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BELARUS: Homeless shelter officially closed; Baptists fined

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

Officials have stripped the legal status from the House of Mary shelter for homeless people, run by young Catholic layman Aleksei Shchedrov in his village home in western Belarus. The 13 residents he cares for might end up back on the streets. The head of the Village Council, the tax authorities and the local police had all made visits looking for faults, he told Forum 18 News Service. "We're not monsters and we understand everything, but for us people's safety is the priority," Village Council head Tamara Zubritskaya claimed to Forum 18, but refused to discuss why she had pressured Shchedrov to register the shelter as part of the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, four Baptists from Gomel, whose church's Sunday worship was raided by police in December, were fined in January.

The House of Mary shelter for homeless people, run by young Belarusian Catholic layman Aleksei Shchedrov in his home in the village of Aleksandrovka in the western Grodno [Hrodna] Region, was deprived of its legal status on 7 February, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The shelter had only been able to acquire legal status less than six months earlier.

Shchedrov had faced daily pressure from the authorities - including visits from either the local police or the head of the Village Council, he told Forum 18 from the village on 24 February. The object of the visits, he stated, seemed to be to find faults in the shelter. He continues to care for 13 people who would otherwise be likely to have to live on the streets.

However, an official from the local Shchuchin District Executive Committee denied to Interfax West news agency on 19 February that Shchedrov had been pressured. "It was his private decision to annul the organisation and terminate its activities," the official claimed.

Meanwhile, after a December 2013 raid on a Council of Churches Baptist meeting for worship in the south-eastern city of Gomel [Homyel] because it did not have state permission, a local court fined four church members in January, local Baptists told Forum 18. All four had their appeals rejected in February (see below).

Criminal charges, smear campaign

A 29-year-old primary healthcare worker who grew up an orphan, Shchedrov helps homeless people in accordance with his Christian beliefs. "I give them food, a bed, a bath and clothes and I pray together with them. But this is no religious organisation, just charity," he told Forum 18 in June 2013. Pressure on him was also brought by the authorities via the Catholic Church (see F18News 2 July 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1853).

Following repeated police raids, criminal charges were brought against Shchedrov in June 2013 for praying in the shelter in his home. He obtained official registration for his shelter on 27 August 2013 (see F18News 9 September 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1873). On 11 September the criminal charges were dropped, but he was formally told of this only on 24 September (see F18News 15 October 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1886).

After wide publicity in Belarus for the problems the authorities caused for the shelter, local television and radio launched a campaign against Shchedrov in June 2013, alleging that he was an alcoholic and drug addict who had established a "sect". He was given no chance to defend himself.

Catholic priest Fr Yury Gritsko from the neighbouring village of Pervomaisky totally refuted the allegations. "I haven't noticed anything indecent about him, I've never seen him drink or smoke," he told Forum 18 on 26 February.

Inspections

"First, I had a visit in late January from a tax office official who threatened to impose such taxes that I wouldn't be able to pay them," Shchedrov complained to Forum 18. "He then said I should seek registration under the Catholic Church."

Shortly afterwards, village council officials carried out fire and sanitary inspections, looking for alleged violations. The fire

inspection fined Shchedrov 39,000 Roubles (25 Norwegian Kroner, 3 Euros or 4 US Dollars) for improper electric wires outside the house and a chimney without bricks on the exterior of the summer kitchen.

"We changed the wires straight away, but we don't have bricks for the chimney," Shchedrov said. He noted that the fine was a "heavy burden" for the shelter as this is equivalent to the amount it spends on bread for two weeks.

Shchuchin District Emergency Situations Department, which initiated the inspection, refused to speak to Forum 18 on 28 February.

The "sanitary inspection" criticised the short distance between the shelter's well and a poultry shed. "They didn't give me any written recommendations, but stated that the shelter should be closed," Shchedrov lamented to Forum 18.

Local police and the village council claimed that the inspection findings were serious enough to rescind the shelter's state registration, thus depriving it of official status.

A state sanitary inspector's view

A qualified Belarusian state sanitary inspector, asked by Forum 18 to comment on the inspections, noted that decisions about wells are usually taken after water analysis – which did not happen in this case. "The requirement concerning a well's location is 50 metres [55 yards] from household buildings," the inspector told Forum 18. "But if a well is located closer than this, and the water analysis is OK, I don't see any problems in using the well."

