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BELARUS: "Divine freedom is given by God, but state freedom you have to pay for"

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

In what seems to be an increasing trend, a Belarusian Pentecostal pastor has been fined for leading worship without state permission. "Divine freedom is given to us by God," Pastor Ilya Radkevich remarked to Forum 18 News Service, "but state freedom you have to pay for." Natalya Lutsenko, head of the administrative commission which fined Pastor Radkevich, totally refused to say why an individual had been punished for holding a peaceful religious service. Radkevich's fine is the latest to be imposed on some Baptist, Pentecostal and independent Orthodox groups, under a legal provision punishing violation of legislation on religion or the foundation and leadership of an unregistered religious congregation. The 2002 Religion Law bans unregistered religious activity, thus violating Belarus' international human rights commitments. A regional assistant bishop of a separate registered Pentecostal Union has told Forum 18 that the number of fines for worship by groups in private homes – which is illegal without state permission even for registered communities - would be much greater if such worship did not take place discreetly.

In what appears to be an increasing trend, the pastor of a Pentecostal community close to the Ukrainian border has confirmed that he was fined in mid-May for leading worship without state approval. "Divine freedom is given to us by God," Ilya Radkevich remarked to Forum 18 News Service from the small south-western town of Povitye [Povits] (Brest region) on 24 May, "but state freedom you have to pay for." He was fined 150,000 Belarusian roubles (438 Norwegian Kroner, 56 Euros or 72 US Dollars).

Natalya Lutsenko, the head of the administrative commission which fined Pastor Radkevich, declined absolutely to explain why an individual had been punished for holding a peaceful religious service. "It is impossible to talk about this case," she told Forum 18 from the town of Kobrin on 26 May. "We don't discuss administrative cases over the phone." Insisting that all religious communities have to register with the authorities before they can function, she put the phone down.

Radkevich's fine is the latest to be demanded in recent years from some Baptist, Pentecostal and independent Orthodox groups under Article 193 of the Administrative Violations Code. This is a Soviet-era provision which punishes violation of legislation on religion or the foundation and leadership of an unregistered religious congregation with a fine of up to five times the minimum wage (see most recently F18News 6 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=712 and 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=762). The 2002 Religion Law bans unregistered religious activity, thus violating commitments Belarus has given under international human rights agreements.

Radkevich told Forum 18 that the local authorities know that his 50-strong congregation gathers for Sunday worship at a purpose-built prayer house in Povitye and have previously fined the congregation sums equivalent to about 50 US Dollars. "We had to pay in the [Soviet] Union and sometimes after Belarus broke away. We were outlawed in the [Soviet] Union, we're supposed not to be now, but it turns out that way in practice." On this occasion, however, he said worship had not been interrupted, but that a local police officer had simply come to his home address on 17 May and drawn up a protocol accusing him of violating Article 193, subsequently signed by two more police officers who were never present.

Radkevich confirmed that the administrative commission - rather than a court - attached to his local district executive committee in Kobrin had imposed the fine on this as on earlier occasions. He added that state scrutiny had lessened during the recent presidential election period, so that this was the first fine he had received in 2006. He also confirmed that he had not yet paid the fine, and would refuse to do so without relevant documentation.

Radkevich told Forum 18 that his congregation – which has existed since 1944 – belongs to the Russia-based Pentecostal Union led by Ivan Fedotov. Present in a number of ex-Soviet states, its communities have traditionally been opposed to state registration. While the Union is believed to have some 50 congregations in Belarus, Radkevich told Forum 18 that he did not know how many there are due to their lack of legal status.

Based in Kobrin itself, a 300-strong affiliate congregation to the Union has not been fined for unregistered worship recently, its pastor's wife Tamara Radkovich told Forum 18 on 24 May. Her husband Nikolai was fined 50,000 Belarusian roubles (156 Norwegian Kroner, 19 Euros or 23 US Dollars) on 11 December 2003 under Article 193 and 25,000 Belarusian roubles (74

Norwegian Kroner, 9 Euros or 11 US Dollars) on 17 October 2005 for not having the correct capacity fire extinguisher at the premises used by the community for worship (see F18News 12 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=212 and 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676).

A regional assistant bishop of the separate, registered Pentecostal Union led by Sergei Khomich has told Forum 18 that the incidence of fines for worship by groups in private homes – which is illegal without state approval even for registered communities under the 2002 Religion Law - would be much more frequent if such worship did not take place discreetly (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=154). In a leaked recent report, Brest's top regional religious affairs official lamented state officials' failure to prosecute unregistered religious activity (see F18News 18 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=691).

Among other congregations recently fined for holding unregistered worship services in private homes are some affiliated with the Baptist Union, including one such congregation which has sought registration, but was fined in April. The Baptist Union leader Nikolai Sinkovets said his churches barely pay any attention to all the fines that are now being imposed. "The first time such fines were handed down we paid attention," he told Forum 18 on 25 May. "Now we're tired of all these fines. It makes no difference if we publicise them or not. They're happening all the time. People only bother to tell me if they are very heavy."

Most of the Baptist communities in the Union led by Sinkovets have sought and received registration. However, congregations of the Council of Churches Baptists, who refuse on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries, have consequently faced routine fines in Belarus, particularly since the adoption of the 2002 Religion Law (see most recently F18News 6 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=712). They have not reported any recent fines, however.

In another recent development, the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre reported on 19 May that Pentecostal pastor Oksana Gavrilenko was pressured into resigning from her post as a school teacher after complaining about a lecture on the dangers of "sects" (including Baptists and Pentecostals) given to pupils by a local Orthodox priest. Despite complaining about her effective dismissal to Rechitsa [Rechyt'sa] (Gomel [Homyel'] region) municipal administration in south-east Belarus, she was not reinstated, according to the report, although the Orthodox priest was asked to stop slandering Protestant churches. Gavrilenko found alternative employment after a few weeks. (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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