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Highest court liquidates a Protestant church after 31 years of existence

[Christian Network Europe](#) (22.12.2023) - Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko no longer has a church. Last Monday, Belarus' Supreme Court ruled that his church "New Life" is extremist and must be closed. The ruling concludes a long legal battle between the church and Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime.

The authorities label this church as "extremist" but refuse to give an explanation for this. As CNE.news [wrote](#) earlier, the authorities refused to explain.

The New Life Church had existed for 31 years. However, since the beginning of this century, it has been embroiled in a conflict with the authorities. In 2002, for example, the government turned down several requests to recognise the church's new premises as a house of worship. Since then, the conflict escalated further.

At the beginning of 2021, the congregation was evicted from the church by force. That did not stop the faithful; instead, they came together in the parking lot despite the cold and wintry weather.

Determined to break up the church, the Belarusian authorities proceeded to criminalise the worship services in September 2022. Last July, the Belarusian authorities destroyed the church building altogether. In August, they took down the church website.

Besides the liquidation, the church was punished with a fine of 111 Belarusian roubles (about 31 euros, an average of two daily wages).

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the New Life Church has been praying "for the cessation of hostilities in Ukraine." The pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, [recorded](#) a video message on February 24, 2022, stating that "war is madness" and with a call for

prayer for peace. The church also criticised violence by Belarusian security forces against protesters in 2020.

USCIRF Report: Religious freedom continues to deteriorate

[USCIRF](#) (04.12.2023) –The religious freedom situation in Belarus continues to deteriorate as Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka subjugates every aspect of social life to the state's security and bureaucratic apparatuses, according to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

The update report of USCIRF provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Belarus in 2023, including the impact of expanding government repression on religious communities.

In 2023, Belarus' parliament considered adopting a new religion law that would impose stricter requirements on religious communities and unjustifiably prohibit them from certain religious and political activities.

Law enforcement agencies harass Protestants who conduct ordinary religious activities without state approval, and local authorities pressure Roman Catholics by targeting their houses of worship, including Minsk's iconic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (also known as the Red Church). Christian religious leaders of all denominations are often detained, fined, imprisoned, and forced into exile for activities that the state perceives as political in nature.

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](#)

Bulldozers destroy Minsk church

By Olga Glace

[FORUM 18](#) (22.06.2023) - Evicted from its church building in February 2021, banned from meeting for worship in the church car park, Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church has now seen its church bulldozed. The bulldozing – ordered by Capital Construction Management Company, owned by Minsk City Executive Committee – began on 20 June, within a day reducing much of the building to

rubble. The Company, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, and Minsk City Executive Committee would not explain why New Life's church building – which it bought in 2002 – was destroyed.

On 20 June, the regime brought in bulldozers to start the destruction of New Life Pentecostal Church in the capital Minsk. By later in the day, much of the building was reduced to rubble. The decision to bulldoze the building – from which the Church was evicted in February 2021 - came from Capital Construction Management Company, which is owned by Minsk City Executive Committee.

In a 20 June video address outside the destroyed building, the Church's Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko described the destruction as "flagrant lawlessness". "God sees everything," he added, "and he sees today our suffering, our grief, our pain. He sees likewise today the mockery of wicked people. He sees their blasphemy" (see below).

The Union of Full Gospel Churches - to which New Life belongs - condemned the destruction. "This action deeply offended the feelings of believers," the head of the Union Bishop Leonid Voronenko and the Union leadership wrote in a 22 June statement. "We believe that state services should seek forgiveness from New Life Church's members for the destruction of their place of worship, provide a plot of land for the construction of a house of prayer, lease premises for the Church to hold worship services during the construction period, and deal with the wickedness that has been committed."

The regime has since 2002 repeatedly denied New Life Church's requests for permission to change the official designation of the former cowshed it bought that year into a place of worship. This was in contrast to a disused railway carriage 500 metres from New Life's building which was without regime obstruction used from January 2001 by a community of the regime-supporting Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). That community has now built a church, also without any regime obstruction (see below).

Forum 18 called the Head Office of Capital Construction Management Company on 22 June to find out why they demolished the building. The secretary answered nervously: "It's not a question to us, maybe it concerns the [company's] district division." The Deputy Director of Frunze District Capital Construction Management Company, Aleksandr Korzhanevsky, told Forum 18 that the New Life Church building is not a property they have responsibility for (see below).

Andrei Aryayev, the Head of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, absolutely refused to discuss the demolition of New Life Church. "I won't give any comments, ask Minsk City Executive Committee," he told Forum 18 before putting the phone down (see below).

The secretary of the Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee Aryom Tsuran refused to direct the call and recommended to call the press service. Ilona Illarionova from the Press Service told Forum 18 that she did not know about New Life Church and promised to collect information later. Neither the Head of the Ideology Department of Minsk City Executive Committee, Olga Chemodanova, nor the Ideology Coordination Section answered their phones when Forum 18 called (see below).

New Life Church has long faced state pressure. In February 2021, police and bailiffs forcibly expelled the community from its church. The Church thinks this may be due to a video it posted online protesting against regime election fraud and violence. In September 2022, officials banned the church from meeting for worship in the car park and fined two pastors for leading open-air worship meetings (see below).

Since being banned from meeting for worship in the grounds of its own church, New Life

Church has had to meet online and for in-person meetings borrow the building of the Protestant God's Grace Church in Minsk (see below).

