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BELARUS: Lutheran communities, real and imagined

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

Developments within Belarus' complex and fragmented Lutheran community are hampered by the country's Religion Law, Forum 18 News Service has found. The Law's strict registration requirements – coupled with officials' arbitrary application of them – artificially preserve organisational arrangements that no longer exist. The two Lutheran associations with state registration appear to be defunct, but they are supposed to account for almost all the country's 26 parishes, so officials are reluctant to register any new groupings. Association status is not just an optional extra, but needed to found missions and seminaries. Shown that the state authorities allow some Lutheran associations to breach legal requirements strictly applied to others, one religious affairs official asked Forum 18 for suggestions as to what should be done about it. A pastor in one unregistered Lutheran association commented to Forum 18: "Officials need to understand that the Church lives not according to their decisions, likes and dislikes, but God's will."

As Lutherans in particular today (31 October) commemorate Reformation Day, when Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation in 1517, Forum 18 News Service finds their organisational development hampered by Belarus' restrictive 2002 Religion Law.

The Law's preamble recognises the Evangelical-Lutheran Church as "inseparable from the common history of the people of Belarus." Due to the great complexity of the country's small present-day Lutheran community, however, it is perhaps hit more than any other confession by the same Law's bureaucratic straitjacketing of the spontaneous growth of religious activity.

Under the Law, a religious confession must register an association of at least ten affiliate communities in order to found a mission or theological educational institution. This restriction contributed to a recent complaint by the Society for Krishna Consciousness – which has five registered communities – to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (see 4 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=682 and 3 August

2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=822). Also, religious organisations – including associations with affiliate communities in at least four regions and therefore recognised as republic-wide – must act in accordance with their registered charters. They are obliged to inform the state authorities of even minor changes or additions, and may be dissolved by a court if found to have gone against their charter activity.

Most clearly demonstrated in the Lutherans' situation, these registration requirements – coupled with officials' arbitrary application of them – artificially preserve past organisational arrangements.

The two Lutheran associations which do hold state registration each have fewer than ten affiliate communities, Pastor Sergei Heil, chair of the unregistered Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus, told Forum 18. The fact that 26 Lutheran communities are registered, however, means that the state authorities are loathe to register any more associations, he explained, since this would highlight their inconsistent application of the law. "Officials need to understand that the Church lives not according to their decisions, likes and dislikes," he remarked, "but God's will." State pressure has been brought to bear against those seeking to register communities the authorities dislike (see F18News 26 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=862).

Pastor Nikolai Badrusev of the Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Communities in the Republic of Belarus on 23 October confirmed to Forum 18 that his association now has only six affiliate communities – two in Grodno [Hrodna], and one each in Mogilev [Mahilyow], Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] (registered as "the Evangelical-Lutheran community in Vitebsk"), the capital Minsk, Zhodino (the Church of Christ's Resurrection, Minsk region). He emphasised that the Union and its individual communities have had no difficulty obtaining state registration.

Until earlier in 2006, the Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Communities was formally linked with the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia (ELKRAS), the largest umbrella body for Lutherans in the former Soviet Union. According to Badrusev, the six Belarusian communities severed this tie in April, but four – all except his own communities in Minsk and Zhodino – renewed it in July. This is in line with a 21 July 2006 ELKRAS report. To Forum 18's knowledge, no other Lutheran communities in Belarus are linked with ELKRAS.

According to Pastor Heil's calculation, the second registered association - the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus - now has a maximum of only four registered affiliate communities. He suggested that those in Narovlya (Gomel [Homyel'] region), Orsha (the Community of St Matthew, Vitebsk region) and Novka (Vitebsk region) either have a handful of members and/or exist only on paper. The Narovlya church - on the edge of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster exclusion zone - is, he stated, omitted from a December 2005 presidential decree exempting religious organisations from land and property tax (see F18News 15 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=705). "Even the state Religious Affairs Committee understands that there isn't anything in Narovlya and never was." In addition, writes Heil, the Community of St John in Grodno is reputed recently to have transferred to the Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Communities. This concurs with Pastor Badrusev's statistics for that association, as compared with an exhibition viewed by Forum 18 at ELKRAS' St Petersburg headquarters in May 2005, which identified only one affiliate community in Grodno.

Pastor Vitali Sozinov of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus told Forum 18, in 2004, that his association has 11 affiliate communities (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454). Forum 18 has since been unable to contact either him or the Church's acting bishop, Kastus Mardvincau, however. Several Lutheran sources have told Forum 18 that both have left Belarus.

In 2000, according to Pastor Heil, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs facilitated the initial registration of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus - then with nine affiliate communities, "as the first, reborn Lutheran association in Belarus." Then with four affiliate communities, he continued, the Union was registered prior to the adoption of the Religion Law in 2002. "In time both turned out to be unviable, with only documents attesting to their republic-wide status," Heil maintained. He added, however, that if officials were now to grant the registration requests of his "de facto republic-wide association," the state would "in practice be declaring the activity of the first two [associations] to have not brought about the consolidation of communities and the revival of Lutheranism, as was planned."

