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BELARUS: Is regime planning to liquidate New Life Church?

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The regime seized and demolished the place of worship of Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church, banned it from meeting outdoors in its car park, jailed its Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko for 10 days and banned its website for six months. On 23 August, a closed court hearing declared two of its internet postings from 2020 "extremist". Asked if the regime is planning to strip the Church of its legal status, Deputy Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Sergei Gerasimenya refused to say.

After the regime seized and later demolished its church, banned its website and, on 23 August, a Minsk court declared two of its internet postings from nearly three years ago "extremist", Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church faces an unclear future, a church member said. Asked if the regime is planning to strip the Church of its legal status, Deputy Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Sergei Gerasimenya refused to say. "We give no comments by phone," he repeatedly told Forum 18.

Human rights defender organisation Christian Vision told Forum 18 in mid-August (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851) that they suspect that formally finding that the Church published allegedly "extremist materials" is a prelude to the Church being "legally" forcibly closed.

On 28 August, New Life Church received by post the court decision declaring two of their internet postings from 2020 "extremist". Minsk Prosecutor's Office claims to have discovered the postings only on 14 July 2023. Judge Tatyana Skopets at Minsk's Central District Court heard the Prosecutor's suit at a closed hearing on 23 August at which only she and her secretary were present. No Prosecutor's Office official attended the hearing. The Church's representative and church members were refused admittance to the hearing (see below).

Judge Skopets' secretary, Aleksandra Levkevich, said on 29 August that the Judge is now on holiday. Levkevich said she did not know who had declared the hearing closed. "That means that only duly authorised representatives of the parties could be present," she told Forum 18. "The representative of the Church had no document confirming that he was the authorised representative of the Church so he was not let in. We explained it to them." The Prosecutor gave no reason for failing to attend, she added (see below).

The materials Judge Skopets deemed "extremist" (which have already been deleted) are:

- a video posted on YouTube by New Life on 21 November 2020 protesting against the regime's violence against protestors objecting to election fraud;

- and an Instagram post of 17 August 2020: "Prayer for Belarus. On 16 August after the morning worship service the New Life Church congregation came outside making up a prayer chain and holding the Bible in their hands. As Christians we condemn the recent violence and cruelty and appeal to the authorities to repent" (see below).

The two posts from 2020 "are directed at undermining the authority of the powers that be and their representatives, discredit the organs of state power and administration, bear a clearly politicised and engaged character and are addressed to an indeterminate circle of people", the Judge wrote in her decision, taking the words verbatim from the Prosecutor's suit (see below).

The posts "contain clearly false information about the political and social position in Belarus and the legal situation of citizens", the court concluded. It added that no special analysis of the materials was needed because the postings contained "direct calls to extremist actions", though it did not specify what these actions might be or whether there had been any since 2020 (see below).

Ahead of the hearing, Minsk Prosecutor's Office refused to discuss with Forum 18 its suit to have these materials banned as "extremist" (see below).

The Judge's secretary said that neither New Life Church nor the Prosecutor has appealed against the court decision so far. Asked if the Church will appeal, a church member told Forum 18: "There's no point, unfortunately" (see below).

[UPDATE 30 August 2023: On 30 August, the Information Ministry added New Life's entire Instagram page and the 21 November

2020 YouTube video to the "Republican List of Extremist Materials", even though both pages are no longer accessible. The updated List also revealed that on 25 August, Molodechno District Court in Minsk Region had also banned the Church's website as "extremist". New Life Church was not aware of this hearing, learning of it only on 30 August.]

[UPDATE 31 August 2023: The List updated on 31 August revealed that on 28 August, Molodechno District Court in Minsk Region had also banned the Church's Facebook page (though it misspelled the page name) and Telegram channel.]

[UPDATE 4 September 2023: The List updated on 4 September revealed that on 31 August, Molodechno District Court in Minsk Region had also banned the Church's VKontakte page and a further YouTube video by Pastor Goncharenko.]

The regime seized and bulldozed New Life Church and has already blocked the Church's website (see below).

Vyacheslav Goncharenko, New Life's Pastor, was freed on 24 August after serving in full his 10-day jail term following his 14 August arrest. He was freed the day after the closed hearing to declare two internet posts "extremist material" containing "deliberately false information on political and social situation in the Republic of Belarus". The Church's youth pastor Ilya Budai was freed on 19 August after serving a five-day jail term (see below).

Asked what the future for New Life Church is, a church member responded: "That's not clear at the moment" (see below).

Meanwhile, on 16 August, Miory District Court declared the Telegram channel of the Christian Vision group to be "extremist". The group documents violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights. "We were not invited to the court and of course not given the court decision," a member of Christian Vision told Forum 18 (see below).

Miory District Court refused to say whether the suit to ban Christian Vision's Telegram channel as "extremist" had been lodged by the Prosecutor's Office, why the suit had been lodged to that court, or which judge had handed down the decision. Prosecutor Andrei Vetyugov at Miory Prosecutor's Office similarly refused to discuss anything (see below).