New Life Church has been seeking a building to rent for worship meetings. However, it has been denied permission to rent buildings - even by organisations recommended to the Church by Minsk City Executive Committee officials, Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18. Officials advised the Church to hold meetings in the cultural centre of Minsk Car Factory. "But they told us that there was no possibility to host us and refused to give a written denial." He noted that local authorities do not encourage organisations to rent premises for religious meetings (see below).

Pastor Goncharenko thinks that buying a new building is not possible. "No-one will sell us a religious building, and religious communities are not allowed to have regular religious meetings in a non-religious building," he commented bitterly (see below).

Rather than seeking meetings with officials, New Life Church is planning to send an open letter to the government setting out the facts. "All our meetings with officials ended up with them twisting whatever we said," Pastor Goncharenko told Forum 18. "They always try to find some trick even in our humanitarian and social projects" (see below).

After the destruction of New Life Church, human rights defenders and others drew parallels with another place of worship in the city that officials have closed, the Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church). Officials closed the church for worship or any other activity after a suspicious minor fire in September 2022 (see below).

"I hope that at least they will not think of demolishing the Red Church in the same way," exiled Orthodox Christian and human rights defender Natallia Vasilevich noted on Telegram on 21 June (see below).

On 2 June, a judge fined Vladimir Burshtyn – who is in his 70s – over a month's average pension for an outdoor meeting in Drogichin with fellow Baptists to share their faith. He has appealed against the fine, [imposed in a court hearing fellow-Baptists were denied access to](#). Police held him overnight before the hearing, and Head of the local Ideology Department Svetlana Shchur insisted to Forum 18 that any event must have state permission.

On 2 June, the regime made public [the draft of the proposed new Religion Law](#), prepared by the chief state religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak. The proposed new Law harshens the [restrictive 2002 Religion Law](#), which human rights defenders at the time publicly condemned.

Officials gave only 10 days for comments, which Minsk's Lawtrend Centre for Legal Transformation criticised given the "exceptional significance of the draft Law for religious and social life". The proposed new Law [is due to be considered by the non-freely elected Parliament in September](#).

[READ MORE](#)

Draft Religion Law "playing on formal appearance of legality"

Felix Corley and Olga Glace

Forum 18 (15.06.2023) - The regime has published the text of a restrictive draft new Religion Law, due to be discussed by the non-freely elected Parliament in September, which it falsely claims "does not affect" international human rights obligations. Exiled human rights defender and Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Shramko described the aim as "to somehow extinguish any pockets of not only possible resistance, but also any uncontrolled life", saying the draft law is "playing on the formal appearance of legality".

On 2 June, the regime made public the draft of the proposed new Religion Law, prepared by the chief state religious affairs official, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak. Only 10 days were given for comments, which Minsk's Lawtrend Centre for Legal Transformation criticised given the "exceptional significance of the draft Law for religious and social life". The proposed new Law is due to be considered by the non-freely elected Parliament in September.

The regime punished previous nationwide civil society attempts to improve the restrictive 2002 Religion Law currently in force. Belarus has not sought a legal review of the 2023 draft Law from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), "but we would be ready and willing to do so if asked", ODIHR spokesperson Katya Andrusz told Forum 18 (see below).

In his justification of the alleged need for the new Law, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Rumak claimed that the regime took account of various other Belarusian laws, as well as the Religion Laws of Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan. All these Religion Laws have been strongly criticised by human rights defenders for not complying with legally-binding international human rights obligations. The regime also falsely claimed that the draft Law "does not affect" international human rights obligations (see below).

The man who answered Plenipotentiary Rumak's phone – who refused to give his name – also refused to explain to Forum 18 why Rumak made his demonstrably false claim, and refused to discuss the content of the draft Law (see below).

Many people concerned about the impact of the proposed new Religion Law on freedom of religion or belief did not want to publicly criticise the new Law "as you could end up facing criminal responsibility", one person who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18 (see below).

Exiled human rights defender and Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Shramko commented that the regime "adopts new laws, corrects old ones - everything in order to somehow extinguish any pockets of not only possible resistance, but also any uncontrolled life," he wrote on the Christian Vision website. "All this looks somewhat absurd on the part of the authorities, which are 'not living by the law'. But after all, animals also want to be like people, playing on the formal appearance of legality" (see below).

The proposed new Law would (see below) among other things:

- continue to require all religious communities to gain state registration before they are allowed to operate;

- ban "the activity of unregistered religious organisations";

- impose compulsory re-registration within one year on all registered religious communities, paralleling earlier demands on political parties and other public associations;

- impose even tighter registration restrictions and conditions;

- make extensive and arbitrary use of the undefined terms "extremism", "terrorism", and "the ideology of the Belarusian state" to justify restricting the exercise of freedom of religion or belief and related fundamental freedoms;
- give the regime new powers for regime to inspect and monitor religious communities;
- give greater "legal" possibilities for the regime to forcibly close religious communities;
- continue and increase censorship and restrictions on religious literature and items, including banning educational establishments from including religious literature in their libraries;
- impose new restrictions on religious education by religious communities, as well as increasing regime surveillance of this;
- aim to separate religious communities from involvement with wider society;
- and impose new restrictions on religious charitable activity (see below).

Draft new Religion Law published

On 2 June, the regime made public on its legal website the [draft of the proposed new Religion Law](#), prepared by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak. The website said the draft Law was open for public comments from 5 to 15 June.

