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BELARUS: State losing its battle with religious believers?

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

A state report seen by Forum 18 News Service gives a rare insight into state attempts to contain religious activity, and official gloom at the state's failure. Vasili Marchenko, top religious affairs official in Brest region, is very upset that officials are not active enough in breaking up worship services and harassing, fining and controlling religious activity, writing of "an even more depressing situation." The report aims at "repairing defects" in controlling religious activity by 1 December 2005. Marchenko gloomily writes of the state's failure to return an alternative Orthodox community to the Moscow Patriarchate, failure to stop Baptists conducting two or three services a week, "freely and systematically distributing .. religious literature," and conducting "an illegal water baptism" lasting over four hours with over 300 participants. Local authorities are also castigated by Marchenko for failing to stop Eastern-rite Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Adventist and Pentecostal activity. Forum 18 has found an apparent link between Marchenko's report and subsequent increased action against religious communities.

A state report on the religious situation in the western region of Brest received recently by Forum 18 News Service gives a rare insight into government officials' attempts to contain religious activity. The 18 January 2005 report, by Brest region's top religious affairs official Vasili Marchenko, examines the religious situation in the region during 2004. Marchenko is in the report clearly very upset that officials are not in his view active enough in breaking up worship services and in other ways harassing, fining and controlling religious communities and believers, writing of "an even more depressing situation" in some areas of the region.

In a covering letter addressed to vice-chairman of Brest regional executive committee Leonid Tsuprik, Marchenko recommends that his report be sent to all 19 municipal and district executive committees in Brest region with a view to "repairing defects and stepping up control over the implementation" of laws and decrees on religious activity by 1 December 2005. The report is also intended for "thorough scrutiny" at meetings of commissions monitoring compliance with laws and decrees on freedom of conscience and religious organisations (whose legal provisions attack both), of which there is one such commission attached to every municipal and district executive committee in Belarus (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186).

The report concentrates on several areas of concern to the state, particularly the rarity of prosecution under Article 193 of the Administrative Violations Code. This punishes unregistered – and thus, under the 2002 Religion Law, illegal – religious activity with fines of up to five times the minimum wage.

Thus, referring to a subsequently Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR - which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate) parish in the village of Ruzhany, Marchenko writes: "A group of Orthodox believers who have broken away from [the Moscow Patriarchate] SS Peter and Paul Church have been meeting for services illegally for two years. In that time state representatives 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. In their stead, however, Uniate [Greek Catholic] missionaries and even a representative of the Patriarch of Constantinople have visited the aforementioned group and each attempted to form their own subordinate community. Moreover, priest I. A. Grudnitsky, who was prohibited from performing services by the Synod of the [Moscow Patriarchate] Belarusian Orthodox Church in 2002, has begun to visit the group regularly. And even in this case, Article 193 of the Administrative Violations Code has not been implemented."

Within weeks of Marchenko's report, the authorities had fined a Ruzhany pensioner for making her house available for the "illegal" Orthodox services, and handed down two heavy fines to Fr Ioann Grudnitsky for performing them (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

"An even more depressing situation," in Marchenko's view, exists in areas where groups of Council of Churches Baptists "have operated illegally for many years." (The Council of Churches Baptists refuses on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries). He estimates that each of these congregations conducts two or three services a week, or 150 a year, "but in 2004 the regional law enforcement agencies brought only five charges under Article 193." This, Marchenko points out, is also despite his own 22 December 2003 instruction ordering municipal and district executive committees to halt the activity of unregistered Baptist organisations by 1 March 2004 (see F18News 26 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=263).

Soon after that instruction, Council of Churches Baptists in Brest region reported two warnings to register and one fine for unregistered religious activity (see F18News 26 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=263), as well as a larger fine under Article 193 later the same year (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463).

In his January 2005 report, Marchenko points out that a group of Council of Churches Baptists "is freely and systematically distributing throughout Brest city and other populous parts of the region religious literature printed in the USA and Russia" in violation of Article 26 of the 2002 Religion Law. This allows only registered religious organisations to distribute religious literature – after it has been assessed by the state, if imported – at locations designated by the local authorities. "Thus," laments Marchenko, "every Saturday in the Vulka suburb of Brest, a group of three to six persons sets up a mobile library and distributes Baptist literature from abroad which does not bear any details of its origin, and this is well known to the city executive committee."

