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BELARUS: Bible school food fine, frozen church bank account

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

A pastor in Belarus has been fined for alleged unsanitary conditions for food served to children at a summer Bible school. Trouble began when local Ideology official Vladimir Zagorsky with two other officials visited the Bible school. Zagorsky maintained that schools have the "duty to control children going to churches during school holidays". He was unable to explain to Forum 18 what law imposed this "duty", or how this matched individuals' right to a private life. Also, for more than two months New Life Pentecostal Church in the capital Minsk has had to exist without a legal bank account. It was frozen after two large fines were imposed in July. "By law, all the contributions we receive have to be placed in our bank account by the following day. We can't do this", the church's lawyer told Forum 18. Paying staff wages and pension contributions is now difficult, and some charities the church supports will not accept gifts in cash, he added. "The church's life and worship continues, but administratively things are difficult."

Belarusian Pastor Nikolai Borichevsky, who leads the Grace of Jesus Pentecostal Church in the small town of Krupki in Minsk Region, has paid a fine of 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,340 Norwegian Kroner, 165 Euros, or 230 US Dollars) imposed on him in August, Forum 18 News Service has learned. The fine was imposed for alleged unsanitary conditions for food served to children at a summer Bible school.

"Our first appeal failed on 30 August, but they only gave us the judgment three weeks later. This meant we could not appeal within the ten day period allowed," he told Forum 18 from Krupki on 5 November. "But it wouldn't have made much difference – the higher court too would have given the same decision. Our courts are corrupt – they defend officials, not the ordinary person."

Trouble began when local Ideology official Vladimir Zagorsky, health inspector Aleksandr Khodorovich and an official from the Commission for the Affairs of Minors visited the Bible school at lunchtime on 11 August. Khodorovich claimed, in documents seen by Forum 18, that the children were being fed "with food prepared in a domestic setting by persons who did not have access to work with food products. The food was prepared from products which did not have appropriate documents (certificates of quality, information on validity), stored in a domestic setting."

Khodorovich recorded a violation against Pastor Borichevsky under Article 16.8 of the Code of Administrative Violations, and the fine was imposed the following day. Pastor Borichevsky lodged an appeal against the fine to Krupki District Court, but on 30 August this was rejected.

Borichevsky insisted to Forum 18 that food was prepared carefully. "Everything was highly clean – we had to give the children something at lunchtime." He blames ideology official Zagorsky for initiating the problems. "Our church statute gives us the right to conduct such events, but he wants to stop them."

Simply insisting on sanitary norms?

Zagorsky, head of Social Affairs and Ideological Work at Krupki District Administration, resolutely denied that he had warned Pastor Borichevsky not to hold the Bible School. "We don't have the right to ban a Bible School," he told Forum 18 on 5 November.

He insisted that officials were simply trying to ensure that the church abided by sanitary norms. "They were not serving just dry food like biscuits, but hot meat and fish – and you have to be careful in the summer heat. We told Pastor Borichevsky that if he provides hot food he should take responsibility."

After initially claiming the church had served "food of dubious quality" ("thank God no one ended up in hospital", he added), Zagorsky then admitted to Forum 18 that hygiene conditions at the church had been good.

Zagorsky insisted that if hot food is provided this constitutes a camp, and organisers must apply in advance to the local District Administration and the Sanitary Service. "They need to provide full details of the menu, its calorific value, details of all activity and who will take part," he told Forum 18. He said all this is needed if children come without their parents.

Schools have "duty to control children going to churches"

Ideology official Zagorsky maintained that schools have the "duty to control children going to churches during school holidays". He was unable to explain to Forum 18 what law imposed this "duty" or to explain how this matched individuals' right to a private life.

The head of Krupki District Education Department Yelena Belkova and her deputy, Liliya Fradkina, both told Forum 18 on 5 November that schools do have responsibility for what children do during school holidays, including knowing whether they attend religious events. "They have a responsibility to ensure that the children spend their time responsibly." Both Belkova and Fradkina refused to discuss the issue further.

"It's good they are doing something for the children"

The head of Nacha Village Council, Nadezhda Vusik, was visiting the hospital on 8 November. However, her assistant, who did not give her name, admitted that "a small conflict" had arisen over the Bible School this year. She told Forum 18 on 8 November that both she and her boss had visited the Bible School "to check their documents – to see if they had permission from the various agencies, permission from the parents and to check about the food". She said the pastor had refused to show them the permission letters from parents.

Pastor Borichevsky said all the parents had made written applications for the children to attend the Bible schools. He complained that photographs of the children participating were given respectively to the directors of the three schools in Krupki and the school in Nacha.

