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TRANSDNIESTER: Still banned from worshipping in church

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A Pentecostal church in the internationally unrecognised entity of Transdnier is still banned from worshipping in its church building, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Pastor Yuri Semenyuk told Forum 18 that he is also now facing criminal prosecution for alleged forgery of documents, although he has not been given a copy of the charges. Prosecutor Vasily Tarnukov categorically denied this to Forum 18, but an independent legal source confirmed that state Commissioner for Religious Affairs Pyotr Zalozhkov had instigated the charges. Jehovah's Witnesses in the entity are also facing sustained harassment and refusals to register some of their congregations. However, after the entity's President Igor Smirnov received "many appeals" from local unregistered Baptists about harassment and fines against them, a presidential official told church leaders that they could meet and that officials "didn't have the power to ban them." The entity's parliament is considering drafts of a restrictive Religion Law and a National Security Concept, which are likely to hit hardest independent Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Bessarabian Orthodox Church.

Six months after his congregation was banned from worshipping in its church building, Pastor Yuri Semenyuk, has complained to Forum 18 News Service of new harassment from the authorities. He leads the Full Gospel Church of Christ the Saviour in the city of Tiraspol, capital of the internationally unrecognised Republic of Transdnier in eastern Moldova. Transdnier does not recognise the authority of the Moldovan Government over the breakaway entity. An official from the city Prosecutor's Office visited him on 6 May to inform him that a criminal case had been launched against him on 9 April. "This was the first I heard about it," Semenyuk told Forum 18 from Tiraspol on 7 May. "The official showed me the document but as is their usual practice I wasn't given a copy."

Vasily Tarnukov, the city Chief Prosecutor, categorically denied this. "No legal case whatsoever has been lodged against Yuri Semenyuk," he told Forum 18 on 8 May. However, an independent legal source confirmed to Forum 18 on 8 May that Pyotr Zalozhkov, Transdnier's Commissioner for Religious Affairs, had instigated the charges against Semenyuk under Article 324 of the unrecognised entity's Criminal Code. This article punishes forgery.

Transdnieran President Igor Smirnov - to whom Zalozhkov reports directly - himself initiated the ban on Semenyuk's 300-strong Pentecostal church worshipping in its church in October 2007 (see F18News 20 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1066). Semenyuk told Forum 18 that officials are currently claiming that he presented forged documents when re-registering his Church in 2005. "This case is the latest attempt to halt the activity of our Church," he complained.

Semenyuk said documentation allowing the transfer of the church building from residential to non-residential use is nearing completion. "This has been done to prevent us getting legal power to resume services once more." He blamed Transdnier's Commissioner for Religious Affairs, Zalozhkov, for the move. "He doesn't want this to happen, so he falsified facts and the prosecutor's office at his request launched the criminal case without any investigation or even speaking to me."

Commissioner for Religious Affairs Zalozhkov is, Semenyuk said, trying to prove that after Zalozhkov had approved the re-registration statute, the Church had registered a different statute with the Justice Ministry. "We repeatedly had to change the statute as Zalozhkov dragged out the re-registration process over six months," Semenyuk reported.

Forum 18 repeatedly tried to reach Zalozhkov on 8 May but the telephone went unanswered.

Semenyuk's Church has been unable to meet as a body for worship since late 2007. Last October, Anatoli Guretsky, Transdnier's senior Prosecutor, ordered him to halt worship at the church building, which he owns personally. Tiraspol's mayor ordered him to take down notices outside that it is a church (see F18News 20 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1066).

Pastor Semenyuk - who points out that the congregation itself still has legal status - told Forum 18 that it chose to abide by the Prosecutor's order and has not met for worship as a single body. He said it meets in small groups only. "Of course we want to be able to meet once again all together," he told Forum 18.

Semenyuk also reported other harassment. He said on 6 May, the same day the city Prosecutor's Office sent a representative, the

local policeman came to question him about notices church members allegedly put up in the town to advertise public services in 2006. "He questioned me until 10 pm about little cards that church members must have posted on lampposts," Semenyuk told Forum 18.

He added that six smaller congregations associated with his Church elsewhere in Transdnier have not been able to gain registration.

Meanwhile, Jehovah's Witness Vyacheslav Radulov narrowly escaped being punished on 8 May by the City Court in Bendery [Bender, also known as Tighina], Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 the same day. "Judge Osovskaya reluctantly cancelled the case after Radulov presented to the court an earlier Supreme Court decision that confirmed that registration is not needed to be allowed to hold religious meetings," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18 from the city in the wake of the hearing.

Trouble began for Radulov on 21 March, the day before the Jehovah's Witnesses this year held their major feast, the Memorial of Christ's Death. Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that he was summoned by the District Department for Fighting against Economic Crimes. The head of the department warned him that the plan to commemorate the Memorial of Christ's Death the following day, at a private home in the village of Parcani, should not go ahead. Later that day Radulov was summoned by the local police chief, who repeated the same message.

