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BELARUS: Second massive fine for organising religious worship

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

On 23 September, two months after a regular Sunday morning service of the embattled New Life charismatic church in Minsk was raided by police, a court fined the church's administrator Vasily Yurevich the equivalent of 160 times the minimum monthly wage for organising an "illegal" service. Yurevich told Forum 18 News Service that Judge Natalya Kuznetsova ignored church members' insistence that he had not organised the service, while the court decision maintained that the judge "believes offender Yurevich is trying to evade responsibility for what has been committed". This is Yurevich's second massive fine and he fears further fines in the wake of a police raid on the church's 4 September service. In separate cases, one Baptist punished for organising "illegal" worship was able to overturn his fine in August, but two other Baptists have been fined in recent months. One was ordered to take down the church sign.

Vasily Yurevich, administrator of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church, was fined 4,080,000 Belarusian roubles (12,324 Norwegian kroner, 1,575 Euros or 1,895 US dollars) by the city's Moscow District Court on 23 September for organising a Sunday morning service two months earlier. Yurevich told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 26 September that Judge Natalya Kuznetsova had ignored his and church members' insistence that he had not organised the service, even though New Life members formally decided on 21 November 2004 that they attend church services on their own initiative.

The fine – equivalent to 160 times the country's official minimum monthly wage – is the second handed down to Yurevich for violating Article 167, Part 1 of the republic's Administrative Violations Code. This punishes an initial violation of "the established procedure for holding religious events" with a warning, a fine of between 20 and 150 times the minimum monthly wage or between three and 15 days' detention, and a fine of between 150 and 300 times the minimum monthly wage or between 10 and 15 days' detention for offences committed within one year of the first. Yurevich was first fined 3,600,000 Belarusian roubles (10,059 Norwegian kroner, 1,215 Euros or 1,654 US dollars) on 28 December 2004 for organising a similarly "illegal" worship service (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480).

A copy of the 23 September court decision received by Forum 18 notes that Yurevich "took part in a religious gathering of prayers and preaching at 11 am on 24 July 2005 in a building not specially designed for religious events without the permission of the district administration". Three police officers conducting a check-up at that time testified to the court that Yurevich was present at the gathering, at which they saw "a man preaching on a stage decorated with religious items, urging those present in the hall to turn to god [sic]". The three also noted that members of the congregation providing security suggested they approach Yurevich and carried out his instructions. Judge Kuznetsova, concludes the court decision, "believes offender Yurevich is trying to evade responsibility for what has been committed" and has no grounds not to trust the testimonies of the witnesses, "since they are consistent and do not contradict one another".

A New Life Church report of the previous day's hearing at Minsk's Moscow District Court notes that Judge Kuznetsova described the church as a "sect" and suggested its members "club together" to pay the fine.

New Life Church has been worshipping at a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002 ever since being barred from renting a local house of culture in September 2004. As Vasily Yurevich told procuracy officials in December 2004, the church was earlier refused requests to rent other public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk. The 2002 religion law requires state permission for religious gatherings in premises not specially designed for worship, but the Minsk municipal authorities have consistently refused to grant both this - on the grounds that the building is a cowshed - as well as permission to reconstruct the building as a church, latterly maintaining that it is to be demolished as part of Minsk's general development plan (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516).

Yurevich told Forum 18 that he intends to appeal the 24 September decision and has not paid either this or last year's fine, which he recently referred to the Supreme Court after an earlier appeal against it was rejected by Minsk City Court (see F18News 19 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=565). He also suggested that further prosecution is likely, since police officers again checked up on New Life's Sunday morning service on 4 September. According to Yurevich, New Life's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko has paid a fine of 720,000 Belarusian roubles (2,090 Norwegian kroner, 255 Euros or 330 US dollars) for similarly organising "illegal" worship, but is also in the process of appealing it (see F18News 23 March 2005

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=530).

The Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries, have reported fines for worship in private homes from time to time ever since the adoption of the 2002 religion law (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463). On 19 August they reported that a local court cancelled a fine of 127,500 Belarusian roubles (385 Norwegian kroner, 49 Euros or 59 US dollars) handed down to Mogilev church member Nikolai Dolbun on 12 July for leading an unregistered religious organisation in violation of Article 193 of the Administrative Offences Code (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

Since then, however, local Baptists reported that Valeri Ryzhuk of Drogichin (Brest region) received a court summons on 16 August after refusing to pay a fine of 51,000 Belarusian roubles (154 Norwegian kroner, 20 Euros or 24 US dollars) handed down to him on 9 June for similarly leading an unregistered religious organisation. The Baptist Council of Churches also reported that police officers and state officials called at the home of Igor Shpakovsky of Staryye Dorogi (Minsk Region) three times during August, ordering him to remove his prayer house sign and fining him 25,000 Belarusian roubles (75 Norwegian kroner, 10 Euros or 12 US dollars) for incorrect land use.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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