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BELARUS: Religious freedom survey, December 2006

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

"Killing a frog by warming up the water very gradually" is how one Protestant describes Belarus' religious policy in Forum 18 News Service's survey analysis of religious freedom. President Aleksandr Lukashenko has brought religious believers back to the late Soviet period, legally unable to practise religion in community without explicit state permission. State registration does not guarantee religious freedom, as has become increasingly clear in the spheres of youth activity and building and hiring places of worship. The state's tendency to harass religious communities for alleged "irregularities" means that some communities are voluntarily restricting or even stopping religious activity. A major reason for the state's eagerness to control religious communities is its preservation of an extensive Soviet-era secret police, religious affairs and ideology bureaucracy. Recently, the state has started focussing upon Protestant evangelicals as a political threat, one of whom notes that "it is not Jesus' example to sit down and accept what happens in your community." As state pressure steadily mounts, Forum 18 observes that religious believers are increasingly putting aside confessional differences in organised resistance.

"Killing a frog by warming up the water very gradually" is how one Belarusian Protestant describes the state's religious policy. He notes that the first religious organisations to be closed down in August 2005 as a result of the restrictive 2002 Religion Law – Pastor Ernest Sabilo's Belarusian Evangelical Church and Pastor Lyavon Lipen's Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Church – are small and independent. So too is Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church, whose pastor, Georgi Vyazovsky, was given a ten-day prison sentence in March 2006 – the first for religious activity on Belarusian territory since the demise of the Soviet Union. Without public prominence or a larger umbrella association to act in their defence, the Protestant points out, these churches made easy initial targets. "When Sabilo had problems, some people said 'Why protect him?' as they saw him as the 'wrong' kind of Baptist," a member of Vyazovsky's church explained to Forum 18. "I said 'Today it's Sabilo, tomorrow it will be us.' And it was."

The incremental growth in restrictions under President Aleksandr Lukashenko – particularly in the wake of the 2002 Religion Law – has in many respects brought Belarusian believers back to the late Soviet period. They are legally able to practise religion in community only with express permission from the state. Under the 2002 Law, religious communities must be registered with the state, for which they require state-approved, non-residential premises. All public events outside these premises must be approved in advance by the state under the 2003 Demonstrations Law. Legal provisions typically combine to make nothing possible. Denied compulsory re-registration because of the impossibility of securing state-approved worship premises in Minsk, for example, the charismatic New Life Church was denied state permission to import religious literature in August 2005.

The state's demands of religious communities are not just simple bureaucratic procedures, which some communities are failing to comply with due to incompetence or intransigence. As one Protestant points out, "They have created conditions so you can't live by the Law. We would need to close half our churches in order to operate technically in accordance with the Law." Religious believers may encounter obstruction from the moment they seek to organise their activity. Baptists, Pentecostals and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate all experience regular state intimidation of those who agree to include their personal details as the founders of a new religious organisation, such as by threatening to withhold a share in a village tractor or livestock. In official documents, one senior official even insists openly that Orthodox should be dissuaded from affiliation to ROCOR, criticising junior officials "who have found neither the time nor the opportunity to influence these believers or to assist the local priest in returning them to the fold of the [Moscow Patriarchate] church."

Particularly in the capital Minsk, Protestants and Hare Krishna devotees report the following phenomenon. Once they have located suitable premises for rent - a difficult task in a Soviet-planned city where religious activity is not permitted in cultural or educational institutions - and included the address as part of the compulsory registration procedure, the landlord suddenly withdraws consent citing state pressure. Officials may also refuse to allow even a legal address to be registered at particular premises. A pastor of the Baptist Union, for example, was this year refused permission to register a new community's legal address at his home, on the grounds that this would be detrimental to his children and that the building has no outside electric light. Krishna devotees complained to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, after similarly being told that they could not register the legal address of an umbrella association at premises in Minsk due to alleged fire-safety and sanitation violations. The UN Committee upheld their complaint, pointing out that "appropriate premises [for worship] could be obtained subsequent to registration," but the Belarusian government defended its decision in 2006, arguing that it was justified under Belarusian law.