Within weeks of Marchenko's complaints, the Council of Churches Baptists reported that their Brest street library had been broken up by police, although they did not state whether any charges were subsequently brought. In 2005 the Baptists reported being handed down four fines for unregistered worship in Brest region, all of which were significantly higher than in previous years (see F18News 11 May http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=558, 28 September http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=661, 25 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676 and 15 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=688).

While these fines were for religious gatherings in private homes, the Council of Churches Baptists has so far not reported obstruction to another form of their activity mentioned in Marchenko's report: "an illegal water baptism near Vychulki village in August 2004 which lasted more than four hours and had over 300 participants, including spectators." Brest region's top religious affairs official also catalogues local authorities' failure to prosecute unregistered groups of Eastern-rite Catholics [Greek Catholics], Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists and Pentecostals, even though they are familiar with the locations of their meetings. Following a fine in December 2003, Pastor Nikolai Radkovich of what Marchenko terms "an unregistered Pentecostal community in Kobrin operating illegally for many years" was fined a second time only on 17 October 2005 (see F18News 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676).

Marchenko's report also expresses concern about "the unfavourable circumstances in which religious communities, especially Protestants, are situated." Thus, he writes, 121 religious communities have received permission from municipal and district executive committees to conduct services at residential premises, and religious communities have consequently developed "a practice of buying a residential building, usually in a populous area, with the intention of using it for prayer meetings." Without any form of official agreement, he continues, "such buildings are re-equipped as prayer houses, signs are hung up, services are conducted, while legally the house remains a residential property." In future, recommends Marchenko, executive committees should regulate the acquisition of residential premises for "religious needs," and public opinion must always be taken into account.

In June 2005 Evangelical Belarus News Service reported that two registered Baptist communities in Drogichin [Dragichyn] district and Ivatsevichi (Brest region) were unable to obtain permission to build new prayer houses on the sites of their old ones, both located in residential areas (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619). New Generation Church, which is affiliated to the charismatic Full Gospel Union, also reports being unable to change to that of prayer house the designated usage of a building it owns in Baranovichi (Brest region) (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

Marchenko does praise Brest region's municipal and district committees for completing registration and re-registration of 662 religious organisations by the 2002 law's deadline of 16 November 2004. He adds, however, that six autonomous Baptist communities did not re-register, primarily because local state representatives "did not conduct any systematic or thorough work" in explaining the 2002 law to their members, the situation in the communities concerned was "insufficiently studied," and there was an absence of "trusted contact" with their leaders. (This may refer to KGB secret police attempts to recruit church leaders.) Here, Marchenko praises the "active work" of Bereza district executive committee in bringing the activity of its local autonomous Baptist community into line with the law: "There was a lengthy and serious article about the community's situation in the district newspaper, by its chief editor, which drew a great response from readers. .. What are the remaining executive committees waiting for?"

Soon after Marchenko's report, on 16 February, Pastor Vladimir Gritsuk of the Bereza [Byaroza] autonomous Baptist community was fined the unusually high sum of 240,000 Belarusian Roubles (698 Norwegian Kroner, 86 Euros or 111 US Dollars), or 10 times the monthly minimum wage, for leading an unregistered religious organisation. By late April 2005, however, the autonomous Baptist communities in Brest region had managed to re-register, even though they continued to reject the 2002 law's territorial restrictions on religious activity (see F18News 11 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=558).

While Marchenko acknowledges in his report that commissions monitoring compliance with laws and decrees attacking freedom of conscience and religious organisations have become somewhat more active over 2004, he maintains that the level of their work "does not yet shape up to the tasks ahead of them. It lacks thorough analysis of the religious situation in the town or district concerned, commission members do not keep records of compliance with the law of the charters [internal statutes] of religious organisations, and there is no close contact between commission members and leaders of religious communities." (END)

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

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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