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BELARUS: Religion law stunts church growth

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

As last year's religion law confines the activity of a religious organisation to a defined area (often a single village, town or region of the country), Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal and Catholic leaders are among those to have expressed their concern. The law's provisions inevitably "make it difficult to organise new churches", Baptist pastor Viktor Zdanevich complained to Forum 18 News Service. As an autonomously registered congregation, his church is banned from creating a mission. The chairman of a Greek Catholic parish council in Polotsk, Mikola Sharakh, noted that the law did not allow for development and effectively created a "reservation" for the church. One Roman Catholic agreed, telling Forum 18: "People might argue that the churches are open, but what freedom is that? It is a silhouette."

Another provision in the new law on religion of concern to Baptist pastor Viktor Zdanevich is that "the territorial activity of mission is restricted," he told Forum 18 News Service in the south-western city of Brest on 16 September. According to Article 14 of the law, a religious organisation consists of at least 20 adult citizens living in one or several neighbouring territories and "functions only on this area".

Speaking to Forum 18 in his Pentecostal church in Grodno on 17 September, Naum Sakhanchuk outlined the implications of this provision. "If my church is registered in the city of Grodno, for example, I have no right to operate elsewhere," he said. As assistant bishop, however, Sakhanchuk is able to minister in the other registered Pentecostal churches in Grodno region, he continued, since they come under the registered regional Pentecostal association, "but if there is no church in a particular place, I have no right to evangelise there". Should church members distribute literature on the street two or three times, added Sakhanchuk, their organisation is liable to liquidation by court order.

As an autonomous Baptist congregation, Pastor Zdanevich's church appears worse off than Sakhanchuk's, since it does not come under the auspices of an umbrella organisation. Registered in the city of Brest, it cannot function outside the city limits.

The regional official in charge of religious affairs, Vasili Marchenko, confirmed this to Forum 18 on 16 September. According to the 2002 religion law, he maintained, the territory of the activity of an organisation is where it is registered. "So Brest city if it is registered in Brest city."

Zdanevich's church is also unable to create a mission. Marchenko pointed out that, according to the new law, missions may be founded only by regional or republic-wide religious organisations. Asked whether this did not restrict autonomous communities, Marchenko insisted that "none of our autonomous ones have a mission".

Zdanevich told Forum 18 that his church has not submitted documents for reregistration as its elders are currently considering those points in the law they believe run against Gospel teaching. "For me, the Gospel comes first and the law comes second," he remarked, "whatever country I am in." Ultimately, however, Zdanevich said he was not concerned by the potential affects of the new law: "We have been through the underground already – they can oppress individuals, but not the church."

Zdanevich also pointed out to Forum 18 that the law's provisions inevitably "make it difficult to organise new churches". One attendee at meeting to discuss the 2002 law hosted by the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk on 12 September maintained that this also proved to be of some concern to the Belarusian Orthodox Church, whose representatives raised the issue of how close localities needed to be to constitute neighbouring territories – could a parish be formed by small groups of believers living in disparate hamlets? According to this source, the issue was not resolved at the meeting. Interviewed by Forum 18 on 23 September, however, the Orthodox dean of the central district of Vitebsk city Fr Aleksandr Rakhunok denied that this issue posed any problems for his Church. "78 per cent of Belarus is Orthodox, it never happens that we have fewer than 20 parishioners in one locality."

Sakhanchuk told Forum 18 that problems organising new churches predate the 2002 law on religion. In Brest region, he said, no new Pentecostal churches have been registered for two years and in Grodno region for three years. Sakhanchuk also described a practice in which state pressure was exerted on some of those listed as founding members in a registration application. "People who have lived through persecution don't care, but these are all new converts – if one turns away then the application is rejected."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 19 September in Minsk, head of the charismatic Full Gospel Association Aleksandr Sakovich said that this phenomenon might take place in rural areas, but "they don't use those methods in big cities". However, he did report a practice in which a local authority sometimes requested details of the premises a newly formed religious community seeking registration planned to rent. "Then they contact and put pressure on the organisation offering its premises, and then the community is refused registration as it has nowhere to meet."

While Zdanevich maintains that the provisions of the new law restricting mission are aimed particularly at Protestant churches, Forum 18 found that some Catholic representatives were also concerned about them. The chairman of St Paraskeva Greek Catholic parish council in Polotsk, Mikola Sharakh, noted that the law did not allow for development and effectively created a "reservation" for the church.

"Any Christian church must preach and evangelise, but this law permits it to preach only to whoever entered the church building, so that the church becomes a passive organisation," a Roman Catholic source who preferred not to be named similarly remarked to Forum 18. "People might argue that the churches are open, but what freedom is that? It is a silhouette."

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