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BELARUS: President woos religious believers while worship restrictions continue

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

In the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections, the state authorities appear to be seeking religious organisations' support by exempting their land and property from tax. While a long list of eligible religious organisations includes those denied compulsory re-registration but not yet liquidated by court order, the administrator of New Life Church joked to Forum 18 News Service that this would be of little use to his community as its property is due to be confiscated by the state authorities. Although the country's top religious affairs official has rejected recent US allegations that Belarus restricts religious freedom, some religious communities continue to be fined or warned for worshipping in private homes. A new amendment to the Criminal Code allows the state to imprison participants in unregistered or liquidated religious organisations for up to two years.

Recent developments suggest to Forum 18 News Service that, while continuing to restrict worship, the Belarusian state authorities are beginning to make overtures towards religious organisations in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections.

In a surprise concession, a decree signed by President Aleksandr Lukashenko on 1 December exempts religious organisations from land and property tax. Under the decree, tax-exempt land is that occupied by houses of worship, "including diocesan offices, monastic complexes and theological schools." An appendix lists 3,025 religious organisations thus exempt from land tax – as far as Forum 18 can ascertain, all currently holding state registration, including some denied compulsory re-registration under the 2002 religion law but not yet formally liquidated by a court. The Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church and the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness, for example, both appear on this list, whereas the recently liquidated Minsk-based Belarusian Evangelical Church and Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Union do not (see F18News 30 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664). Notably, the list features confessions often regarded negatively in Belarus as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union (see F18News 24 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=90), such as Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, commonly known as the Mormons).

A second appendix details tax-exempt property belonging to organisations listed in the first. Most of the items stipulated are used by Orthodox and Roman or Eastern-rite Catholic communities; various types of church plate, vestments and church bells are mentioned, as well as icons. The list also includes some items used in Judaic worship, however, and a range of literature applicable to all confessions, such as service books and music, prayer books, theological works and educational and missionary materials. Interestingly, it also includes the sixteenth-century Shulkhan Arukh Jewish law code, about whose alleged extremist sentiments a group of 500 nationalists complained to Russia's public prosecutor in January (see F18News 6 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=668).

While aimed at all registered religious organisations, the publication of the new decree was accompanied by a display of state support for the dominant Belarusian Orthodox Church. According to a 30 November report on his official website, President Lukashenko promised the Church's Synod at a meeting the same day that he would continue to support the Orthodox first and foremost. Lukashenko also reportedly paid special tribute to the Church's social and youth work, and its efforts to "consolidate society."

The new presidential decree will be of no benefit to the many - predominantly Protestant - organisations unable to obtain houses of worship or those assisting them with premises, however. While houses of worship themselves are not taxed under a 1991 law on real estate, a law governing tax on real estate introduced in January 2004 resulted in the Minsk-based Light of the Gospel Church being fined heavily for offering its premises to other registered Baptist Union congregations without their own prayer houses (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478). Under the legislation, tax must be paid if a legal personality rents its premises to another, even if free of charge.

Unaware of the new presidential decree when contacted by Forum 18 on 7 December, New Life's administrator Vasily Yurevich joked that the new tax exemption would not benefit his church – despite being listed in its appendix – as its property is due to be confiscated in accordance with a 17 August Minsk City Executive Committee decision (see F18News 7 December 2005

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=700).

Notwithstanding the introduction of the new presidential decree, the restrictive impact of the 2002 religion law continues to increase steadily, in particular the requirement that all religious activity should be registered and take place in state-approved, non-residential premises.

According to the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre, court bailiffs warned Vasily Yurevich's family on 9 December that his personal property would be seized and wages docked if he failed to pay eight million Belarusian roubles (23,807 Norwegian kroner, 2,996 Euros or 3,604 US dollars) within three weeks. Yurevich has been repeatedly handed down but refused to pay heavy fines for allegedly organising New Life Church's "illegal" worship (see most recently F18News 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676).

On 25 November Minsk's Partisan District Court issued a warning to Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church for holding unapproved religious services. The 30-strong congregation meets for prayer and Bible study in a home. It had unsuccessfully sought independent re-registration under the 2002 law after previously being affiliated to the mainstream Baptist Union (see 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454 and 30 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664).

On 24 November New Life Church reported that its sister Full Gospel congregation, Light to the World, is unable to re-register at its previous legal address. In the third such incident, according to its pastor, Andrei Sidor, a landlord who had agreed to lease his premises to the church was told informally by state representatives that his organisation would be shut down if he did so. Forum 18 has discovered that several other churches in Minsk have had similar experiences (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560 and 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

Last year Minsk's Frunze District Court fined Pastor 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 Sunday service at his own home (see F18News 5 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=446).

On 17 November, according to a report from the Council of Churches Baptists, which refuses on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries, a member of its Brest congregation was fined 145,000 Belarusian roubles (432 Norwegian kroner, 54 Euros or 65 US dollars) by a local administrative commission for conducting unregistered religious worship. A January report by Brest region's top religious affairs official lamented the low prosecution rate of local unregistered Baptist congregations and called for the situation to be rectified by 1 December 2005 (see F18News 18 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=691).

Released on 8 November 2005, the latest US Department of State religious freedom report on Belarus details restrictions and harassment of some religious communities, including those experienced by New Life, Light to the World and the unregistered Baptists. Responding to the report at a 9 November press conference, chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Stanislav Buko reportedly maintained that the facts contained within it were "either inaccurate or out of touch with reality." In a 10 November article published on Radio Free Europe's Belarusian website, a Belarusian Orthodox Church representative similarly rejected the US report as "biased and unobjective," adding that the 2002 law "does not differentiate at all, but is even deeper and richer in content than the laws of western European countries and the USA." A representative of the Catholic Church in Belarus declined to comment, maintaining that he was unfamiliar with the contents of the US report.

Such reluctance to criticise state religion policy may now increase. Under amendments to the Criminal Code passed on 2 December, "discrediting" Belarus or its state authorities by "intentionally passing false information to a foreign state or organisation about its economic, social, military or international position, or the legal position of its citizens," may result in a prison sentence of up to two years.

Another addition to the Criminal Code states that participation in a religious organisation (as well as political party or social organisation) that is unregistered or has been liquidated by a court is punishable by a fine or imprisonment for up to two years. (END)

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

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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