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BELARUS: Priest forced out after 10 years

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

After 10 years' service as a parish priest Fr Robert Maciejewski was forced to return to his native Poland because Belarus' senior state religious affairs official refused the Catholic bishop's request to extend state permission for him to continue religious work.

Another foreign Catholic priest has been forced to leave Belarus after the authorities refused to extend permission for him to continue to serve in the country. Polish citizen Fr Robert Maciejewski - who served as parish priest in Mstislav in Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region for almost 10 years – had to leave Belarus on 25 April.

Fr Maciejewski left Belarus because the authorities had not extended his permit to carry out religious activities, the spokesperson of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, Fr Yuri Sanko, confirmed to Forum 18 from the capital Minsk on 23 May. Fr Sanko did not explain the reasons for the denial.

Fr Maciejewski's enforced departure from Belarus came two weeks after the diocesan head, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, had called for the state to end the requirement that foreign citizens need permission to conduct any religious activity (see below).

Another Polish Catholic priest who left Belarus at the end of May after 28 years' service had seen his application for Belarusian citizenship rejected five years ago (see below).

Meanwhile, organisers of a bike ride in mid-May to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the publication of the first translation of books of the Bible into Belarusian were told both the ride and meetings they had planned in several towns along the route were banned (see below).

And court bailiffs visited New Life Full Gospel Church in Minsk in late April in a renewed attempt to force it to vacate the building it bought and has used for worship for 14 years. Church leaders hope that negotiations with the authorities will resolve the dispute (see below).

State controls on foreign religious workers

Under a January 2008 Council of Ministers Decree, amended in July 2010, the religious activities of foreign citizens invited for religious purposes are regulated by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, who is entitled to grant permission to stay in Belarus and permission to conduct religious activities. He may refuse a foreign religious worker's visit without giving any reason. Foreign citizens must also demonstrate knowledge of Belarus' state languages (Belarusian and Russian) in order to perform religious work. The Plenipotentiary defines the period of permission, has the right to shorten it and is not obliged to communicate the reasons for a refusal (see F18News 12 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1969).

The Catholic Church is the community most hit by such controls on foreigners invited to serve in the country. State officials have repeatedly expressed their aim to reduce the number of foreign Catholic clergy (see F18News 14 March 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2157).

Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk]-based Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok acknowledges the problem of the shortage of Catholic clergy. "Relying only on local priests the Catholic Church could not provide pastoral care to its flock," he told Forum 18 on 29 May. "That's why the only option is to invite foreign priests."

Fr Barok maintains that as long as the state interferes in Church affairs, battles over work permits for foreign clergy will be never-ending. "Unless the Plenipotentiary's Office is reformed the situation will continue," he lamented to Forum 18. "You won't find such an institution anywhere in the world, even in Russia."

Priest's permission denied

Polish priest Fr Robert Maciejewski was appointed priest of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish in Mstislav in

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Minsk-Mogilev diocese in 2007, five years after his ordination. He later became a senior priest and local dean. He also supported the Catholic community in the nearby town of Gorky.

Fr Maciejewski has been replaced by Fr Pavel Adamovich, priest of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary parish in Krichev [Krychaw], 40 kms (25 miles) south of Mstislav. Fr Sanko told Forum 18 that this is a temporary appointment. He could not say when a permanent priest for Mstislav parish will be appointed and whether it will be a local or a Polish priest.

Fr Sanko praised the work of Fr Maciejewski, pointing out that the parish is small in number and the church needs serious restoration. "He did as much as he could, but what's more important he was restoring the spiritual community," he told Forum 18.

Asked why Fr Maciejewski's extension of state permission to serve in Belarus had been denied, the head of the Religious Affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office Andrei Aryayev explained to Forum 18 from Minsk on 23 May that according to the Law the Plenipotentiary has the right not to give the reasons for a denial.

Aryayev absolutely refused to discuss how the Plenipotentiary's Office decides whether to accept or reject a request to extend the permission for a foreign citizen to conduct religious activity. But he confirmed that the Plenipotentiary Leonid Gulyako takes such decisions personally.

Foreign Catholic clergy and nuns often denied permission

The authorities frequently refuse to allow foreign Catholic priests to continue to serve in Belarus, often after many years' service in the country.

Vitebsk-based priest Fr Barok complains that though the Plenipotentiary's Office is supposed to give permission to carry out religious activities for a year, if it does grant permission it usually does so for only three to six months. This forces a diocese to re-apply after the permission expires.