The following day, as the Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting, some 40 demonstrators in a bus and seven cars arrived to protest against them. The Jehovah's Witnesses report that the demonstrators held by signs reading "Today Jehovah's Witnesses – Tomorrow NATO" and "Sect Beware". A police car was parked at a nearby road junction, but the Jehovah's Witnesses say officers did nothing to protect the meeting. "The demonstrators were accompanied and protected by Cossacks [a type of local militia] carrying whips," the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. The demonstrators eventually dispersed after Radulov telephoned the head of the village administration.

The Jehovah's Witnesses insist the demonstration was organised by the local Orthodox priest with the backing of local officials. They say the priest was visible in the bus during the protest.

The following day the Parcani police chief summoned Radulov to the police station, where he was given a summons to appear before the Police Commissioner in Bendery. On 24 March Radulov went to the Bendery police, where the Jehovah's Witnesses say he was interrogated by "high-ranking officers". After interrogating him they accused him of holding an unapproved religious meeting in Parcani. They lodged a case under Article 200 of Transdnier's Administrative Code, which punishes failure to register a religious community.

Radulov was initially summoned to Bendery City Court on 10 April, but this was postponed until 23 April. During the hearing, the judge asked him about how the 22 March meeting was organised, how many people were present, whether children were there and how people were invited. Radulov's lawyer moved to have the case abandoned in the light of an earlier Supreme Court decision (see F18News 17 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1035). The case was postponed until 8 May, when the motion was accepted.

Officials at Bendery police told Forum 18 on 8 May that the chief, Major Oleg Obruchkov, was away that day. His deputy, Yevgeny Gulchak, refused to discuss why Radulov had been harassed merely for holding a religious meeting. "You mustn't ring the police," he told Forum 18 angrily. "If you ring again we'll put you inside." He then put the phone down.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that on 6 April in Dubosary [Dubasari], Cossacks demonstrated against another of their meetings holding similar banners. They say no police attended.

Jehovah's Witnesses have faced intermittent harassment in recent years in Transdnier. Two of their communities – in Tiraspol and Rybnitsa [Ribnita] – have registration, but have been unable to re-register as they would like. "We want to re-register with new statutes which are in line with the current Religion Law," one Jehovah's Witness told Forum 18. "But officials refuse to process the applications."

The Jehovah's Witness added that two other communities in Transdnier – in Grigoriopol and Bendery – lodged registration applications in 2006, but that these have got nowhere. "The Religious Affairs Office refused to give its conclusion about these applications, so we went to court. But after the Religion Law changed these cases became irrelevant. They still refuse to register us."

Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse to apply for state registration – also face intermittent harassment in Transdnier. Baptists told Forum 18 from Tiraspol on 8 May that on 26 March local police tried to stop an evangelistic service with a visiting choir from Germany at their church in the city. "An hour before the event started some 20 police officers blocked the road providing access to the prayer house," Baptists reported. "They insisted that the guests went away and that all those already gathered should disperse. We had to hold our service on the streets in front of the gates of the prayer house. The police several times tried to disrupt the service."

Three church members – Pavel Timoshchuk, Peter Gruzevich and Vladimir Baron – were taken to the police station, not being freed until 9 pm. Police forcibly removed the rest of the church members from outside the church. Administrative cases were drawn up against the three and they were due in court on 28 March. However, this was postponed until 1 April, when only Timoshchuk and Gruzevich were summoned.

At the 1 April hearing Gruzevich was found not guilty, but Timoshchuk was fined 30 Transdnistran Roubles (18 Norwegian Kroner, 2 Euros or 4 US Dollars). "This is only the cost of half a kilo of meat – it is symbolic," one Baptist told Forum 18. When he refused to pay the fine, arguing that it is not a crime to meet for worship without registration, the court ruled that the sum should be deducted from his wages. Timoshchuk works as an electrician at the Central State Library in Tiraspol, a state job that makes it easy for the authorities to deduct the fine.

The Baptist added that later in April, after protests at the harassment continued to arrive at the office of Transdnistran President Smirnov, an official from the President's Office in Tiraspol summoned three church leaders. "The official told them that the church could continue to meet and that they didn't have the power to ban them," the Baptist told Forum 18. "He added that they had received so many appeals and asked them to help stop them."

Several times in 2007 Transdnistran's Religion Law was amended, strengthening the powers over registration by Zalozhkov's office. "This was all done very quietly," one local religious leader told Forum 18. "It has made it still harder for religious groups to gain registration."

A planned new Religion Law was presented last October to Transdnistran'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 Transdnistran. 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 Transdnistran 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).

Also still in parliament is a draft National Security Concept, presented in October 2007. Among the many dangers it says Transdnistran faces is, according to its Article 27, "the activation of the activity of foreign religious organisations and missionaries to monopolise the spiritual life of society". It calls for measures to "counter" their "negative influence".

A parliamentary spokesperson told Forum 18 on 8 May that neither the draft Religion Law nor the draft National Security Concept has yet been presented in the full parliament for a first reading. (END)

Further coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Transdnistran is available at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=19>.

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

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