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BELARUS: Why is Catholic priest still detained by KGB secret police?

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

Four and a half months after Belarus' KGB secret police arrested Catholic priest Fr Vladislav Lazar on 31 May, it is still unclear why he was arrested or what specific acts he is accused of having committed, Forum 18 News Service notes. Fr Lazar is being held in a KGB detention centre under conditions which have been described as designed to crush the spirit. He has – against international human rights law - been denied visits from his family, friends and fellow-clergy, including Papal Nuncio Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti. Fr Lazar has been charged with treason, which carries a punishment of between seven and 15 years in jail, but the authorities have refused to reveal details of their allegations. Curiously, the charges were first revealed by the Catholic Church three and half months after the arrest, not by the authorities. The KGB secret police has bullied Fr Lazar's family, but campaigns for him continue. Pope Francis has also expressed his concern, and many in Belarus are convinced the priest is innocent. "The case is falling apart and everyone understands that the charges sound funny", journalist and family friend Lyubov Lunyova told Forum 18.

Four and a half months after Belarus' KGB secret police arrested Catholic priest Fr Vladislav Lazar on 31 May, it is still unclear why he was arrested or what specific acts he is accused of having committed, Forum 18 News Service notes. He is being held incommunicado by the KGB and has been charged with treason, which carries a punishment of seven to 15 years' imprisonment.

The Papal Nuncio to Belarus, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, has still not been able to visit Fr Lazar in the KGB detention centre in the capital Minsk, the Nuncio's secretary told Forum 18 from Minsk on 8 October. On 12 September the Catholic Bishops' Conference announced that the Nuncio would "in the near future" visit Fr Lazar.

Archbishop Gugerotti has in the past visited and held private meetings with political prisoners in detention. Vatican Radio reported on 27 September 2012 that he had visited Sergei Kovalenko, Pavel Syromolotov, Nikolai Statkevich, Ales Beliaty, Dmitry Dashkevich, Eduard Lobov and Pavel Severinets. Political prisoners are normally denied their right to be visited by members of the clergy they request visits from (see F18News 4 July 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1589).

"The case is falling apart"

Fr Lazar denies the treason charges, according to Lyubov Lunyova, a journalist from the "Narodnaya Volya" (People's Will) newspaper and a close friend of the family. She told Forum 18 on 9 October that she had been able to read his letter addressed to his family. "I am not guilty and looking forward to being released," she quoted Fr Lazar as writing.

"The case is falling apart and everyone understands that the charges sound funny", Lunyova told Forum 18. Like many others in Belarus, she thinks Fr Lazar is innocent (see F18News 9 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1873). She thinks that the authorities made a mistake and now feel embarrassed to release the priest.

Officials have given no information about the case and the only information on the criminal charges Fr Lazar faces comes from the Catholic Bishops' Conference. The priest's lawyer has been ordered not to discuss the case. The KGB's press service in Minsk has refused to give any comments. An officer - who would not give his name - told Forum 18 on 7 October that while the investigation is going on, information is not to be disclosed.

Fr Lazar's address in the KGB detention centre he is being held in is:

220050 Minsk

ul. Komsomolskaya 30

SIZO KGB

Lazaryu Vladimiru Mikhailovichu

Belarus

Prison conditions designed to crush the spirit

On 31 August, the Charter 97 website published an account of conditions in the KGB detention centre. The account was by an unnamed businessman who said he knows an arrested Russian businessman, Vladislav Baumgartner, who was transferred to the centre several days earlier.

On arrival, prisoners are taken down to the basement, where they are strip-searched, the businessman noted. All property is taken away from them and they are finger-printed. The first days are spent in a cell with little light on the cold north-facing side of the prison. The cell has no toilet, only a plastic bucket with a lid. For the first ten days, no hot water is provided for tea.

After the first ten days or so, prisoners are then transferred to other cells, which usually have a toilet. Cells are generally about 7.5 square metres (9 square yards), "three and a half steps in one direction, and the same in the other". They are often shared by up to four prisoners. The only fresh air comes through a hatch in the white-washed window about the size of an A4 piece of paper, and a small ventilation point on the inner wall that can be closed by the guards.