"The Constitution guarantees us our religious rights but the state constantly interferes in the Church's affairs," Fr Barok complained to Forum 18. "The Plenipotentiary decides who will serve and where."

Fr Maciejewski's predecessor, fellow Polish citizen Fr Karol Tomecki, had similarly been denied permission to continue his religious work in 2008 after 12 years serving as priest in Mstislav.

Fr Tomecki had begun restoration of the church building and initiated the first Knights' Festival in Mstislav in 2008. As part of the Festival a liturgical tradition of the Middle Ages in Latin was reproduced. "The town's authorities decided that all this was ideologically too dangerous, but economically very attractive," Fr Tomecki complained to EuroBelarus Information Service on 10 August 2012. "I am not afraid to say that they raided us."

In May 2016 Plenipotentiary Gulyako refused to extend permission for religious activities in Belarus for Fr Andrzej Stopyra in Biarozauka (Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese). He also denied state permission to Fr James Manjackal from India for a religious visit to Belarus (see F18News 30 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2194).

In July 2016 Gulyako refused to grant permission for Fr Roman Schulz, who serves in Mogilev, Fr Lech Bochenek in Ivanets and Fr Jerzy Kotowski in Kolodishchi to continue religious service. He overturned this refusal only after Archbishop Kondrusiewicz issued a public complaint, allowing the three priests to remain until July 2017. In November 2016 Gulyako also refused to allow a Catholic priest from Russia Fr Klemens Werth to serve in Belarus at the invitation of Vitebsk Bishop Oleg Butkevich (see F18News 7 December 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2237).

Vitebsk Diocese has again prepared documents to submit to the Plenipotentiary's Office for permission for Fr Werth to conduct religious service. "We rely on the wisdom of the authorities," Fr Barok told Forum 18. "Every sense of priesthood is lost if a priest does not undertake pastoral care."

Catholic spokesperson Fr Sanko confirmed to Forum 18 that he is not aware of any other recent denials of permission to either clergy or nuns.

Citizenship refused

On 28 May another Polish citizen Fr Slawomir Laskowski held his last mass in the parish of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God in Gomel after 28 years' service. He returned to Poland to serve as a parish priest in Lublin Diocese. Fr Laskowski "left Belarus of his own will but the question over his replacement is still open", the spokesperson of the Pinsk Diocese Fr Andrei Rylko confirmed to Forum 18 on 2 June.

Five years ago – after he had lived and served in Belarus for more than 20 years - Fr Laskowski applied for Belarusian citizenship

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but this was denied. Fr Barok considers that this might be a factor in Fr Laskowski's decision to leave. "Foreign priests who know the traditions, people and language are willing to serve in Belarus and seek citizenship, but get a denial," Fr Barok complained. "They are treated like people of lesser value."

Call for end to state permission for foreigners

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz of Minsk and Mogilev criticised the ban on foreign citizens conducting religious services without obligatory state permission. "I don't know any country which has this," Christian news agency Krynica.info quoted the Archbishop as telling an 11 April press conference in Minsk. "The Law is not in line with the spirit of the age and should be amended."

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz noted that the problem will become acute in the run-up to the Plenary Assembly of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, due to be held in Minsk on 28 September. Dozens of foreign cardinals, bishops and priests are invited, he pointed out. All the visiting clergy would need state permission to conduct religious service.

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz complained that the ban also harms religious pilgrimages to local shrines, where foreign clergy could hold religious services. He said he had appealed to the Sports and Tourism Ministry to change the law which restricts foreign clergy from conducting religious services at Belarus' shrines.

"On the one hand we are getting more open to the world and on the other we are holding back. This regulation should be cancelled," the Archbishop insisted.

Following a 9 January presidential decree, Belarus introduced visa-free entry to Belarus for citizens of a further 80 countries, though individuals can enter and remain without a visa only for up to five days and must enter and leave through Minsk Airport.

Catholic Bishops' Conference spokesperson Fr Sanko maintained to Forum 18 on 2 June that this lifting of the visa requirement will end the problem over visas for short-term visitors. He added that permission to conduct religious services and participate in religious meetings will be negotiated "beyond the standard procedure". He did not explain if such negotiations with the Plenipotentiary's Office are underway.

