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KAZAKHSTAN: Protestant teacher's crime: "not hiding my religious beliefs"

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

The KNB secret police has accused a ballet teacher, Vladislav Polskikh, of "a corruption of [children's] objective interpretation of events and adoption of certain life values", and is investigating him under an under an article of the criminal code which can lead to imprisonment of up to two years. Polskikh told Forum 18 News Service that "my only 'crime' is that of not hiding my religious beliefs" from children or parents. Even though this it is not required by Kazakh law, he told parents in writing that he was a Protestant and gained their specific written consent to "the use of any expressions or images connected with his faith during lessons." The KNB is hostile to Polskikh's church, and only began investigating him after he sued a newspaper which accused him of being a paedophile.

A ballet teacher from the city of Pavlodar, in north-eastern Kazakhstan, has protested at the criminal charges he now faces, after openly telling parents of his pupils that he is a Protestant. He did this in an attempt to protect himself from charges of proselytism. "My only 'crime' is that of not hiding my religious beliefs from the children," Vladislav Polskikh told Forum 18 from Pavlodar on 13 October. "It is true that I began lessons with the words 'With God's help' and said good-bye to the children by saying 'God be with you'. When I found out that some of the parents were unhappy with my professions of belief, I asked them to sign a form by way of insurance, but I achieved precisely the opposite result."

The KNB secret police in Pavlodar region launched the case against Polskikh on 19 August under criminal code Article 141 (breaking the law on equality of rights), which carries a penalty of either a fine or imprisonment of up to two years. Ninel Fokina, head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, told Forum 18 on 11 October that the form which Polskikh asked his pupils' parents to fill in was the ostensible reason for bringing the case: "I entrust my child (name and surname) to the teacher V E Polskikh. I am aware of the teacher's religious beliefs and I do not object to the use of any expressions or images connected with his faith during lessons."

The case against Polskikh is now being led by the internal affairs administration for Pavlodar region. Forum 18 has been unable to reach Lazat Jozenbayeva, the investigator on the case at the regional public prosecutor's office, to find out why the case has been brought. Her telephone went unanswered on 13, 14 and 15 October.

The KNB's statement launching the case makes no attempt to hide the secret police's hostility to the activity of Polskikh's church, the Grace Christian missionary centre. "In the course of an investigation," it states, "it was established that V E Polskikh, as General Secretary of the Dance Federation of Kazakhstan and head of the Prestige public association, took advantage of his own responsible position in the organisation, and his influence and authority among children and adolescents at the sports club who had not yet reached 18 years of age... and enticed them into the activities of the Grace Evangelical Christian missionary centre both during lessons and through personal contact, without forewarning the adolescents' parents of possible negative subsequent changes in the behaviour of their children connected with a corruption of their objective interpretation of events and adoption of certain life values (falling out with close relatives and negative attitudes to criticism of the religious association)."

The secret police claimed that, in response to parents' attempts to stop his "unlawful activity", Polskikh "issued an ultimatum and ordered the parents of pupils to sign a statement addressed to himself that he had prepared in advance, stating that they were aware of the teacher's beliefs and had no objection to the use of religious images and expressions in the course of lessons". The secret police say that Polskikh threatened to stop teaching any children whose parents refused to sign the statement. The KNB claimed that the club's management regarded the signed statements as documentary proof that the parents agreed that their children "could be drawn into a non-traditional religious movement".

Unlike other Central Asian states, the written permission of parents is not required for the religious instruction of underage children. However, Article 3 of Kazakhstan's religion law declares: "The direct or indirect restriction of rights or the establishment of any advantages for citizens that depend on their attitude to religion... will be accountable under the existing legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan" (in fact under Article 141 of the criminal code).

Polskikh insisted to Forum 18 that he had not refused to teach children who did not share his religious beliefs, and had not forced

them to carry out any religious rituals. He believes he is being persecuted simply for his religious beliefs, pointing out that the case came after a long-running campaign against him in the media. On 21 April the privately-owned Pavlodar newspaper Gorodskaya nedelya published an article calling him a "paedophile who physically seduces children". Polskikh pointed out that it was immediately after he sued the newspaper, that a criminal case was brought against him.

"Moreover, when the criminal case had already been initiated, the state television channel Kabar screened a programme, accusing me of teaching children destructive religious doctrines," he reported. "It's hard for me to say precisely who launched the campaign against me, whether it was the authorities, the journalists at the newspaper Gorodskaya nedelya, or some of my pupils' parents, but I am clearly being persecuted for my faith."

For more background, see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>

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