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BELARUS: Top official says "no change" to harsh Religion Law

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

As a mass petition to amend the harsh 2002 Religion Law reaches 30,000 of a targeted 50,000 signatures, Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets has categorically rejected any changes to it. He was speaking at an unprecedented round table of religious leaders in Minsk on 19 September. "The Protestants suggested amendments, but he said that this is the law we have and it must be applied, it's final," Yakov Basin of the Religious Association of Progressive Jewish Communities, one of those present, told Forum 18 News Service. "It's clear that the state doesn't want to lose control over the religious life of the people." Kosinets also rejected the suggestion to introduce a category of "religious group" which would not need state registration. The law's stipulation that all religious activity without registration is illegal has led to raids, fines and detentions.

At an unprecedented round table of religious leaders in Minsk on 19 September, Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets rejected any changes to the repressive 2002 Religion Law currently being challenged by a mass petition. He revealed no other significant shift in state policy, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "It's clear that the state doesn't want to lose control over the religious life of the people," Yakov Basin, the chairman of the Religious Association of Progressive Jewish Communities who was present at the four-hour meeting, told Forum 18 on 26 September.

According to Basin, Kosinets categorically defended the 2002 Religion Law. "The Protestants suggested amendments, but he said that this is the law we have and it must be applied, it's final." Kosinets's responses to 34 questions elicited from religious representatives beforehand by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, were couched in terms of "what we can and can't do under the law," added Basin. "His position was that the confessions are violating the law."

Gulyako also spoke against changing the 2002 Law, Basin told Forum 18. When Protestant representatives suggested the introduction of a "religious group" status not requiring state registration, Gulyako claimed that their demands were not found in other European laws, with 50 people required for registration in Finland, for example. "He omitted to mention that this is not compulsory but only if you want a bank account," remarked Basin. Kosinets expressed doubts about the religious group status proposal, questioning who would lead such groups and whether they might know enough about religion to do so. This suggested to Basin the Soviet-era nature of Kosinets' attitude and signalled that the difference of understanding between the state and some religious representatives has not changed.

Religious Affairs Plenipotentiary Gulyako criticised the ongoing petition to change the 2002 Religion Law (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957). "They said they don't want that, don't do it, we can resolve issues like this." The petitioners currently have some 30,000 signatures and intend to reach 50,000, Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of New Life Church told Forum 18. Belarusian police have detained and confiscated literature from Catholics and Protestants petitioning to change the harsh 2002 Religion Law (see F18News 5 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=989).

Among the 2002 Religion Law's many restrictions are compulsory state registration for religious communities, a minimum membership of 20 and a limitation of religious activity to the location where a community is registered (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=154 and 13 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=162).

During the meeting Kosinets complained about the presence in Belarus of foreign religious leaders, a comment widely viewed as targeted at the Catholic Church, though other religious communities would also be affected. He also criticised some religious communities for failing to keep up historic places of worship (see F18News 1 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1027).

After stating that Kosinets was unavailable for comment on 26 September, his assistant directed Forum 18 to Gulyako, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. However, Gulyako's telephone was engaged whenever Forum 18 rang on 26 September and went unanswered on 27 September.

In a 26 September statement to the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Warsaw, Yuri Uralsky of the office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs defended the

government's religious policy. "Belarusian law allows Belarusian citizens to realise the right to freedom of conscience and belief and to function fully as religious organisations," he insisted.

Both Basin and Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the Minsk-based New Life Church, who heads the charismatic Full Gospel Association, noted that the recent round table at the new National Library is the first at which a senior government official has brought religious leaders together as a single group. The approximately 20 who attended appear to have represented religious organisations with a republic-wide official presence; Orthodox, Old Believer, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Muslim and Jewish, but not Hare Krishna or Messianic Jewish.

Vice-premier Kosinets reportedly remarked that "the president has an interest in the religious sphere" and announced that similar meetings would take place twice a year. Following Kosinets' lengthy presentation and responses to the previously submitted questions, there was plenty of opportunity to raise other questions and then to speak informally with the vice-premier, Pastor Goncharenko reported.

It is so far unclear whether the round table will result in any improvement for religious communities. Pastor Goncharenko's impression was that the state "doesn't want any sharp corners". Vice-premier Kosinets criticised the 2006 hunger strike by New Life Church members in defence of their building (see F18News 20 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858).

After it was pointed out that religious communities are adopting extraordinary measures because their problems are not being resolved, according to Basin, Vice-premier Kosinets suggested a compromise in the situation surrounding New Life's building. Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18 that, in response to Kosinets' order to sort the situation out, Gulyako arranged to visit New Life's church on 26 September. Cited in a 26 September report of the visit on New Life's website, Gulyako stated: "I consider it my professional duty to come and see what sort of a building this is, what condition it is in. I see that the building has been put in order and favourable conditions have been created for people to be in it."

The state has long denied New Life Church permission to worship in its own building, a disused barn, and came close to confiscating it in late 2006 (see F18News 20 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858). A court case to resolve the issue has been adjourned indefinitely (see F18News 12 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=930).

However, when Protestant representatives complained about the brief imprisonment of Pentecostal Pastor Antoni Bokun this summer for leading worship without state permission, according to Goncharenko, Kosinets insisted that this was "a political issue" (see F18News 28 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=964 and 5 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=969). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY