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BELARUS: Plenipotentiary attacks Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses, no religious radio

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

In December 2015, two Polish Catholic priests invited by the Church to work in Belarus were denied entry to the country. The visa application for one of the priests is being re-considered and there is a chance that the decision will be positive, Forum 18 News Service has learned. But "it's becoming ever more difficult for priests from abroad to come to Belarus" the Catholic Bishops Conference stated. Also, the government's Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, has as usual criticised the Catholic Church for alleged failings in clergy training and alleged "destructive" work by priests. Plenipotentiary Gulyako also threatened to revoke the state permission to exist of Jehovah's Witness communities, even though he does not have the legal power to do this. Forum 18's questions to him have not been answered. Also, no individual or belief community is able to have a religious FM broadcasting band radio station, despite several attempts. No official is prepared to take responsibility for dealing with such applications.

In December 2015, two Polish Catholic priests invited by the Church to work in Minsk-Mogilev [Mahilyow] Archdiocese were denied entry to Belarus, spokesperson for the Conference of Catholic Bishops Fr Yuri Sanko told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Minsk on 11 March. He added that the visa application for one of the priests is being re-considered and there is a chance that the decision will be positive. He declined to give any details or indicate why he thought the Church's applications were denied. "It's becoming ever more difficult for priests from abroad to come to Belarus," he told Forum 18.

The visa denials were before the state's senior religious affairs official made public his annual report. As he usually does, the government's Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako criticised the Catholic Church (see eg. F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040). At the 2 February presentation of the report in Minsk, Gulyako accused unspecified Catholic priests of carrying out "destructive" work, in remarks noted by Belta state news agency the same day.

"These facts do not pass unnoticed by local departments for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, but other authorities in Regional Executive Committees and Minsk City Executive Committee should have an increased focus on these problems and take measures to prevent them," the Plenipotentiary said as he presented his report for 2015.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako also mentioned an unnamed foreign Catholic priest who allegedly disregarded the rules of stay in Belarus, but provided no details.

The authorities often refuse to grant or extend, or deny, visas and work permits for foreign citizens working with belief communities. Only belief communities that have state permission to exist can issue invitations to foreigners to work with them (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997). The number of foreign Catholic priests is declining: in 2012 there were 146 foreign Catholic priests, in 2013 this had fallen to 135 and in 2014 it had fallen again to 113 priests (see eg. F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040). Fr Sanko of the Catholic Bishops Conference assured Forum 18 that the foreign priests forced to leave were replaced by local clergy.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako also threatened to revoke the state permission to exist of Jehovah's Witness communities (see below). Under international human rights law (which Belarusian law contradicts) state registration cannot be a precondition for exercising freedom of religion or belief, as is outlined in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities (see <http://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>). Belarus is an OSCE participating State.

Forum 18 tried to reach Plenipotentiary Gulyako to find out why he had again made unsubstantiated accusations against Catholic priests, as well as Jehovah's Witness communities. However, his Secretary refused to put Forum 18 through to him on 26 February, saying he does not give comments on the phone.

Forum 18 several times called the Sector for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk (part of Minsk Executive Committee's Ideology,

Culture and Youth Department) to find out why the visas had been denied. However, the phone went unanswered or the line was busy on 9 and 10 March.

Foreign and local Catholic priests targeted

In 2015 Plenipotentiary Gulyako accused Polish priests serving in Belarus of poor command of the Belarusian language and of involvement in politics (see F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040). However, his 2016 accusations of alleged and unspecified "destructive activities" concern both foreign and Belarusian priests, Forum 18 notes.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako criticised Catholic clergy training and priests' work with parishioners in 2014 and 2015, and in his 2014 report published in January 2015 he also accused Catholic priests from Poland of alleged legal violations (see F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040). His reports have accused priests of political engagement, apparently because the authorities see communities they cannot control – such as churches – as a political threat (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

Both foreign and Belarusian Catholic priests have been put under pressure. Local priest Fr Vladislav Lazar spent six months in 2013 in a KGB prison on ungrounded charges of espionage (see F18News 13 January 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1914). Polish citizen Fr Roman Schulz was barred from conducting religious work in April 2014 after serving seven years in St Kazimir and Yadviga Church in Mogilev, although this permission was eventually extended (see F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040). Fr Schulz is still serving in the Mogilev parish.

