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BELARUS: Massive fine for "illegal" Baptisms

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

Baptising 70 people in a lake has led to the pastor of one of Belarus' largest Pentecostal churches being fined over 150 times the minimum wage, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This is, to Forum 18's knowledge, the first time that a congregation of a mainstream Protestant Union has had such a huge fine imposed for religious activity without state permission. Judge Oksana Kusheva of Baranovichi Municipal Court imposed the fine on Pastor Sergei Poznyakovich and fined the Pentecostal Union's bishop for Brest region, Nikolai Kurkayev, a significantly smaller amount. Baranovichi's state official dealing with religious affairs, Ruslan Krutko, told Forum 18 that Pastor Poznyakovich's fine was so large because the church performed similarly unsanctioned baptisms in the same lake in 2005. Confirming that the authorities had not responded formally to a request to be allowed to perform the baptisms, Krutko nonetheless insisted that official permission must be obtained in advance. A church member commented to Forum 18 that "if we are fined again within a year, the authorities will have grounds to close the church down."

The pastor of one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Belarus has been fined the equivalent of over 150 times the minimum wage for performing baptisms in a local lake, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "We didn't manage to appeal against the court's decision in time and now we're deciding what to do next," a member of Salvation Pentecostal Church wishing to remain anonymous recently told Forum 18. "If we are fined again within a year, the authorities will have grounds to close the church down."

To Forum 18's knowledge this is the first time that a member congregation of a mainstream Protestant Union has been faced with such a huge fine for unapproved religious activity. Similarly heavy fines have been imposed on New Life, the Minsk-based charismatic church (see F18News 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676). New Life is also facing the building it uses for worship being taken from it by the authorities (see F18News 22 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=844). A parish in Brest Region of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate, was also heavily fined (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

Pastor Sergei Poznyakovich baptised some 70 people in a local lake on 2 July, a congregation member told Forum 18 from the small town of Baranovichi (Brest region) in south-west Belarus, where Salvation Pentecostal Church is located. The Pentecostal – whose son was among the baptised - was not aware of any state representatives observing the event, but recalled that police officers subsequently visited the church on Sunday 16 July.

As a result of the baptisms, Judge Oksana Kusheva of Baranovichi Municipal Court on 30 August fined Pastor Poznyakovich 4,650,000 Belarusian Roubles (14,225 Norwegian Kroner, 1,696 Euros or 2,171 US Dollars), the congregation member confirmed to Forum 18. Also, the Pentecostal Union's bishop for Brest region, Nikolai Kurkayev, was fined 640,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,952 Norwegian Kroner, 235 Euros or 298 US Dollars).

Founded in the 1920s, Salvation Pentecostal Church has some 1,500 adult members. The church holds state registration and worships at its prayer house, an imposing building constructed in the early 1990s.

The baptisms should not have taken place in the lake, "due to a higher than permitted level of bacterial pollution in the water," Baranovichi's state official dealing with religious affairs claimed to Forum 18 on 27 September. Ruslan Krutko also claimed that this had been repeatedly explained to Salvation Pentecostal Church prior to the baptisms and alternative sites offered, "but they particularly wanted the lake right next to the church." While confirming that the authorities had failed to respond formally to the Pentecostals' request for the outdoor event with either permission or a ban, Krutko pointed out that the law regulating mass public events insists that official permission is obtained in advance: "The state authorities would be responsible if something happened to people, so we have certain rules."

Pastor Poznyakovich's fine – equivalent to 150 times the minimum wage - was so large because the church performed similarly unapproved baptisms in the same lake in 2005, Krutko explained to Forum 18. Article 167 of the Administrative Violations Code punishes a repeat violation of legislation regulating mass public events with a fine of between 150 and 300 times the minimum wage, or imprisonment of between ten and fifteen days.

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Pastor Poznyakovich confirmed that in 2005 he was fined 640,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,952 Norwegian Kroner, 235 Euros or 298 US Dollars) for performing baptisms, the independent Belarusian news agency Belapan reported on 31 August. He also maintained that the lake preferred by the church is "the cleanest in town", and that, while it is not officially recommended to swim in it, "neither is it forbidden to do so."

The Belarusian authorities are hostile to religious believers sharing their beliefs in public, and such religious activity faces numerous restrictions under the harsh Religion Law (see F18News 20 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=842).

In the wake of presidential elections this spring, Reformed Baptist pastor Georgi Vyazovsky and religious freedom lawyer Sergei Shavtsov both served ten-day jail sentences under Article 167 of the Administrative Violations Code after organising unapproved religious meetings (see F18News 6 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=737 and F18News 27 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=750). On 13 July the Supreme Court upheld Minsk City Court's 26 May ruling dissolving Pastor Vyazovsky's Christ's Covenant Church (see F18News 13 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=798). (END)

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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