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## **Fined for singing, offering religious literature**

***Police stopped a Baptist husband and wife from singing and offering Christian literature outside Lepel's market. "We were detained like criminals and brought to the police station," Andrei Fokin complained. A court fined the couple one month's average wages each. Bailiffs are seeking to confiscate property and ban him from driving.***

By Olga Glace

Forum 18 (12.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2BtvUO4> - One year after a Baptist husband and wife were last detained and fined at the same location, police in the north-eastern town of Lepel again detained them to stop them singing Christian songs and offering literature outside the market. The couple were each fined about one month's average local wages on 30 October. "We were detained like criminals and brought to the police station for records of an offence to be drawn up against us," Andrei Fokin complained to Forum 18.

The couple were punished for violating the strict restrictions on public meetings or events (see below).

Andrei and Tatyana Fokin – who belong to the Council of Churches Baptists, who choose not to seek state registration – insisted that they were not sharing their faith on behalf of any organisation. In fining them, the court rejected their arguments (see below).

Council of Churches Baptists have a policy of not paying fines imposed to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Fokin is challenging a lower court order approving listing his property for possible confiscation and banning him from driving until he pays two fines imposed after the 2017 detentions. The fine imposed on his wife Tatyana in 2017 was taken from her salary in 2018 (see below).

Similarly, two Jehovah's Witnesses were fined in the south-eastern town of Rogachev [Ragachow] in May for violating the law on meetings to punish them for sharing their beliefs with others and offering religious publications outside a shop. A Jehovah's Witness community in Brest was given an official warning not to distribute religious literature. A second warning could lead to the community being liquidated (see below).

Meanwhile, police in the capital Minsk detained an Autocephalous Orthodox priest for going from door to door in a block of flats preaching and seeking donations for the Church. Police held him for nearly 24 hours, including three hours in a cell. He told Forum18 the detention in a cell was illegal as he is registered as a second-category

disabled person. A court rejected police attempts to punish him for "minor hooliganism" (see below).

In Belarus the state closely controls all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief. The Religion Law requires state registration before communities can meet for worship. Those who meet without state registration risk police raids and fines, though such raids have diminished in recent years. Any public religious meetings or outdoor events risk fines or other punishment. Individuals can be punished under the Administrative Code for violating the Law on Mass Events, which requires prior permission (usually refused) for a range of public events.

At the same time, the authorities have long been reluctant to register religious communities, using various pretexts to make state registration unobtainable for communities they do not like. The most frequent pretext is rejecting a community's proposed legal address as unsuitable. The Jehovah's Witness community in Borisov [Barysaw] in Minsk Region has had 16 registration denials in 20 years. A Minsk Pentecostal Church has had three rejections in 2018 alone and chooses not to meet for fear of raids and fines.

### ***Lepel: Fined for singing and offering literature***

On 27 October, police in the town of Lepel in the north-eastern Vitebsk [Vitsyebesk] Region detained Baptist husband and wife Andrei and Tatyana Fokin to stop them singing Christian songs and distributing Christian literature at the entrance to the market. Officers took them to the police station.

An official from Lepel Executive Committee called the police and watched the detentions, Andrei Fokin told Forum 18 from Lepel on 21 November. "We were detained like criminals and brought to the police station for records of an offence to be drawn up against us," he complained. He confirmed that officers seized none of their literature during the detention.

Church members in Lepel have run a street library since the 1990s. The Fokins are Council of Churches Baptists, who do not seek state registration on principle. Andrei Fokin insists that registration is a matter of freewill and cannot be applied to a family.

At the police station officers drew up records of an offence against both Andrei and Tatyana Fokin under Article 23.34 of the Administrative Violations Code ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"). They accused Andrei Fokin and his wife Tatyana under Part 3, which punishes repeat offences.

