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BELARUS: Pastor fined for leading unregistered worship

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The Pentecostal Church in Kobrin, near Brest in south western Belarus, has told Forum 18 News Service that it will continue to meet for worship – even though their Pastor was yesterday (11 December) fined after police attended the unregistered church's worship. Pastor Nikolai Rodkovich told Forum 18 that "we have no intention of halting our services. We're ready for anything." Under the harsh new religion law, which came into force in November 2002, unregistered religious activity is illegal. But Pastor Rodkovich's fine is the first fine known to Forum 18 since this summer. The state official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region has declined to discuss with Forum 18 why religious communities cannot function without registration.

Church members in the town of Kobrin, near Brest in south western Belarus, have pledged to continue meeting for worship despite a fine yesterday (11 December) on the pastor Nikolai Rodkovich for leading the unregistered Pentecostal church. "We don't want to register our church," Rodkovich's wife Tamara told Forum 18 News Service from Kobrin on 12 December, "but we have no intention of halting our services. We're ready for anything." Under the harsh new religion law, which came into force in November 2002, unregistered religious activity was declared illegal. However, the fine on Rodkovich is the first such fine known to Forum 18 since the summer.

Vasili Marchenko, the official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region, said he knew nothing of the fine on Pastor Rodkovich. "We have no such pastor on the list of registered religious communities," he told Forum 18 from Brest on 12 December. "I have a whole list of registered religious organisations and his church is not there." Told that Rodkovich's church refuses registration on principle, Marchenko responded: "If anyone was fined it would have been for violating the law." He declined to discuss why religious communities could not function without registration.

Tamara Rodkovich recounted that the local policeman came to the church's Sunday service on 23 November and instructed her husband to appear at the local administration. "He had to go twice," she reported. "The first time they talked to him, trying to persuade him to register the church, but he refused. The second time they fined him." He has ten days to pay the fine or the money will be deducted from his pay packet.

The administrative commission of the Kobrin district administration fined Nikolai Rodkovich 50,000 Belarusian roubles (156 Norwegian Kroner, 19 Euros or 23 US Dollars) under Article 193 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes the creation or leadership of an unregistered religious body. The commission declared that Rodkovich had "conducted a meeting without having a statute and permission to conduct meetings from the district administration, a fact established on 23 November 2003".

The Kobrin church has existed since 1952 and has some 300 members. Pastor Rodkovich argues that under the constitution, believers are free to meet without registration and links the latest pressure on the church to the new religion law. Tamara Rodkovich reported that the policeman's visit and the fine was the first such incident for the church since the new law was adopted. "The last fine was five years ago," she noted.

A spokesperson for the Freedom of Conscience Information Centre told Forum 18 from the capital Minsk on 12 December that this is the first known fine on Protestant congregations since a spate of such fines in spring and early summer of this year (see F18News 20 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=87). "It's difficult to say if this is a one-off or whether there will be more."

The spokesperson added that the Kobrin church is one of about 50 such congregations in Belarus of a Pentecostal union that refuses registration on principle. "They maintain this stance even for their communities in Germany and the United States. This is a principled position – they say they don't need registration." The union is separate from the much larger Pentecostal Union led by Bishop Sergei Khomich, which does not oppose registration and has gained re-registration as a national body this year.

There is similarly a Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists that refuses registration on principle. It has some 30 congregations in Belarus. So far it has not reported any major incidents since unregistered religious activity was declared illegal with the new law last year.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

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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