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BELARUS: Four Catholic priests and three nuns banned

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Three Catholic priests in the western Grodno Diocese, and one priest and three nuns in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese face a ban on religious work in Belarus from 1 January 2009, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk-Mohilov told Forum 18 that "this makes me deeply sad. Who has been punished for this? Our faithful, citizens of Belarus who pay their taxes. As a bishop, I have a duty to take care of my flock." The bans will bring to 29 the number of foreign religious workers banned from working with local religious communities since 2004. It is unclear why the priests and nuns have been banned. However, Catholic clergy have previously been expelled for being active on social issues, and state officials have repeatedly expressed particular hostility to foreign Catholic priests. Marina Tsvilik of the state Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 that "these are not bans. They've just not had their permission to work extended."

Amid continuing state opposition to the ministry of foreign Catholic priests, three parish priests in the western Grodno [Hrodna] Diocese face a ban on religious work in Belarus from 1 January 2009, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. All three are Polish citizens who have served in Belarus for many years. The head of the Catholic Church in the country, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk-Mohilov, told Forum 18 on 23 December that he has just learned that one foreign priest and three nuns in his archdiocese have also been banned from further religious work. "This makes me deeply sad. Who has been punished for this? Our faithful, citizens of Belarus who pay their taxes," he told Forum 18. "As a bishop, I have a duty to take care of my flock."

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Grodno Diocese identified the three priests from its jurisdiction to Forum 18 as: Fr Jan Bronowski, a diocesan priest (formerly of Lomza diocese in Poland) who serves in the village of Galynka in Grodno District; Fr Jan Skonieczny, a Conventual Franciscan who serves in the village of Porozovo in Svisloch District; and Fr Andrzej Krawczyk, a Capuchin who serves in the town of Slonim.

The latest banned priest is Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, a Polish citizen who is assistant priest of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary church in Borisov [Barysaw] in Minsk-Mohilov Diocese. The three banned nuns have been working in parishes in the same diocese.

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz said that, of the 430 or so Catholic priests in Belarus, about 160 are foreign citizens. "We are working to get more local priests and we have about 140 seminarians, but this takes time," he told Forum 18. "We need foreign priests and nuns to be able to offer our faithful a full religious life."

Marina Tsvilik of the government's Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs defended the moves. "These are not bans," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 23 December. "They've just not had their permission to work extended."

Tsvilik insisted that the three priests of Grodno Diocese deserved a ban because they failed to preach in either of the state languages, Belarusian or Russian. "Why does the Diocese not understand this?" she exclaimed. Asked how she knew this, she said her office had received about ten complaints through the post about Fr Krawczyk. She said that the local authorities had told her that Fr Bronowski and Fr Skonieczny did not preach in Belarusian or Russian. "We have the right to check up on religious communities." The KGB secret police closely monitor all religious communities (see F18News 22 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1207).

Asked why it is the state's concern what language sermons are in, Tsvilik said foreign religious workers must abide by the Law on Languages. "We have to respond to complaints from believers," she insisted. Asked why, given that the Constitution establishes the separation of the state and religious communities, she told Forum 18: "If religious leaders won't deal with complaints, then it becomes an issue for the state."

Tsvilik claimed that the problems over the priest and nuns in Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese were resolved at a 22 December meeting at her office with Archbishop Kondrusiewicz. However, the Archbishop disputes this, saying that the issue was not discussed and the four still face a ban. He said he does not know why the priest and nuns of his diocese have been banned.

Tsvilik insisted to Forum 18 that the state does not require religious communities to pray in a state language. "So Russian Orthodox can pray in Old Church Slavonic, Muslims can pray in Arabic and so on," she claimed. "It's just that the sermon has to be in a state language."

However, this was contradicted by Fr Yan Kuchynski, the dean of Grodno's Catholic cathedral. "Officials constantly tell us priests that Masses have to be comprehensible, and so should not be in Polish," he told Forum 18 from Grodno on 23 December. "They don't say this to the Orthodox or the Muslims." He said that in Grodno Diocese, where there is a large ethnic Polish minority, Mass is generally in Polish or Belarusian with a sermon often in Russian.

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz said that in his archdiocese, Mass is mostly in Belarusian with some Masses in Polish, Lithuanian or Italian. "Officials have a desire that Mass should be in a state language, but here at least there's no direct pressure."

Both Archbishop Kondrusiewicz and Fr Kuchynski reported that while in most of Belarus foreign Catholic priests need to get new permission for religious work once per year, in Grodno Diocese permission must be renewed every six months.

