

Kachanova Natalya Ivanovna  
Chairman of the Council of the Republic  
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BELARUS

Your Excellency,

I am writing to express my deep concern about the treatment of the New Life Pentecostal Church in Minsk. 17 February 2021, the congregation was forcibly evicted by police and court bailiffs from their church building. Without access to their church building, the congregation have been gathering outdoors on the church parking lot for weekly religious services since February. Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko was recently warned by the Minsk Moscow District Administration and the City Executive committee that this could lead to administrative or criminal prosecution.

In 2002, the New Life Church bought a former cowshed and converted it into a spacious, modern place of worship. Under the Presidential Decree on Tax Exemption of Religious Organizations of 1 December 2005, places of worship are not subject to land and property taxes. The authorities have repeatedly rejected the Church's application to have the legal designation of the building changed from cowshed to house of worship – despite the fact that it has not been used for livestock for more than 20 years. The Housing Repairs and Utilities Association claims it owns the building and that the Church are liable for considerable taxes on it. However, in a similar case, just 500 metres (yards) away from New Life Church, a disused railway carriage has been used by a Russian Orthodox community since 2001 without the local authorities raising any questions about the railway carriage's legal status or use as a place of worship. I believe Belarus wishes to treat all religious groups on equal terms.

I am aware that Belarus, as early as in 1573, adopted one of Europe's first legal declarations upholding religious freedom for all – this was nearly 400 years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The position of Belarus as a beacon of light for religious freedom and tolerance is a proud heritage which I am confident you would seek to uphold.

The Belarusian Constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess and practice any religious belief and I therefore humbly petition your intervention to ensure that:

- the confiscated building is handed back to the New Life Church, and its legal designation changed to 'religious building';
- the congregation is allowed to gather freely for worship, whether inside or outdoors;
- all threats of criminal charges against Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko and other members of the New Life Church congregation will not materialize and are pulled back immediately.

Sincerely,