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BELARUS: Obstacles to religious events outside the home

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

With all outdoor religious events requiring advance permission from the local authorities, some regions allow them while others are hostile. "If our relations are OK with the local authority we write a request for permission to perform an outdoor baptism," Pentecostal assistant bishop of Grodno region Naum Sakhanchuk told Forum 18 News Service. If not, he added, there was no point in writing. "I'll be refused - they'll say that the river is polluted, or that swimming is prohibited in the lake." Since being banned in the capital Minsk in 2000, the Catholics' annual Corpus Christi procession has to take place away from main streets "to make sure it is not seen", yet in Grodno region the Catholics report no difficulties obtaining permission for such processions. The difficulty of renting public venues varies - in 2002 all cinemas in Grodno were banned from renting to religious groups.

Should a religious community become too large to meet for worship at a residential address or be prevented from doing so by the state authorities, it may choose to rent premises such as a cinema or house of culture for services. A religious organisation's form of worship might also involve holding events outdoors: Roman Catholics mark the feast day of Corpus Christi with street processions, for example, while many Protestant churches baptise new members in rivers or lakes. In 1999 the decree on protests and demonstrations was extended to religious gatherings, however, so that events such as these require the advance permission of the local state authorities.

A hostile local authority may withhold that permission. For example, a 2 October 2002 circular letter from Grodno regional executive committee to Grodno's cinema directors, seen by Forum 18 News Service, orders them to terminate all contracts related to religious worship in cinemas, "in order to broaden and optimise the activity of establishments offering a direct cinematic service to the public".

Responding to a request from New Life Full Gospel Church to use a house of culture in Minsk's Factory District for Bible study, the district's administration wrote on 9 November 2001 that this would not be possible due to decision No. 44 of 28 April 2000, "which affirms the inadmissibility of organised religious instruction and the location of religious organisations in the district's cultural establishments".

In response to the church's repeat request to the higher instance of Minsk City Council, it received a rejection on 24 January 2002, which explained that the formulation of the dates of the proposed meetings ("Sundays 10am-1pm and Thursdays 7-9.30pm every week for a period of six months starting on 6 March 2002") did not satisfy the legal requirement of stipulating precise dates.

Dina Shavtsova, a lawyer specialising in religious freedom issues, added that Baptists in the town of Bobruisk, Gomel region, were recently refused permission to hold an outdoor baptism "for no particular reason". In cases when the use of a public building for a religious event is denied, she told Forum 18 in Minsk on 19 September, "the reason most frequently given is that the premises concerned are not intended for such purposes".

The Pentecostal assistant bishop of Grodno region reported that the state authorities there no longer allow churches to rent public swimming pools for baptisms. The situation regarding the use of rivers and lakes varied greatly within the region, added Naum Sakhanchuk: "If our relations are OK with the local authority we write a request for permission to perform an outdoor baptism." If not, he told Forum 18 on 17 September, there was no point in writing. "I'll be refused - they'll say that the river is polluted, or that swimming is prohibited in the lake."

The decision to refuse to let cultural venues to religious organisations is not in force throughout the country, the head of the charismatic Full Gospel Church Aleksandr Sakovich noted, having been taken only by district executive committees in Minsk. While the situation was nevertheless difficult in this respect in Grodno and Gomel regions, he told Forum 18 on 19 September, in Mogilev, Vitebsk and Brest regions it is "tolerable". His own congregation's inability to rent public swimming pools, added Sakovich, "does not affect how we perform baptisms - we are not afraid".

An autonomous Baptist church in the western city of Brest, by contrast, reports no difficulties whatsoever with holding outdoor baptisms. Showing Forum 18 group photographs of the participants in annual baptisms on 16 September, pastor of the church Viktor Zdanevich said that he had experienced no difficulty in obtaining permission from the local authorities to hold the events.

Forum 18 found a similar geographical variation regarding Catholic religious processions. A Catholic in Minsk who preferred not to be named told Forum 18 that the annual Corpus Christi procession through the capital, which involves between 6,000 and 15,000 participants, has gone ahead every year since being prohibited in 2000. Since that year, however, it has been diverted from central streets "to make sure it is not seen," said the source, and it now takes between two and three months for the Catholic Church to obtain permission to hold it. By contrast, auxiliary bishop of Grodno diocese Aleksandr Dziemianko told Forum 18 on 17 September that there were no problems in obtaining state permission to hold Corpus Christi processions in the region.

Citing the local Grodno order prohibiting the use of cinemas for worship services, Shavtsova said that such documents were supposed to be officially registered as legal acts with the Ministry of Justice. While this used to be the case, she said, she had learnt from an acquaintance employed at the Ministry that it had begun not to approve such local instructions. "So now they are just described as 'methodological recommendations,'" Shavtsova remarked to Forum 18, adding that it was a rarity for such decisions to be issued on paper anyway.

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