Guards can observe prisoners through a peep-hole. Prisoners are banned from having watches. Prisoners are taken out to empty the toilet bucket at 6 am and 6 pm. Inspection of the cell takes place at 8 am.

The businessman says the system is designed to crush the spirit of the prisoners in the initial days in the detention centre.

No visitors

For four months of his imprisonment in the KGB secret police detention centre, Fr Lazar was allowed to have neither a Bible, nor a prayer book, nor a clergy visit, Forum 18 has found. Family friend Lunyova told Forum 18 that a relative of Fr Lazar tried to pass him religious literature but it was not accepted. "The rules are the same: a squared notebook and hygienic items," she told Forum 18.

Lunyova said that no visits are allowed, including by Fr Lazar's fellow clergy. Fr Barok is also concerned by Fr Lazar's isolation from his fellow clergy, which he considers as a form of pressure. Prisoners have the right under international human rights law to request and receive clergy visits, but this is routinely denied in Belarus (see F18News 4 July 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1589).

Political and other prisoners are also routinely denied other aspects of their right to freedom of religion or belief (see eg. F18News 15 May 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1700).

The Catholic Church in Belarus' website stated that the Church had received assurances from the state that all Fr Lazar's "rights under the laws of Belarus will be respected".

Treason charges revealed three and a half months later

The 45-year-old Fr Lazar – a Belarusian citizen, born Vladimir Lazar – has been since mid-April parish priest of the Descent of the Holy Spirit parish in Borisov [Barysaw] in Minsk Region. He was arrested on 31 May, but without the authorities giving any information on why he was arrested.

Almost two months later on 26 July, Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko commented on the arrest of a KGB secret police officer, apparently linking this arrest with Fr Lazar: "We recently arrested one traitor who served in the special services [KGB] and who was connected with foreign states through representatives of the Catholic Church, and not only passed on information, but because of his activity people who work abroad suffered". Lukashenko continued, "How should this be characterised? From our point of view it is treason." (see F18News 9 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1873).

But it was only on 12 September, three and a half months after the arrest, that the Catholic Bishops' Conference – not the authorities – confirmed Fr Lazar's arrest and made the state's formal charges public. The Bishop's Conference only learned that day of the charges, from state agencies they did not identify.

According to a statement published on the Church's website after a meeting of the bishops, Fr Lazar is charged with violating Criminal Code Article 356, Part 1 (treason), which carries a punishment of 7 to 15 years' imprisonment. The case also cites Criminal Code Article 16, Part 6 which defines a "person who has assisted in the commission of the crime with advice, guidance, provision of information or tools and means of committing the crime" as "participation in a crime".

Fr Lazar is accused of treasonably giving money and valuables to a person accused of spying – but no details are given of these allegations. The authorities have also not made public any evidence they may have to back their allegations.

It is possible that Fr Lazar's detention may be linked to his effective pastoral work in his parish, a district where it is known retired KGB secret police officers are among the inhabitants (see F18News 9 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1873). Polish priests and nuns active in their parishes and on social issues, such as alcoholism, have in the past been particularly targeted by the authorities for expulsion (see F18News 7 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1237).

No comment

The Catholic Bishops' Conference asks Catholics "to entrust this problem to God's mercy". It said the government assured the Catholic Church that this incident will not have an effect on relations with the state. Bishops' Conference press secretary Fr Yury Sanko refused to discuss Fr Lazar's case. "Please see our website where you can find the information and the official position of the Catholic Church," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 8 October. The Catholic Church in Belarus' website states that the authorities have promised to keep the Church informed of the course of their investigation.

Fellow-Catholic priest Fr Yury Barok, who has known Lazar since they trained together at seminary, told the Belsat TV channel on 6 October: "After three months of interrogations, keeping a person in isolation, he is accused only of passing over valuables or money." Fr Barok remarked that the prolonged official silence followed by unspecific allegations "can't help but cause people to not take the allegations seriously".

