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BELARUS: Christians campaign to change harsh Religion Law

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants in Belarus have joined together to launch a nationwide campaign to gather signatures calling for a change to the country's restrictive Religion Law, Forum 18 News Service notes. The organisers state that "the Law violates the rights of all people, even atheists." Petitions to change the law require at least 50,000 signatures to be considered by the Constitutional Court. As of this evening (16 May), more than 10,000 Belarusian citizens had signed the petition challenging state violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief. The campaign organisers affirm that the rights to life, free speech and freedom of belief are inalienable, stating that "because we have them from birth, they are given to us by God and not the government. Since the government does not give us these rights, they have no right to take them away." After one Minsk-based Orthodox priest joined the campaign, the Belarusian Orthodox Church issued a statement rejecting all connection with the petition and calling on Orthodox Christians not to take part.

By the evening of 16 May, more than 10,000 Belarusian citizens had signed a national petition to change the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, reports the campaign's spokesperson Sergei Lukanin. "This is already a serious figure for our country, where we don't have ideal conditions to gather such a petition," he told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk the same day. Stressing that this is an interim figure, he pledged that signature collection would continue. "The campaign is involving more and more churches and non-religious organisations in thirty towns across Belarus."

Local Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants have been gathering signatures since 22 April. As the campaign's promotional material states, "we are defending the rights of all Christians (Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants), all citizens of Belarus. The law violates the rights of all people, even atheists." Petitions to change the law require at least 50,000 signatures in order to be considered by the Constitutional Court.

Copies of campaign material received by Forum 18 explain that the rights to life, free speech and freedom of belief are inalienable, "because we have them from birth, they are given to us by God and not the government. Since the government does not give us these rights, they have no right to take them away." The petition form calls upon the Constitutional Court to bring the 2002 Law into line with the 1994 Constitution – Article 31 of which affirms religious freedom – and international human rights agreements which Belarus has signed. Petitioners also express concern at the "numerous violations of the rights of Belarusian citizens in the area of religious freedom" over the four years since the Law's adoption.

A 12-page supplementary document details the Religion Law's unconstitutional provisions. These include provisions that regular prayer meetings in private homes are illegal, and the fact that people can only meet together to worship after a complex state registration procedure has been completed.

The campaign material also gives theological grounds for supporting religious freedom, including that of personal responsibility for the development of society: "We are responsible for what laws our children will live under. God expects us to take affirmative action, as do our people." The timing of the petition, the supplementary material explains, is due to the fact that "since the end of 2006 it is in the interests of the government to have good, friendly relations with the European Union (EU) as never before, and one of the EU's conditions is improvement in the sphere of human rights." The co-ordinators stress, however, that the campaign "does not have political aims."

The petition is open only to Belarusian citizens, but an English-language appeal to the world community is on the website of the charismatic New Life Church, which is based in the capital Minsk. The website appeal asks "all people of good will to support the campaign of protection of the rights of freedom of conscience in Belarus and write letters to the leadership of our country" (see http://www.newlife.by/eng/right03_en.php).

Faith-based opposition to violations of the freedom of thought, conscience and belief has appeared, on other issues, from a number of Belarusian religious communities (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880).

Aleksei Shein, a campaign coordinator who is also co-chairman of the organisational committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement, told Forum 18 that his request for permission to hold a small demonstration on Freedom Square in central

Minsk on 20 April in support of freedom of conscience was refused. No explanation for the refusal was given by the city authorities. Normally an alternative, more distant, site is offered to demonstrators requesting a city centre location. Shein intends both to appeal against the refusal and also to submit a similar request for a less prominent site.

Public demonstrations require advance state permission under the relevant 2003 law (see F18News 1 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=131).

