

10 September 2003

TRANSDNIESTER: Did Orthodox join police in crushing Baptist street library?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Baptist pastor Vasili Timoshchuk alleges that Orthodox priest Fr Igor Konstantyushko confiscated the books from a Baptist street library in Krasnoe on 30 August and called the police to detain the library organiser, Aleksandr Kulysh. "I can't believe this. Fr Igor doesn't command the police. That's a state matter," Orthodox diocesan secretary Fr Dionisy Abramov told Forum 18 News Service, though he admitted he had not enquired of the priest if he had broken up the library or not. Kulysh could now be fined. The authorities of the separatist republic of Transdnester in eastern Moldova have a history of impeding distribution of literature by Baptists and other religious minorities they dislike. The incident came three weeks after Transdnestrian customs seized copies of a Baptist journal, which have still not been returned. Forum 18 has been unable to find out why they were seized.

Baptists in the separatist republic of Transdnester in eastern Moldova have complained of increasing restrictions on the distribution of their literature. Pastor Vasili Timoshchuk told Forum 18 News Service that on 30 August their street library in the village of Krasnoe in Slobozia district south of the Transdnestrian capital Tiraspol was broken up and its leader held by the police at the instigation of the local Orthodox priest Fr Igor Konstantyushko. But the secretary of the Tiraspol Orthodox diocese rejected Baptist claims that their priest was involved. "I can't believe this," Fr Dionisy Abramov told Forum 18 from Tiraspol on 4 September. "Fr Igor doesn't command the police. That's a state matter." The Transdnestrian authorities – who are close to the Orthodox diocese – have a history of impeding distribution of literature by Baptists and other religious minorities they dislike.

Fr Abramov told Forum 18 that had Fr Konstantyushko taken part in breaking up the library "it would be a very serious issue for the diocese". "We would demand an explanation from him." But he repeated that he could not believe that Fr Konstantyushko had taken part.

Fr Abramov admitted he had not spoken to Fr Konstantyushko to confirm whether he had been involved or not. Forum 18 was likewise unable to reach him. The diocese said he had no home phone in Krasnoe and no mobile phone. The contact number the diocese had for him in the village was of some elderly parishioners, who were unable to go to find him when Forum 18 telephoned.

However, Fr Abramov attacked the activity of other religious organisations which, he claimed, "often break the law". "Any religious activity needs to be agreed with the state," he told Forum 18. He complained that unregistered religious organisations (the Krasnoe Baptist community is unregistered) "conduct propaganda". Echoing the phraseology of Transdnestrian officials, he denied that the Baptist Church of which the Krasnoe congregation is a member even exists. "There is no such organisation," he declared bluntly.

According to the Baptists, Fr Konstantyushko confiscated all the books from the street library run by local Baptist Aleksandr Kulysh and called the police. "Aleksandr was forced to go to the local police station, where they demanded he sign an official record," Pastor Timoshchuk told Forum 18 from Tiraspol on 4 September. "He refused and the policeman got angry. The books still haven't been returned." Kulysh was soon released, but the Baptists fear he will be summoned to an administrative commission, where he could be fined. It remains unclear on what basis he might be accused.

Pastor Timoshchuk insists Fr Konstantyushko was instrumental in breaking up the street library. "I rushed to the police station with a colleague after Aleksandr was detained. I saw the priest in the police station together with the local police chief and the district policeman," he told Forum 18.

Kulysh, who hosts the Krasnoe Baptist congregation in his home, has several times been detained by police for running street libraries and fined. On one occasion he was fined under Article 200 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes "violation of the law on religious associations" with a fine of up to 50 times the minimum monthly wage. The judge reportedly told him that it was not her decision that he should be fined for doing something good, but she had to do it. Timoshchuk complained that Article 200 has been "copied from the Soviet atheist times" and continues in force "although we have democracy".

Asked about other occasions when Orthodox priests were alleged by the Baptists to have instructed the local police to break up Baptist street meetings and libraries, Fr Abramov flatly denied them. "There were no such incidents."

The breaking up of the street library came three weeks after the Transdnistran customs – which is run by the local State Security Ministry (former KGB) – confiscated Baptist literature. On 10 August customs officers at the Varnitsa checkpoint in Bendery (Tighina) seized 240 copies of the Russian Baptist journal Herald of the Truth from Ivan Dobrovolsky, who was returning to Transdnistr by moped. "He was given no documents about the confiscation of the literature," a 31 August statement from Bendery's Baptist church complained.

Bendery city procurator Valery Starodub told Forum 18 on 8 September that he had "received a report" about the confiscation of the literature. He said he would study the file and be able to explain to Forum 18 on what basis the journals had been confiscated. When Forum 18 telephoned an hour later, an official said he had fallen ill and had been taken to hospital. The official said on 10 September he was still hospitalised and that no-one else was available to answer Forum 18's questions as to why religious literature was subject to confiscation.

The Bendery church reported that books seized from Baptist street libraries in March and April (see F18News 29 April 2003) have now been returned, which Starodub confirmed. "The administrative commission ordered their return," Pastor Timoshchuk told Forum 18. "We have prayed that in this latest case sense too will prevail."

Forum 18 tried to reach Pyotr Zalozhkov, the commissioner of religion and cults who reports to the president of the unrecognised entity, Igor Smirnov. But neither Zalozhkov nor his assistant Tamara Kovalchuk answered the phone at their office in Tiraspol between 3 and 10 September, so Forum 18 was unable to find out why Baptist street libraries were considered illegal, why Orthodox priests were apparently working with the police to break them up and why Baptist journals could be confiscated from individuals returning to Transdnistr.

The Baptists belong to congregations of the International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians/Baptists, which rejects registration on principle in all the former Soviet republics where it operates. Its congregations in Transdnistr have long faced obstructions to their work from the authorities, which insist their activity is completely illegal.

Other religious communities in Transdnistr whose activity is restricted include the Methodists, whose two local congregations have been repeatedly denied registration (see F18News 5 September 2003).

Despite their closeness to the authorities, Orthodox leaders also complain about some of the provisions of Transdnistr's 1995 religion law. "We're not free – we have to register," Fr Abramov told Forum 18. "Unfortunately the law demands it." He said the religion law is not perfect and needs revision.

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