She raised questions about the use of water from an outside well, but Pastor Borichevsky told Forum 18 that local homes – as well as the Village Council building – are not connected to the mains water supply either, and local people drink this water.

The Village Council assistant said that after she and Vusik had visited, ideology official Zagorsky and his assistant had visited from Krupki. "But everything was sorted in the end," she insisted. "It's good they are doing something for the children, but we have to make sure the children are looked after by specialists."

Previous official interest

Three days after the raid on the Krupki Bible school, the head of the village council and someone from the local school visited a Bible school held by an affiliated congregation in the nearby town of Nacha, Pastor Borichevsky told Forum 18. In summer 2009 police, together with a school headteacher, had raided a Bible school in the nearby town of Ukhvala. "Many of the children were frightened and stopped coming." Similar Bible schools have been held in Nacha since summer 2007, and from 2008 there have been annual visits by officials.

After the raid in 2008, according to Pastor Borichevsky, the school headteacher Vladimir Yuzhko threatened at least some children who attended that they could be taken away from their parents and sent to a children's home. He warned some parents that they could be deprived of parental rights if their children continued to attend. "After the threats, the children were too afraid to attend church." Although some similar threats were made in 2009, Pastor Borichevsky said that there have been no threats so far in 2010. School headteacher Yuzhko vigorously denied to Forum 18 that threats have been made to either children or parents.

Borichevsky also complained about photographs of children who attended the camps being given to three local schools. Belkova and Fradkina of Krupki District Education Department both told Forum 18 that they had no information that school headteachers had been given photographs of children attending the Bible schools. They both also denied that the headteacher of the Nacha school could have threatened any parents. "School directors can't threaten parents," Fradkina told Forum 18. "If the pastor didn't complain to us, maybe it didn't happen," Belkova declared. Zagorsky similarly stated he had received no complaints.

Minsk church's bank account frozen

For more than two months, the New Life Pentecostal Church in the capital Minsk has had to exist without a legal bank account, making administration of the church's finances very difficult, church lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 on 5 November. The church's account was frozen in the wake of two massive fines imposed in July. "By law, all the contributions we receive have to be placed in our bank account by the following day. We can't do this." Paying staff wages and pension contributions is now difficult, and they have found only a temporary solution. Some charities the church supports will not accept gifts in cash, he added. "The church's life and worship continues, but administratively things are difficult."

Officials have long sought to oust the New Life church from its building – a former cowshed which the church bought in 2002 and converted for worship – on the edge of Minsk. In the most recent legal case on 29 July the church was found guilty of causing "environmental damage" to the church's car park, and large fines were imposed (see F18News 29 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1471).

The church learnt of the freezing of its bank account on 31 August. The Oktyabr District branch of Belinvestbank told the church's bookkeeper that this was in response to the Minsk City Economic Court decision. The bank told the church that the 935,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,793 Norwegian Kroner, 222 Euros, or 309 US Dollars) that were in the account have been transferred to the court in part payment of the fines. Any further funds arriving in the frozen account would similarly be transferred to the court.

Civil disobedience

The church has a policy of civil disobedience, and after the Sunday service on 8 August voted to refuse to pay the fines. It also voted not to appeal against the fines, particularly as it would have to pay a fee to do so of 17 million Belarusian Roubles (32,590 Norwegian Kroner, 4,040 Euros, or 5,620 US Dollars). The court decision went into force on 14 August.

Lukanin told Forum 18 that officials have not taken any action against the church recently. "Because of the forthcoming presidential elections [on 19 December], the authorities have other concerns at the moment besides dealing with us."

However, he points out that at any time criminal cases could be initiated against the church's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, as leader of the organisation. "He could be prosecuted because the church has failed to vacate the building, because for three years the church has refused to allow any state officials inside, and because the church has been found guilty of what they claim is environmental damage to our site."

As on previous occasions, the church refused to allow in inspectors from the Sanitary-Epidemiological Service, the police, the Extraordinary Situations Ministry and the Tax Inspectorate on 24 August. On 7 September the Extraordinary Situations Ministry again visited the church, but was not allowed in. At a meeting later in the day, Major Vladimir Kazachek, who heads the Ministry department for Minsk's Moscow District, insisted to Pastor Goncharenko that he wished to "begin a dialogue" on how to ensure fire safety in the church. Goncharenko outlined the fire precautions that are in place in the church building.

Lukanin welcomed support from other churches, such as an early November letter to President Aleksandr Lukashenko from 140 Baptists, including five pastors. "This was their initiative," Lukanin told Forum 18. (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=1311.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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