

29 November 2006

BELARUS: Faith-based political opposition emerges

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

When Catholic parishioners in Grodno announced a hunger strike to begin on 1 December if officials fail to overturn their decade-long refusal to allow them to build a new church, they took their inspiration from protests by New Life Church. This Minsk-based charismatic congregation held a high-profile hunger strike in October to try to prevent the authorities seizing their church. "We are grateful to the Protestants for giving us courage," Fr Aleksandr Shemet declared. Forum 18 News Service notes that - after exhausting other methods of negotiation with the state authorities - some religious believers are adopting tactics more usually associated with secular political activism in their pursuit of religious freedom in the country that has the tightest controls on religious activity anywhere in Europe. Forum 18 also notes that mainstream opposition activists are in turn drawing on religious ideas.

"Only believers can be a real moral force for change," one local Protestant remarked to Forum 18 News Service in Belarus this summer. "Just look at what was achieved by Karol Wojtyla [Pope John Paul II] and Fr Jerzy Popieluszko [prominent anti-communist Catholic priest murdered by the Polish secret police in 1984]." Forum 18 notes that some religious believers in Belarus - after exhausting other methods of negotiation with the state authorities - are indeed turning to tactics more usually associated with secular political activism in their pursuit of religious freedom.

Belarus has the tightest controls on religious activity of any European country. All religious activity needs official permission before it is legal and unregistered religious activity is punishable by penalties that can be heavy.

Four thick files of correspondence with municipal officials and 18 months of court cases having failed to secure the right to use their own land and building for worship, members and supporters of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church went on a high-profile hunger strike on 5 October 2006. Within just two weeks the church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, was invited to see a top-ranking presidential administration official (see F18News 20 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858). On 26 October a senior judge cancelled a 27 October 2005 decision against New Life and called for the church's case to be heard again (see F18News 3 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=865). On 4 November the Higher Economic Court cancelled every court decision issued against New Life since 27 October 2005 and confirmed that it would reconsider the church's case on 27 November.

On 24 November more than 100 members of the Catholic parish of Our Lady of Ostrobrama delivered an ultimatum to the offices of their local Regional Executive Committee. Having petitioned unsuccessfully to build a church in the city of Grodno [Hrodna] for nearly ten years, they intend to go on hunger strike if they do not receive official state permission by 1 December. While Grodno Regional Executive Committee chairman Vladimir Savchenko reportedly promised the Catholics that the authorities would soon grant the relevant permission, parish priest Fr Aleksandr Shemet told Nasha Niva newspaper that he remained sceptical: "Promises are promises and a written answer is a written answer. I was born in this country and have lived here long enough to know what promises are worth."

New Life's example appears to have inspired the Grodno parish. "We are grateful to the Protestants for giving us courage," Fr Aleksandr remarked. "We prayed for the hunger-strikers every day during their protest."

While a relatively small proportion of believers are demanding freedom of worship in this way, Forum 18 has found that religious motivations are beginning to feature prominently within the political opposition movement. As general restrictions are progressively tightened under President Aleksandr Lukashenko, believers appear to be questioning whether they can now square a passive position with the moral obligations of their faith.

In the wake of this year's presidential elections, the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre reported that on 20 March more than half of those demonstrating against the regime in central Minsk raised their hands when asked who would join in prayers for Belarus: "The next day almost everyone responded to the same request, and the day after that the majority of songs heard in the tent camp were Christian." Forum 18 has seen a photograph of one column of post-election demonstrators marching behind banners bearing New Testament verses: "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for what is right" [Matthew 5:6] and "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" [1 Corinthians 3:17].

Observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found that the 19 March presidential election "failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and that "arbitrary abuse of state power, obviously designed to protect the incumbent President, went far beyond acceptable practice".

On 20 March opposition activist Boris Khamaida was fined 180 times the minimum wage, 5,580,000 Belarusian Roubles (16,370 Norwegian Kroner, 1,984 Euros or 2,610 US Dollars) for staging an unauthorised post-election demonstration. According to the Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe, he had walked around Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] city centre with the placard: "He who endures to the end will be saved" [Matthew 24:13].