The inspector added that the reason the village council inspection gave for closing the shelter was not sufficient. "If the well water is found after analysis not to be drinkable, we would just recommend that bottled water be used instead," the inspector explained.

The shelter in the eyes of visitors

Belarusian opposition Christian Democrat activist Pavel Severinets, who recently visited Shchedrov, told Forum 18 from Minsk on 22 February that the shelter is an ordinary village house, "except that it's very clean there". Severinets also noted that the houses are equipped with bathrooms and indoor toilets, which is rare in the countryside.

The shelter has three houses, one of which is used as a canteen. Shchedrov equipped a prayer room with statues, icons and religious books, which he reads to the shelter residents. He also has a vegetable garden and keeps goats, hens and pigs.

Grodno Catholic priest Fr Aleksandr Shemet and Fr Gritsko both on 4 March praised to Forum 18 the order and cleanliness inside the shelter.

"I've been visiting the shelter for six months," Fr Gritsko told Forum 18. "Each time I'm overwhelmed with joy that I can see not only my parishioners but also those who are really in need and who receive love." He added that an Orthodox priest and a Protestant pastor also attend to the residents.

Since its start on 1 December 2011, the shelter has given refuge to more than 97 homeless people, Shchedrov told Forum 18. Guests are given washing facilities and medical treatment, and Shchedrov reads the Bible to them.

Shchedrov noted that people who come to the shelter are grateful. "We have an ex-colonel who has had his legs amputated, and he always says thank you and tries to kiss my hands," he told Forum 18.

"We're not monsters"

"We're not monsters and we understand everything, but for us people's safety is the priority," the head of the Village Council Tamara Zubritskaya insisted to Forum 18 on 4 March. She absolutely refused to give a direct answer why registration had been given to Shchedrov's shelter and then revoked. "I'm not discussing it on the phone as I don't know who you are," she told Forum 18.

Asked why she and other authorities will not help to improve the shelter's conditions and support Shchedrov to make his work legal, and why she recommended him to seek registration via the Church, Zubritskaya said she was late for a meeting and could talk no longer.

Christian Democrat Severinets worries that the House of Mary shelter is now vulnerable without registration. "Without state registration Shchedrov can be charged again under the same Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code – organisation of or participation in the activities of an unregistered organisation," he warned.

Asked if the criminal case against Shchedrov might be re-opened, the deputy head of the local police public order department Vladimir Vazovsky refused to discuss the situation with Forum 18 on 24 February.

Why does state want church control?

Village Council head Zubritskaya – like the tax inspector and the local police – pressured Shchedrov to seek registration under Catholic Church auspices. "When you are within the Church structure we'll leave you alone," Shchedrov quoted her as saying.

It is unclear why this is relevant to the alleged "insanitary conditions".

It is also unclear why state officials suggested that an individual cannot run a homelessness shelter on their own initiative, but can carry out the same activity if they are under the control of a church.

Both Zubritskaya and Grodno Assistant Bishop, Iosif Stanievsky, separately acknowledged to Forum 18 on 4 March that the shelter and its charitable activities are a good initiative and homeless people should be helped. They both insisted that registration either with the state or with the church requires the shelter to provide the residents with a certain level of living conditions in compliance with the law.

Fr Gritsko, who is assigned by Grodno's Bishop Aleksandr Kashkevich to visit the shelter, explained that if the shelter had registration under the Church, the authorities' attitude would be different. "At the moment Aleksei is on his own and there's nobody to defend him," he remarked.

The Vice Chancellor of Grodno Diocese, Fr Antony Gremza, confirmed to Forum 18 that the Diocese has no possibility to register the shelter and expressed its concern about taking financial responsibility for it.

Assistant Bishop Stanievsky similarly told Forum 18 that the Church is helping the shelter "in a private way", but is not currently ready to take the responsibility to register it. He said that legal procedures needed to be followed and that the Church cannot register with the state an organisation that does not have legal status and is run by an individual.