Fokin said that in drawing up the records of an offence, the police officers simply copied the records from 2017, when Fokin and other Church members were detained and brought to court. In October 2017, a court issued Fokin with a warning and, at further hearings, two fines (460 and 575 Belarusian Roubles). Tatyana Fokina was also fined 460 Belarusian Roubles. During one of the 2017 detentions, officers inflicted injuries on Fokin and another detained Baptist.

Asked whether the police officers inflicted any injuries after the October 2018 detentions, Fokin said that the officers were young and did not seem to know what to do. They appeared wary after the public response to the 2017 incident.

On 30 October, Judge Alesya Novik of Lepel Court found both husband and wife guilty. She fined Andrei Fokin 661.50 Belarusian Roubles (27 base units) and his wife Tatyana 539 Belarusian Roubles (22 base units). Andrei Fokin's fine (2,700 Norwegian Kroner, 275 Euros or 310 US Dollars) represents about one month's average local wages.

"They tell us that we are a religious organisation and treat us accordingly, but we are just a family sharing our belief in God with other people," Andrei Fokin lamented to Forum 18. "During the court hearing we repeatedly highlighted that we are a husband and a wife and we go preaching inspired by our personal belief, and not representing the religious interests of a group of people as stated in the records."

Fokin insists that judging by the manner of speaking and behaviour, the Court decision had been prepared before the hearing.

The Fokins appealed to Vitebsk Regional Court. However, on 21 November, Judge Svetlana Ivanova rejected their appeals and upheld the lower court decisions.

The secretaries of Judge Novik at Lepel Court and Judge Ivanova at the Regional Court separately refused to put Forum 18 through to the judges on 27 November, saying that they do not give comments on the phone.

### ***Lepel: Bailiffs seek to seize property, impose driving ban***

Fokin told Forum 18 he had not paid the 2017 fines totalling 1,035 Belarusian Roubles, and he and his wife do not have money to pay the new fines. He said he has a seasonal job and, given his wife's small salary, the total of the two new fines is exorbitant. Half of his wife's salary has been deducted in recent months to cover the 2017 fine of 460 Belarusian Roubles, he told Forum 18. The authorities intend to suspend his driving licence and register their belongings for a restraining order.

Under Article 482 of the Civil Procedure Code, measures of forced recovery that can be imposed on a debtor include blocking funds held in bank accounts, confiscation of or restraining orders on property, temporary restrictions on going abroad, or temporary bans on driving a vehicle for the period defined by Court.

The Head of Lepel's Bailiffs Department, Nataliya Azaryonok, confirmed to Forum 18 on 11 December that officials had already deducted the fine of 460 Belarusian Roubles from Tatyana Fokina's wages. She said bailiffs had not recovered Andrei Fokin's 2017 fines and had therefore secured a lower court decision to have Fokin's possessions listed with a view to confiscation of items to cover the cost of the fines and a driving ban until the fines have been paid.

Azaryonok explained that suspending a driving licence is a measure imposed to prompt a response and is withdrawn as soon as the penalty is paid. She said it would not last longer than for five years. She also pointed out that a restraining order will allow confiscation of Fokin's possessions equal to the amount of the fine and the costs of recovering the unpaid fines. "The materials are still in the court - we are not going to do anything until we get them," she told Forum 18.

Fokin said he had lodged an appeal against the bailiff's actions to Vitebsk Regional Court on 10 December and confirmed that the financial measures and driving ban are not yet in force. "Until the decision is taken nothing will be done against me," he told Forum 18 on 12 December.

Asked whether pressure from the authorities would prevent him and his wife from continuing to run the Christian library, Fokin maintained to Forum 18 that they have no intention of stopping the library ministry. "If we are banished from one place we'll find another and we'll appeal to all possible institutions, but we'll never give up."

Fokin believes the new wave of pressure might be connected with the change of the head of Lepel Executive Committee. Mikhail Kiselevich was appointed to this post in September 2018. "This person knows us very well, so he decided to use his position to demonstrate

his power," Fokin stated to Forum 18. He said an official from Lel Executive Committee called the police and watched the detentions.