In addition to Christian Democracy activists, various church representatives have been promoting the petition. New Life Church hosted a press conference on 25 April addressed by: its pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko; the campaign spokesperson Sergei Lukanin (who is also lawyer for the New Life Church); fellow Minsk Full Gospel pastor Boris Chernoglaz; Pentecostal pastor Gennadi Kernozhitsky; and a Belarusian Orthodox priest from Minsk's Protection of the Holy Veil parish, Fr Aleksandr Shramko. As reported by New Life's website, Fr Aleksandr Shramko spoke of his belief that the 2002 Law "limits one of the basic human rights and needs to be changed. It is not right that other people are allowed to gather in apartments and engage in their favourite activity while Christians aren't allowed to gather at home and pray to God."

Although unable to attend the press conference, Grodno [Hrodna] Catholic priest Fr Aleksandr Shemet called upon all believers to support the petition, in an interview published on the Belarusian Christian Democracy website on 28 April. "Its importance must be understood," he remarked. "If we don't stand up for the rights guaranteed us by the Constitution, who knows what could happen next."

On 26 April, the day after the press conference, Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Shramko was invited to the office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, where staff member Aleksandr Kalinov tried to persuade him that the 2002 Religion Law was in line with the Constitution. On 15 May Fr Aleksandr told Forum 18 that Kalinov simply expressed disagreement with his views – "there were no questions" – but had not been able to change the priest's mind about the law.

Kalinov's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 16 May.

The Belarusian Orthodox Church, which comes under the Moscow Patriarchate, rejected all connection with the petition, in a statement issued on 27 April. It called on Orthodox Christians not to take part in any campaign for a review of the 2002 Religion Law. Fr Aleksandr Shramko, the church pointed out, participated in the 25 April press conference without church permission and only expressed his personal views.

Metropolitan Filaret (Vakhromeyev) of Minsk and Slutsk, the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, on 15 May supported a church court's 10 May recommendation to ban Fr Aleksandr from acting as a priest, although he retains the status of priest.

Fr Aleksandr told Forum 18 on 15 May that Metropolitan Filaret's decree "isn't final – it presumes repentance." He also confirmed that the ban was due to the fact that his participation in the press conference was unsanctioned by the church, "not for what I said."

The Belarusian Orthodox Church supported the 2002 Religion Law. Amongst proposals made by the Church as the Law was being discussed were a ban on all but irregular meetings in private homes for worship, as well as raising the minimum number of people needed to register a religious community with the state from ten to 20. Both these proposals were adopted. The church proposals were published in the 2002 "White Book" on religious freedom in Belarus, compiled by the subsequently outlawed Civic Initiative for Freedom of Conscience.

In its 27 April 2007 statement, the Belarusian Orthodox Church maintains that the 2002 Law "facilitates religious peace and confessional stability in Belarus" and "draws upon international experience of legislation on religion, especially practice in European countries."

Contrary to the church's assertions, the Belarusian Religion Law is the most repressive in Europe. For example, it is the only such law to demand state registration of religious communities and to place geographical restrictions on where the activity of an individual religious community can take place.

Belarus' President, Aleksandr Lukashenko, publicly stresses the role of Orthodoxy in the country. However, Forum 18 has found little evidence that state support for the Moscow Patriarchate is more than nominal (see F18News 10 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=826).

According to New Life Church's website, a petition co-ordinator from Baranovichi's [Baranavichy] Salvation Pentecostal Church, Yuri Stupakov, was "summoned for a chat" by the city Executive Committee's Ideological Department on 27 April. This happened when information about the campaign against the 2002 Law appeared in a local newspaper. An official was reportedly interested to know whether the petition violated the law in any way, but Stupakov maintained that it was in accordance with the Constitution and no further action was taken.

Belarus is tomorrow (17 May) competing in a vote to join the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council. The Belarusian bid has

been condemned by a broad range of Belarusian and international human rights activists, as well as by many democratic countries.

Belarus has flagrantly broken UN human rights standards, and denied that it has done this. One example amongst many is the country's refusal to give legal status to a nationwide Hare Krishna association, despite the finding of the previous UN Human Rights Committee that this violated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). One member of the Human Rights Committee, Professor Ruth Wedgwood, noted that there are many other serious problems raised by the Religion Law (see F18News 4 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=682). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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