Shchedrov optimistic

Meanwhile Shchedrov and Fr Gritsko point out that in the nearby village of Novy Dvor is a former monastery, one of whose buildings could be used. "The monastery grounds contain a well-preserved building with a good roof and functioning water supply, which would suit the shelter nicely," Fr Gritsko told Forum 18. He added that the Bishop should issue a resolution to make it happen.

However, the Assistant Bishop doubts that this building would be appropriate. "The building's condition is not as good as they [Shchedrov and Fr Gritsko] think," Stanievsky maintained to Forum 18.

Grodno priest Fr Shemet concluded to Forum 18 that for the authorities the shelter is a source of unwanted trouble. For the Church it represents responsibility and a financial burden because it would need to invest in providing proper living conditions.

Fr Gremza rejected suggestions that the Bishop is under pressure from the authorities, explaining to Forum 18 that the shelter has nothing to do with the Church.

Yet Shchedrov remains optimistic about the future of his shelter. "A lot of people in Belarus know and support me," he told Forum 18. "I wrote to the Pope, to the Nuncio in Belarus. All we need is registration with the Church to solve all our problems."

He added happily that the religious literature confiscated during previous raids had been returned.

Fines follow raids

Four members of the Gomel Council of Churches Baptist congregation were fined at the city's Soviet District Court in January, local Baptists told Forum 18. All four had their appeals rejected in February. The fines followed the police raid during the congregation's meeting for Sunday worship on 22 December 2013 (see F18News 13 January 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1914).

Council of Churches Baptists reject state registration on principle, pointing out that they have the right to meet for worship without such restrictions. Belarus insists – in violation of its international human rights commitments – that all unregistered religious activity is illegal.

On 28 January Judge Sergey Shevstruk found the pastor, Aleksandr Zolotaryev, guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 23.34, Part 2. The Judge fined him 25 base units, 3,250,000 Roubles (2,000 Norwegian Kroner, 240 Euros or 330 US Dollars).

In the verdict the Judge stated that Pastor Zolotaryev had "organised religious worship of a Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists without Gomel Executive Committee's permission and violated the established procedure of organising mass

events provided by the Law on mass events".

The same day church members Oleg Danilevsky and Dmitry Sidorenko were found guilty of participation in unauthorised worship under Administrative Code Article 23.34, Part 1. Each was fined 10 base units, 1,300,000 Roubles (800 Norwegian Kroner, 100 Euros or 130 US Dollars).

At a separate hearing on 30 January, Judge Viktor Kupratsevich convicted the owner of the house where the church meets, church deacon Andrei Tupalsky. He was found guilty under Administrative Code Article 21.16, Part 1 – improper use of residential property – and also fined 10 base units, 1,300,000 Roubles.

The authorities refused to discuss the verdicts and punishment with Forum 18. On 20 February the secretaries of both Soviet District Court judges separately refused to transfer the calls to Judges Shevstruk and Kupratsevich, saying that they do not give comments by phone.

Appeals fail

All four Baptists appealed against their punishments to Gomel Regional Court. In his appeal, Tupalsky rejected accusations of improper use of private accommodation, insisting that "according to the Constitution I have the right to profess my religion, which is vital both for me and my fellow believers".

He insisted that any place where religious meetings take place can be called a prayer house, regardless of the number of believers, and the Law cannot restrict his right "to place as many benches and clothes hangers for my fellow believers as I want".

Council of Churches Baptists insist that the only condition to be considered when exercising the religious rights is respecting the rights of other citizens and compliance of religious practice and rituals with the law.

The chancellery for administrative cases at Gomel Regional Court told Forum 18 on 6 March that all four appeals were rejected, Tupalsky's on 19 February and those of the other three on 26 February.

Third 2013 raid

The December 2013 raid was the third on Council of Churches Baptists in Gomel in 2013. Following separate raids on worship services at both of their congregations in the city in February and April 2013, three local leaders were fined. Pastor Nikolai Varushin was fined about one month's average local wages, and two other church members were fined much smaller amounts (see F18News 14 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1847).

In May 2013, after the April raid, Tupalsky was summoned to the City Executive Committee, where he was warned that next time he would face criminal prosecution (see F18News 14 June 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1847).

No other religious communities reported to Forum 18 any raids or severe pressure from the authorities. (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=1796.

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.

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