The refusal to renew the priests' permission to conduct religious work came as the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs was renewing its attack on foreign Catholic priests working in Belarus. Tsvilik told the Permanent Commission for Human Rights, Ethnic Relations and the Media of the lower chamber of Parliament on 9 December that the "problem" of lack of local Catholic priests remains "unresolved".

In remarks cited by the state news agency Belta, Tsvilik complained that Catholic seminary education was too long and that the Catholic Church "actively invites priests, mainly from Poland". "Indeed, the invited priests often don't know the state languages of Belarus [Belarusian and Russian] and are bearers of a different mentality and culture and do not always understand social and political processes which have taken place in the country."

Tsvilik defended her comments to Forum 18, insisting that all foreign religious workers need permission from the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. "This means that those arriving here will be theologians and not those deploying hypnotic skills."

Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns – also working in Grodno Diocese - 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. A petition and other campaigns by local Catholics failed to get the decisions overturned. At the end of 2005, two Catholic parish priests working in the Minsk-Mohilov Archdiocese did not have their annual visas renewed and were thus forced to return to their native Poland (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899).

Another priest, Fr Grzegorz Chudek, had to leave Belarus at the end of 2007, apparently due to his discussion of Belarus' social problems in the Polish press (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090).

State officials have repeatedly criticised the Catholic Church for its wide use of foreign clergy. In September 2007, Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets indicated that the government believes all foreign religious leaders should leave Belarus within five or seven years. He also criticised the length of Catholic seminary training and said foreign clergy cannot serve in the country "if they do not know either Belarusian or Russian, or the mindset and customs of Belarus" (see F18News 1 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1027).

A January 2008 Council of Ministers decree imposed tighter restrictions on inviting foreign religious workers to the country. The Office of the Plenipotentiary was given sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by foreign citizens is necessary. The decree specified that only registered religious associations have the right to invite foreign religious workers. These consist of ten or more communities, at least one of which must have functioned in Belarus for 20 years. Applicants have to attest the knowledge of Belarusian and Russian for most of those they invite (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090).

The regulations on foreign religious workers closely follow the highly restrictive Religion Law, which contravenes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090). In comments that caused outrage among many Belarusian Catholics and human rights defenders, the Holy See's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, conveyed the thanks of Pope Benedict XVI to the state "for the religious liberty that Belarus enjoys." He also told a 22 June 2008 press conference in Belarus that the Religion Law was "a good law reflecting the necessary protection and respect for the rights of the five main confessions traditional to Belarus" (see F18News 25 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1193).

Protestants and Jews have also been affected by the tight restrictions on freedom of religion and belief. The last religious deportee was Veniamin Brukh, Ukrainian founder of one of Minsk's largest charismatic churches, who was expelled in October 2008. He was the 22nd foreign citizen to be barred from Belarus for religious activity in the four years since 2004 (see F18News 22 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1207).

Meanwhile, the authorities have moved to confiscate personal property from Vladimir Burshtyn, a Council of Churches Baptist who was fined on 5 June after he "organised choir singing and conducted conversations on religious topics" outside a public market in the town of Ushachi (Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] Region). At 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,697 Norwegian Kroner, 211 Euros or 329 US Dollars) – more than two months' average wages - his was the highest fine so far imposed on a Baptist (see F18News 23 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1147).

Local Baptists told Forum 18 that court executor A. Kovgan came to Burshtyn's home in the town of Malorita near Brest on 16 December. "Several times he walked through all the rooms and drew up a record of the confiscation of property: a music centre and a fax machine," local Baptists told Forum 18 on 21 December.

The Baptists told Forum 18 that Burshtyn refused to pay the fine, considering himself innocent of any crime. In support of this, the rights to freedom of religion and belief (Article 18) and freedom of association (Article 20) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are cited by Baptists. They called for prayer for his property not to be confiscated and for the fine to be annulled. They point out that Burshtyn and his wife have eleven children.

In another case, three Council of Churches Baptists who sang on the street in Kobrin, east of Brest, alongside a table offering Christian literature on 6 December were warned within "to clear off" by police. This was because they did not have permission from the local executive authority, Baptists told Forum 18. When they continued to sing, the three were forcibly taken by car to the local police station and forced to write statements.

The police summoned Galina Burdyko, the head of the district executive committee's Ideology Department, who said they should be fined. Officers drew up a list of the 104 books (including Bibles), 81 booklets, 380 leaflets and 21 CDs they had with them before confiscating them. The three were then released and told not to come back to the town.

A week later, 13 December, two of the three returned to Kobrin in a group of 15 Baptists, determined to continue singing and offering Christian literature on the street. As the week before, police took all of them to the police station. Local Baptists complain that once again all the religious literature was confiscated and some of the 15 are believed to be facing administrative penalties. (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

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

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

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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