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BELARUS: Why can't believers speak on social themes?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

When Baptist deacon Vladimir Golikov spoke in a private capacity at an evening on married life on 28 January at a cultural centre near the capital Minsk, local ideology official Oleg Bobrik arrived to close down the meeting. Golikov had violated an unwritten rule banning religious believers from speaking publicly on social issues. "I was accused of conducting religious propaganda, but there was nothing religious in my talk – it was about family life and ethics," he told Forum 18 News Service. The authorities came close to sacking all 15 employees of the cultural centre in retaliation for his participation. Also in late January, the Supreme Court closed down Generation, a social organisation run by Minsk Christians and registered in 2004 which was accused of conducting religious activity at its English camps and classes. The excuse used was an invalid legal address. Ahead of elections, religious leaders in some towns are summoned by the local authorities and warned not to get involved in politics.

Religious believers have complained to Forum 18 News Service of being excluded from speaking publicly on social and public issues, with the authorities maintaining close scrutiny and punishing individuals and organisations who violate this unwritten rule. "Religious believers and communities are not allowed to speak on public and social affairs," one non-Protestant religious leader who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18.

Vladimir Golikov, a deacon at Minsk's Good News Baptist Church, was invited by a fellow Christian in Volozhin (Minsk region) to address a 28 January evening on the subject of married life at the town's state-owned cultural centre where his friend works, he told Forum 18 on 2 March: "We didn't inform anyone from the local authorities as no religious organisation was involved - I was acting on my own, as a private citizen." When a local journalist present at the gathering immediately informed the local district executive committee that the speaker was an evangelical Christian, however, Oleg Bobrik, an official from its ideology department, arrived at the cultural centre and ordered its director to end the meeting, which he did.

"I was accused of conducting religious propaganda," Golikov told Forum 18, "but there was nothing religious in my talk – it was about family life and ethics. I made only two references to the Bible, when I was explaining that men and women were created with different natures."

According to a 7 February report of the incident from the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre, Volozhin district executive committee met in extraordinary session on 30 January and voted to dismiss all 15 employees of the cultural centre. Golikov told Forum 18, however, that no one was dismissed in the end. "Lawyers warned that it would be illegal, and my friend asked the authorities for an official instruction forming the basis of any dismissal so that he could challenge it in court. He said that, according to the Constitution, I could not be prevented from sharing my convictions with others. The authorities seem to have thought again."

Bobrik, the local ideology department official, was unavailable for comment when Forum 18 rang on 3 March.

Also in late January, the Supreme Court closed down Generation, a social organisation run by Minsk Christians and registered with the Ministry of Justice in 2004, its director Gleb Yermakov confirmed to Forum 18 on 2 March. Generation had run English camps for up to 500 schoolchildren every summer and conducted similar language-learning projects in conjunction with state schools, he said, "but they were educational – we abstained from any kind of Christian ministry or promotion. At the summer camps we wouldn't hide the fact that we are Christians, we might even talk about our faith one-to-one and invite anyone who was interested to separate events run by church organisations, but whatever the Ministry of Justice saw as religious activity was not part of Generation's activities." Yermakov emphasised that Generation always informed the parents and teachers of the schoolchildren involved that its leaders were Christians.

While accused of conducting religious activity – under Belarus' highly restrictive laws, only specifically religious organisations are allowed to do so – the formal reason for Generation's liquidation was its lack of a legal address, Yermakov told Forum 18. (Like religious organisations, social organisations must be registered at non-residential premises). "The company where we were registered was ordered to end its contract with us," he explained. "From October 2005 we looked for a new place, but private organisations don't have much power to rent out legal addresses, and not having one was enough to shut us down."

According to Yermakov, Generation's problems started at a camp last summer, when 23 visiting American citizens were fined ten

dollars each for not being correctly registered. Following the camp one of the local teachers involved did not have her annual employment contract renewed, he said, and others were unexpectedly not awarded top-up salary payments of 100,000 Belarusian roubles (312 Norwegian kroner, 39 Euros or 47 US dollars). Finally, from the start of the academic year on 1 September 2005, Generation was barred from co-operating with state schools.

Yermakov commented to Forum 18 that he understood from one police officer who questioned him that the authorities' attention to Generation was occasioned by the recent regime changes in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

On 2 March Natalya Komovskaya, the co-ordinator of the charismatic Embassy of God Church's 15 congregations in Belarus, told Forum 18 from Gomel that her regional executive committee hosted an 8 February round table meeting entitled "For Spiritual Renewal and Stability." At the meeting, she said, a regional official warned all local religious leaders that they had no legal right to conduct political "agitation" but should instead encourage their congregations to vote in the 19 March presidential elections "as their civic duty".

While Komovskaya said she was unaware of any other similar meetings, other sources have told Forum 18 that in some towns local religious leaders are summoned to the town administration when election campaigns begin and are warned not to get involved in politics. "This happens at presidential and parliamentary elections, and when the referendum was called in 2004 allowing President Lukashenko to stand for a third time," one source who has attended such meetings – who preferred not to be named – told Forum 18. "If you don't go, there could be repercussions." The source cited a case when a religious community that had hosted an opposition political candidate received a warning from the local religious affairs committee. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus 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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