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BELARUS: Charismatic congregations barred from meeting

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

Ongoing state obstruction of the worship services of the charismatic Full Gospel Association appears to make the concept of state registration under the repressive religion law meaningless. The deadline for the compulsory re-registration of all religious organisations is 17 November 2004. In Minsk for example, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that Pastor Andrei Sidor has been fined more than the average monthly salary for "violating regulations on holding religious events," by holding a service in his own home. Even though Pastor Sidor's congregation has state registration, the fine could still be upheld, as the authorities have not given him the approval from fire safety and sanitation officers which the religion law requires. Pastor Boris Chernoglaz of the Church of Jesus Christ told Forum 18 that "The authorities know that it is a serious trial for a church not to be able to gather together, that's why they do this." Many members of Belarus' religious minorities fear the consequences of the government implementing the repressive 2002 religion law.

While some representatives of the charismatic Full Gospel Association tell Forum 18 News Service that they have become optimistic in recent weeks that their churches will be re-registered under the 2002 Belarusian religion law, ongoing state obstruction to these communities' worship services would appear to render the receipt of legal status all but meaningless. Under the 2002 law, the deadline for compulsory re-registration for all religious organisations expires on 17 November 2004.

A 6 October decision by Frunze District Court in the Belarusian capital Minsk, for example, fined Pastor Andrei Sidor 380,000 Belarusian roubles (1,110 Norwegian kroner, 136 Euros or 174 US dollars) for "violating regulations on holding religious events" by conducting a two-hour worship service at his own home on Sunday, 19 September. The average monthly salary in Belarus is estimated to be around 303,000 Belarusian roubles (885 Norwegian kroner, 108 Euros, or 139 US Dollars).

Speaking to Forum 18 on 4 November, the head of the Full Gospel Association in Belarus, Aleksandr Sakovich, said that, after paying the fine, Pastor Sidor will still challenge the 6 October decision at a district court hearing in Minsk next week. He added that, even though Sidor's Light to the World congregation currently holds state registration, the home worship service could be considered a violation of Article 25 of the 2002 religion law, which states that religious services may take place on premises not specially designed for them only after a corresponding decision by the local state authorities. According to Sakovich, Sidor's local district executive committee has denied him permission to use his flat for services because he has likewise been unable to obtain the necessary approval from fire safety and sanitation officers. He added that another Minsk Full Gospel church, the 1000-strong New Life congregation, has nowhere to meet either because local fire safety and sanitation departments have similarly withheld their approval of a building recently purchased by the community.

New Life is cited with three other Minsk churches – the 500-strong Full Gospel Church of Jesus Christ and Pentecostal congregations New Testament" and Hope of Salvation – in a 14 September resolution by the city's Moscow District prohibiting them from holding worship services. According to the document, a check-up on these organisations' premises revealed that "measures to provide medical services had not been taken" in addition to "insufficient public safety measures".

"It's ridiculous – police and medical teams should supposedly be on standby, but that doesn't happen at theatre performances, for instance," Pastor Boris Chernoglaz of the Church of Jesus Christ remarked to Forum 18 on 4 November. Currently, he said, his congregation and New Life cannot obtain permission to rent a hall anywhere in the city: "The authorities know that it is a serious trial for a church not to be able to gather together, that's why they do this." He added, however, that the two communities are preparing a court challenge to fight Minsk's Moscow District ban.

According to Aleksandr Sakovich, securing worship premises is currently the main difficulty for Full Gospel churches in Belarus. While there was a hitch with re-registration in mid-October 2004 – when Minsk district authorities denied re-registration to Pastor Sidor's church and refused even to accept applications from the Church of Jesus Christ, Word of Faith and Life in Abundance congregations – local state officials have since accepted the necessary documents, he told Forum 18. Both he and Pastor Chernoglaz expressed confidence that they would be re-registered by the deadline.

One difficulty posed by the 2002 religion law, however, is that a community applying for re-registration must provide an official document certifying its right to be situated at the location indicated in its statutes. (Article 17) This is further complicated by the fact

that the Belarusian Civil Code prohibits the siting of an organisation in a dwelling which is still used as living quarters. (Article 272)

On 4 November Yuri Novitsky, a member of the 40-strong "Word of Truth" Full Gospel congregation in Dzerzhinsk, Minsk region, confirmed to Forum 18 that this had now become an issue for his church as it gathered the necessary documentation for re-registration. On 5 October – the eve of nationwide parliamentary elections in which the congregation's pastor, Nikolai Kozel, was standing as a candidate – the church lost the use of premises belonging to a local factory, he said. Novitsky emphasised that, although the congregation's contract had expired some weeks before, no questions were raised by the municipal authorities until the day before the elections. "The landlord said he couldn't have any further agreement with us because he didn't want problems," he told Forum 18.

Many members of Belarus' religious minorities fear that, after the 17 October referendum and parliamentary elections, the government will now harshly implement Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law. Under this law, all religious activity by unregistered religious communities is illegal (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=154) and legal restrictions on public religious events also exist (see F18News 1 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=131). The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186), and close supervision by officials of religious communities is an integral part of central state policy (see F18News 9 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=248).

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

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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