Plenipotentiary criticises Catholic clergy training

In his 2015 report presented on 2 February 2016, Gulyako repeated his normal claim that "the Roman Catholic Church is still not active enough in training of personnel". He maintained that in 2015 Pinsk Seminary had only one first year student, while the Catholic Theological Academy which opened in 2015 in Minsk had no students. However, the Plenipotentiary's Office made it difficult for the Church to gain the necessary state registration for the Theological Academy to be opened (see F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040).

In its 4 February response, the Conference of Catholic Bishops pointed out that training priests is an internal issue for the Catholic Church. They also refuted Gulyako's accusations, noting that 19 students attend Catholic seminaries in Belarus and abroad. The Bishops also pointed out that although the Theological Academy is registered, construction is not yet finished.

"Such statements from the authorities have become a regular occurrence"

In their response to Plenipotentiary Gulyako's allegations, the Conference of Catholic Bishops said on their website that the allegations of priests' "destructive" activities would be discussed during a meeting with the Plenipotentiary. The meeting went ahead on 2 March, Fr Sanko of the Catholic Bishops' Conference told Forum 18 on 26 February. Asked what issues were on the agenda, he replied "those which Gulyako raised in the report". He refused to comment on Gulyako's allegations of "destructive activities", saying that the head of the Church gives official reaction to the situation.

Similar allegations in 2015 provoked a vigorous response from Catholics and others, as well as a petition accusing Gulyako of increasing tensions between the Catholic Church and the state (see F18News 20 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2040).

Commenting on the latest allegations, Fr Sanko commented that "it makes no sense to react vigorously, as such statements from the authorities have become a regular occurrence". He insisted that the situation did not worsen after critical remarks in early 2015. "Gulyako didn't urge persecution of the Church, he just referred to facts - though not in the correct way".

Jehovah's Witnesses threatened

In his 2 February remarks, Gulyako also threatened to revoke the registration of Jehovah's Witness communities. "I don't see the need to review issues of all 26 confessions in the country, this is our daily routine, but I'll focus on Jehovah's Witnesses," Belta state news quoted him as saying. "It may happen that together with the regional executive communities steps will be taken to revoke registration of some Jehovah's Witnesses communities. There will be a lot of noise but I am ready for it."

Under Article 37 of the Religion Law "in case the religious organisation violates Belarus Law or its actions contradict its statute of association, the registration authority issues a written warning and forwards it to the leaders of the religious organisation within 3 days", human rights defender and lawyer Dina Shavtsova pointed out to Forum 18 on 10 March. She insisted that if a religious community fails to eliminate violations, only a court can annul its registration. She pointed out that any alleged violations need to be found, documented and proved by a relevant authority (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

Although local authorities collect information about Jehovah's Witnesses local communities, no further measures have yet been taken against any of them, Pavel Yadlovsky of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from Minsk on 26 February. He highlighted Jehovah's Witnesses' commitment to the law and remarked of Gulyako's claims that "generally any community could be referred to".

Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors to military service have been persistently targeted (see eg. F18News 5 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2146).

"Unauthorised" literature distribution

Gulyako also referred to cases of alleged literature distribution by Jehovah's Witnesses "without the appropriate approval of the local authorities". He alleged that Jehovah's Witnesses activities are "tenacious and illegal" and annoy ordinary people and believers of other confessions. "Local authorities must take the most decisive measures to halt the illegal distribution of religious literature," Gulyako insisted.

Yadlovsky of the Jehovah's Witnesses noted that officials often fail to understand how religious literature is distributed. "Literature is given away by individuals, not by a legal entity," Yadlovsky explained to Forum 18. "The law does not restrain them from distributing literature and doesn't determine where such literature distribution can take place."

Individuals of a variety of faiths have been punished for offering religious literature in public places without state approval. For example, Jehovah's Witness Valery Shirei in Vitebsk Region was prosecuted after police detained him for offering religious literature on the street. However, a judge acquitted him (see F18News 11 December 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2132).

Jehovah's Witnesses have arranged a meeting with Plenipotentiary Gulyako in March, which will give them an opportunity to raise these questions, Yadlovsky told Forum 18. He noted that "it takes time to solve these problems". "The most important thing for us is to discuss the situation and start a dialogue. Decisions can't be made unilaterally."

Yadlovsky also noted that following every part of Belarus' laws is not easy, a point often made by other communities and human rights defenders. They have told Forum 18 of "invisible ghetto of regulation" (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

No religious radio stations

No individual or religious community in Belarus is able to have a religious FM radio station, despite several attempts, Forum 18 has found.

