

17 November 2004

BELARUS: Most - but not all - communities re-registered

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

Most religious communities denied state re-registration are Protestant, Forum 18 News Service has found. But before the deadline (Tuesday 16 November) for obligatory state re-registration under Belarus' restrictive 2002 religion law, most religious confessions – such as the Catholic, Old Believer, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Adventist, Islamic, Jewish, and Jehovah's Witness communities - told Forum 18 that most of their applications were largely successful. Registration by most non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches was effectively barred, and some other religious communities are still re-registering. Stressing that registration does not guarantee freedom of worship, one Protestant source in 2003 suggested to Forum 18 that this would happen: "They can reassure the West by saying, 'Just look how many organisations we have re-registered'." Aleksandr Kalinov of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 that "96.2 per cent" had successfully re-registered, but that religious organisations which failed to re-register would be liquidated following the deadline.

The bulk of re-registration denials under Belarus' obligatory state re-registration process have been mainly of Protestant churches, Forum 18 News Service has found. But, contacted by Forum 18 shortly before the final day (Tuesday 16 November) of a two-year period for obligatory state re-registration under Belarus' restrictive 2002 religion law, representatives of almost all of the country's religious confessions report that their applications were largely successful – with some notable exceptions.

Offering some preliminary figures on 16 November but stressing that a little time remained for approximately 20 outstanding religious organisations to re-register, Aleksandr Kalinov of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 that "96.2 per cent" - or 2,678 out of 2,783 religious organisations - had successfully re-registered. Those which had not, he maintained, were either too small to qualify (the 2002 law stipulates a minimum of 20 members) or had voluntarily applied for liquidation: "We didn't set ourselves the aim of harming legal personalities," he claimed. Kalinov added that the final results would probably be released in two or three days' time.

After a slow start (see F18News 11 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=139), state officials appear to have striven to re-register most religious organisations. While stressing that re-registration was not necessarily a guarantee of the right to worship freely, one Protestant source earlier suggested to Forum 18 that this would be the case: "They can reassure the West by saying, 'Just look how many organisations we have re-registered'." (See F18News 7 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=178)

The 2002 religion law does not prescribe a compulsory liquidation procedure as a consequence of failing to re-register. However, repeated violations of its provisions – such as failure to re-register – may result in liquidation by court order, according to Article 23. On 16 November, Kalinov told Forum 18 that religious organisations which failed to re-register would be liquidated following the deadline.

Many members of Belarus' religious minorities fear that, after last month's referendum and parliamentary elections, and this month's re-registration deadline, the government will now harshly implement Belarus' repressive 2002 religion law. Under this law, all unregistered group religious activity is illegal (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=154 and forthcoming article). Legal restrictions on public religious events also exist (see F18News 1 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=131).

The preamble to the 2002 law gives special recognition to the Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Lutheran Church, Judaism and Islam. Speaking to Forum 18 in recent days, several religious leaders referred to an 11 November meeting attended by representatives of these confessions as well as the Old Believers, at which Vice-premier Vladimir Drazhin reportedly announced that their organisations had all successfully passed re-registration. Kalinov told Forum 18 that 1,256 Orthodox parishes had re-registered, while 11 would be liquidated by their own decision or because they had become monasteries. While he said that precise data would not be available from dioceses until the new year, Belarusian Orthodox Church press secretary Andrei Petrashkevich told Forum 18 that the handful of parishes which had failed to re-register had done so "for technical reasons", such as a change of location.

The True Orthodox Church was in 2003 effectively banned from re-registering (see F18News 2 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=23 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=24). Non-Moscow

Patriarchate Orthodox Christian communities could only gain state registration if they had the approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop. This non-legal, but state-enforced, requirement barred re-registration of the Russian True Orthodox Church, which comes under the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR - which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate), the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox (People's) Church and the catacomb True Orthodox communities (see F18News 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177).

A Minsk-based spokesperson for the Roman Catholic Church told Forum 18 that all its parishes – approximately 430 – had also re-registered, while Kalinov gave the figure of 428. A spokesperson for the 15 Greek Catholic (Eastern-rite) communities in Belarus similarly told Forum 18 that they had all re-registered successfully, as did Kalinov.

Fr Werner Bösiiger of the controversial Latin-rite Society of St Pius X, founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, told Forum 18 that its two previously registered communities in Minsk had amalgamated and re-registered as one since they did not have more than 20 members each. Remarking that it was "not so complicated" for Catholics in Belarus, he added that this community had managed to gain the authorities' approval to use a free-standing house as a legal address: "You just need to be a little bit flexible."

