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TRANSDNIESTER: President initiates order to halt Pentecostal church's public worship

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The authorities in the breakaway unrecognised entity of Transdnier have ordered a Pentecostal church to stop meeting for public worship, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Pastor Yuri Semenyuk halted his Pentecostal church's public worship after a warning from Transdnier's senior Prosecutor, which was initiated by the entity's President, Igor Smirnov. "We're trying to abide by the law," Pastor Semenyuk told Forum 18. "Our church meets in a building designated as a private home, and the Prosecutor said this was not allowed." He said the 300-strong congregation has now been forced to meet in small home groups. If the church were to defy the ban and continue to meet as one congregation, Pastor Semenyuk suspects that the authorities would strip the congregation of its legal status. The Deputy Prosecutor insisted to Forum 18 that "in no way is this persecution." Transdnier routinely makes religious activity outside state-approved places of worship difficult.

Pastor Yuri Semenyuk has halted his Pentecostal church's public worship services in the wake of a demand to do so from Anatoli Guretsky, the senior Prosecutor in the breakaway unrecognised Transdnier republic, in eastern Moldova. "We're trying to abide by the law," Pastor Semenyuk told Forum 18 from Transdnier's capital Tiraspol on 19 December. "Our church meets in a building designated as a private home, and the Prosecutor said this was not allowed. Yet we have tried to convert the building into non-residential premises for the past year but have been told we can't." He said the 300-strong congregation has now been forced to meet in small home groups. "The church is lying empty now."

Transdnier's Deputy Prosecutor, Yekaterina Lysenko – whose department handled the issue - insisted that the church's rights are not being violated. "In no way is this persecution," she told Forum 18 from Tiraspol on 20 December. "One room in Semenyuk's house was being used for religious services and this is not allowed according to the Housing Code. He simply has to remove the violation – either by re-registering part of the house for non-residential use or by renting a non-residential building elsewhere."

Transdnier – which rejects the authority of the Moldovan government – has a restrictive religious policy that makes religious activity outside state-approved places of worship difficult. Officials routinely use bureaucratic means to deny legal status to communities they do not like. Communities functioning without legal status are at risk of harassment.

A planned new Religion Law has been presented to Transdnier's parliament. This would stop any new religious communities, unaffiliated to existing registered denominations, from gaining legal status for ten years. This would deny them the right to produce and import literature, set up religious colleges, and invite religious workers from outside Transdnier. Independent Protestant congregations or faiths such as the Jehovah's Witnesses are likely to be most affected. But also hard hit is likely to be a newly-established diocese of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church. Local Russian Orthodox Church officials, as well as Transdnier state officials, have indicated their strong opposition to the new Bessarabian diocese (see F18News 31 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1041).

Pastor Semenyuk said the Full Gospel Church of Christ the Saviour gained registration with the Transdnieran authorities back in 1995. It has met in a house he owns which he rents free of charge to the congregation. "But we have faced constant pressure from the authorities," he complained. "It has all been done using the cover of the law."

If the church were to defy the ban and continue to meet as one congregation, Pastor Semenyuk suspects that the authorities would strip the congregation of registration and hence of its legal status. "Only small groups of believers can get away with worshipping without registration," he told Forum 18. "Our church is far too big for that."

The latest trouble began in October, when officials from the Tiraspol city administration inspected the building. They complained that on the facade of the building are "symbols of religious significance". In a 19 November letter, seen by Forum 18, Tiraspol's mayor Viktor Kostirko ordered Pastor Semenyuk to remove the religious symbols and re-register the building as non-residential property.

Prosecutor Guretsky also became involved in October. In a two-page letter dated 30 October, also seen by Forum 18, the prosecutor

instructed Pastor Semenyuk to use the building "in strict accordance with its purpose envisaged by the Housing Code" and "to halt the use of the residential premises as the base for the religious organisation the Full Gospel Church of Christ the Saviour and for the holding of religious services, rites and ceremonies". Guretsky ordered Semenyuk to report back on his fulfilment of the instruction within one month.

In his letter, Guretsky stated that his office's investigation into the church's use of its building was initiated by a submission from Transdnier's President, Igor Smirnov. Pastor Semenyuk believes the Prosecutor's action was inspired by Pyotr Zalozhkov, Transdnier's Religious Affairs Commissioner who reports to Smirnov.

As is their normal practice, no-one from Zalozhkov's office was available to comment to Forum 18 on 20 December on the enforced closure of the Full Gospel Church.

Deputy Prosecutor Lysenko confirmed Smirnov's involvement, but refused to say whether Zalozhkov was the instigator. She maintained that the check-up on the Full Gospel church was part of a continuous programme of check-ups which other religious communities have undergone. She cited the example of the Russian Orthodox Church, which she claims had violated the Land Code by not registering its land properly. "They're sorting this out." She also mentioned the ongoing legal cases over the denial of registration to several Jehovah's Witness congregations, but refused to discuss them in detail.

Pastor Semenyuk said that one of Religious Affairs Commissioner Zalozhkov's then assistants, named Lukyanov, tried to extort a bribe from the church in August 2006. He threatened that if the church did not pay 3,000 US Dollars (25,450 Transdnier Roubles, 16,820 Norwegian Kroner or 2,090 Euros) Pastor Semenyuk would be falsely convicted for bombing taxis. "I went to the organised crime department and reported the attempted extortion," Semenyuk told Forum 18, "and Lukyanov was later arrested. Zalozhkov was quiet for the next six months, but then the problems started once again."

Meanwhile, the Transdnier authorities have revived attempts to fine a family of Baptists. Pyotr Mardar and his wife Tatyana host a congregation in their home in the village of Rogi near the town of Dubosary. The congregation belongs to the Council of Churches, which refuses to seek state registration in any of the former Soviet republics.

Church members told Forum 18 on 8 December that Pyotr Madar had initially been fined 100 Transdnier Roubles (66 Norwegian Kroner, 8 Euros or 12 US Dollars) by Dubosary town administration in June 2003 for refusing to register the congregation. He refused to pay, arguing that "registration of a religious community is a right, not an obligation" and insisting he had done nothing wrong by hosting services. In April 2005 he was summoned to the District Court and fined a further 40 Transdnier Roubles (26 Norwegian Kroner, 3 Euros or 5 US Dollars). He again refused to pay.

Over two years later – and over four years after the initial fine - on 16 August 2007 court executors visited the family home to confiscate property to pay off the fines. However, church members say Tatyana Mardar refused to let them in, saying she could not let them in as she and her four children were at home without her husband. The court executors then left. However, they arrived again on 4 December and handed Pyotr Mardar a demand to go to the court executors' office. They also handed over notification that Tatyana Mardar had been fined a further 53 Transdnier Roubles (35 Norwegian Kroner, 4 Euros or 6 US Dollars) for refusing to allow the court executors into the family home.

Local Baptists have also told Forum 18 that Vasily Rotar, who leads the more than 200-strong Council of Churches congregation in the Transdnier town of Bendery, has had confiscated literature returned to him. Baptist magazines and books were seized from him on 13 October as he tried to bring them into Transdnier to give out to members of his congregation (see F18News 13 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1047). However, Baptists report that after appeals to various agencies the magazines were returned to him on 1 December.

Other Protestants, a Russian Orthodox priest and Jehovah's Witnesses have complained of seizures of literature and other religious materials at checkpoints manned by the Transdnier authorities (see F18News 13 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1047). (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Transdnier can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=19&results=50>.

A printer-friendly map of Moldova, including the unrecognised entity of Transdnier, is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=moldov>.

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