

8 February 2008

BELARUS: Renewed pressure on Baptists

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Belarus has stepped up pressure on the Baptist Council of Churches, issuing a spate of fines for unregistered religious activity, Forum 18 News Service observes. The Council's congregations reject state registration in post-Soviet countries, believing that it leads to government interference. One of those recently prosecuted, Nikolai Varushin, told Forum 18: "This is our path; we are prepared to suffer for our faith. We just pray that our people will remain true to the Lord." In defiance of international human rights standards, Belarus is the only country in Europe to ban unregistered religious activity. While not including Baptists among their number, the judge in one of the recent cases, Aleksei Belotsky, told Forum 18 that the state regulates religious activity to protect citizens from "destructive sects". The increased pressure on Protestants coincides with a number of prominent public statements on the religious situation in Belarus by state officials. For example, Leonid Gulyako, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, recently announced that in 2008 "measures will be activated to prevent the spread of neo-cults and pseudo-religions."

Belarus has stepped up pressure on congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches in recent months, Forum 18 News Service observes. "This is our path; we are prepared to suffer for our faith," explained one of those recently prosecuted for religious activity, Nikolai Varushin. "We just pray that our people will remain true to the Lord." The Baptist Council of Churches broke away from the Soviet-recognised Baptist Union in 1961. It continues to renounce state registration in post-Soviet countries, believing that it leads to government interference. In defiance of international human rights standards, Belarus is the only country in Europe to ban unregistered religious activity.

Other active Protestant churches - particularly prominent charismatic churches - are also experiencing increased state pressure. One of these churches, New Life Church in the capital Minsk, has voted to opt for civil disobedience as a response to state pressure (see F18News 7 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1084).

One Baptist, Viktor Yevtyukhov, faced charges at Lelchitsy District Court (Gomel [Homyel'] Region) on 6 February because "fellow believers (...) come to his house in order to pray to God." The local authorities also demanded the removal of a prayer house sign from the building, according to the Baptist Council of Churches. Yevtyukhov refuses to comply "because he wishes everyone to know that this house belongs to a believer and anyone who wishes may come here to talk about God and pray." Yevtyukhov has been fined for religious activity before (see F18News 3 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=243).

Judge Aleksei Belotsky stressed to Forum 18 on 7 February that he had fined Yevtyukhov the minimum possible sum of 350,000 Belarusian Roubles (880 Norwegian Kroner, 110 Euros or 163 US Dollars), over one month's average wage. By not using his home according to its designation of living accommodation, he explained, Yevtyukhov is breaching Article 21.16, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code. Although Yevtyukhov appealed to constitutional religious freedom guarantees during the 6 February hearing, "no one is violating his religious freedom," the judge insisted. He said he had pointed out to Yevtyukhov that, while religious rites may take place at home, the 2002 Religion Law stipulates that they cannot be systematic or large-scale unless in a designated place of worship. "Every state has its rules - and we have to follow them," Belotsky remarked to Forum 18.

On Wednesday, 19 December 2007, a local police officer and town official entered a private home in Kostyukovka (Gomel Region) and took the names and addresses of the five women and one man holding a service there. The state representatives ordered them to remove an "Evangelical Christian Prayer House" sign from the building and to register the 18-strong church, the Baptist Council of Churches stated. On 15 January, Gomel's Railway District Court handed down a fine of 175,000 Belarusian Roubles (449 Norwegian Kroner, 56 Euros or 82 US Dollars) - about two weeks' average wages - to Nikolai Varushin of the congregation for leading an unregistered religious organisation.

Nikolai Varushin does not intend to pay the fine, "because we don't consider ourselves guilty of any crime," he told Forum 18 on 4 February. He was not surprised by it, however. "Our church functioned in the Soviet period and then we had a period of relative freedom," he explained. "Now we are still able to gather and preach, but things like this happen sometimes. We believe the Lord allows it, to keep us awake."

Another Baptist Council of Churches member, Lyudmila Yermalitskaya, stands accused of hosting "a religious event (a gathering of a group of believers, Bible reading)" at her home in Bobruisk [Babruysk] (Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region) and so breaching Article

9.9, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code (formation and leadership of a religious organisation without state registration). A court hearing has been set for 12 February. In the charges drawn up against Yermalitskaya, Irina Kot, the chief specialist at Bobruisk's Ideological Department notes Yermalitskaya's defence that she may not form or lead a religious organisation in line with Biblical teaching (Acts 6:3-6, which she takes to describe the founders of a new Christian community as all being male). Kot argues, however, that the fact of the violation was established by a "collective visit" to Yermalitskaya's home by seven state representatives on 19 December 2007, the Baptist Council of Churches stated on 7 February.

In a more positive development, the 24 August 2007 fine handed down to Viktor Orekhov for religious activity has been annulled (see F18News 14 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1018). Brest Regional Court noted that the Baptist's "violation" took place on 22 June 2007, more than two months before the legal prosecution deadline, the Baptist Council of Churches stated on 6 February.

Lyudmila Yermalitskaya's is the fifth such case in two months. On 14 December three Council of Churches members in Baranovichi [Baranavichy] (Brest Region) were fined a total of 840,000 Belarusian Roubles (2,143 Norwegian Kroner, 169 Euros or 386 US Dollars), or over a month's average wages (see F18News 17 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1063). On 21 December Pastor Yuri Kravchuk of the Council of Churches congregation in Grodno was fined 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (357 Norwegian Kroner, 45 Euros or 64 US Dollars) (see F18News 11 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1070).

Up until 2004, fines for unregistered religious activity were usually relatively low - equivalent to several days' average wages - and for the most part encountered by congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches. They and other unregistered independent Protestant churches stated 17 such fines in 2003 to 2004. While the analogous figure for 2005 to 2006 is 12, those fines were on several occasions significantly higher - ranging from the then equivalent of two weeks' to two months' average wages.

The increased pressure on Protestants comes at the same time as a number of prominent public statements on the religious situation in Belarus by government representatives. "Religious issues always lie within the field of activity of the KGB because they are very delicate issues," the secret police force's Chairman told journalists in Minsk on 19 December 2007. In the coming year, "measures will be activated to prevent the spread of neo-cults and pseudo-religions," Leonid Gulyako, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, announced at a 22 January staff meeting, Interfax news agency reported.

A secret ruling by Gulyako's predecessor body, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, denies state registration to 12 "destructive sects", including Aum Shinrikyo and Satanists as well as Ahmadiya Muslims. While registered and not on this list, a March 2000 analysis of a Minsk-based charismatic church by an expert at the State Committee nevertheless concludes that it is a "neo-mystical religious-political destructive sect" whose growth poses "a significant threat to the individual, society and state" (see F18News 4 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186).

Aleksei Belotsky, the Lelchitsy District Court judge in the case of Viktor Yevtyukhov, stressed to Forum 18 that he did not regard the Baptist Council of Churches as a "destructive sect". However, Judge Belotsky did maintain that it is to protect citizens from "destructive sects" that the state regulates religious activity.

Belarusian state officials tend to regard Protestant communities generally as both ideologically and spiritually damaging (see 8 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=824) and as the major source of religious-political dissent (see 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880). Dissent is not limited to Protestants, as Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants have joined together in a nationwide campaign to gather signatures calling for a change to Belarus' restrictive Religion Law (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>.

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