According to its website, the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus was refused registration as a republic-wide association on 14 September 2006. Since October 2004, the Church's synod has held four founding sessions in Bobruisk (Mogilev region) in its efforts to comply with registration procedure, attended by representatives of all ten affiliate communities and observed on at least two occasions by officials from the local district Ideological Department. According to Pastor Heil, the Church's ten registered communities are located in Lida (Grodno region), Bobruisk [Babruysk], Glusk and Klichev [Krychaw] (Mogilev region), Gomel, Khoyniki [Khoyniki] and Dubrovitsa (Gomel region) and Vitebsk (the Community of Martin Luther), Orsha (the church of Christ's Resurrection) and Polotsk [Polatsk] (Vitebsk region). None of the communities, affiliated to the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus, are claimed by representatives of other Lutheran formations whom Forum 18 has been able to contact.

The Church's website also emphasises that information pertaining to the Church as an association "will take effect from the moment of its registration." In a 26 October message to Forum 18, Pastor Heil is optimistic that the Church will be registered as a republic-wide association following a further synod meeting on 11 November.

Asked why the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus was refused registration in September, Aleksandr Kalinov, of the staff of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (reformed by a 15 July 2006 Council of Ministers decree from the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs), said that it had not been refused, but that its application had contained "technical problems - minor errors - they are submitting new documents." There was a long silence when Forum 18 enquired why the Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Communities and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus held the legal status of republic-wide associations with a maximum of four and six communities respectively, whereas the 2002 Religion Law stipulates a minimum of ten. Kalinov then pointed out to Forum 18 that this requirement applied only since the adoption of that Law: "They were registered before the new Law came into effect and then they were re-registered." When Forum 18 noted that the 2002 Religion Law states that religious organisations' previously registered statutes are valid only in so far as they comply with its provisions, Kalinov replied: "Do you have any suggestions for measures to be taken? They have been re-registered and have legal status, so they may function."

This is not the first instance in which religious affairs officials selectively consider the 2002 Religion Law to have or not to have retroactive force. For example, Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church, the Belarusian Evangelical Church and the Belarusian Evangelical Reformed Church have all been refused re-registration and dissolved by Minsk courts because their previously legitimate worship premises do not comply with its provisions (see 30 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664).

Another apparently defunct Lutheran grouping, bureaucratically preserved, is that of three registered communities in Vitebsk listed in the December 2005 presidential decree. The communities of the Holy Trinity, St Mary and St Luke, according to Pastor Heil, are legally headed by Leonid Zwicky, who was bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Belarus following its foundation in 2000 until his dismissal in 2002 by then ELKRAS head Archbishop Georg Kretschmar. According to Heil, they in fact constitute "a single community artificially split into three." Leonid Zwicky refused Forum 18's request for an interview in Vitebsk in 2003.

Pastor Valeri Hryhoryk, with whom Forum 18 has been in contact this year, heads a newly emerged fifth Lutheran formation, the Belarusian Lutheran Missionary Fellowship. Featured in its February 2006 newsletter, an English-language statement addressed to the US-based Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the German-based Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) is signed by representatives of the Fellowship's seven constituent communities: St John the Baptist (Mazolovo, Vitebsk region), Christ's Nativity (Vitebsk), SS Peter and Paul (Polotsk, Vitebsk region), Insight (Minsk), Christ's Resurrection (Zhodino, Minsk region), Renewal and St Matthew (Orsha, Vitebsk region).

According to Pastor Heil, Insight did not pass re-registration and has been dissolved. He believes that the Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Communities also claims the church of Christ's Resurrection in Zhodino (as was confirmed to Forum 18 by Pastor Badrusev) and that the church of St Matthew in Orsha is one of those few communities claimed and legally controlled by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Republic of Belarus.

Asked whether these disputed two communities are registered and legally part of the Belarusian Lutheran Missionary Fellowship, Hryhoryk told Forum 18 that the church of St Matthew in Orsha is re-registered as an autonomous community, while he does not know about the one in Zhodino. He did not respond to Forum 18's query about whether Insight church in Minsk has been dissolved. Like Heil, Hryhoryk commented that many Lutheran communities in Belarus "exist only on paper and are used by people who claim to lead the Church."

Hryhoryk also maintained to Forum 18 that his Fellowship is not seeking state registration as a religious association. "As a spiritual movement we do not need registration, since the emphasis is on spiritual unity. Nevertheless, as autonomous, registered communities we work together on the basis of an agreement on spiritual co-operation." He acknowledged, however, that the formation of a seminary or invitation of foreign missionary from abroad would require religious association status. "An autonomous community - even registered in the legal manner - cannot do this."

Heil maintained to Forum 18 that the absence of registration as an association "does not at all stop us from doing the main activity of the Church – preaching the Gospel, helping our neighbour, teaching followers of the Lutheran confession – and I don't think the Apostle Paul would have tried to register his communities under Nero." He noted, however, that the authorities' refusal to register one of its affiliate communities in Berezovka (Grodno region) means that its parishioners have been unable to meet there for services for three years, instead travelling some 30km (20 miles) to the registered church in Lida (Grodno region).

While the Reformation movement in sixteenth-century Belarus was predominately Calvinist, this is not reflected in the 2002 Religion Law's attempt to define the nation's "traditional" confessions. The small present-day Calvinist community has also been hit by its restrictions (see, for example, F18News 31 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=172).

Many other religious communities also face state pressure against their activities. These include other Protestants (see eg. F18News 20 October http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858 and 28 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=847), Catholics (see eg. F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849), Orthodox Christians (see F18News 26 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=862), Jews (see F18News 13 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=798) and Hare Krishna devotees (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856). (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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