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BELARUS: Baptists demand end to "persecution" of family

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The congregation of a Baptist Church in Bobruisk, in eastern Belarus, has called for an end to the "persecution" of members of the Yermalitsky family, who host the church's services in their home. The family has faced a series of fines and other harassment from state officials, much of which has been personally orchestrated by Aleksandr Markachev of the town administration. Markachev has defended his actions to Forum 18 News Service, claiming that "a private home is not designated for religious worship," and that "their services are illegal." He also alleged that the church services caused the risk of a fire and health problems, but dismissed Forum 18's suggestions that if church members believed they were at risk of fire or health problems they could choose not to attend. The congregation has also called for worship services to be allowed to take place freely, and the cancellation of fines imposed on the Yermalitsky family.

An official of the town administration of Bobruisk [Babruysk] in Mogilev [Mahilyow] region in eastern Belarus, has defended a series of fines imposed on a Baptist family which hosts a church in its home, in the latest in a series of escalating moves against the Yermalitsky family. "A private home is not designated for religious worship," Aleksandr Markachev told Forum 18 News Service from Bobruisk on 5 January. "Their services are illegal as they refuse to register their church and abide by the law." The congregation, like other congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches, refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries.

Markachev, who has personally led much of the harassment of the congregation, insists that the church must comply with the religion law, which against international human rights standards makes registration compulsory. He also alleged that church services in his home risked causing a fire and health problems. Markachev dismissed suggestions that if church members believed they were at risk of fire or health problems they could choose not to attend.

However, Markachev denied that the authorities are restricting the rights of the church members, insisting that he maintains "excellent relations" with the church's pastor, Aleksandr Yermalitsky.

While refusing to discuss the specifics of successive fines on the Yermalitsky family on the grounds that "the courts are independent", he insisted the authorities are right to bring the family "to responsibility". Asked what the authorities will do when the church continues to worship, as it has promised to do, Markachev said further legal cases will be inevitable. He rejected absolutely all suggestions that church members' rights to profess their faith freely are being violated, insisting that a number of registered churches exist locally that believers could attend.

Pastor Yermalitsky was reluctant to discuss the pressure on his church. "We're going to take our complaints to the procuracy here and the courts," he told Forum 18 from Bobruisk on 5 January. "We want to resolve these problems here at home."

The Yermalitsky family in Bobruisk has long faced pressure for its religious activity. After religious literature he was displaying at a street library was confiscated in September 2005 (see F18News 15 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=688), Aleksandr Yermalitsky was summoned to a meeting with Markachev at the town administration, where the official insisted that Pastor Yermalitsky register the church. The Baptists told Forum 18 that Markachev threatened to use all "levers" at his disposal to "close down" the house where the church meets, which is also where the family lives.

On 21 November the Lenin district court of Bobruisk fined Yermalitsky 145,000 Belarusian Roubles (442 Norwegian Kroner, 56 Euros, or 67 US Dollars) under Article 193 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes founding and leading an unregistered religious congregation. However, on 25 November the case was cancelled, and two days later the confiscated literature was returned.

In the evening of 25 November, as a prayer meeting was underway, Markachev led a nine-strong group of town officials and police in an inspection of the Yermalitsky's home. Among the officials were a Fire Inspector, a member of the Commission for Children, a doctor from the Hygiene Service, the Education Department and the local police officer. Those attending the prayer meeting were detained for an hour. On 28 November, in the wake of the raid, Yermalitsky's wife Lyudmila was summoned to the Hygiene and

Epidemiological Centre "for verification of the technical conditions". An official of the Emergencies Service visited the house the following day. Late on 1 December the basement of the house was broken into and items stolen.

Markachev of the town administration again summoned Yermalitsky on 6 December to a meeting also attended by Mikhail Kovalevich, deputy head of the town administration, who the Baptists accuse of being "the main inspirer" of the harassment they have faced. Yermalitsky was again threatened at the meeting that things would "end badly" for him if the church continues to violate the law. The following day Markachev and five other officials again visited the Yermalitsky home for an alleged "fire inspection". When the family protested that such an inspection had already been carried out on 29 November, officials maintained that had been "insufficient".

On 12 December, Yermalitsky was summoned to the Emergency Situation Department where Senior Inspector Yuri Migas fined him administratively 28,000 Belarusian Roubles (85 Norwegian Kroner, 11 Euros or 13 US Dollars) for allowing his house to be remodelled for use as a place of worship without approval of the plans.

The following day, the pastor was summoned to the police, where Senior Lieutenant A. Malakhov warned him that the church had to register according to the demands of the religion law. Another police officer warned him: "Either you register or the church will not be allowed to exist at this address."

On 27 December, Lyudmila Yermalitskaya was fined 580,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,767 Norwegian Kroner, 223 Euros or 270 US dollars) under Article 167 part 1 of the administrative code, which punishes violations of the law on religious and other gatherings with fines of up to 150 times the minimum monthly wage or imprisonment of up to 15 days. Officials claim that children were present "against their will" and "in the absence of their parents", something banned by the country's religion law. The average wage in Belarus is estimated to be between 100 and 150 US Dollars per month.

Markachev of the town administration insisted to Forum 18 that nine children had been present without their parents during the service raided on 25 November. Repeatedly asked by Forum 18 whether these children had been present without the knowledge of their parents and against their wishes, he declined to answer.

Church members claim "suspicious vehicles" are regularly outside the house. In a 1 January 2006 statement, they call for appeals for their congregation to be able to meet freely for worship, an end to the "persecution" of the Yermalitsky family and the cancellation of the fines.

For more background information see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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