Denis Sadovsky, General Secretary of the opposition Belarusian Christian Democracy movement, noted to Forum 18 that there are differences in Catholics' willingness to advocate for Fr Lazar depending on their geographic location and priest's nationality. "In places like Minsk and Vitebsk regions, Catholics help to collect signatures, donate money, and priests talk about Fr Lazar from the pulpit," he told Forum 18 on 9 October. "But in regions like Brest and Grodno this subject is considered taboo." He explained that Brest and Grodno regions are closer to Poland, and there are many Polish priests who are afraid to attract too much attention from the authorities.

Fear of expulsion is acute for many Polish Catholic priests in Belarus (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1796).

Seeking information, advocating for Fr Lazar

Family friend Lunyova told Forum 18 that even after the official accusations were announced, "we still don't know much. They [the authorities] never say anything but people discuss this situation and social networks are boiling."

The Belarusian Christian Democracy movement has campaigned on behalf of Fr Lazar (see F18News 9 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1873). "In response to all our inquiries we are told that the information is not to be disclosed for legal (investigation) reasons," General Secretary Sadovsky told Forum 18.

He said the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement has launched many activities in support of the priest. The petition was signed by about 5,000 people, donations are collected for his family and the situation is discussed at round tables. He insisted that for many people it is news to discover that a Catholic priest is arrested for spying. "When they learn more about it they sign the petition because they don't believe in these accusations," he commented to Forum 18.

KGB intimidation

Family friend Lunyova told Forum 18 that the family is nervous that if they themselves speak publicly about the case, Fr Lazar could suffer negative consequences. "But at least now the family is allowed to pass parcels to him, and have some correspondence with him," she noted.

Sadovsky of the Christian Democrats noted that the family previously attended public events organised in support of Fr Lazar, but now did not attend events or talk about the case. "I think they [the KGB] worked on them and probably warned that their relative will be treated worse."

Family members have previously noted that they are constantly followed by KGB secret police agents. "Their control is severe: anywhere I go they trace me and spy; if I step away they are also present on the spot," a relative told Belsat TV on 7 August. "People feel indignant seeing that."

Papal concern

Fr Lazar's case was discussed with Pope Francis by the Nuncio Archbishop Gugerotti, during a 40 minute audience on 30 September. The Pope expressed his concern about Fr Lazar, and asked to be kept informed regularly about the "delicate situation", the Catholic Church in Belarus' website noted on 1 October. The secretary of the Nunciature refused to comment on any further

actions that might be taken on Fr Lazar's case.

On 3 October, three days after he met Archbishop Gugerotti, Pope Francis met Fr Lazar's bishop, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, who was visiting the Vatican for a meeting. The Pope asked him about Fr Lazar and expressed "serious concern" about his situation, the Catholic Church in Belarus' website noted the same day. "The Pope said that he wanted personally to know all the details of the case and how it will be resolved."

Charges dropped

Meanwhile, on 11 September the Shchuchin District Investigation Committee dropped the criminal charges against a 28-year-old Catholic Aleksei Shchedrov. He received the formal notification on 24 September, the Vyasna (Spring) human rights group noted on 1 October.

The charges had been lodged in June for praying in the shelter he organised for homeless people in his home in the village of Aleksandrovka in the western Grodno [Hrodna] Region (see F18News 2 July 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1853). Criminal charges under Article 193-1 were dropped after Shchedrov obtained official registration for his shelter on 27 August.

A primary health worker, Shchedrov helps homeless people in accordance with his religious beliefs. "I give them food, a bed, a bath and clothes and I pray together with them. But this is no religious organisation, just charity," he told Forum 18 in June. Pressure had been brought by the authorities via the Church against him (see F18News 2 July 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1853).

Human rights defenders in Belarus have long called for Criminal Code Article 193-1 to be abolished. Such calls were echoed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, Miklos Haraszti, in a 6 August report (A/68/276), in which he called for the Article to be repealed. He said the Article, among other legal provisions in the country, is "in evident contradiction with the international human rights obligations of Belarus". (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1796.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/?map=Belarus>.

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