The Catholic Church has been trying to register Radio Mariya for more than a year. Radio Maria was founded in 1983 as a parish radio station of Arcellasco d'Erba in the Italian province of Como. It was intended to inform believers and assist in prayers. In 1998, the Italian organisation of Radio Maria established an international association which now broadcasts to 75 countries. (Belarus' Radio Mariya is unrelated to Radio Maryja in neighbouring Poland, which is not a member of the Italian-based international association.)

The Executive Editor of Radio Mariya in Belarus, Fr Aleksandr Tarasevich, told catholic.by that the radio station will be established as a public organisation and its founders are local believers. Fr Sanko considers that the radio service is needed as "it will serve Catholics, other religions and society in spreading and strengthening Christian values", he told Forum 18.

The Archbishop of Minsk and Mogilev, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, raised the difficulty of gaining approval for the station during an online conference on 23 December 2015. "The Justice Ministry told us that these are religious affairs, go to the Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. This registers religious organisations which conduct worship, but on the radio the Mass is not held," the Archbishop declared in the conference, hosted by Belarus Radio and Television Company tvr.by. He added that the city was going to give some options and confirmed that they were received.

"Officials don't know which of them should take responsibility, as radio is a special service," the spokesperson for the Conference of Bishops Fr Sanko told Forum 18. He stated that the Justice Ministry considers radio registration to be the responsibility of the Plenipotentiary, which does not consider radio stations to be religious organisations and therefore within its responsibilities.

Forum 18 called the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Sector of Minsk City Executive Committee on 27 January to find out why the Justice Ministry sent the Catholic Church to them. Sector Head Alla Martynova denied that the Catholic Church had lodged any application to register a radio station. "We register only religious organisations and radio has nothing to do with us," she told Forum 18.

The Head of the Synodal Department of the Belarus Orthodox Church, Fr Sergiy Lepin, also stressed the importance of religious FM

radio. He told Forum 18 on 27 January that there was a trial launch of online radio but they have a joint project together with Russian Orthodox Radio Vera. However, the Communications and Information Ministry told the Church that no FM frequency is available.

The senior broadcasting specialist of the Communications and Information Ministry, Olga who would not give her surname, claimed to Forum 18 that no application had been received from any religious organisation. She also on 14 March would not give details of the application procedure.

"We are waiting for the right opportunity and meanwhile we have programmes on state channels," Fr Lepin told Forum 18. Asked whether registration of an Orthodox radio station would have been possible, he replied that they "didn't go that far".

Fr Lepin mentioned a plan to establish an Orthodox radio Sophia, for which all the documents were prepared for registration. However, without proper financing the radio was at first launched on UV frequency "which could be received only by long-distance drivers" and later closed.

Bishop Sergei Tsvor of the Pentecostal Union told Forum 18 on 14 March that his Church has not applied for any radio licences as it knows it is not possible to obtain one.

Internet broadcasting allowed

Fr Sanko of the Catholic Bishops' Conference told Forum 18 that internet broadcasting does not require any registration. "But we'd prefer to have everything done properly in one go," he told Forum 18. He expressed optimism about a positive outcome. "The most important thing is that a dialogue is being held." He was unable to say why a religious radio station cannot be registered as a normal legal entity.

Fined for hosting religious meeting in private home

In the town of Gorki [Horki] in Mogilev Region, Council of Churches Baptist Liliya Shulgan has been fined for hosting a religious meeting in her home on 22 December 2015. She was charged under Article 21.16, Part 1 of the Administrative Code for not using living premises for their designated purpose. During the trial on 8 February 2016, Judge Yelena Vorobyeva of Gorki District Court found Liliya Shulgan guilty and fined her 10 base units, 2,100,000 Belarusian Roubles (about 850 Norwegian Kroner, 90 Euros or 100 US Dollars).

The punishment followed a pre-Christmas raid on the Baptist congregation which meets in the family home, of which she is the owner. Her husband Mikhail Shulgan denies the accusations. "According to the Constitution, everyone has the right individually or in a group to profess any religion, express and preach their belief" (see F18News 5 February 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2146).

Belarus has in the past occasionally used Administrative Code Article 21.16 against people exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

Forum 18 called Gorki District Court on 16 February trying to find out why Liliya Shulgan was fined for hosting a meeting in her own home. However, the Secretary refused to put the call through, claiming that the Judge gives no comments on the phone to the press. (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1997.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Belarus>.

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