Petr Orlov, who heads 38 priestless Pomorye Old Believer communities in Belarus, told Forum 18 that they had all re-registered, while a spokesperson at the Old Believer church belonging to the Belokrinitsa Concord in the city of Gomel [Homyel'] said that it too had recently re-registered. Kalinov added that three Old Believer communities in Minsk, Brest and Vitebsk [Vitsyeb'sk] regions would be liquidated by choice due to scant numbers.

According to Kalinov, 23 of 27 Muslim communities have re-registered, since the remaining four – two in Grodno [Hrodna] region, one in Minsk and one in Brest – had disbanded by themselves. Mufti Ismail Aleksandrovich of the Religious Association of Muslims in Belarus told Forum 18 that all 20 of his organisation's communities had re-registered. Previously potentially affected by the law's provision preventing the use of residential premises as a legal address (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=155), he said that this had not been problematic in practice: "In some places the authorities helped us." Ismail Voronovich, the head of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Belarus, which is said to embrace some five communities, has so far been unavailable for comment.

Yuri Dorn, who heads the Judaic Religious Association, told Forum 18 that 14 of 15 of its communities had re-registered. The fifteenth, in Molodechno [Maladzyechna] (Minsk region), had failed to find a suitable legal address in time, he explained, but he was confident that it would be registered in the near future. Dorn thought that a further two Hassidic Jewish communities under the Union of Jewish Religious Communities of the Republic of Belarus had not managed to re-register for the same reason, but Eduard Parizh, who heads that organisation, has so far been unavailable for comment.

The chairman of the Religious Association of Progressive Jewish Communities, Yakov Basin told Forum 18 that 15 of its 16 member organisations had re-registered. The sixteenth, in Borisov (Minsk region), had no legal address, he explained, "but that was our fault – the problem was with the community itself." Kalinov maintained that a total of 36 Jewish religious organisations had re-registered – the exceptions being an Orthodox community in Brest and a Progressive community in Minsk.

Although he was unsure of the exact number, Vitali Sozinov of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Belarus confirmed that all – or approximately 11 – of its communities had re-registered. Kalinov said that 17 out of 19 Lutheran communities had re-registered, the exceptions being in Minsk and Mogilev.

More varied results emerge regarding the remaining Protestant and other confessions. Bishop Sergei Khomich of the Pentecostal Union told Forum 18 that some 480 of 490 Pentecostal communities had re-registered successfully. Kalinov of the State Committee put the figure at 462, adding that the remainder were too small and had voluntarily surrendered their legal personality status. Bishop Nikolai Sinkovets of the Baptist Union told Forum 18 that it was still too early to gauge how many of his organisation's 272 communities would be re-registered, "but it will be fewer than 272, as some won't pass". A member of an independent Baptist church in Brest told Forum 18 that it had filed for re-registration, but had not yet learnt the result. Kalinov said that 239 of 266 Baptist communities had re-registered, with the remainder due for liquidation with their full consent.

Aleksandr Sakovich, who heads the charismatic Full Gospel Churches Association, also told Forum 18 that it was too early to say how many if its 64 congregations would be re-registered, since many had submitted applications only recently. Kalinov told Forum 18 that 49 of 61 Full Gospel congregations had re-registered, maintaining that the remainder had either requested liquidation or were too small. Forum 18 has documented the difficulties experienced by some of the Full Gospel Association under the 2002 law, particularly as only six of its congregations possess their own worship buildings (see F18News 5 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=445). On 16 November the 500-strong New Life Full Gospel Church was reportedly refused re-registration in Minsk city. The Freedom of Conscience Information Centre told Forum 18 that district authorities rejected the church's use as a legal address of a building it had purchased over two years before while simultaneously denying permission for its renovation. As well as restrictions on buildings for worship, legal restrictions on public religious events also exist (see F18News 1 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=131).

The non-denominational Church of Christ – unconnected, according to its Minsk pastor, with the controversial group of that name

also known as the Boston Movement – has re-registered five of its six congregations, Pastor Konstantin Momatyuk told Forum 18. He explained that a member of the sixth, in Molodechno, had "walked off with the official church stamp", making re-registration impossible. While one Minsk congregation successfully re-registered at its own building, Momatyuk noted that this was without the right to conduct services there as it was technically still a residential address.

Minsk-based Pastor Nikolai Khaskin of the Zion-Jerusalem Messianic Jewish community told Forum 18 that it was having difficulties with re-registration due to the absence of a suitable legal address. A further two Messianic congregations in the capital have managed to re-register, he said.

Moisei Ostrovsky, who heads the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Belarus, told Forum 18 that 61 of its communities had been re-registered and a further nine registered anew. Pastor Aleksandr Timashev of the non-denominational Johanneskirche in Grodno city told Forum 18 that his church, the only such community in Belarus, had also re-registered. Kalinov confirmed that both these churches had fully re-registered.

