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BELARUS: Pressure mounts on two more Minsk Protestant churches

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

Following two warnings last year, Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church now faces administrative charges for leading an unregistered congregation after a city official and a police officer arrived at his home during Sunday worship on 5 February, he told Forum 18 News Service from Belarus' capital Minsk. The hearing is due on 3 March. Meanwhile, court officials are demanding that Pastor Ernst Sabilo of the Minsk-based Belarusian Evangelical Church – a veteran of Soviet labour camps for his faith – pay court costs of almost 60 US dollars for the liquidation of his congregation's legal status last September. Sabilo told court officials that as a pensioner he cannot afford to pay the sum. The two churches are among many religious groups in Belarus unable to gain registration under highly restrictive registration regulations, thus rendering all their activity illegal.

Legal pressures are mounting on two more Protestant churches in the capital Minsk which have been unable to gain registration under Belarus' highly restrictive registration regulations, their pastors have complained to Forum 18 News Service. Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky of Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church is once again facing legal charges for holding unapproved religious services, while in a separate case, Pastor Ernst Sabilo of the Belarusian Evangelical Church – a veteran of Soviet labour camps for his faith – is being required to pay court costs for the liquidation of his congregation's legal status last September.

On Sunday 5 February the Christ's Covenant congregation of approximately 30 was reading the Bible and praying at his home, Pastor Vyazovsky told Forum 18 from Minsk on 22 February, when a local district official entered and began to take photographs. When church members refused to let in a police officer who arrived shortly afterwards, continued Vyazovsky, the two state representatives drew up a protocol accusing the pastor under Article 167-1, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code, of violating the established legal procedure for holding religious events. Under the 2002 Religion Law, such events require state permission if held outside a designated house of worship and may not be conducted systematically or on a large-scale in a private home.

Officially summoned to Minsk's Partisan District Court at lunchtime on 22 February - the same day that the case against him was due to be heard - Vyazovsky told Forum 18 he was unable to attend and that the hearing has consequently been postponed to 3 March. The pastor also said that the authorities had easily been able to find out about his church's Sunday service as its timetable had not changed, "up to now".

Contacted on 22 February, a secretary at Partisan District Court directed Forum 18 to its office dealing with administrative violations, but there was no response at that number.

On 25 November 2005 Partisan District Court issued a warning to Pastor Vyazovsky under the same Administrative Violations Code article following similar police check-ups on 26 May 2005 and 30 October 2005 (see F18News 15 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=705). An appeal against the court's decision was rejected by Minsk City Court on 10 January 2006.

Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church unsuccessfully sought independent re-registration under the 2002 law after previously being affiliated to the mainstream Baptist Union (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454 and 30 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664). On 22 February Pastor Vyazovsky told Forum 18 that to date, there has been no attempt to liquidate his church by court order.

Pastor Vyazovsky asks for petitions in support of Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church to be sent to the authorities from churches, individual Christians and from "those who are not indifferent to basic human rights". "We beseech you for help. It is easy and very effective - this was proved during the Soviet time. We need firstly prayers and secondly letters to government institutions and to President Alexander Lukashenko. The more letters we have, the more effective they are."

In the case of another Protestant church in the capital, after Minsk City Court liquidated his Belarusian Evangelical Church on 20

September 2005, Pastor Ernst Sabilo was told to pay court costs of 127,500 Belarusian roubles (376 Norwegian kroner, 48 Euros or 58 US dollars). Pastor Sabilo - who spent 13 years in a Soviet prison camp after being convicted in 1951 for "speaking about my religious convictions and the political injustice of Soviet power" – tried to re-register his church under the 2002 religion law but was unsuccessful due to the absence of state-approved, non-residential worship premises (see F18News 30 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=664).

On 23 February Pastor Sabilo told Forum 18 that he had recently received a demand from the court in Minsk's Moscow District – where the Belarusian Evangelical Church had previously been registered at his home address – to pay the outstanding court costs by 20 February. Visiting the courthouse on that date, Pastor Sabilo said that he had cited his inability to pay the sum demanded and argued that, as only one of 12 founder members, he was not solely liable in any case: "They registered the church, not me – my name never even featured in the court case."

Sabilo said he was told that bailiffs would make an inventory of his property for confiscation, "but nothing has happened so far". He told Forum 18 that some time earlier a Moscow District Court official had rung his home and told his wife that the sum would be deducted from his state pension.

Forum 18 tried to reach officials at the Moscow District Court on 23 February but the telephones went unanswered.

On 15 February the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre reported that the City Executive Committee of Gomel [Homyel] in eastern Belarus hosted a meeting at which all local religious leaders were warned against using land not according to its designation. Officials cited the position of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church as a particularly negative example (for the latest on that church's predicament, see F18News 7 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=700). On 23 February New Life administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 that no steps had been taken against his church during the last couple of months, however. (END)

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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