Bike ride obstructed

In the south-western city of Brest the authorities refused to give permission for a bike ride to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the publication in 1517 of the first books of Francysk Skaryna's Bible translation into Belarusian. The bike ride also aimed to promote a healthy life style and Christian values.

Full Gospel Church members intended to start the event on 12 May in Brest and finish on 21 May in Baranovichi, with stops and meetings on the way in Kobrin, Drogochin [Dragychin] and Pinsk. They asked the Brest authorities to allow a press conference at the start and assist in "creating a festive atmosphere".

Event organiser Heorhi Dmitruk said that they submitted applications for organising a mass event according to the law 15 days prior to the bike ride and even met officials. "Officials received our idea with much enthusiasm, but two or three days before the event I received a refusal from Brest and others after I came back," he told Forum 18 from Kobrin on 26 May.

Dmitruk maintained that letters were also written to the regional Traffic Policing Units and Regional Public Roads Offices along the bike ride route. "We prepared in total more than 100 pages of letters, which is 33 sets of documents," he complained to illustrate the difficulty in organising a mass event.

In a 5 May letter (seen by Forum 18), Deputy Head of Brest Regional Executive Committee Oleg Velichko explained the reason for the denial. "According to information from the Internal Affairs Department, you did not follow the recommendations .. related to submitting the route and its approval to the State Traffic Policing Unit".

However Dmitruk insisted to Forum 18 that he sent letters to the State Traffic Policing Unit as well.

The authorities also banned organisers from holding meetings relating to the Bible translation in towns on the bike ride route. "The given mass event in the proposed format on the territory of towns and districts of [Brest] Region is not considered possible (whereof you will be informed by the appropriate city and district executive committees)," Velichko's letter added.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Velichko as his secretary explained that he was busy on 1 June. Explaining the reasons for the denial, the Head of the Ideology Department Gennady Ivanchin said he was not aware whether Dmitruk had written to the State Traffic Policing Unit, but said the Traffic Police had not approved the event.

"If the State Traffic Policing Unit had not granted approval it means that security was not provided and we couldn't therefore allow this," Ivanchin told Forum 18 from Brest on 5 June. Asked how the proposed meetings were the responsibility of the Traffic Police

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he repeated: "All this was about ensuring security to the participants of a mass event. No security, no mass event."

The bike ride went ahead, but Dmitruk had to change the format and cancel the planned meetings. "No one can prohibit us from riding," he insisted to Forum 18. Participants instead held meetings in churches along the route.

Court bailiffs again visit Minsk church

In an unexpected move, court bailiffs again tried to evict New Life Full Gospel Church in Minsk from the building it has used for more than 14 years. On 26 April court bailiffs together with the police ordered the church to vacate the building, citing a 2009 court order. Church members refused to obey, forcing the officials to leave empty-handed.

Church administrator Vitaly Antonchikov told Forum 18 from Minsk on 4 May that they were advised to negotiate with the authorities and the first contact has been made.

Antonchikov highlighted that the situation is different now and "the authorities realised that they are hostages of circumstances". He explained that when the building was purchased it had the status of a cow shed, which it still officially maintains. The authorities refused to redesignate the building as a religious building and now they have to pay taxes for the land.

The head of Housing Repairs and Utilities Association of Minsk's Moscow District, Svetlana Yaloshko, confirmed that the church building is officially recorded as its property and they are now liable for considerable taxes on it.

"There's no way to solve this issue other than through court action, as we are also under pressure with the building as a cow-shed on our balance sheet," Yaloshko complained to Forum 18 on 4 May. She refused to identify to Forum 18 who is putting pressure on her. "If you have questions please make an official enquiry."

Asked if any steps had been taken to resolve the conflict, the head of the Religious Department at Minsk City Executive Committee Alla Martynova said that she is not entitled to discuss her superior's issues. But she insisted to Forum 18 on 22 May that "our doors are always open for this religious community".

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee, Igor Yurkevich. His secretary told Forum 18 that he was on a business trip.

For more than 14 years, members of New Life Full Gospel Church repelled numerous attacks of local authorities demanding to hand over the building. The last eviction order for New Life was received in June 2013 but was quickly suspended – but not cancelled (see F18News 14 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1847).

Church members have no intention of leaving their building and are cooperating with the local authorities seeking a legal way to settle the property conflict. "We just want to pray to our Lord, that's all," Antonchikov told Forum 18. He seemed cautious about discussing the situation, anxious that media attention might jeopardise cooperation with the authorities. (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1997.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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