However, Kiselevich, the Head of Lel Executive Committee, denied knowing Andrei Fokin. "I am a new person and I officially declare that I don't know Andrei Fokin," he told Forum 18 on 28 November. Asked about the detentions of and fines on the Baptist couple, he said that it is not his responsibility to deal with fines.

The Head of the Executive Committee's Ideology Department, Yelena Borodeiko, confirmed that she knows of the fines but absolutely denied that a local Executive Committee official had called the police. She insisted to Forum 18 on 27 November that no other religious community sings and performs in public places.

Asked what the Fokins should do to stop the persecution she declared that they should register with the state. "After registration they can sing without any limitations," Borodeiko told Forum 18. She said officials had warned the Fokins and their fellow believers more than once against sharing their faith without state registration, but they ignore the law.

### ***Rogachev: Fines, warnings for offering literature***

On 24 March, police in the town of Rogachev [Ragachow] in the south-eastern Gomel Region detained two Jehovah's Witnesses, Tamara Vitkovskaya and Olga Grapova, as they were sharing their beliefs with others and offering religious publications near a local shop. Police accused them of illegal picketing under Administrative Code Article 23.34 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration").

On 16 May, Rogachev District Court found Vitkovskaya and Grapova guilty and fined each 49 Belarusian Roubles (two base units). The two appealed to Gomel Regional Court, which dismissed both appeals on 15 June.

In the south-western city of Brest on 30 March, Brest Regional Executive Committee handed an official warning to the local Jehovah's Witnesses community not to distribute printed religious materials in unauthorised places. The Executive Committee warned that if the community receives a second warning, they will liquidate it.

### ***Minsk: Police detention follows registration denials***

On the evening of 26 November, police officers in Pervomaisky District of the capital Minsk detained the 58-year-old Fr Vikenty (secular name Viktor Kovalkov) for preaching and seeking alms in a block of flats. They took him to the police station, where he spent almost 24 hours, Fr Vikenty told Forum 18 from Minsk on 30 November.

The records seen by Forum 18 stated he "disturbed public order i.e. was asking the residents for alms which disturbed the public order and peace of the residents".

Fr Vikenty is a priest of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which has repeatedly been denied state permission to operate, most recently in 2014.

Police prepared a case against Fr Vikenty under Administrative Code Article 17.1 ("minor hooliganism", including "disturbing the public order") and handed the case to Pervomaisky District Court. However, on 30 November Judge Svetlana Cherepovich found Fr Vikenty not guilty and closed the case, he told Forum 18 after the hearing.

Fr Vikenty intends to lodge a complaint against the police. He insists they violated the law by holding him for more than three hours in a cell, ignoring his status as a second-category disabled person.

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## **Order not to register new religious communities?**

***"We want to comply with the law and gather for religious meetings without fear of raids, fines or detentions," says Pastor Vyacheslav Novakovsky of Your Will Be Done Church. A Minsk official involved in the four registration rejections since 2017 told him of "an order from superiors not to register any new communities". She refused to explain this to Forum 18.***

By Olga Glace

Forum 18 (11.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2BtTZED> - In Belarus' capital Minsk, the Pentecostal Your Will Be Done Church has felt unable to meet for worship for fear of punishment, as officials found different reasons to reject its four registration applications since 2017. One rejection claimed the Church's faith was "unknown in Belarus". "We want to comply with the law and gather for religious meetings without fear of raids, fines or detentions," Pastor Vyacheslav Novakovsky told Forum 18.

After one rejection, a Minsk city official told the pastor: "There's an order from superiors not to register any new communities." The official refused to tell Forum 18 if this is indeed the case. She insisted the registration rejections were up to the Church to resolve. A district official told the city authorities that new religious communities were not needed because the population was not increasing (see below).

