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BELARUS: Minsk Krishna society facing closure?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Just a week before the deadline expires for re-registering religious communities under the repressive 2002 religion law, Minsk's Society for Krishna Consciousness fears a 3 November court ruling that religious activity at its current place of worship is illegal will make it impossible to re-register. Like many Protestant churches without their own building, the 200-strong Hare Krishna community meets in a residential property, but the religion law bans "systematic" worship in such premises. "The authorities don't allow us to meet on our own premises and don't allow us to go anywhere else either," Sergei Malakhovsky of the Society complained to Forum 18 News Service. Police broke up a September celebration of Krishna's birthday held at a Minsk restaurant in the presence of the Indian ambassador.

The Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness fears that it will not be granted the necessary re-registration under Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law after a recent district court ruling declared worship services at its current legal address to be unlawful. "We are being forced down a blind alley," Sergei Malakhovsky of the Society remarked to Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 11 November. "The authorities don't allow us to meet on our own premises and don't allow us to go anywhere else either." Under the 2002 law, the deadline for compulsory re-registration for all religious organisations expires on 17 November. Unregistered religious activity is illegal.

Although the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness was legally registered at 11 Pavlov Street in 1992, subsequent legal additions place its right to worship in the two-storey building at that address in doubt. Thus, on 3 November Minsk's Central District Court issued an official warning to Society chairman Aleksandr Karzov for violating the legal procedure on religious events. On conducting a check-up at 11 Pavlov Street at 7.10 pm on 14 October, the court's decision noted, local police officer Yuri Nesterovich found Karzov conducting an evening service with approximately ten other persons "dressed in ritual clothing".

The court found that this constituted an administrative offence because, as specialist from Minsk's municipal Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Alla Martynova explained, 11 Pavlov Street has not been transferred from the state's catalogue of housing stock and is therefore legally a dwelling that cannot be considered to be specially designed for religious events. In accordance with Article 25 of the religion law, the verdict continued, worship meetings in such residential premises are permitted only if they are not "systematic" in character and follow a corresponding decision by the local state authorities.

Local police officer Nesterovich, however, pointed out to the court that the 14 October service at 11 Pavlov Street was the most recent such gathering to be held "systematically" at that address since 2002. "Permission had not been granted for the holding of religious events," he reportedly told the court, "and no one had applied for it."

This situation – similar to that of some Protestant congregations (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=155 and 5 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=445) - makes re-registration problematic for the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness. In addition, Article 17 of the religion law states that a religious organisation applying for re-registration must provide an official document certifying its right to be situated at the address indicated in its statutes, while Article 272 of the 1998 Civil Code does not allow an organisation to be sited in a dwelling unless it has been transformed into non-residential premises.

Malakhovsky admitted to Forum 18 that the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness has been reluctant to request formal permission to use its building for worship services in line with the most recent law. "We have been refused permission for anything at all over the past five years – to rent a hall, distribute literature or collect donations," he explained (see F18News 27 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=236).

Illustrating how the Society now finds it impossible to obtain the use of premises outside 11 Pavlov Street, Malakhovsky described to Forum 18 how state representatives recently broke up a community celebration at a privately-hired function suite. On 11 September, he said, Krishna devotees and guests – including the Indian ambassador to Belarus – gathered at a restaurant belonging to a local factory "for a purely secular celebration" following a religious ceremony marking Krishna's birthday at 11 Pavlov Street.

During the celebration, however, some half a dozen police officers and local officials arrived at the restaurant, said Malakhovsky,

and insisted that the event was a religious gathering for which official permission was required in accordance with the religion law. Threatening to call riot police, he continued, the state representatives obliged Society members and guests to leave the premises, and court warnings were subsequently issued to the directors of both the factory and the restaurant.

In the wake of these official warnings, Malakhovsky told Forum 18 that he now fears fines, closure of 11 Pavlov Street and prosecution of its Krishna devotee owner should the approximately 200 Society members who attend weekly worship services continue to practice their faith as a community.

An 8 October 1997 analysis by experts attached to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs declared the Minsk Society for Krishna Consciousness to be a "destructive totalitarian sect" and recommended its closure.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom

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

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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