The Minsk-based Lawtrend Centre for Legal Transformation [criticised the short time allowed for public comments](#), despite the "exceptional significance of the draft Law for religious and social life."

By 15 June, a number of individuals had submitted written comments on the proposed new Law on the legal website. Some comments questioned some wording in the draft without questioning the underlying principles of the new Law. Others made specific criticisms of a number of provisions.

On 30 May, before publishing the draft of the proposed Law for public discussion, Plenipotentiary Rumak summoned the leaders of registered religious communities to present the text. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant leaders were among those present.

Civil society attempts to improve 2002 Religion Law punished

The new Law is set to replace and harshen the highly restrictive 2002 [Religion Law](#).

In May 2007, Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants launched a nationwide petition [to change the 2002 Religion Law](#) as it is unconstitutional. Its organisers stated that the law "violates the rights of all people, even atheists". Petition supporter Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Shramko was in May 2007 [banned from functioning as a priest](#) by the regime-supporting Belarusian Orthodox Church.

More than [50,000 people signed the petition](#) and it was submitted in March-April 2008 to the Constitutional Court, Parliament, Presidential Administration, Supreme Court, and the Higher Economic Court. The regime rejected the petition, and three of the organisers were in April 2008 fined almost double the average monthly wage.

Lawtrend Centre for Legal Transformation and the advocacy group For Religious Freedom drew up an alternative Religion Law compliant with international law, but in October 2009

Minsk Executive Committee [blocked attempts to have an open discussion on this](#) by bans on renting conference facilities.

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A Catholic priest testified at the European Parliament

Vyacheslav Barok: "The responsibility for the fate of Belarus rests not only on the Belarusian people, but also on the whole of Europe."

By Willy Fautré, reporting about the conference

[The European Times](#) (12.06.2023) - On 31 May, **MEPs Bert-Jan Ruissen and Michela Sojdrova** organized an event at the European Parliament about religious freedom in Belarus titled "Help the Christians in Belarus."

One of the speakers was Vyacheslav Barok, a Roman Catholic priest who had to leave the country in 2022 and is now living in Poland. Through his personal experience, he testified about the situation of human rights and religious freedom under Lukashenko's rule.

Being a priest in Belarus: from the Soviet Union to the 2020s

Vyacheslav Barok has been a priest for 23 years. Most of the time he lived in Belarus. He built a church there, reconstructed and repaired several more religious buildings. He was actively engaged in evangelisation and for over 10 years, he organised trips to pilgrimage places such as Velegrad, Lourdes, Fatima or Santiago de Compostela.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a brief sunshine period when religious life could be revived but still, the Church remained an object of discrimination, the priest said.

Until today, Belarus is the only country in the post-Soviet space, where the Office of the Commissioner for Religious Affairs has survived. This state institution was created at the time of the USSR for controlling and limiting the rights of believers.

"Even today, the state still gives the Commissioner the authority over all religious organisations as in the Communist period. It is within his or her competence to decide who is allowed to build churches, to pray in them and how," Barok added.

Back in 2018, the same state-authorized Commissioner pressed his bishop to censor him in his homelies and to forbid him from speaking and writing in social media about social injustice in the country. Such pressure took place despite the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus providing for the right to freedom of thought and expression in its Article 33.

"Still, everything that happened before the autumn of 2020 with the rigged presidential re-election of Lukashenko was only a prelude to the open and comprehensive persecution of any manifestation of freedom of thought and the suppression of opinions alternative to 'ideologically sound ones'," Barok stressed. Consequently, there were dozens of imprisoned priests and thousands of political prisoners.

Lukashenko's open persecution of priest Vyacheslav Barok

In January 2020, Barok started producing a YouTube channel on which he shared his views on Christian matters in the modern world and discussed the social teaching of the Church.

His activities on social media drew attention of law enforcement agencies. From November 2020 to May 2021, they monitored the content of his YouTube videos looking for some of his statements that could be criminalized. They ordered a linguistic examination of ten of his videos but they failed to find any crime on the basis of which he could be prosecuted. However, as a preventive measure, he was sentenced to ten days of administrative arrest in December 2020.

His requests for the administrative process and the court proceedings to take place in Belarusian, one of the two official languages alongside Russian, were rejected. The Belarusian language is unacceptable in Belarusian courts today, Barok said.

During the year 2021, law enforcement agencies staff called him occasionally and asked him more than once if he was still in Belarus. They were hereby hinting that he should leave the country.

As he neither wanted to limit his freedom of thought and expression nor planned to leave Belarus, an administrative case was again opened against him on trumped-up charges in July 2022. The prosecutor's office started to confiscate all his office equipment and phones, most probably to try to deprive him of his means of producing videos for YouTube. At the same time, he also received an official warning from the regional prosecutor's office. He then had to leave Belarus. Otherwise, he would not have been able to continue his ministry. He left to Poland from where he went on preaching and speaking on YouTube and other social media.

However, Lukashenko's regime did not forget him. Four of his YouTube videos were added to its list of extremist materials.

Additionally, to put pressure on him, representatives of law enforcement agencies visited his father several times in November and December 2022 and questioned him as a witness in the criminal case.

"Long before 2020, I predicted the social and political crisis in the country to get deeper. I argued that without rethinking the atrocities committed under communist rule, state-sponsored terror would inevitably reoccur," Barok stressed.