The authorities have long been reluctant to register religious communities, using various pretexts to make state registration unobtainable for communities they do not like. The most frequent pretext is rejecting a community's proposed legal address as unsuitable.

Communities of the Belarusian Autocephalous Church have given up any hope of getting state registration – and thus permission to exercise freedom of religion or belief legally. Their last rejected application was in 2014. "Obtaining registration is a waste of time and unnecessary trouble for our people," a priest told Forum 18. They have to meet for worship in homes or, in summer, in the woods (see below).

Ten Jehovah's Witness communities across Belarus are still being denied state registration and have to risk functioning without it, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18. The community in Borisov [Barysaw] in Minsk Region has had 16 registration denials in 20 years. Jehovah's Witnesses say each time a new official takes charge locally, such a community has to negotiate to find a way to continue to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief (see below).

In Belarus the state closely controls all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief. The Religion Law requires state registration before communities can meet for worship. Those who meet without state registration risk police raids and fines, though such raids have diminished in recent years. Any public religious meetings or outdoor events risk fines or other punishment.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee called in October for the repeal of "the requirement of mandatory State registration of religious communities" (see below).

A Baptist husband and wife were fined about one month's wages each in the north-eastern town of Lepel in October for singing religious songs and offering literature outside the town's market. Two Jehovah's Witnesses were similarly fined in the south-eastern town of Rogachev [Ragachow] in May for violating the law on meetings to punish them for sharing their beliefs with others and offering religious publications outside a shop. And a Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox priest came close to being punished for "minor hooliganism" for going door to door in Minsk to seek funds for the Church.

### ***UN call to end compulsory registration***

Meeting in Geneva in October to review Belarus' record, the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern "about undue restrictions on the exercise of the freedom of religion, such as the mandatory registration of religious communities, the alleged repeated denial of registration to some religious communities and the permission required by foreign citizens to participate in religious activities".

In its concluding observations, adopted on 25 October (CCPR/C/BLR/CO/5), the Human Rights Committee called for "repealing the requirement of mandatory State registration of religious communities" and an end to other restrictions.

### ***Minsk: Church repeatedly denied permission to exist***

In the capital Minsk, Pentecostal Christians of Your Will Be Done Church complained to Forum 18 that they are struggling for registration and facing resistance from the authorities, who have rejected three of their applications in 2018. "We have been applying for the registration of our community since 2017 and have already received four denials," the church's pastor Vyacheslav Novakovsky complained to Forum 18 on 6 December.

The Your Will Be Done Church, previously a member congregation of the Pentecostal Union, has more than 20 members. But, aware of current laws which prescribe punishments for meeting for worship without state registration, it insists it will hold no religious meetings until it can get registration.

"We want to comply with the law and gather for religious meetings without fear of raids, fines or detentions," Pastor Novakovsky told Forum 18.

He also pointed out that the law makes no provision for how religious communities can exercise freedom of religion or belief as they prepare for and wait for registration applications to be processed. "Community registration requires at least 20 believers, but if they gather they won't sit and wait [to hold worship meetings] until the registration is done," Novakovsky told Forum 18 with indignation.

Your Will be Done Church had to revoke its first registration application in 2017 as the landlord who provided the legal address could not wait until officials had finished considering the application.

Pastor Novakovsky applied for the second time on 6 February 2018. Minsk Executive Committee's rejection of that application came only on 16 July, breaking the time limit established by law requiring the authorities to give an answer within 60 days.

The 16 July rejection letter drafted by Deputy Head of the Executive Committee's Ideology Department Alla Martynova, seen by Forum 18, stated that "the religious community of Evangelical Christians Your Will Be Done is autonomous and professes a belief previously unknown in Belarus". The rejection also claimed that "information on the basics of the creed was not submitted".

Pastor Novakovsky, who says his Church is Pentecostal Christian, told Forum 18 he does not understand why officials claim this belief is "unknown in Belarus". He also complained that, during the second application, officials tried to pressure the landlord not to allow the Church to use his premises as its legal address.