On 1 June, three evangelical Christians were issued official warnings for their participation in a 24-hour vigil in Brest city centre. The three had silently read the Bible as an expression of solidarity with demonstrators arrested in the wake of the presidential elections (see F18News 13 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=798).

Religious believers have complained to Forum 18 that they are barred from speaking publicly on general social issues (see F18News 3 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=736). A foreign Protestant who used to work in the humanitarian aid sphere in Belarus has suggested to Forum 18 that he was denied a visa because his partnership with Christian churches involved teaching "responsibility, a change of attitude - that it is not Jesus' example to sit down and accept what happens in your community" (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856).

Apparently due to heightened state sensitivity towards unauthorised gatherings during the March 2006 presidential election period, Reformed Baptist pastor Georgi Vyazovsky and religious freedom lawyer Sergei Shavtsov were handed down ten-day prison sentences for organising unapproved religious events, and Pentecostal bishop Sergei Tsvor was only spared a possibly similar fate due to the expiry of the legal deadline for his prosecution (see 13 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=743 and 27 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=750).

Now that independent political, business and social organisations have been crushed in turn, one Minsk Protestant maintained to Forum 18 this summer, "evangelical churches are the largest remaining social organisations". Formed to revive Reformation ideals, he said, a movement has been working within these churches in recent years "so that evangelical Christians become active in daily life, influence society, and are united as one front".

A September 2006 contribution to "What I Believe", a programme on Radio Free Europe's Belarusian service, suggests that faith-based opposition is also developing within the Catholic Church. Imprisoned for ten days with other post-election demonstrators, Fr Andrei Sidorovich, a Catholic parish priest in Orsha in Vitebsk region, declared: "I believe that in future no one will pray in holy places built at a cost of silence and concession to evil (â€) that the Lord will deliver us from the curse of fear, and none of my friends will regard visiting the editorial offices of Nasha Niva [an independent Belarusian newspaper] as opposition activity (â€) that today my lungs are still full of the keen frosty air of March – my favourite month - and that it was worth living if only to take just one gulp of that air without regard for cost or consequences."

Forum 18 has also found a number of political opposition figures to be active Christians. Unable to exist officially after analogous parties were denied re-registration in 1999, the Belarusian Christian Democracy Movement stands for aims such as "honest, moral and responsible politics" and "freedom of conscience and Christian tolerance" according to its literature. Those mainly associated with the Movement include practising Orthodox and Pentecostals. One prominent Orthodox activist, Pavel Severinets, is currently serving a two-year sentence at a corrective labour camp for organising an unapproved opposition demonstration in 2005. On his personal website, he maintains that the Belarusian national idea "is the idea of the New Testament – faith, hope and love (â€) Belarusians bear a unique spiritual instinct which is Christian in its principles."

Sentenced to 18 months in a general regime prison camp on 1 November 2006 for acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation, Belarusian Youth Front leader Zmiter Dashkevich is also a committed evangelical. Commenting to Christian Human Rights House soon after Dashkevich was detained in September, Pastor Boris Chernoglaz of the Minsk-based charismatic Church of Jesus Christ pointed out that "Zmiter never concealed his relationship with God and always openly expressed his position – that every person should have a choice, that God gave us this right."

A participant in both the post-election opposition demonstrations and New Life's recent hunger strike, Zmiter Marchuk calls for prayer for greater participation by believers in public life in his 17 October article on the Belarusian Christian Democracy Movement's website. "The Bible destroys the myth that believers should not engage in politics," he argues, maintaining that the 2006 presidential election posed the nation with a choice of which path it should follow: "Either democratic – on the basis of the Bible, truth, freedom and economic development, or of slavery – chained by the darkness and lies of a pagan-atheist monarchy."

Marchuk also suggests that Christ's call to "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's" [Matthew 22:21] limits the authority of the state in relation to the Church: "What right do officials have to grant or withhold permission to conduct services or baptise, if this right was given by God himself - 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' [Matthew 28:19]? Not to sit, that is, but to act!" (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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