A call and a message to the EU

And Barok went on saying: *"Today, being in the European Parliament, I want to thank you for your interest in the difficult situation in Belarus. Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2022, [Aleś Bialacki](#), who is Catholic and a Belarusian pro-democracy activist, called the current situation a 'civil war'. He used this phrase in his final speech at the court and called on the authorities to put an end to it."*

On 3 March 2023, Ales Bialacki was sentenced to 10 years in prison on fabricated charges. He is a founding member of Viasna, a human rights organization, and the [Belarusian Popular Front](#), serving as leader of the latter from 1996 to 1999. He is also a member of the [Coordination Council](#) of the Belarusian opposition.

Barok added: "The civil war waged by the criminal regime against its own people is taking place in the context of the increasingly pervasive Russian occupation. Of course, under such external conditions, there is very little hope for freedom of religion. Today, if religious organisations still have the right to exist openly, it is only because Lukashenko's regime needs to instrumentalize the churches for his own political purposes."

And Barok concluded: "If the world ignores the Belarusian problem, or an attempt is made to base a dialogue on compromises with evil (bargaining, for example, the release of political prisoners for the lifting of sanctions), the opposition in Belarus will only grow. It inevitably will lead to a violent scenario. In order for peace to return to Belarus, it is necessary to create a situation in which all those who have committed crimes against Belarusian people will begin to answer for those crimes. And of course, the help of the whole of Europe is needed here. The responsibility for the fate of Belarus rests not only on the Belarusian people, but also on the whole of Europe."

More about Priest Vyacheslav Barok

<https://charter97.org/en/news/2021/8/14/433142/>

<https://charter97.org/en/news/2021/7/12/429239/>

<https://angelusnews.com/news/world/exiled-belarusian-priest-wants-bishops-to-speak-out-for-clergy/>

<https://belarus2020.churchby.info/christian-vision-statement-viachaslau-barok/>

<https://www.golosameriki.com/a/myhotim-vytashit-stranu-iz-yami/6001972.html>

Detained, fined for sharing faith on streets

By Olga Glace and Felix Corley

Forum 18 (12.06.2023) - On 2 June, a judge fined Vladimir Burshtyn – who is in his 70s – over a month's average pension for an outdoor meeting in Drogichin with fellow Baptists to share their faith. He has appealed against the fine, imposed in a court hearing fellow-Baptists were denied access to. Police held him overnight before the hearing, and Head of the local Ideology Department Svetlana Shchur insisted to Forum 18 that any event must have state permission. Elsewhere, for the first time since 1990 a Catholic Corpus Christi procession did not stop at Minsk's Red Church, which the regime closed in September 2022.

On 1 June, police stopped a group of Baptists with a musical group from sharing their faith in the town of Drogichin in the south-western Brest Region. They took Vladimir Burshtyn – who is in his seventies - to the police station and held him overnight. The following day, a judge fined him the equivalent of just over a month's average pension for organising an illegal event. The judge held the closed hearing in the police station to prevent fellow-Baptists from attending.

"We thought the hearing would be open, but it was closed," a local Baptist told Forum 18. "It should have been open, but we weren't surprised that they would not let us attend" (see below).

Burshtyn has appealed against the fine to Brest Regional Court, the local Baptist told Forum 18. The Baptists are also gathering signatures on complaints to local, regional and

national officials about the way Burshtyn and the other Baptists were treated (see below).

Burshtyn is a member of the Council of Churches Baptists, who do not seek state permission to exercise freedom of religion or belief.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Head of Drogichin Police Lt. Colonel Sergei Peryayev to ask why police had detained Burshtyn and held him for 24 hours (see below).

Judge Leonty Stankevich absolutely refused to give any comments when Forum 18 called Drogichin District Court. "The case is not closed, and the judge does not comment on such cases," the court secretary told Forum 18. She did not explain why Judge Stankevich decided to hold the hearing on Burshtyn's case not at the court but at the police station (see below).

Asked why preaching and singing in public places are illegal and require the authorities' approval, the Head of the Ideology Department of Drogichin District Executive Committee Svetlana Shchur insisted that according to the law any event should be coordinated with the local authorities.

"What does it have to do with religion?" Shchur told Forum 18. "Vladimir Burshtyn was together with a music band in a crowded public place. What if somebody collapsed in the street, or something else happened? They should have provided security and medical aid, according to the Mass Events Law" (see below).

Andrei Aryayev, the Head of the Religious Department of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk, had put the phone down before Forum 18 could ask why Burshtyn was punished for sharing his faith on the streets (see below).

For the first time since 1990, the 11 June Corpus Christi procession in Minsk did not stop at the Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church). The regime ordered the prominent church closed following a small, suspicious fire in September 2022. The parish tried to get permission to hold a 2023 Easter service on 9 April in its own grounds, but was denied state permission for the Mass (see below).

When Forum 18 asked Aryayev of the Plenipotentiary's Office whether officials had instructed the Catholic leadership to amend the route to avoid the Red Church, he claimed: "I don't have such information." He then put the phone down (see below).

Fr Yuri Sanko, spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops' Conference, told Forum 18 that the amended Corpus Christi procession route with no stop at the Red Church was the decision of the Minsk-Mogilev Archdiocese (see below).