### ***No new communities allowed to gain registration?***

Pastor Novakovsky lamented that in private discussion Martynova told him that "there's an order from superiors not to register any new communities". She suggested that instead they meet without registration.

Asked whether officials will ever give Your Will Be Done Church the registration it is seeking, Martynova responded that it all depends on the Church. "It's their business and you should ask them," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 11 December. "If they get rejections, this means there are questions about their documentation."

Martynova absolutely refused to answer any other questions, including whether any senior officials had given an order not to register any new religious communities and the name of the superior who gave the order. "I am not authorised to give comments on the phone," she told Forum 18. She then put the phone down.

Pastor Novakovsky lodged a complaint to Minsk's Moscow District Court, but on 3 December Judge Polina Antipchuk rejected the complaint. "The court violated the law as well as Minsk Executive Committee, denying us the right to invite a specialist and giving no time to read the materials," Novakovsky lamented to Forum 18. He intends to appeal against the decision.

Meanwhile the third registration attempt, lodged on 17 June, also failed. The 4 September official rejection (seen by Forum 18) noted that the building the Church intended to use as its legal address "is rented by an educational institution for intramural and extramural studies". It added that "Lenin District Executive Committee gave a negative conclusion on the provided legal address".

Novakovsky lodged a complaint to the Council of Ministers explaining that they were not going to hold religious meetings at the legal address, requiring it for administrative purposes only.

A district official had also told the city authorities that new religious communities were not needed locally because the population was not increasing. Novakovsky was shown this communication but not given a copy of it.

The Deputy Head of the Ideology Department of Lenin District Executive Committee, Yekaterina Usova, refused to explain how hosting the office of a religious organisation might interfere with the activities of an educational institution. "I don't give comments on the phone, please send an official enquiry," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 11 December.

Pastor Novakovsky submitted the most recent registration application on 1 October. He had received no response by 11 December, despite the response period expiring on 1 December. Novakovsky complained to Minsk Executive Committee that officials had violated the time limits.

"Each time we send a complaint it always returns to Alla Martynova, who is determined to make state registration unobtainable for us," Novakovsky protested to Forum 18. He intends to continue the struggle. "Since the authorities are given 60 days to give us their registration decision, we are going to apply four times a year until we are registered and can comply with the law."

## ***Autocephalous Orthodox give up on applying for registration***

Representatives of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church told Forum 18 that they have given up any attempts to obtain state registration. The Church has its official headquarters in Brooklyn, New York and since the 1990s its community in Belarus has tried several times to register in vain, most recently in 2014.

One of its priests, Fr Vikenty (secular name Viktor Kovalkov), complained that each time the Church submitted applications, officials found excuses to reject them. "Obtaining registration is a waste of time and unnecessary trouble for our people," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 30 November. He explained that they meet for worship in each other's flats or, in summer, in the woods.

Autocephalous Orthodox Church members complain of intermittent police detentions. Police detained Fr Vikenty for 24 hours in late November and tried to punish him for "minor hooliganism" for going from door to door in a block of flats seeking donations for the Church. However, a court rejected an attempt to punish him.

## ***Ten Jehovah's Witness communities denied registration***

Ten Jehovah's Witness communities across Belarus are still being denied state registration and have to function without it, the Jehovah's Witness leader in Belarus Pavel Yadlovsky told Forum 18 from Minsk on 28 November. He maintained that in some regions the situation has not improved.

The "leader" among the officially-rejected communities is in the town of Borisov [Barysaw] in Minsk Region, which has had 16 registration denials in 20 years. The community in the north-western town of Vileika had six denials in 2017, while the community in the western town of Lida has sought registration in vain for 10 years.

Jehovah Witness Andrei Kuzin was fined for organising a meeting for worship without state permission at his home in Borisov raided by police and local officials in November 2014.