Without republic-wide association status, Krishna devotees do not have the right to establish monasteries, missions and educational institutions or invite foreign citizens to Belarus to preach or conduct other religious activity. In September 2006, the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus was likewise refused registration as a republic-wide association, due to "technical problems" in its application.

Without state registration, religious communities are liable to a fine under a Soviet-era provision of the Administrative Violations Code. Up until two years ago, such fines were usually relatively low – typically 33,000 Belarusian Roubles (105 Norwegian Kroner, 13 Euros or 15 US Dollars) – and for the most part encountered by congregations of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on theological grounds to register with any state authorities in the former Soviet Union. They and other unregistered independent Protestant churches reported 17 such fines over the period 2003/4. While the analogous figure for 2005/6 is 12, the fines have on several occasions been significantly higher – 150,000 Belarusian Roubles (438 Norwegian Kroner, 56 Euros or 72 US Dollars), 240,000 Belarusian Roubles (698 Norwegian Kroner, 86 Euros or 111 US Dollars) and 580,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,767 Norwegian Kroner, 223 Euros or 270 US Dollars). The average monthly wage in Belarus is estimated to be around 303,000 Belarusian Roubles (885 Norwegian Kroner, 108 Euros or 139 US Dollars).

Also during the period 2005/6, the pastor and administrator of New Life Church were given fines for unapproved religious activity totalling 11,897,000 Belarusian Roubles (34,828 Norwegian Kroner, 4,370 Euros or 5,455 US Dollars), a Pentecostal church fines totalling 5,930,000 Belarusian Roubles (19,553 Norwegian Kroner, 2,166 Euros or 2,767 US Dollars) and members of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate fines totalling 4,152,000 Belarusian Roubles (12,320 Norwegian Kroner, 1,582 Euros or 1,857 US Dollars). Orthodox communities outside the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) have been denied official status, and the worship building of one autonomous Orthodox parish was even bulldozed by the authorities in 2002.

Muslim and Jewish communities, however, have told Forum 18 that their home meetings, while technically illegal, are not subject to state scrutiny. It thus remains unclear to what extent illegal home worship meetings are targeted. One young Protestant points out that many Soviet-generation pastors do not bother to publicise relatively small fines, as they were used to more frequent and harsher prosecution in their youth. Senior state representatives appear keen to enforce this part of the Administrative Code, however: one regional religious affairs official complained to his subordinates in a 2005 report about the low prosecution rate of those involved in unregistered Baptist meetings.

Despite tight restrictions on missionary activity in the highly restrictive Religion Law - and with state approval for such activity hard to obtain – religious believers have managed to share their faith in public through popular music. In what seems to be a unique phenomenon in the former Soviet Union, Forum 18 has found that faith-inspired musicians have achieved broad public support. Christian bands often appear on state television's pop music programmes and several Hare Krishna groups – among them rap artists – have also performed at a prestigious music festival. Asked by Forum 18 whether the prevalence of religious themes in Belarusian popular music might be the consequence of extensive state restrictions on organised church activity, one lead singer of a Christian band remarked "if they try to stop God one way, we'll try another".

Apparently due to heightened political tension during the presidential election period, punishment for unapproved religious events became harsher during the spring of 2006. Previously given only an official warning, Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky was imprisoned for ten days, as was religious freedom lawyer Sergei Shavtsov. A Pentecostal bishop, Sergei Tsvor, was spared a possibly similar fate only due to the expiry of the legal deadline for his prosecution. In March/April 2006, Minsk's Hassidic Jews were also refused permission to hold their Purim and Passover celebrations, which went ahead without obstruction in the rest of the country. November 2005 amendments to the Criminal Code – which have yet to be enforced - now punish the organisation or leadership of a religious organisation found to "harm the rights, freedoms and legal interests of citizens, or prevent their fulfilment of state, social or family duties" with imprisonment for up to three years.