Exiled Catholic journalist Maksim Hacak notes that any public activity is banned near the Red Church, including processions and prayers. "Therefore, the absence of a stop there fits into this ban," he told Forum 18. "Or the diocese itself decided not to anger the authorities and therefore did not even offer to stop there. In any case, this is a forced decision, with very little chance for an independent decision" (see below).

Asked when the authorities will allow the Red Church to reopen for worship, Fr Sanko responded: "This is not clear. Some kind of works are going on inside." He said the works are being carried out without any involvement from the church. "Our access to the church is barred. We can enter only by prior agreement and stating our reason" (see below).

Draft new Religion Law published

On 2 June, the regime made public on its legal website the [draft of the proposed new Religion Law](#), prepared by the [Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak](#). The website said the draft Law was open for public comments from 5 to 15 June.

The [proposed new Religion Law](#) harshens the [restrictive 2002 Religion Law](#), which human rights defenders at the time publicly condemned.

On 30 May, before publishing the draft of the proposed Law for public discussion, Plenipotentiary Rumak summoned the leaders of registered religious communities to present the text. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant leaders were among those present.

Detained, fined for sharing faith on streets

On 1 June, Vladimir Burshtyn was among a group of Council of Churches Baptists who shared their faith on the street in Drogichin, a town in the south-western Brest Region. They brought with them a musical band.

Burshtyn – who is in his early 70s – had travelled to Drogichin from his home in the town of Malorita, 110 kms (70 miles) away.

Police soon intervened to halt the event and took Burshtyn to Drogichin police station. Police took only Burshtyn to the police station because he had been previously punished for organising unapproved events, a local Baptist told Forum 18 on 9 June.

Police drew up a record of an offence against him under Administrative Code Article 24.23 ("Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration"), Part 2. Punishments for organising such events under Part 2 are a fine of 20 to 150 base units, or community service, or 15 days' imprisonment.

Police detained Burshtyn for 24 hours until the court hearing the next day. Forum 18 was unable to ask the Head of Drogichin Police, Lt. Colonel Sergei Peryayev, why police had detained Burshtyn and held him for 24 hours. His phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 5 and 8 June.

Drogichin District Court scheduled Burshtyn's hearing for 10 am on 2 June, and officers took him to the court. However, the judge later rescheduled the hearing for 5 pm that day. The closed trial then went ahead earlier, not at the court but at the police station.

Judge Leonty Stankevich handed down a fine of 15 base units, 555 Belarusian Roubles. This is equivalent to just over a month's average pension or about two weeks' average wage. More than 20 local Baptists waited for Burshtyn outside the police station to welcome him once he was released.

"We thought the hearing would be open, but it was closed," the local Baptist told Forum 18. "It should have been open, but we weren't surprised that they would not let us attend."

Burshtyn has appealed against his fine to Brest Regional Court, the local Baptist told Forum 18. "We are also collecting signatures from believers on three petitions, to the local court and police, as well as to Brest and Minsk."

Judge Stankevich absolutely refused to give any comments when Forum 18 called Drogichin District Court. "The case is not closed, and the judge does not comment on such cases," the court secretary told Forum 18 on 9 June. She confirmed that Judge

Stankevich had decided to hold the hearing on Burshtyn's case not at the court but at the police station. She did not explain why.

[READ MORE](#)

Seven fined for talking about Easter in street

Olga Glace and Felix Corley

FORUM 18 (11.05.2023) - Seven Protestants were fined about 2 months' average wages each for talking to others on a Minsk street about Easter. Police arrested and handcuffed the seven, took them to a police station, and held them for about eight hours. No official would explain why they did this. Similarly, regime officials refuse to explain why they denied the Catholic Red Church parish – forcibly closed by the regime in 2022 – permission to hold Easter mass in the church grounds. The regime also refuses to publish planned 2023 Religion Law changes.

A court in Belarus' capital Minsk has fined seven young Protestants about two months' average wage each. They were punished for talking to others on a city centre street about the meaning of Easter on Saturday 15 April, the day before Orthodox Christians celebrated the festival. Police arrested and handcuffed the seven, took them to Central District Police Station, and held them for about eight hours.

Officials refused to explain to Forum 18 why it is a violation of the law for individuals to talk in a street to others about their faith, and why police needed to arrest, handcuff, and detain the seven Protestants for eight hours at a police station. The duty officer at Minsk's Central District Police Station – where the seven were held - refused to give any comments. "I have no information to give you," he told Forum 18 (see below).

"Unfortunately, the court did not take into account the arguments of the young people that they sincerely wanted to share the meaning of Easter with others, that public order was not violated, and that they shared their message with those who were interested," Minsk's New Life Church noted on 28 April, the day the court handed down the fines. Five of the seven fined are members of that Church (see below).

Officials closed Minsk's Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) after a suspicious September 2022 fire. Nearly eight months later, officials refuse to say when they will allow the Church to reopen for worship. "There is no information," parish administrator Fr Yuri Sanko told Forum 18 (see below).

The parish expressed its gratitude on 19 March to an Orthodox Christian from Russia, Mikhail, who had passed on "a word of support from your Orthodox brothers and sisters from Russia". Mikhail had also written to Belarus' Embassy in Moscow about the enforced closure of the Church (see below).

As its access to the Red Church remained blocked, the parish wrote to Minsk Executive Committee for permission to hold an Easter service on the Church's land. (Catholics celebrated Easter this year on 9 April.)

