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BELARUS: "If they try to stop God one way, we'll try another"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Despite tight restrictions on missionary activity in the highly restrictive Belarusian Religion Law - and approval for such activity hard to get - religious believers still have one unexpected way of sharing their faith in public: through popular music. Salvation - a Christian group from the western region of Brest - has often won top place each week on state television's "Silver Marathon" pop music programme since the summer, while several Hare Krishna groups - among them rap artists - have performed at the prestigious annual Slavic Bazaar festival in the north-eastern city of Vitebsk in recent years. Asked by Forum 18 News Service whether the prevalence of religious themes in Belarusian popular music might be the consequence of extensive state restrictions on organised church activity, Aleksandr Patlis - lead singer of another Christian band New Generation - remarked "if they try to stop God one way, we'll try another".

Notwithstanding the 2002 Religion Law's heavy restrictions on missionary activity, Forum 18 News Service has found sharing faith to be well-established in an unexpected sphere of Belarusian mainstream culture - popular music.

Religious communities - especially Protestants without a state-approved house of worship - routinely find that legal provisions combine to restrict the provision of facilities even to their existing members. Numerous examples of this are documented in, for example: F18News 1 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=131, 7 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=154 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=155, 8 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=156 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=157.

In addition, state officials have issued decisions since the late 1990s barring religious organisations from the only publicly available premises in Soviet-planned cities and towns. A September 2000 decision by Minsk's Moscow District Executive Committee viewed by Forum 18, for example, bans proprietors of all cultural institutions and organisations from making their facilities available to religious organisations "for public or other events, as they are not specially designed for religious activity". As one Minsk Protestant recently remarked to Forum 18, this is while "there are empty halls whose owners want to lease them - but they don't have permission".

The 2002 Religion Law went even further in restricting missionary activity, permitting those religious communities which have passed compulsory state registration to operate only at the specific location where they are registered - within the city limits of Brest if registered in Brest, for example. On 18 July the main Baptist Union's elder for Minsk region pointed out to Forum 18 that, even if a religious organisation has a registered region-wide association or mission, it may operate only at those locations within the given region where it has registered communities. "We don't even try outside that," Gennadi Brutsky continued. "We did four or five times but we were warned that it was illegal, that liquidation would follow if it was repeated, so we didn't carry on. In practice our mission now is directed at helping existing churches develop."

Amongst the other activities attacked by the authorities has been a private family holiday camp arranged by members of a Minsk church (see F18News 17 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832).

In what seems to be a unique phenomenon in the former Soviet Union, however, Forum 18 has found that faith-inspired musicians have achieved broad public support in Belarus. Almost every week since June 2006, for example, Salvation - a group from the western region of Brest - has held first place on "Silver Marathon", a state television programme in which viewers vote for their favourite current pop song by text message. In addition to their name, Salvation's song is clearly Christian in sentiment: "You built a bridge from heaven to earthâ€¦ heaven weeps raindrops of love over you and me."

Paradoxically, state restrictions on the media have proved of assistance in this regard. Since January 2005, all FM radio stations in Belarus may devote no more than 20 per cent of their airtime to foreign music, and several popular Belarusian rock bands are banned from public performance due to their declared opposition to President Aleksandr Lukashenko. Despite the reduced competition, however, the Belarusian Christian bands now flourishing are - as Forum 18 observed - both more accomplished than many Russian pop musicians and appear to be more accessible to a young secular audience than their counterparts in the West.

The Belarusian authorities' hostility to religious belief in public manifests itself in intolerant actions against many religious

communities. A Jewish kindergarten music teacher, who celebrated the traditionally joyful Jewish holiday of Purim with Jewish children, was threatened with criminal prosecution. Her and the children's celebration of the normally very public Purim holiday was officially described as "illegal and deliberate dissemination of religious dogma to young children, which could cause considerable harm to their world view, rights and legal interests." (see F18News 13 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=798).

Hare Krishna devotees are another religious community which has been prevented from sharing their faith in public (see F18News 27 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=236). The Society for Krishna Consciousness, recently had two groups of its musicians – Ananda ("Bliss") and Kripa ("Charity") - perform at the prestigious annual Slavic Bazaar festival in the north-eastern city of Vitebsk, Sergei Malakhovsky of the organisation's Minsk branch told Forum 18 on 17 July. Malakhovsky also showed Forum 18 a video of local Krishna devotee rap artists performing before an enthusiastic audience of several thousand at the same festival in 2005 – albeit noting that they did not feature in the televised broadcast of the event, which is viewed across Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

Also successful on "Silver Marathon" is New Jerusalem, one of the most popular Belarusian Christian bands. Its lead singer, Aleksandr Patlis, told Forum 18 on 20 July that it typically plays to local audiences of approximately a thousand people, between 50 and 60 per cent of whom are non-believers. Like Salvation, New Jerusalem's music is distinctly but not blatantly Christian. Their 2002 album, "Fragments from Heaven", for example, includes the single "That Love":

"We searched so long for love, we searched night and day

It came and became like us, but we didn't recognise it.

We didn't expect it crucified, not in our wildest dreams

It came and became like us, so we could become like it.

That love still believes in us

That love is waiting for us

That love is still holding us."

According to Patlis - who hails from the western city of Grodno and became Christian as a young conscript in the early 1990s – "Belarus always differed from the rest of the Soviet Union in having a lot of Christian bands." He confirmed that New Jerusalem's approach is intentionally subtle: "If people turn on the TV and see a black suit and a Bible, they think 'Oh, Baptist' and switch channel. And Christians also feel disappointment, fall in love from time to time – it's not just 'Jesus Loves You'." Also, while the band's members are committed Protestants, Patlis works closely with prominent local Orthodox musicians, and there is extensive use of Catholic imagery in the video for "That Love". "We purposefully don't accentuate the fact that we are Protestant," he told Forum 18. "The important thing is not a particular doctrine, but bringing the truth of Jesus Christ to people. There are four gospels, some might prefer one or other, but what matters is that Christ is at the centre of all of them."

Acknowledging that "to a great extent people know we're Protestant but no one has ever stopped us from doing anything," Patlis ascribed this to New Jerusalem's efforts at building up relationships in the music industry over the past nine years: "We just became friends with producers, directors, journalists, so today the people who work in the media are simply our friends, and they help us." In December 2005, Patlis said, he even performed a track from "Fragments of Heaven" to the accompaniment of the presidential orchestra as part of a televised concert, and some 18 months ago New Jerusalem members and their families were invited to discuss the Christian upbringing of children on a state television talk-show.

When Forum 18 asked whether the prevalence of religious themes in Belarusian popular music might be the consequence of the extensive state restrictions on organised church activity, Patlis remarked "if they try to stop God one way, we'll try another". Due to "our inefficiency", he suggested, Christians sometimes wrongly think that they will always be able to work in familiar ways, but "we should be praying for and using opportunities to reach people, or the grace will go some place else." (END)

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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