Lyudmila Chizhmakova of the New Apostolic Church similarly reported that all 20 of its congregations had re-registered. While half of these have their own worship buildings, she said, the authorities permitted others to re-register at residential addresses if they were free-standing houses with specific approval from fire and sanitation officers, as one regional religious affairs official had maintained to Forum 18 last year (see F18News 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=155). Kalinov also confirmed that this confession had fully re-registered.

A spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Minsk, Pavel Yadlovsky said that 25 of 26 communities had re-registered. A decision had not been received for the twenty-sixth, he said, but was confident that it would be positive. Kalinov maintained that all 26 had been re-registered. A spokesperson for the East European representation of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints told Forum 18 that in practice there were two rather than three Mormon communities in Minsk and that only these two had re-registered. This was similarly confirmed by Kalinov.

Of six Baha'i organisations, five have re-registered, Minsk community member Vasili Kislyak told Forum 18. The Baha'i organisation in Grodno voluntarily disbanded because it did not have ten members, he said. (Regional religious affairs officials earlier told Forum 18 that they would accept ten rather than 20 members for re-registration of an existing community, as this was the number required for initial registration under the 1992 religion law.) Although there are 12 people in the group, explained Kislyak, only nine are registered residents of Grodno city and some of them were too wary to provide their names for re-registration. He stressed, however, that there had been no state pressure and expected that the Grodno community would still be able to meet in small groups.

Sergei Malakhovsky of the Society for Krishna Consciousness told Forum 18 that four out of six of its communities had re-registered, the exceptions being in Bobruisk [Babruysk] (Mogilev [Mahilyow] region) and Minsk, where Forum 18 has already documented the community's problems in meeting the stipulations of the 2002 law (see F18News 10 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=450).

Two Reformed Baptist churches previously registered with the Baptist Union have been refused re-registration, the pastor of one of them, Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky, told Forum 18. Although his Minsk congregation applied and was rejected two months ago, it has still not been officially notified, he said, while a second community in Gatovo (Minsk region) was also refused without explanation: "They just returned the documents." After a check-up in October 2004, police officers tried to prosecute the Minsk congregation for meeting without state permission but failed due to procedural irregularities, Pastor Vyazovsky added. In his view the congregations have been refused re-registration because "we reject the close scrutiny of church life instigated by the 2002 law".

The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186), and close supervision by officials of religious communities is an integral part of central state policy (see F18News 9 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=248).

A member of another Reformed church, Aleksei Frolov, told Forum 18 that his Calvinist community in Minsk has not yet been re-registered, although it only recently applied. This community has also previously had difficulty holding events in the capital (see F18News 31 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=172). Pastor Lyavon Lipen of a second, entirely separate, Calvinist community in Minsk told Forum 18 that it would not be re-registering as he considers the 2002 law discriminatory and anti-Christian. "The authorities didn't include Calvinists as historical in the law despite historical fact and they haven't returned our historical church buildings to us - if they ignore us, we'll ignore them."

Churches whose congregations belong to the Council of Churches Baptists refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in the CIS countries they operate.

The religion law envisages two levels of re-registration prior to the 16 November 2004 deadline. The individual local religious communities described so far must re-register with regional executive committees or, if applicable, Minsk City Council. Religious associations (obyedineniya), however – which must contain ten or more affiliate local communities, including one that has

functioned in Belarus for at least 20 years - must re-register with the main government body dealing with religious organisations, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. Only these religious associations have the right to found monasteries, monastic communities, brotherhoods and sisterhoods, missions and religious educational institutions, which also have to re-register individually with the State Committee. Kalinov told Forum 18 that all those organisations liable for re-registration with the State Committee had done so successfully.

Certainly, no representative of a confession with a previously registered association reported difficulty re-registering it. Jewish leader Yakov Basin explained that the authorities had disregarded the provision stipulating that one community must have been active in Belarus for more than 20 years when re-registering existing associations. Currently without a central association even though they have sufficient communities, however, the Greek Catholics may have difficulties registering one in future due to the law's restrictions in this area (see F18News 30 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=171). Without such an association, they do not officially have the right to found media organs or invite foreign personnel to engage in religious activity.

And while all 25 Orthodox monasteries and convents have re-registered, according to Church press secretary Aleksandr Pashkevich, re-registration of similar Roman Catholic institutions is "still ongoing", according to a Catholic spokesperson in Minsk. Although the Roman Catholic Church claims 357 monks and nuns in Belarus, only a handful of Catholic convents and no monasteries have previously obtained registration (see F18News 30 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=67).

Forum 18 has been unable to locate representatives of the three remaining registered confessions: the First Christian Church, the Apostolic Faith Christians, and Oomoto (a faith often regarded as an offshoot of Shinto, founded in Japan in 1892).

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus 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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