The fact that three massive fines totalling 5,930,000 Belarusian Roubles (19,553 Norwegian Kroner, 2,166 Euros or 2,767 US Dollars) were imposed on a registered Pentecostal church, for holding unapproved open-air baptisms in 2005/6, indicates that registration does not guarantee full religious freedom. This looks set to be increasingly the case, particularly in the property sphere. Several Protestant representatives have told Forum 18 that a high proportion of registered churches own prayer houses which are not legally houses of worship or else are not fully documented. One referred to "a lovely large meeting hall" which is "a ruin on paper". At another Protestant church, which the authorities refuse to approve as fit for use, staff quickly leave their office just before regular state check-ups and do not install furniture properly to avoid prosecution. Protestant representatives fear that, in future, there will be more systematic moves to restrict registered churches, such as by forcing those in free-standing residential buildings (currently possible with state approval) to change those premises' legal status via an onerous bureaucratic procedure, or by issuing burdensome tax demands. A December 2005 presidential decree relieving religious organisations from land and property tax extends only to official houses of worship and the land supporting them.

Protestants also complain that securing permission to build new churches is virtually impossible. In Minsk, city planners reportedly are not planning to grant any such permissions until 2030. Protestant churches in the capital also report being treated as commercial organisations with regard to the City Development Fund, to which those seeking to buy or build property are asked to pay a one-off sum determined by the city authorities, estimated by different sources as equivalent to hundreds of thousands of Dollars.

This requirement is not enforced against all religious communities. Muslim representative Mufti Abu-Bekir Shabanovich, whose community is currently building a mosque in Minsk with Saudi Arabian funding, told Forum 18 that it has not had to donate anything to the Fund. He commented that the presence of a mosque in the capital is important for Belarus' relations with the Islamic world.

The state's tendency to pick up on religious communities' "irregularities" means that some feel obliged to keep a low profile. One Catholic representative, for example, told Forum 18 how a parish voluntarily closed down an educational programme, which did not have official approval, for fear of harassment. In Minsk, Krishna devotees appear to have arrived at an unofficial compromise: They have not been disturbed for over a year by the city authorities - despite not having the right to use their own building for worship - but they have also ceased all visible public activity, such as street processions and book distribution.

The state's different treatment of different faiths is not random. While Minsk officials claim that Krishna devotees and New Life Church are simply violators of the law and dealt with accordingly, 1997 and 2000 reports by state religious affairs specialists brand the Society for Krishna Consciousness "a destructive totalitarian sect" and one of New Life's fellow Full Gospel congregations "a neo-mystical religious-political destructive sect" whose growth poses "a significant threat to the individual, society and state".

Together with 1996 amendments to the Constitution, the 2002 Religion Law regulates the state's treatment of religious organisations according to their historical influence. President Aleksandr Lukashenko has repeatedly affirmed his support for the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) - whose leadership endorsed the 2002 Law - as "the basis of our faith", "the most important origin of correct decision-making at state level" and, prospectively, "one of the most important pillars of our state". While the Belarusian Orthodox Church does not encounter the obstacles experienced by out-of-favour groups and has received state backing for church construction and religious education, it is affected by some provisions in the 2002 Law, however, such as the minimum requirement of 20 members for a new community and a ban on the use of state school premises, even outside school hours.

One important reason for the state's relative eagerness to exert control over religious communities is its preservation of an extensive Soviet-era religious affairs bureaucracy. As well as a Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs and four staff in Minsk (until July 2006 the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs) and one or two religious affairs officials in each of the country's six regions plus Minsk city, each district (approximately 20 per region) has a Department for Relations with Religious and Social Organisations and a Commission for Monitoring Compliance with Legislation on Religion.

A Soviet-style anti-religious attitude is particularly strong in the educational sphere. After celebrating Purim in an optional class on Jewish culture and traditions for Jewish children at a state kindergarten in 2006, a music teacher was accused by a district public prosecutor of "illegal and deliberate dissemination of religious dogma to young children, which could cause considerable harm to their world view, rights and legal interests." A 2002 state textbook teaches that Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses are "sects" encouraging fanaticism, that Krishna devotees need psychiatric help and that Orthodox worship induces a hypnotic state. State officials have rejected religious leaders' complaints about such schoolbooks.

