg Proleskovsky, is due to an earlier unfulfilled promise by a senior government representative. In September 2005 the congregation called off plans to march to the office of the Mayor of Minsk after Belarus' Deputy Interior Minister similarly gave "his word as an officer" that he would help resolve the church's predicament. This did not happen, however (see F18News 22 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=656).

Contacted on 19 October, a spokesperson at President Lukashenko's Press Service was unfamiliar with the issue and directed Forum 18 to Oleg Proleskovsky of the Main Ideological Department's secretary. Explaining that Proleskovsky was absent, the secretary said that she did not have any documentation referring to the 17 October meeting Forum 18 described. Asked whether Proleskovsky could be contacted either by Forum 18 or herself, the secretary said not, and that it would be better to speak to the Presidential Administration official who would have organised the meeting. Her telephone went unanswered on 20 October, however.

New Life has previously written to President Lukashenko, most recently sending an open letter with a 2500-signature petition on 7 August 2006. A 23 September response came not from the president's office, however, but from Minsk City Executive Committee, which claimed that it had repeatedly offered solutions to the church's property problems. New Life rejects this claim.

New Life's high-profile public protests over the past two weeks thus appear to be responsible for the president's sudden attention. On 5 October the church began an indefinite fast/hunger-strike, which at the time of writing has 156 participants in 16 locations throughout Belarus. A core of approximately 30 hunger-strikers are protesting within the church's threatened building, whose inner walls display banners with the congregation's demands to Minsk City Executive Committee and a Belarusian-language slogan: "Stop discrimination against evangelical Christians in Belarus!" At a press conference on 6 October, Pastor Goncharenko declared, "if the authorities continue to ignore our demands and start acting aggressively, then we reserve the right to unapproved public action."

The church is also holding services at its building every evening, attended on 8 October by pastors from 19 other Belarusian Protestant churches. Cited on New Life's website, one of the pastors explained his participation thus: "I believe that this protest against the arbitrariness of the authorities should be the principal activity of all those seeking truth and justice in our country." By 10 October, New Life was reporting receipt of letters of support from America, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, Uganda, Ukraine and the UK, including from several Protestant bishops. On 12 and 13 October representatives of the US Embassy, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the wife of imprisoned presidential opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin visited the church.

On 16 October Minsk City Executive Committee granted official permission for New Life to hold a demonstration with up to 700 participants on Bangalore Square – a major junction 4 km [2 ½ miles] north-east of Minsk city centre – at 6 pm on Saturday 21 October.

According to New Life, state medical personnel refused to monitor the condition of the hunger strikers in the church's building after their first visit on 12 October. On that day one participant was admitted to a local hospital but discharged on 13 October after taking doctors' advice to break his fast. On 17 October the church reported that a doctor working for the main Baptist Union's medical programme and other Christian medics were now monitoring the hunger strikers.

So far the Minsk authorities have made no move to seize the church, despite believing that they are legally entitled to do so (see F18News 6 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=851). On 11 October a local official informed New Life that its building has now been transferred onto the balance of Minsk's Moscow District, and asked a church representative to sign papers confirming the forced sale. Believing the state's action to be unlawful, New Life is refusing to comply. Also on 11 October, the church reported the first of two threatening incidents. At approximately 9am, a truck, a bulldozer, two cars and three minibuses with tinted windows approached the church's building. New Life's website cited the driver of one of the cars as saying that Minsk City Executive Committee had sent them "to level something here" and that they were awaiting further instructions. The vehicles reportedly moved away from the church's building some time later, however.

In the second incident, New Life reported the presence of two senior police officers and four people in plain clothes watching the church's building on the evening of 17 October.

In comments published by the Russian news agency Interfax on 12 October, the vice-chairman of Minsk City Executive Committee and the city's top religious affairs official accused New Life of violating laws on religious activity and demonstrations. The former official, Mikhail Titenkov, stressed that "Minsk City Executive Committee does not intend to give permission to turn the building of the disused cowshed – a fire hazard, moreover – into a house of worship." As she has previously maintained to Forum 18 (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516), the latter official, Alla Ryabitseva, insisted that New Life had purchased the disused cowshed and associated plot of land without the right to alter its designated usage: "It is not intended for religious events." She also claimed that the church's request to reconstruct the building had been denied because statutes of religious organisations did not provide for social or cultural work under the 2002 Religion Law, and that the church's heating system and electricity generator "pose extreme danger to its parishioners".

New Life denies these claims. In a 13 October statement on the Interfax feature, the church points out that Paragraph Four of the state-registered sale contract for its building notes the aim of acquisition to be reconstruction of the building as a house of worship, while the church's land-use contract stipulates that construction will take place with the agreement of the state authorities. In 2003 and 2004 Minsk's architecture officials twice granted such permission, New Life continues, but this was rescinded "in view of the written opinion of the Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs" – which is headed by Alla Ryabitseva. The church also insists that its building - housing a high-quality heating system rather than a stove - is in full compliance with relevant safety standards.

Photographs of the hunger strike – clearly showing the condition of the church's building – may be viewed at http://newlife.by/photo_post-golodovka.php.

Arguing that New Life's building is technically a cowshed, Minsk officials have refused to grant the 1000-strong congregation permission to use it for services. The state authorities simultaneously refuse to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to that of a house of worship. Minsk's top religious affairs official – Alla Ryabitseva - has claimed to Forum 18 that this is impossible due to the city Development Plan (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516). However, an official in charge of executing the Development Plan recently told a Minsk court that it was technically possible to site a house of worship for New Life "anywhere in the city", but that this depended upon permission from the religious affairs department (see F18News 28 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=819).

New Life has been worshipping at its disused cowshed ever since being barred from renting a local house of culture in September 2004. As church administrator Vasili Yurevich told public prosecution officials in December 2004, the congregation was earlier refused requests to rent other public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477). The church's continued use of its building for services has resulted in multiple large fines (see most recently F18News 17 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832), in addition

to the authorities' decision to confiscate the building.

Other churches in Minsk have also been fined for meeting. For example, this month a Baptist, Andrei Piskun, was prosecuted by an administrative commission in Minsk's Soviet District for organising and holding a religious meeting without registering its statutes (an offence under Article 193 of the Administrative Violations Code) on Sunday 13 August. Piskun was fined 15,550 Belarusian Roubles [48 Norwegian Kroner, 6 Euros, or 7 US Dollars] on 4 October, according to the Baptist Council of Churches, who refuse on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries.

In a statement to Judge Vladimir Chvala, Piskun writes of his disagreement with the verdict, arguing the accusation that he organised a church to be unfounded, "as services in the church have been taking place since 1963." He also cites guarantees of freedom of expression, religion and association in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Belarusian Constitution. (END)

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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