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BELARUS: KGB raid Moscow Patriarchate fellowship group

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

When six KGB officers raided a prayer meeting of the Transfiguration Fellowship back in March at the home of Sergei Nesterovich in Gomel, this represented the first time to Forum 18's knowledge that adherents of the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate have been targeted for their religious activity in Belarus since the Soviet period. One Fellowship member present during the three-hour raid told Forum 18 News Service that the KGB told them openly the group was raided "because we were conducting unsanctioned religious activity – they said we were a pseudo-Christian sect engaged in the recruitment of members!" Nesterovich was issued with an official warning in April, but has appealed against it. Officials denied knowledge of the raid or the warning to Forum 18. "Yes, it is unusual, but this is Belarus, and our [Religion] Law is unique," the Fellowship member told Forum 18. The 2002 Religion Law lays down tight restrictions on all religious activity and – in defiance of international human rights commitments – bans unregistered religious activity, especially worship in private homes without specific approval. Protestants are the most frequent victims of these restrictions.

In what is to Forum 18's knowledge the first incident of its type in Belarus since the Soviet period, officers of the KGB secret police raided a prayer meeting in March of approximately 15 Moscow Patriarchate parishioners at a private apartment in the south-eastern city of Gomel [Homyel']. One of the group was given an official warning in April. "Yes, it is unusual, but this is Belarus, and our [2002 Religion] Law is unique," another of those present told Forum 18 News Service on 22 May. "But we're not going to run away and hide – that is not what Christ taught." Officials have denied knowledge of the raid or the warning to Forum 18.

The group is part of an informal network of Orthodox brotherhoods, the Moscow-based Transfiguration Fellowship under the spiritual directorship of Fr Georgi Kochetkov, who serves at Moscow's Novodevichy Monastery. Known for his reformist theological views, Fr Georgi was temporarily under a church ban during the late 1990s. His Moscow-based St Philaret Orthodox Christian Institute was licensed by the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of Religious Education and Catechisation in 2004.

According to the Gomel brotherhood member, the group meets for Bible fellowship and to discuss religious literature after Sunday liturgy and also during the week. It was during one such meeting in March at the apartment of member Sergei Nesterovich, he said, that six KGB officers conducted a three-hour search of the premises, downloading data from a computer and confiscating some of Nesterovich's notebooks, as well as questioning and photographing some of those present. The brotherhood member added that the KGB officers introduced themselves as such and explained that they were acting at the request of the local state authorities, "because we were conducting unapproved religious activity – they said we were a pseudo-Christian sect engaged in the recruitment of members!"

In late April a Belarusian Orthodox website, www.churchby.info, reported that Gomel Regional Public Prosecutor Oleg Polovinko issued an official warning to Nesterovich on 12 April. This stated that a check-up by Gomel Regional KGB Directorate had established that he was breaking the law by leading an unregistered religious community and "disseminating religious teachings". Nesterovich could be fined or detained under the Administrative Violations Code if targeted a second time.

The top religious affairs official for Gomel Region, Mikhail Zhukevich told Forum 18 on 5 June that he had no idea who Sergei Nesterovich was or whether there had been any 12 April warning. "If a group is not registered, then another state organ could have issued such a warning," he remarked. "It's written in black and white in the [2002 Religion] Law – all religious communities must be registered." Forum 18 then asked Zhukevich for his view of someone leading a religious community and disseminating religious teachings without registration. "That's illegal," he replied, before again insisting that he knew nothing about the specific case.

Also asked by Forum 18 about the 12 April warning issued to Nesterovich, a spokeswoman at Gomel Regional Public Prosecutor's Office maintained on 1 June that it "did not have that information" and "would probably not be able to help". Reached on 5 June, a spokeswoman at the Office's Department for Public Relations similarly maintained that it was the first time she had heard about the warning. "We have very many cases here," she explained to Forum 18. "I only know about what we put out to the media, and we haven't issued any information like that."

Currently unavailable for comment, Nesterovich has appealed against the warning, according to the Gomel brotherhood member, but has yet to receive a response. He stressed that the group is in full canonical communion with the Belarusian Orthodox Church

(Moscow Patriarchate), and that its members have never encountered similar problems previously. While speculating that the incident could have been either a misunderstanding or meant as a warning, he also saw it as a consequence of the "rather discriminatory" 2002 Religion Law, under which a religious community requires 20 members to qualify for state registration, "which we don't have".

The Belarusian Orthodox Church supported the 2002 Religion Law. Among formal proposals made by the Church as the Law was being discussed were a ban on all but irregular worship meetings in private homes and an increase in the minimum number of people needed to register a religious community from ten to 20. Both these proposals were adopted.

Protestants – whether unregistered or registered but without state permission to conduct worship at a certain location - have been the confession most affected by police raids since the 2002 Law was adopted. In the most recent case, Pastor Antoni Bokun of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church was handed down a three-day prison sentence on 4 June (see F18News 5 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=969). He was released at approximately midday on 6 June.

Until now the only Orthodox communities to receive similar treatment have been those independent of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko publicly stresses the role of Orthodoxy in the country. However, Forum 18 has found little evidence that state support for the Moscow Patriarchate is more than nominal (see F18News 10 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=826). (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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