Less than a week before the proposed service, the Deputy Head of Minsk Executive Committee Artyom Tsuran denied permission for this, insisting that the Red Church cannot be used until repair works are finished. He said the application for an outdoor

service – a "mass event" – did not meet the requirements of the Mass Events Law, which was harshened after widespread popular protests against the regime began in 2020 (see below).

"Unfortunately, our shrine is still closed," the Red Church website noted. "The Red Church, which used to be filled with thousands of Catholics praying on Easter day, is empty now. We asked officials to allow us to hold the Easter Mass but received NO as an answer" (see below).

The Deputy Head of Minsk Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department, Yekaterina Kaverina (who drafted Tsuran's reply), refused to explain to Forum 18 why the Red Church was denied permission to celebrate Mass on its own grounds (see below).

Meanwhile, the regime is preparing more changes to the harsh Religion Law. Aleksandr Lukashenko specified that the Council of Ministers should prepare the draft amendments by June for them to be presented to the lower chamber of Parliament, the House of Representatives, in September. The Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs and the Justice Ministry were instructed to prepare the amendments, supervised by the Education and Social/Cultural Department of the Council of Ministers (see below).

As of 11 May, no text of the Religion Law amendments has been published. Officials persistently refuse to give any information or comments on the regime's planned changes to religious leaders and human right defenders. Forum 18 could not reach the head of the Education and Social/Cultural Department at the Council of Ministers (see below).

An official – who did not identify herself - of the Religious Affairs Department of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked for comment on the planned amendments (see below).

The regime has stripped individuals from Belarus of the possibility to complain to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee about violations of their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The move took effect from 8 February, three months after the UN received the notification of Belarus' renunciation (see below).

The Human Rights Committee has found that Belarus violated the rights to freedom of religion or belief of a number of complainants. Three complaints from Jehovah's Witnesses are still pending with the Committee, which will continue to consider them (see below).

Seven fined for talking about Easter

On Saturday 15 April, the day before Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter, a group of young Protestants from several churches shared their faith with passers-by in central Minsk. They stood with a two-metre high wooden cross on Nemiha Street by a park below the Orthodox Holy Spirit Cathedral close to the metro station. They explained the meaning of Easter and offered passers-by to write their sins on a piece of paper and, as a symbol, attach it to the cross.

Police arrested seven Protestants, five of them members of Minsk's New Life Pentecostal Church. Officers handcuffed them and took them to Minsk's Central District Police Station, holding them for eight hours, Protestants told Forum 18. Police released them not long before midnight.

Officers drew up records of an offence against the seven under [Administrative Code Article 24.23](#) ("[Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration](#)"). Punishments are a fine of up to 100 base units (about two months' average wage), or community service, or 15 days' imprisonment.

One of those detained wrote a verse (chapter 3, verse 16) from John's Gospel on the police record: "For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

On 28 April, Minsk's Central District Court found all seven Protestants guilty in separate hearings under different judges. The judges fined each of them between 90 and 100 base units, between 3,330 and 3,700 Belarusian Roubles, a Protestant close to the case told Forum 18. (3,700 Belarusian Roubles is 100 base units, the maximum fine under this Article.)

"Unfortunately, the court did not take into account the arguments of the young people that they sincerely wanted to share the meaning of Easter with others, that public order was not violated, and that they shared their message with those who were interested," New Life Church noted on Telegram on 28 April. It pointed out that the court sentenced each of them to a fine that was the maximum or close to the maximum possible.

The seven Protestants appear to have decided not to appeal against the fines.

Officials refused to explain to Forum 18 why it is a violation of the law for individuals to talk in a street to others about their faith, and why police needed to arrest, handcuff, and detain the seven Protestants for eight hours at a police station.

The duty officer at Minsk's Central District Police Station refused to give any comments. "I have no information to give you," he told Forum 18 on 3 May.

An official of the Religious Affairs Department of the [Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs](#) - who did not identify herself - put the phone down on 3 May before Forum 18 could ask about the detentions and fines. The Deputy Head of the Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department of Minsk City Executive Committee, Yekaterina Kaverina, similarly put the phone down on 10 May before Forum 18 could ask about the detentions and fines.

In 2022, courts used [Administrative Code Article 24.23, Part 1](#) ("[Violation of the procedure for organising or conducting a mass event or demonstration](#)") to punish three Protestant pastors in Gomel [for holding outdoor baptisms](#), and two Protestant pastors in Minsk [for leading worship in the car park of the confiscated New Life Church](#).

On 17 February 2021, New Life Pentecostal Church was [forcibly evicted from its place of worship](#), which the regime had never allowed to be redesignated for religious use. On 25 September 2022, the regime [banned the Church from meeting for worship in the church car park](#), fining church leaders.

Kaverina of Minsk City Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department refused to reply, when Forum 18 asked [whether the authorities will compensate the Church for its building](#) from which they evicted it

Minsk's Red Church still closed, nearly 8 months after suspicious fire

Minsk's Catholic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (known locally due to its brickwork as the Red Church) remains closed. The church has been closed [since a fire in September](#)

[2022](#) which took place with multiple regime agencies close by, which parishioners described as "strange and ambiguous."

Officials have refused to say when they will allow the Church to reopen for worship. "There is no information," Fr Yuri Sanko, Red Church parish administrator and spokesperson for the Catholic Bishops' Conference told Forum 18 from Minsk on 10 May 2023.

