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## **BELARUS: Pentecostal Church demolished, members harassed**

### **BELARUS: In the footsteps of Russia: Pentecostal Church demolished, members harassed**

*New Life Pentecostal Church was razed to the ground in June. Members are told they are not allowed to gather outdoors and not even online*

*by Massimo Introvigne*

Bitter Winter (15.08.2023) – Belarus' President Aljaksandr Lukašënka behaves more and more like a miniature version of

Vladimir Putin, even when it comes to persecuting minority religions.

In Russia, leading anti-cultist Alexander Novopashin, affiliated until March 2023 with the French-supported European federation of anti-cult movements FECRIS, in an interview of August 7 declared all Pentecostals “non-Christian” and part of “cults.” He quoted the Berlin Declaration of 1909 where he claims German Evangelicals supported his position.

This was, however, 1909. More recently, prominent German Evangelical theologians have condemned the Berlin declaration and apologized for it. Pope Francis also apologized for past declarations where Catholics called Pentecostalism “a cult” when he visited a Pentecostal church in Caserta, Italy, in 2014.

All this is, however, irrelevant for Novopashin, the Russian anti-cultists, and their Belarusian sidekicks. New Life Church, founded in 1992, is one of the most successful Pentecostal churches in Belarus, with some 1,500 members. In 2002, New Life purchased part of a farm in Minsk and converted it into a church.

The church never had an easy life, but the situation took a turn for the worst when in 2020 its pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko posted a video criticizing the fraudulent 2020 Presidential elections. In February 2021, New Life was informed it should vacate the building it used as a church.

Devotees continued to meet outdoors, in the former church’s car park. Their participation with other Evangelical churches in March 2022 in prayer events for Ukraine and to ask that Belarus did not participate in the war did not contribute to endear them to the regime.

In September 2022, Goncharenko was informed that the outdoor meetings were illegal and shortly detained. Pastor Antoni

Bokun of Minsk's John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, who publicly supported New Life, was also detained.

New Life was informed it was also under prohibition to rent any premises for worship purposes. On June 20, 2023, state bulldozers razed New Life's former place of worship to the ground.

Activities continued online (and sometimes at Protestant God's Grace Church in Minsk). However, earlier this month, the government shut down New Life's website, and asked the church to pay the equivalent of Euro 167,000 as a fine for the past outdoor gatherings. The Prosecutor also informed New Life that it is being investigated as an "extremist" organization and may be liquidated.

The process of transforming Belarus into a miniature and somewhat caricatural version of Russia continues.

More photos here

**Massimo Introvigne** (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of California Press' *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the

*Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.*

*Photo: New Life service in the restored Minsk farm building they converted into a church.*

**Further reading about FORB in Belarus on HRWF website**

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