Yadlovsky added that in most regions, the authorities do not cause trouble for Jehovah's Witnesses and allow them to hold worship meetings even without registration. He pointed out that whenever new officials are appointed to local administrations, the communities have to negotiate a modus vivendi.

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## **Pope Francis criticizes Belarus' rules for Catholic priests**

### ***Catholics displeased by restrictions for foreign priests***

Russia Religion News (29.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2E8agOY> - The head of the Roman Catholic Church of Belorussia, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, is displeased with restrictions for foreign priests who may not conduct masses in the country without permission of the authorities.

Earlier Catholic bishops of Belorussia, at a meeting with Roman Pope Francis in the Vatican, touched on the situation for priests who arrive in the republic from abroad. According to information of the Roman Catholic Church of Belorussia, the pontiff was surprised that foreign priests, who visit the republic as tourists, may not conduct mass without permission of the authorities.

"It is incomprehensible for people who know the situation in the world and the Catholic church that a priest who. . . like any other person may come to Belorussia for five days (the five-day visaless rules apply for citizens of 80 countries who arrive through the Minsk national airport—ed.), may not conduct services (in Belorussia) without permission of the commissioner for affairs of religions (and nationalities—ed.)" Kondrusiewicz told journalists on Tuesday.

The head of the Belorussia Catholic also added that "nowhere in the world" is there such a practice.

Roman Pope Francis earlier noted that the situation for foreign priests in Belorussia "contradicts the general trend of the internationalization of the ecumenical church."

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## **Demand to suspend activity of Jehovah's Witnesses arises in Belarus**

Russia Religious News (19.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2psLTHa> - A petition to the commissioner for affairs of religions and nationalities in Belarus, Leonid Gulyako, with a demand to conduct a state religious studies expert analysis of the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, has appeared on the website change.org. Its author is indicated to be a certain Maksim Arsentiev.

According to the petition, the Jehovah's Witnesses in Belarus have not undergone a religious studies expert analysis of their doctrines, which is required for state registration of religious organizations or associations. "Until the time of receiving the results of an expert analysis regarding said organization, we demand the suspension of the activity of all local religious organizations and the religious association of Jehovah's Witnesses of Belarus and the issuance of a prohibition on illegal recruitment activity and distribution of religious literature," the authors declare.

At the same time, they cite the experience of Russia where the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses was recently prohibited. "We all, as citizens of our country, cannot tolerate illegal propaganda work on the territory of our motherland attracting adherents of a religious organization whose doctrine and ideology have never been examined in detail by recognized experts and scholars (just who is not specified—Krynica.info) looking for its danger for the physical and psychological health of citizens of the republic of Belarus, and also for their social life," the petition says.

It is also reported that last summer activists sent to the office of the commissioner for affairs of religions and nationalities a letter with a demand to conduct a state expert analysis of Jehovah's Witnesses in connection with their conduct of an annual congress on the territory of Belarus. At the time, it was indicated that there is no basis for an expert analysis inasmuch as the planning of the Jehovah's Witnesses' congress was conducted legally.

One of their believers, the blogger Anton Chivchalov, commented for Krynica.info about another attempt to forbid the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses are active officially and legally in all countries of the European Union, and they were registered in the republic of Belarus in 1994. In all these years they have cooperated closely with the authorities of the country at all levels. For example, all literature imported into the country undergoes required government censorship. The religious association of Jehovah's Witnesses in the republic of Belarus conscientiously pays all taxes and fees. Anybody who wishes may attend any event of the Jehovah's

Witnesses and be persuaded that these are peaceful, law-abiding people. This is known by both Belorussian and Russian experts. Unfortunately, the authorities of the Russian federation have decided to follow the path of North Korea, Afghanistan, and several other countries, in which freedom of religious confession is severely restricted. The April decision of the Russian Supreme Court has already been accepted for review by the European Court of Human Rights. I would like to believe that Belarus will not want to step on the same rake, but will continue to respect the rights and liberties of its own citizens as is customary in Europe and generally in the civilized world," the interlocutor declared.