Years of regime pressure

New Life Pentecostal Church was formed in 1992. It bought its building - a former cowshed on the western edge of Minsk - in 2002. The Church converted the building into its place of worship, turning it into a spacious, modern structure, but the regime refused to change its legal designation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) as a cowshed.

The regime repeatedly tried to evict New Life Church from 2009 onwards, and on 17 February 2021 30 police and court bailiffs forcibly evicted New Life from its building, using an angle grinder to cut the door lock to gain entry. On 20 June 2023, the regime began bulldozing New Life's church building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2841).

The regime has used a variety of threats against New Life Church and other religious communities it dislikes, including an August 2021 tax demand for 458,918.22 Belarusian Roubles - equivalent to more than 25 years' average wages for someone in work. On 18 July 2023 the tax demand was renewed. Housing Repair and Utilities Association Deputy Head Nataliya Kalistratova refused to explain to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851) why the 2021 tax claim was being renewed.

On 3 August, Minsk's Oktyabrsky District Tax Office requested New Life's annual financial reports (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851), as well as documents relating to the Excurs Trans Company which transported children to the Church's summer camp and whose bus was involved in an accident on 10 July. The accident led to hostile media coverage and Prosecutor's Office questioning of people connected with the camp.

New Life Pastors freed

Vyacheslav Goncharenko, New Life Church's Pastor, was freed on 24 August 2023 from Minsk District Police Detention Centre after serving in full his 10-day jail term, church members told Forum 18. He was freed the day after the closed hearing at Minsk's Central District Court upheld the Prosecutor's suit to declare two internet posts "extremist material" containing "deliberately false information on political and social situation in the Republic of Belarus" (see below).

The Church's youth pastor Ilya Budai was freed from the same Detention Centre on 19 August after serving in full his five-day jail term, church members added.

Pastor Goncharenko and Pastor Budai were arrested on 14 August after 20 armed police officers from the Organised Crime and Corruption Department raided Pastor Goncharenko's house. The officers also searched the house. Minsk District Court jailed the two the following day (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851).

A human rights defender suggested to Forum 18 on 15 August (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851) that the length of Pastor Goncharenko's imprisonment was dictated by the regime's wish to stop him attending the 23 August "extremist

materials" hearing.

Deputy Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) Sergei Gerasimenya refused to answer any questions, including about regime pressure on New Life Church. "We give no comments by phone," he repeatedly told Forum 18 on 29 August.

Two 2020 New Life postings declared "extremist" in 2023

New Life Church's website was blocked without warning on 25 July. This is a tactic which the regime has used with the excuse of alleged "extremism" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) against many organisations.

New Life was without warning sent a document (seen by Forum 18) signed by Minsk Prosecutor Oleg Lavrukhin on 25 July, which bans the website for 6 months (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851). He accuses the Church of publishing "extremist" information and "building up threats to national security, which includes artificially whipping up tensions in society and inciting social hostility or discord through the dissemination of false information".

On 4 August, Minsk's Central District Court sent a notification to New Life (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851) of a 23 August court hearing to consider a suit lodged by Minsk Prosecutor's First Deputy, Oleg Avdei. This demands that two internet posts be declared "extremist material" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) containing "deliberately false information on the political and social situation in the Republic of Belarus." These are:

- a video posted on YouTube by New Life on 21 November 2020 protesting against the regime's violence against protestors objecting to election fraud (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806). A New Life church member suspected that this was the reason for the sudden eviction of the Church from its building;

- and an Instagram post on 17 August 2020 quoted by Prosecutor Lavrukhin: "Prayer for Belarus. On 16 August after the morning worship service the New Life Church congregation came outside making up a prayer chain and holding the Bible in their hands. As Christians we condemn the recent violence and cruelty and appeal to the authorities to repent."

These materials have already been removed from the internet.

Minsk Prosecutor's Office on 8 August refused to discuss with Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2851) its suit to have these materials banned as "extremist".

Judge Tatyana Skopets at Minsk's Central District Court heard the suit at a closed hearing on 23 August at which only she and her secretary were present. "The hearing to recognise some of the Church's information production extremist materials was declared closed and they did not allow people in to listen to the judicial process," New Life Church noted the same day. "They also informed that they will send a copy of the court decision the next day by post."

The two posts from 2020 "are directed at undermining the authority of the powers that be and their representatives, discredit the organs of state power and administration, bear a clearly politicised and engaged character and are addressed to an indeterminate circle of people", the Judge wrote in her decision (seen by Forum 18), taking the words verbatim from the Prosecutor's suit.

The posts "contain clearly false information about the political and social position in Belarus and the legal situation of citizens", the court concluded. Echoing the view of the Prosecutor, it added that no special analysis of the materials was needed because the postings contained "direct calls to extremist actions", though it did not specify what these actions might be or whether there had been any since 2020.

The decision says that the parties to the case did not come to the court for the hearing although they had been duly informed of it. It did not say that New Life's representative and church members were barred from the hearing. Nor did it explain why the Prosecutor's Office did not send a representative.