The regime has also repeatedly rejected appeals over many years to [hand the Church of Saints Simon and Helena back to the Catholic community](#). Minsk Heritage, an agency owned by the city administration, has also for some years been in dispute with the parish over large financial demands from the state for building work it did not agree to and which it cannot afford. "Why should we pay the state 13,000 Belarusian Roubles a month to pray in our own church?" the then-parish priest Fr Stanislav Stanevsky [asked independent news agency Naviny.by in July 2020](#). City officials refused to explain to Forum 18 the large sums they have demanded, or why they [repeatedly refuse to hand the Church back to its parishioners](#).

Some other Catholic parishes face similar problems. The regime [terminated unlimited, free of charge rental agreements with at least four Catholic churches](#) still in state hands. It claimed that, in exchange for signing a new agreement to pay rent, the churches would eventually be allowed to resume using their historical buildings rent-free. "We were told that if we don't sign the new agreement, the church will be given to the museum .. while we'll be allowed to worship there only once a week," a Catholic close to Corpus Christi Church in Nesvizh told Forum 18 in February 2023.

Minsk's Red Church parish expressed its gratitude on 19 March 2023 to an Orthodox Christian from Russia, named only as Mikhail, who had passed on "a word of support from your Orthodox brothers and sisters from Russia".

Mikhail had written to the Embassy of Belarus in Russia about the enforced closure of the Church. He received a reply dated 24 January (seen by Forum 18) from the regime's senior religious affairs official, [Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak](#), claiming that the Church of Saints Simon and Helena would be reopened "for believers and tourists" once repair works are completed. He gave no timetable.

Mikhail also asked the Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs of Russia's State Duma (lower house of parliament) to support attempts to have the Red Church reopen for worship. In a 7 March reply (seen by Forum 18), Committee Chair Leonid Kalashnikov said the issue would be discussed in the Culture, Science and Education Commission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Belarus and Russia.

Officials of the Union's Parliamentary Assembly in both Minsk and Moscow told Forum 18 on 11 May that they had no information about the work of the Culture, Science and Education Commission.

Officials of the State Duma's Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs in Moscow did not answer the phone on 11 May. Forum 18 sent written questions for Kalashnikov in the middle of the working day in Moscow of 11 May on whether and, if so, when the Parliamentary Assembly's Culture, Science and Education Commission had discussed the enforced closure of the Red Church, and what the result of any discussion might have been. Forum 18 received no response by the end of the working day in Moscow of 11 May.

"We asked officials to allow us to hold the Easter Mass but received NO as an answer"

The parish of Saints Simon and Helena tried to get permission to hold an Easter service on its own grounds by the closed Red Church, but the authorities refused. Catholics celebrated Easter this year on 9 April 2023.

The parish had applied for permission to Minsk Executive Committee on 23 March. In a 3 April reply (seen by Forum 18), the Deputy Head of Minsk Executive Committee Artyom Tsuran denied permission for the Church to celebrate Mass on its own grounds, insisting that the Red Church cannot be used until repair works are finished.

Minsk Executive Committee regarded the Red Church parish's request to hold an outdoor Mass on their own land as coming under the [Mass Events Law](#). This Law was harshened in June 2021 after large-scale protests began [against regime violence after the August 2020 falsified presidential election](#).

After Russia's February 2022 renewed invasion of Ukraine, with Belarusian regime support, the regime's main focus for its freedom of religion and belief and related human rights violations switched to monitoring, threatening, and punishing religious leaders and people [opposing Russia's renewed war against Ukraine](#) and the Belarusian regime's role in this. The regime tries to stop any public event held independently of the regime, such as the seven Protestant's sharing their faith, and the Red Church parish's Easter Mass.

The Executive Committee's 3 April 2023 reply the the Red Church parish also referred to the January 2019 Council of Ministers Decree No. 49 ("On the procedure of payment for public security provided by police, for healthcare services, for cleaning a venue after a public event"). The [Decree imposes further conditions related to the Mass Events Law](#) by setting varying event fees to be paid to state agencies depending on the number of participants. It requires that all permitted public event organisers - including of religious events - must both agree event fees with the police, state healthcare, and cleaning services, and also pay these fees in advance.

"For your information, your application does not meet the requirements of Articles 5, 6 and 9 of the [\[Mass Events\] Law](#), and also the requirements of the above-mentioned Council of Ministers' Decree and the decisions of Minsk Executive Committee," Tsuran told the parish. "Minsk Executive Committee does not approve the declared mass event and warns against legal violations by the community."

Minsk Heritage officials also denied permission for Easter Mass either inside or anywhere around the Red Church. In his 7 April letter (seen by Forum 18), the General Manager of Minsk Heritage Aleksandr Kokhan informed the religious community of "the impossibility to carry out worshipping and other events in the Red Church building, priest's house and the church grounds". He insisted that all the parish's religious activities have been transferred to the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"Unfortunately, our shrine is still closed," the Red Church website noted on 7 April. "The Red Church, which used to be filled with thousands of Catholics praying on Easter day, is empty now. We asked officials to allow us to hold the Easter Mass but received NO as an answer."

The Deputy Head of Minsk City Executive Committee's Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department, Yekaterina Kaverina (who drafted Tsuran's reply), refused to explain to Forum 18 why the Red Church parish was denied permission to celebrate Mass on its own grounds. "Call Minsk-Mohilev Archdiocese, let them give you comments," she told Forum 18 on 10 May before putting the phone down.

