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TRANSDNIESTER: Police move to crush Baptist street libraries

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Authorities in Bendery (Tighina) in the unrecognised republic of Transdniestral in eastern Moldova have moved to crush a street library run by local Baptists. A Baptist statement reaching Forum 18 News Service reported that on 20 April police confiscated all the books for a second time. "This activity is illegal in Transdniestral," the city police chief Valeri Smyk told Forum 18. The local security ministry insisted that the matter was nothing to do with them. The Baptists – who reject registration on principle – have long complained about harassment from the Transdniestral authorities, which insist that because they are not registered they should not be allowed to function.

In the latest in a series of such incidents, authorities in the city of Bendery (Tighina) in the unrecognised republic of Transdniestral in eastern Moldova have moved to crush a street library run by local Baptists. A 24 April Baptist statement reaching Forum 18 News Service reported that four days earlier police confiscated all the books for a second time. "The local authorities in the city of Bendery are obstructing the work of the mobile Christian library and have drawn up police records against the Christian library workers with the aim of judicial persecution," the statement complained. "This activity is illegal in Transdniestral," the city police chief Valeri Smyk told Forum 18 on 29 April. "They didn't have a licence for it."

However, different agencies are passing responsibility to each other for the incidents. Smyk declined to say why street libraries are illegal and referred all enquiries to the Bendery branch of the Transdniestral State Security Ministry (MGB, the local successor to the KGB). "They are in charge of this matter." He refused to say whether the Baptists will face prosecution.

Reached by telephone on 29 April, the duty officer at the Bendery MGB Stepan Ivanovich (he declined to give his last name) insisted that the police was responsible. "They detained them – it's their responsibility," he told Forum 18. He declined to say whether the Baptist street library was illegal or not. He said the head of the city MGB – whom he refused to name – was not available.

The first police action against the street library came on 30 March, when police lieutenant N. Stolyarchuk seized the fifty books on the stall and detained the three Baptists running it, Vyacheslav Bachu, Vladimir Boligar and Dmitry Masterov. The Baptists report that Stolyarchuk and a colleague "questioned them a lot about the internal life of the church". The three men's identity card details were recorded and they were then taken to the city police station, where they were interrogated by police lieutenant D. Tashoglo. "Again questions were asked about the internal life of the church," the Baptists complained. The three Baptists refused to sign the police record of the incident.

When they demanded to know why they had been detained, they were transferred to the local branch of the MGB. An officer in civilian clothes, who did not give his name, told the three: "You are free to go, but I am keeping the literature." The MGB officers refused repeated Baptists demands to explain why the books had been confiscated.

The same three Baptists, Bachu, Boligar and Masterov, were again detained by a police patrol on 20 April and taken to the city police station. At the duty room, police sergeant V. Frait drew up a list of the 29 confiscated books and released the three men. The Baptists complain that again no reason was given for confiscating the books.

Baptist sources in the Transdniestral capital Tiraspol, who asked not to be named, told Forum 18 on 29 April that the confiscated books have still not been handed back. However, the sources reported that 44 books confiscated under similar circumstances from a Baptist street library in the village of Krasnoe on 18 January have now been returned.

Several Baptists have had fines imposed this year. Aleksandr Kulysh, who owns the church in Krasnoe, was twice fined for using a building on his land as a church. The authorities argue that as the congregation does not have registration the church was built illegally. Kulysh should have paid the fines by 1 April but has refused, Baptists in Tiraspol told Forum 18, and expects to be brought to court again for his refusal to pay. The Baptists have complained about the case to the Transdniestral Constitutional Court in Tiraspol.

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 Transdnierster have long faced obstructions to their work from the authorities, which remain close to the local diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Baptists have repeatedly demanded that the Transdnierstran authorities delete articles from the 1995 religion law that make registration of religious organisations compulsory and require religious leaders to undergo "accreditation" with the authorities. "The law does not leave space in the legal sphere for unregistered communities," they complained.

They have also called for the abolition of Article 200 of the Administrative Code, which specifies fines for those who lead unregistered religious communities, conduct unregistered religious rituals or who lead special religious activities for young people or musical activities not related directly to religious worship.

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