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## **The Church is not demanding any privileges, but insists on its rights**

By Eva-Maria Kolmann

ACN United States (08.02.18) - <http://bit.ly/2BpbXJZ> - ARCHBISHOP Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk-Mohilev is speaking out about the violation of the rights of the Catholic Church in Belarus. To rectify the situation, he has called for the signing of a concordat between the Belarus and the Catholic Church—a pact that has been in the making for many years, but has yet to be signed. "Without a concordat in place, the Church in the Republic of Belarus cannot completely fulfil its mission as it does in other countries," the archbishop told us.

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A religious procession in Belarus

The Church is not demanding "any privileges," he said, "but an acknowledgement of its rights, so that it is able to adequately carry out its work."

The situation is especially problematic when it comes to state regulations affecting the activities of foreign priests in the country. Although the number of native Belarus priests has "significantly" grown—from 60 to 400 in the past 25 years—the contributions of the work of foreign priests remain "indispensable," stressed Archbishop Kondrusiewicz. These priests, most of them coming from Poland, often have difficulties extending their residency permits.

The prelate explains: "they are often issued a visa for only three to six months. That is not conducive to doing any sort of real work as priest. As a result, the pastoral work with believers and youth formation are suffering. We are trying to develop local vocations, but that takes time. And then you have to factor in the demographic crisis, which also has a negative impact on the number of vocations."

The archbishop reported that a growing number of foreign priests are being denied extensions when they try to renew their residence permits; a number have been deported under the pretext of minor offences such as speeding—even after having worked in Belarus for many years.

Again, the archbishop: "For some unknown reason, Belarus is afraid of foreign priests. But how many church buildings have been and are being built to serve believers in Belarus – and all thanks to the efforts of these foreign priests! These priests come to proclaim the Word of God in places where there are no local priests. How many pastoral and social programs have they launched!

“They get to know the culture of Belarus and the country becomes their home. And they bring fresh pastoral experience with them. Today’s world is not only undergoing economic globalization, but cultural and religious globalization as well; we need to get on board so that we are not left standing at the station, watching the taillights of the train disappear.”

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Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk -Mohilev

Foreign priests who are only in Belarus for a short visit have to apply for approval from the authorities before they are allowed to say Mass. The application process that practically impossible to get through in limited period a time. “There is a paradox: a foreign priest may attend Mass as part of the congregation, but when he stands on the other side of the altar and celebrates Mass himself, he becomes a criminal,” the archbishop explained.

There also is the ongoing issue of the Church trying to reclaim properties—including many churches— that were expropriated under Soviet rule. These structures, said the archbishop, are “our cultural heritage. Tourists and pilgrims are more likely to come here to look at these churches;” they are far less interested in “the modern buildings with their often tasteless architecture.”

He cited the example of an 18th century church from his archdiocese that was expropriated during Soviet times and then restored by the Catholic Church with its own funds after the demise of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, formal ownership of the church has yet to be returned to the parish and the Church has to pay rent in order to use the parish church. “Where is the justice?” the archbishop asked, calling for restitution laws similar to those on the books in several other Eastern European countries.

When it comes to the construction of new churches, the state treats such projects as it would state-funded projects and insists the building process is completed within one year, which is impossible to achieve. This means the Church has to apply for extensions of building permits several times, at significant cost each time.

Finally, the archbishop said he “very concerned” about the state’s attempts to influence the content of catechetical material used in the Church’s Sunday school program. He said: “this is just interference in the internal matters of the Church. This cannot be reconciled with religious freedom and the freedom of conscience and the rightful liberty of religious organizations.”

Some 7 percent of the 9.5 million inhabitants of Belarus are Catholic. Last year, Aid to the Church in Need supported the Catholic Church in Belarus with more than \$900,000 in aid.