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BELARUS: Religious activity in public life attacked

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A Jewish kindergarten music teacher in Belarus, who celebrated the traditionally joyful Jewish holiday of Purim with Jewish children, has been threatened with criminal prosecution, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Lyudmila Izakson-Bolotovskaya is accused of "illegal and deliberate dissemination of religious dogma to young children, which could cause considerable harm to their world view, rights and legal interests." Public prosecutor Sergei Kopytov refused to talk to Forum 18 about his threat - one of several recent attempts, known to Forum 18, to restrict all religious activity to existing state approved places of worship. Minsk City Court has liquidated the Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church, thus making it illegal. Earlier, its pastor, Georgi Vyazovsky, was jailed for ten days for leading worship in his home. The charismatic New Life Church in Minsk has been visited again by police, demanding confirmation of state permission to hold worship services. Also, three evangelical Christians were given official warnings for silently reading the Bible on Brest's central square, as an expression of solidarity with those arrested after March's presidential elections.

A public prosecutor in eastern Belarus, who recently warned a kindergarten music teacher that she risks criminal prosecution by celebrating a Jewish religious holiday with Jewish children has declined to speak about the incident. "We don't give consultations by telephone," Sergei Kopytov of Mogilev's [Mahilyow] Lenin District public prosecutor's office told Forum 18 News Service on 13 June, refused even to confirm that he had issued the official warning to Lyudmila Izakson-Bolotovskaya. The warning is one of several recent efforts by the state to minimise religious activity in public life.

Lyudmila Izakson-Bolotovskaya is accused of "illegal and deliberate dissemination of religious dogma to young children, which could cause considerable harm to their world view, rights and legal interests," in a 17 April letter from Kopytov which has been seen by Forum 18. Kopytov goes on to maintain that, although the 2002 Religion Law prohibits "anonymous or other illegal activity by religious organisations in educational institutions," Izakson-Bolotovskaya has conducted "events of a religious nature" as director of Alef. This is a musical group providing an optional class on Jewish culture and traditions for some 12 Jewish children at Mogilev's state-run Kindergarten No. 72.

According to public prosecutor Kopytov, Alef's aim is "the formation of the foundations of Jewish national identity by introducing children to the culture and traditions of the Jewish people, encouraging their interest in Hebrew and acquainting them with Jewish holidays." His letter to Izakson-Bolotovskaya states that, "rather than acquaint the children with religious holidays you organised them with the children and propagandised some of them in the mass media." Thus, it continues, on 14 March 2006 Alef was shown on local television celebrating "the Judaist religious holiday Purim" with children from Kindergarten No. 72, while all the musical group's events incorporate "Judaist church symbols, such as the Star of David and Menorah."

"Elements of a crime under Article 193 of the Criminal Code are observed," in Izakson-Bolotovskaya's actions, Kopytov concludes, threatening that prosecution will follow if these actions are repeated. Article 193 punishes "organisation or leadership of an association infringing upon the person or rights of the citizen" with a fine, deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities, or arrest for up to six months.

Contacted on 13 June, Progressive Jewish leader Yakov Basin told Forum 18 that all Jewish symbols - "Menorahs and Stars of David - there wasn't anything else" - have been removed from the kindergarten in the wake of the warning at the request of Mogilev's local educational department. Basin added that there have been no further repercussions, however, in particular no answer to his 4 May letter to Belarus' general public prosecutor arguing that the warning had no legal basis.

Purim is a joyous Jewish holiday, that commemorates the deliverance of Persian Jews from a plot - recorded in the Book of Esther - to exterminate them. Amongst the activities traditionally associated with Purim are acts of charity and public celebrations.

This year, city authorities in the capital Minsk refused permission for the local Hassidic Jewish community to hold its Passover celebration at a state-owned Palace for Children and Youth, similarly arguing that a religious event could not be permitted at a venue frequented by children. "It wouldn't be very good to have a religious event at a children's institution," Minsk city administration told Forum 18 (see F18News 27 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=770).

Other recent developments further illustrate the state authorities' determination to confine all forms of religious activity to already-existing purpose-built houses of worship. On 26 May Minsk City Court liquidated Christ's Covenant Reformed Baptist Church, thus rendering it illegal under the 2002 Religion Law. Earlier this year the church's pastor, Georgi Vyazovsky, served a ten-day prison term for leading the 30-strong congregation in worship at his own home (see F18News 6 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=737 and 13 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=743).

Christ's Covenant Church was unable to obtain compulsory re-registration under the 2002 Law due to its lack of state-approved worship premises, which are notoriously difficult to find in the Belarusian capital (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560). The same Law bans all but occasional and small-scale religious meetings in private homes.

On 1 June, three evangelical Christians were given official warnings under Article 167 of the Administrative Violations Code (violation of the procedure for organising and conducting religious events, which require advance state permission if held outside a designated house of worship). According to the Belarusian Christian Democracy website <http://www.bchd.info>, the three had taken part in a 24-hour vigil in which they sat on Brest's central square and silently read the Bible as an expression of solidarity with demonstrators arrested in the wake of March's presidential elections (see also F18News 27 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=750).

The Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church has reported a visit on Sunday, 4 June by local police demanding to see confirmation that the church has state permission to hold worship services. The church stated that at Moscow District police station the following day, the police drew up a protocol against Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko for conducting unapproved religious activity in a building not designated as a house of worship.

The Minsk municipal authorities have consistently refused to grant New Life permission to change the designated usage of its building and reconstruct it as a church, latterly maintaining to Forum 18 that this is because it does not feature in the Belarusian capital's general development plan (see most recently F18News 24 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=788). Arguing that the building is still technically a cowshed, they have also refused to grant the church permission to use it for services (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516).

In March 2005 New Life's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, was fined 720,000 Belarusian roubles (approximately 2,090 Norwegian kroner, 255 Euros or 330 US dollars) under Article 167 of the Administrative Violations Code (see F18News 23 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=530). Church administrator has also been three times given large fines for organising religious worship (see F18News 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676). (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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