It is unclear why Kaverina thought the Archdiocese (which wants the Red Church to be reopened) could comment on behalf of the regime's Minsk City Executive Committee which closed the Church.

Forum 18 could not reach Minsk Heritage to find out why the Easter celebration was not allowed on the church grounds. Kokhan's phone was not answered when Forum 18 repeatedly called on 10 May to get comments on its refusal and to inquire about the progress on any repair works.

Some religious communities have told Forum 18 that, after [the Decree came into force in January 2019](#), they had to [cancel or change their plans for annual pilgrimages and religious meetings](#) because they cannot afford the fees.

Religion Law changes planned in 2023

The regime plans to this year again change the country's [harsh Religion Law](#). The intention to amend the law was included in a 30 December 2022 Decree signed by Aleksandr Lukashenko setting out the legislative plan for 2023.

Lukashenko tasked the Council of Ministers to prepare draft Religion Law amendments "to perfect the law taking into account its practical implementation and bring it into line with the Constitution". The regime amended the Constitution in early 2022 to increase Lukashenko's powers. None of the amendments appeared to affect the way religious communities function.

Lukashenko specified that the Council of Ministers should prepare the draft Religion Law amendments by June 2023 for them to be presented to the lower chamber of Parliament, the House of Representatives, in September.

A Council of Ministers Decree of 24 January handed the task of preparing the Religion Law amendments to the [Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs](#) and the Justice Ministry. Supervision of the amendments was placed under the Education and Social/Cultural Department of the Council of Ministers.

As of 11 May, no text of the Religion Law amendments has been published. Officials persistently refuse to give any comments or information on the amendments to religious leaders and human right defenders.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out the details of the amendments from the Council of Ministers. It was unable to reach the Head of the Education and Social/Cultural Department, Yosif Petkevich.

Human rights defenders and religious leaders do not know what will be in the Religion Law amendments. "We have not seen the amendments to the [Religion Law](#). I hope they [the officials] will inform us and would like to hear our opinion," one religious leader who wished to remain anonymous told Forum 18 on 3 May. Another feared that the regime might require all registered religious communities to seek re-registration under the amended Religion Law.

An official – who did not identify herself – of the Religious Affairs Department of the [Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs](#) put the phone down on 3 May as soon as Forum 18 asked for comment on the planned amendments.

The Head of the Ideology, Religion, and Ethnic Affairs Coordination Department of Minsk City Executive Committee Tatyana Shevchik refused to discuss this issue with Forum 18

on 10 May. "Why should I give you any answers?" she told Forum 18. "Come personally with an official inquiry, we do not give such comments on the phone."

Regime strips individuals of possibility to complain to United Nations

The regime has stripped individuals from Belarus of the possibility to complain to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee about violations of their rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The move took effect from 8 February 2023.

In 1992, Belarus acceded to the [ICCPR Optional Protocol](#). This allows individuals to complain directly to the UN Human Rights Committee after domestic remedies have been exhausted. Since 2000 the Committee has considered more than 175 complaints from Belarus, many of them involving more than one complainant, and is still considering other complaints from Belarus. Some of these relate to violations of individuals' right to freedom of religion or belief.

Three separate complaints from Jehovah's Witnesses are [among those pending with the Human Rights Committee](#). Dmitry Mozol lodged a complaint in November 2021 after being fined four months' average wages for refusing on grounds of conscience to undergo nearly four weeks of reservist military training. Earlier, Andrei Kuzin lodged a complaint after a court fined him more than a month's average wage for leading a Jehovah's Witness meeting on his property. Kirill Dashkovsky complained of being fined after police raided a meeting for worship.

In [earlier decisions](#), the Human Rights Committee found that the rights of an executed prisoner's family had been violated when the regime refused to release the body for burial. In another case, the UN Committee found that the rights of two Hare Krishna devotees had been violated when the regime refused to register a nationwide Hare Krishna organisation as well as a local community in Minsk.

Parliament approved the draft Law on the denunciation by the Republic of Belarus of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in October 2022 and Lukashenko signed it into law on 27 October 2022.

On 22 August 2022, seven local human rights groups – including Viasna (Spring), the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and Human Constanta – had [condemned the proposed withdrawal from the Optional Protocol](#) and called for it to be abandoned. They noted that "although the authorities consistently ignored the [Human Rights] Committee's decisions, the state was under an obligation to respond to the Committee, explaining the relevant issue and providing information on measures taken".

Belarus notified the UN Secretary General in early November 2022 of its denunciation of the ICCPR Optional Protocol. The move took effect on 8 February 2023, three months after the UN received the notification.

The UN Human Rights Committee expressed "profound regret" at the move. It said this "will deprive victims of human rights violations in Belarus, who have been denied justice domestically, of bringing their complaints before the Committee".

"The Committee noted that Belarus adopted its decision without providing a particular explanation and without holding any consultation with civil society and non-governmental entities at any stage of the national process of denunciation," the Human Rights Committee [stated on 25 November 2022](#).

"With this regrettable step, the Republic of Belarus becomes the fourth and only country

in the twenty-first century to withdraw from the Optional Protocol, which has been ratified by 117 countries," the Committee added.

The Human Rights Committee said it would continue to accept and examine petitions about human rights violations lodged with it before 8 February 2023. It stressed that it would continue after then to follow up on implementation of earlier "cases found to be in violation of rights".