Older school pupils have told Forum 18 that those of approximately 13 and younger - who have been in the education system while the state's anti-Protestant stance has become more pronounced - regard their charismatic church as a "sect", whereas their contemporaries are neutral. While the state-promoted Belarusian Republican Youth Union is also negatively inclined towards Protestant churches, the authorities tend to discourage faith-based youth work. In early 2006, the Ministry of Justice closed down Generation, whose Christian leaders had run English-language summer camps. Numerous checks by local state departments on one Baptist youth summer camp in 2006 "made it impossible for us to work," according to one pastor. Also this summer, local authorities forcibly returned to Minsk a group of church families camping together in private grounds, claiming that their holiday was an event requiring state permission. Some teachers try to identify and threaten those pupils who attend Baptist Sunday schools, as in the Soviet period.

Recently the state appears to have become particularly keen to restrict Protestant activity as a potential political threat. One Protestant points out that, with independent political, business and social organisations crushed in turn, evangelical churches, as the largest remaining social organisations, are now in the frontline, especially as their belief in the priesthood of all believers means that "each individual Protestant is a potential activist". The situation is not in fact clear-cut, however. While a number of prominent opposition activists are committed Protestants, an undetermined proportion of evangelicals are said to be broadly content with the current regime, "except for the persecution". Particularly during election periods, the state discourages religious leaders from engaging in political activity.

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". Western contact appears to be another reason for the state's particularly negative attitude towards Protestants. In recent years several Protestant communities have been refused permission to invite foreigners to work with them. In addition, two Polish Catholic priests were refused permission to renew their annual visas in 2005, and 12 more priests and nuns in 2006. A 1999 Council of Ministers decree restricts a foreign citizen's professional religious activity to specific state-approved premises. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one organisation to another - such as

between parishes – requires state permission, even for a single service. In this way, a Polish Catholic priest was detained after serving Mass while passing through Minsk in September 2006.

In a Catholic weblog discussion, a parishioner present at the Mass noted that the man and woman in plain clothes who accused the priest of violating the law "are always sitting in our church". Similar anecdotal evidence suggests that Soviet-style observation of religious communities by the secret police is commonplace. In late 2004, for instance, KGB secret police officers interrupted a service at a Baptist church when two foreign citizens stood in for a pastor without state permission. More recently, a Pentecostal told Forum 18 that the local KGB warned an Orthodox friend not to meet with him by claiming that "Pentecostals are controlled by foreign money and that for attracting two people into my church I would get a car." There have been reports of the KGB seeking to recruit members of religious communities as informers.

The Belarusian KGB secret police – which has not changed its name since Soviet times - has made no attempt to distance itself from its Soviet past and proudly traces its history back to the first Soviet secret police, the Cheka. In the 1920s "Chekists stood shoulder to shoulder with the entire Belarusian people in resolving the most difficult and pressing economic and social tasks before them," its official website maintains, before claiming that the organisation was actually a victim of Stalin's purges in the 1930s: "23,000 Chekists were repressed - the very best professionals, moreover, [Felix] Dzerzhinsky's comrades, outstanding people with rich and sensitive souls, selflessly serving the Motherland and fighting for a bright future for their country."

Revived in 2003, state Ideology Departments are sometimes also involved in the close monitoring of religious communities. In 2005/6 local ideology officials broke up a seminar on family life led by a Baptist and threatened a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate with two weeks' imprisonment or a large fine for "illegal religious activity".

As state pressure steadily mounts, however, Forum 18 observes that religious believers are increasingly putting aside their confessional differences in organised resistance. Most recently, a variety of Protestant churches joined in support of New Life Church's hunger-strike in defence of its property. Catholics in the town of Grodno [Hrodna], who also prayed for New Life, drew on that community's example in turn by declaring their own hunger-strike for permission to build a new church.

Such initiatives appear exceptional within the former Soviet Union, but Belarusians typically do not regard their religious differences as divisions. Several have suggested to Forum 18 that any insistence upon affiliation to a particular confession (or none) is characteristic of successive historical attempts by external powers to manipulate the Belarusian people. Instead, they point to a passage in one of the earliest legal declarations of religious freedom and tolerance, chapter 3, article 3 of the 1588 Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (which included the territory of present-day Belarus): "And if there should be significant difference in the Christian faith, we vow to ourselves and to our descendants for all time, under oath, on our faith, dignity and conscience, that those who differ in faith will keep peace with one another." (END)

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>

Previous Forum 18 Belarus religious freedom surveys are at <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=16>

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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