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BELARUS: Foreign Protestants expelled for "harming national security"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Following the expulsion in March of US citizen Travis Decker in retaliation for his active work with a Baptist church in the capital Minsk, the Belarusian authorities have moved to deport another foreigner on similar grounds. Polish citizen Jaroslaw Lukasik told Forum 18 News Service he must leave Belarus by 7 June, although his wife and children are Belarusian citizens. The KGB accused him of participating in "illegal religious activity by Protestant communities and gatherings of radically inclined, politicised groupings". Both Decker and Lukasik were accused of harming national security. Other Protestants, as well as Catholic priests and nuns, have already had permission to remain in Belarus curtailed. Belarus' 2001 National Security Concept describes the activity of foreign religious organisations and missionaries as a threat. Israeli Rabbi Borukh Lamdan told Forum 18 he is still trying to get his permission to work in Bobruisk renewed.

Jaroslaw Lukasik, a Polish citizen active in the Belarusian Pentecostal community, has told Forum 18 News Service that he must leave the country by the end of 7 June. The official reason given in the state's notification of his deportation, he confirmed on 15 May, is "activity aimed at bringing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus in the sphere of interconfessional relations".

"National security" is not a permissible reason to restrict freedom of thought, conscience or belief under either the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - both of which Belarus is party to.

The 8 May decision to annul Lukasik's residency permit – valid since 1999 – was taken by the Citizenship and Migration Department of Myadel District (Minsk Region) on the basis of information from the KGB secret police, he told Forum 18. At Myadel Department for Interior Affairs, he explained, he was shown – but not given – the KGB's accusations. "That I had participated in 'illegal religious activity by Protestant communities and gatherings of radically inclined, politicised groupings'."

Lukasik, whose wife and three small children are Belarusian citizens, has already started to appeal the decision. "We don't want them to decide the fate of a family in this way - without a court case, based upon unsubstantiated rumours," he remarked. Also speaking to Forum 18 on 15 May, Lukasik's wife Natalya stressed that her husband has never been charged with any violation of the law while living in Belarus.

On 17 May the Evangelical Belarus Information Centre published an appeal to the state authorities in Lukasik's defence, signed by Sergei Tsvor, the Pentecostal Union's bishop to Minsk and Minsk Region; Vyacheslav Goncharenko, bishop of the Full Gospel Union and pastor of the Minsk-based New Life Church; and 27 other Protestant pastors in Belarus. They describe Lukasik as "a Christian active in the life of evangelical churches (...) a person of high moral qualities (...) a bearer of Christian values who conducts educational work in the spheres of history and culture." The Protestant leaders also express their hope that "the principle of presumption of innocence will continue to be the foundation of Belarusian legal norms, and the accusations against Jaroslaw Lukasik will remain groundless in the absence of a court ruling".

In a similar recent case, Travis Decker, a US citizen active in the Minsk Baptist community, was ordered to leave Belarus within 15 days of being notified of his deportation on 20 March. According to a local Protestant source, he is no longer in Belarus. Viewed by Forum 18, documents issued by the Department for Internal Affairs in Minsk's Frunze District inform Decker of its 14 March decision to annul his stay in Belarus. One bears his signature, dated 20 March, and acknowledgment that he has been familiarised with its content.

According to the document, "in the course of his [Decker's] continued residence on the territory of [Frunze] District, as well as of his stay in Belarus in general (...) information was received from the Citizenship and Migration Department of the Interior Ministry of Belarus in relation to this foreign citizen concerning his relationship to activity aimed at bringing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus."

Until his deportation, Decker had formally been engaged in the humanitarian sphere, and held a one-year visa valid until 1 October

2007.

The country's National Security Concept, signed by President Aleksandr Lukashenko on 17 July 2001, includes "the activation of the activity of foreign religious organisations and missionaries to monopolise the spiritual life of society" among fundamental factors posing a threat to national security in the humanitarian sphere. It also calls for the counteraction of their "negative influence".

On 15 February 2007 seven US citizens were deported from Belarus following a local police warning that they had been conducting illegal religious activity in the eastern city of Mogilev [Mahilyow]. A further three left voluntarily (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=922).

Also in Mogilev Region, an Israeli rabbi based in the town of Bobruisk is still trying to get his state permission to conduct religious activity renewed, he told Forum 18 on 17 May. Permission was not renewed in September 2006 on the grounds that Rabbi Borukh Lamdan was conducting commercial activity – a charge he denies (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=922).

In a 10 May interview with the Russian-language Jewish News Agency, the chairman of the Hassidic Union of Jewish Religious Communities of Belarus, Vladimir Malinkin, acknowledged that Rabbi Lamdan has "committed some violations of the passport regime and the authorities dropped heavy hints that he should go". Malinkin added that the local Jewish community is keen for him to stay, however, "because Borukh has done much to revitalise Jewish life in Bobruisk".

Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities of various confessions are increasingly being barred from Belarus (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856). Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns were forced out of the country at the end of 2006, apparently because of their high levels of religious activity, including youth and alcohol rehabilitation meetings open to all (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

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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