Sergiy Melyanets, a member of a different Protestant Church in Minsk, noted how "convenient" for the authorities it was that Pastor Goncharenko had been jailed, preventing his presence in court for the hearing. "In addition, they declared the hearing closed so that no 'unwanted' person could slip in and hear what the comrade judge was spouting," he wrote on his Facebook page on 28 August. He added that church members were present near the court room "but they were not allowed in". Nor too was the Church's lawyer.

In her decision, Judge Skopets instructed the Information Ministry to include the two items she found "extremist" to be added to the "Republican List of Extremist Materials" and to take measures to block access to them in the country (though both have already been removed). She said the banning order had to be "immediately implemented". She added that the decision can be appealed against to Minsk City Court within 15 days of the issuing of the written decision.

Judge Skopets' secretary, Aleksandra Levkevich, said on 29 August that the Judge is now on holiday. She refused to comment on the

decision itself, insisting that it had been "based on the case materials".

Levkevich said she did not know who had declared the hearing closed. "That means that only duly authorised representatives of the parties could be present," she told Forum 18. "The representative of the Church had no document confirming that he was the authorised representative of the Church so he was not let in. We explained it to them." The Prosecutor gave no reason for failing to attend, she added.

The Judge's secretary said that neither New Life Church nor the Prosecutor has appealed against the court decision so far.

The Church received the written "extremist" decision by post on 28 August. Asked by Forum 18 if the Church will appeal against the court decision, a church member responded: "There's no point, unfortunately."

Asked what the future for New Life Church is, the church member responded: "That's not clear at the moment."

[UPDATE 30 August 2023: On 30 August, the Information Ministry added New Life's entire Instagram page and the 21 November 2020 YouTube video to the "Republican List of Extremist Materials", even though both pages are no longer accessible. The updated List also revealed that on 25 August, Molodechno District Court in Minsk Region had also banned the Church's website as "extremist". New Life Church was not aware of this hearing, learning of it only on 30 August.]

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Christian Vision channel declared "extremist"

On 16 August, Miory District Court in Vitebsk Region declared the Telegram channel of the Christian Vision group (<https://t.me/s/christianvision>) to be "extremist". Representatives of various Christian Churches across Belarus formed the group in September 2020, amid protests against the falsified presidential elections, to document violations of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights.

The decision became public on 19 August when Christian Vision's Telegram channel was included in the Information Ministry's "Republican List of Extremist Materials". It said the banning order had to be "immediately implemented".

Miory District Court refused to say whether the suit to ban Christian Vision's Telegram channel as "extremist" had been lodged by the Prosecutor's Office, why the suit had been lodged to that court, or which judge had handed down the decision. "No one will give you such information as you are not a party to the case," the court secretary told Forum 18 on 21 August.

Asked if such a decision can be challenged, the court secretary said an interested party could lodge a supervisory appeal to the Prosecutor's Office, or possibly appeal to the Regional Court. However, she did not seem sure about whether such appeals would be possible.

"Of course, we're against extremism and extremist ideologies," a Christian Vision member who asked not to be identified told Forum 18 on 28 August. "We were not invited to the court and of course not given the court decision. As we don't have legal personality, the question arises: who could appeal against the decision?"

Forum 18 was unable to find out why Miory Prosecutor's Office lodged the suit and whether it can be challenged as Prosecutor Andrei Vetyugov absolutely refused to discuss anything. "We do not give any information on the phone, come to us in person," he told Forum 18 on 23 August before putting the phone down.

The Christian Vision member speculated that the suit might have been brought to Miory District Court as two local Catholic priests – Fr Andrei Kulik and Fr Vyacheslav Adamovich - had been arrested there in May and officials had searched their phones.

Forum 18 was unable to ask why Christian Vision's Telegram channel had been declared "extremist" for monitoring violations of freedom of religion or belief as Deputy Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806) Sergei Gerasimenya refused to answer any questions on 29 August.

Ever-expanding "Republican List of Extremist Materials"

The Information Ministry's "Republican List of Extremist Materials" includes many xenophobic and racist works (such as Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf"), as well as material produced by the political opposition and foreign-based news websites. It also includes some religious materials – like the Christian Vision Telegram channel - that do not call for the violation of anyone's human rights.

All had been banned as "extremist" by a local court.

The List has been expanding rapidly as ever more publications, websites and internet postings are declared "extremist". The List, with the latest addition on 22 August, runs to 693 pages. (At the end of 2022 it ran to 480 pages (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2801).

A Greek Catholic news website and a YouTube interview with a Catholic priest who fled to neighbouring Poland in 2021 to escape prosecution are among religious items to be banned by local courts as "extremist" and added to the "Republican List of Extremist Materials" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2801). Other banned religious works include an introduction to Orthodoxy published in Russia's capital Moscow and added to the Republican List in 2016, as well as several Muslim books. Anyone who distributes any of these works risks criminal prosecution.

Deputy Information Minister Igor Buzovsky, who is also Deputy Chair of the "Republican Expert Commission for the Evaluation of Symbols, Attributes, and Information Products for the presence (or absence) in them of signs of Extremism", defended the banning of specific publications and websites as "extremist". "This is done exclusively on the basis of the law," he insisted to Forum 18 in January 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2801). (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>)

For more background, see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2612)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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