

30 May 2007

BELARUS: Second deportation order and fine for Polish Pentecostal

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A fine and a second deportation order were handed down today (30 May) on Polish Pentecostal Jaroslaw Lukasik to punish him for his activity with his church in the capital Minsk. The authorities claimed he was "illegally" involved in the church's 27 May Pentecost service which was raided by police. He was ordered to leave Belarus by the end of 7 June and has been banned from returning for five years, he told Forum 18 News Service. He was also fined one month's minimum wage. A Citizenship and Migration Department official told Forum 18 Lukasik's deportation was ordered "for repeated violations of the regime governing the presence of foreigners on the territory of Belarus". Lukasik – whose wife and their three children are Belarusian citizens - insists the order is unjust. "I was present at the service and prayed – that's normal participation," he told Forum 18. "But even though we produced a statement signed by a whole list of church members saying that I did not preach that Sunday, the police insisted on their own version."

Jaroslaw Lukasik, a Polish citizen, today (30 May) received a second deportation order and a small fine from a Minsk administrative commission for engaging in "illegal religious activity" during the Pentecost service last Sunday (27 May) of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church, he told Forum 18 News Service from Central District Police Station in the Belarusian capital. Under the latest deportation order, he has been given eight days to leave the country – or until the end of 7 June. He may not return for five years, or until 31 May 2012.

This latest deportation order coincides with one of 8 May under which Lukasik must leave Belarus by 8 June (see F18News 17 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=958). His wife and their three children are Belarusian citizens.

In addition, Lukasik told Forum 18, he was today fined the minimum monthly wage, or 31,000 Belarusian roubles (88 Norwegian Kroner, 11 Euros or 14 US Dollars), under Article 23.55, part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code. He intends to appeal against both the deportation order and the fine.

"I was present at the service and prayed – that's normal participation," he remarked. "But even though we produced a statement signed by a whole list of church members saying that I did not preach that Sunday, the police insisted on their own version." Lukasik said that several of the state representatives who conducted Sunday's raid on the Pentecostal church had signed a protocol maintaining that he had conducted illegal religious activity at the service. "But I haven't seen it, so I don't know precisely of what sort of activity I am accused."

Detained for several hours following the 27 May police raid, Lukasik was ordered to go before an administrative commission at midday today. Speaking to Forum 18 shortly afterwards, he said he was waiting for police to finish issuing his deportation papers and would then be free to leave the station.

Also reached by Forum 18 on 30 May, an official of Minsk District's Citizenship and Migration Department confirmed the details of today's deportation order and fine, but at first refused to provide further details by telephone. Asked nevertheless for what crime Lukasik was being deported, the official remarked: "For repeated violations of the regime governing the presence of foreigners on the territory of Belarus. All the relevant documentation has been given to him and everything's been explained to him - if he disagrees, he can challenge the decision in court."

Following Sunday's raid, police held Pastor Antoni Bokun of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church overnight, and a local court fined him 20 times the minimum monthly wage the next day (see F18News 28 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=964). Pastor Bokun's 100-strong congregation has been meeting at his home since 2001 because the authorities refuse to allow the church to rent a building for worship. Under the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, home worship meetings without advance state approval are illegal.

While the 2002 Law does allow a religious organisation to meet at free-standing residential premises with the consent of the local authorities, in practice this is highly dependent upon the discretion of individual officials (see F18News 7 October 2003

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=155). The authorities have consistently obstructed religious communities from meeting for worship in residential buildings (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

Protestant communities have great difficulty in renting public buildings for worship meetings. A consistent pattern has emerged in recent years, in which those who control premises available for rent regularly back out of contracts with Protestants soon after the authorities are informed (see F18News 29 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=965). The authorities also severely obstruct attempts to rebuild churches, get land and buildings formally redesignated for use for worship buildings, or meet together for worship in private homes (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966).

In a 29 May open statement to Minsk City Police Department, Bishop Sergei Khomich of the Belarusian Pentecostal Union – to which John the Baptist Church is affiliated – expresses his concern about Pastor Bokun's recent prosecution. "As a bishop, I am deeply troubled by the following circumstance: On the day of Pentecost a pastor of a Pentecostal church spent approximately 24 hours under arrest for celebrating a major religious holiday in the same way as all Christians in our country."

Bishop Khomich also complains that "unlawful police action is leading to increased tension in Belarusian society and destabilising the religious situation". He calls for laws affecting religious activity to be brought into line with the 1994 Belarusian Constitution.

Lukasik believes the purpose of Sunday's raid was to prosecute him further after his public refutation of the 8 May deportation order. "National security" - the reason given for the deportation - 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 (see F18News 17 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=958).

The authorities in Belarus maintain tight controls on the religious activity of foreign citizens. Under a 23 February 1999 Council of Ministers decree, their work with local religious communities is subject to approval by the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. In requesting permission for a foreign citizen to lead its activity, a religious association must "give grounds for the necessity of such an invitation and include a copy of documentation certifying the religious education of the invitee." If successful, the foreign religious worker may conduct religious activity only within places of worship belonging to or premises continuously rented by the host religious organisation.

In September 2006 a Polish Catholic priest narrowly escaped prosecution after he celebrated Mass without state permission while passing through Minsk (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849). 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). One example of the problems encountered is the case of an Israeli citizen, Rabbi Borukh Lamdan, who is still trying to get his state permission to conduct religious activity renewed (see F18News 17 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=958).

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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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