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BELARUS: Baptism banned, a fine and a threat for leading worship

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Officials have tried to stop three different Protestant communities in Grodno Region, north-western Belarus, from conducting peaceful religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In the small town of Svisloch, a planned open-air baptism has been banned, despite the attempts of Pentecostals to negotiate with the authorities. Bishop Fyodor Tsvor told Forum 18 that "they just don't want to allow it." In the nearby town of Mosty, a Pentecostal pastor was fined nine months' minimum wages for leading a small unregistered church. The court verdict notes as evidence of wrongdoing that "at meetings they read the Gospel, discuss questions of religious faith, sing songs and conduct religious rites." In Grodno itself, Baptist pastor Yuri Kravchuk was summoned by the senior state regional religious affairs official, Igor Popov, who told him that his leadership of a worship service in a private home violated the Administrative Code. His case has now been sent to the city's Oktyabr District Court. All three communities point out that the state's actions violate the Belarusian Constitution.

Officials in Grodno [Hrodna] Region of north-western Belarus have moved against three different Protestant communities to try to prevent them from conducting religious activity which each community insists is guaranteed in the country's Constitution. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that the local authority in the small town of Svisloch has banned an open-air baptism planned for the afternoon of Sunday 3 August. In the nearby town of Mosty a Pentecostal pastor was fined nine months' minimum wages on 9 June for leading a small unregistered church. In the city of Grodno a Baptist pastor faces a second fine for holding worship services without state registration.

Each of the three communities point to Article 31 of Belarus' Constitution, which declares: "Everyone shall have the right independently to determine one's attitude towards religion, to profess any religion individually or jointly with others, or to profess none at all, to express and spread beliefs connected with one's attitude towards religion, and to participate in the performance of acts of worship and religious rituals and rites, which are not prohibited by the law."

The head of the Department of Religions and Nationalities for Grodno Region, Igor Popov, insisted all these state actions were in line with the law. "In Svisloch the church received an official response. In the other two cases the decisions are with the courts," he told Forum 18 from Grodno on 25 July. "In any civilised democracy such decisions are taken by the authorities and courts."

Told that each of these three communities insists that their right to conduct peaceful religious activity is guaranteed by the country's Constitution, Popov responded: "So what is your concrete question?" He then refused to answer any more questions by phone, insisting they be put in writing, and put the phone down.

Belarus maintains tight restrictions on all religious activity. In defiance of international human rights standards, it is the only country in Europe requiring religious organisations to gain state registration before they engage in religious activity. Article 25 of the Religion Law, as well the Law on Mass Events, require that permission for religious events in places not designated for religious worship be obtained in advance from local executive committees. Only registered religious organisations are eligible to ask for such permission. Organisers of and participants in such religious events without official permission risk punishment.

State officials have rejected a mass petition calling for changes to the Religion Law and for freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant human rights defenders in the petition campaign have been harassed, arrested, and fired from employment (see F18News 29 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1121). The campaign affirmed that the rights to life, free speech and freedom of belief are inalienable, stating that "because we have them from birth, they are given to us by God and not the government. Since the government does not give us these rights, they have no right to take them away" (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957).

Many Protestant churches across Belarus hold open-air baptisms in rivers and lakes during the summer for which they are required to gain permission from local executive committees. However, when Pastor Viktor Kharchenko of Grace Pentecostal church in Svisloch applied to the town Executive Committee officials rejected the application. In their 9 June response – of which Forum 18 has seen a copy – the authority said it "could not give permission" at the site requested.

It maintained that as the "overwhelming majority of residents of the town belong to the two confessions historically found on Slavic territory – Orthodoxy and Catholicism – the rite of baptism conducted by members of your religious organisation could arouse mixed reactions among the population". The letter insisted that the site chosen was a popular recreation spot for local people "and cannot be used for various rites and rituals".

Fyodor Tsvor, the Pentecostal Union bishop for Grodno Region, rejected this decision as "unjust". "They just don't want to allow it," he told Forum 18 on 24 July. He said that in the wake of the 9 June rejection of the request the church has been involved in discussions with town officials in a bid to find a solution so that they can hold the baptism on 3 August as planned. "There are three suitable places in Svisloch, but they won't give permission to use any," he complained. "People are waiting for baptism, so we'll have to go ahead somewhere anyway."

Bishop Tsvor contrasted the problems there with the situation elsewhere. "We've had permission this year for an open-air baptism in Lida, and last year I conducted a similar outdoor baptism in another town."

However, Tatyana Shmyga, an official of the Ideology Department of Svisloch Executive Committee who prepared the rejection letter, defended the refusal. "We answered according to the law," she insisted to Forum 18 from the town on 24 July. "But this is not a ban. It's just a question of the location – this is not the place and they must choose somewhere else." She said it was impossible to allow a popular beach to be used for two hours on a Sunday afternoon as it would disturb local people. "In good weather 200 people come there – they have the right to relax," she declared.

Shmyga refused to tell Forum 18 which location or date and time the church could apply for with the likelihood that it would be accepted. Improbably, she also denied that any other religious community in the town ever held any religious events – including street processions, even by the Orthodox Church at Easter – on public property. Orthodox and Catholic Christians often arrange processions at major festivals.

Although her official job includes oversight over religious affairs, Shmyga refused to clarify to Forum 18 what this entails. Asked what the role of the Ideology Department is she put the phone down.

In nearby Mosty, Pastor Valentin Borovik was found guilty by the town court on 9 June of violating Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Administrative Code, which punishes leading an unregistered religious organisation. According to court documents seen by Forum 18, Judge Vitali Sinilo fined him 315,000 Belarusian roubles (768 Norwegian Kroner, 95 Euros or 149 US Dollars).

The verdict notes that a check-up on the congregation on Sunday 16 March found that a religious service without registration was underway in a private home in the town. "At meetings they read the Gospel, discuss questions of religious faith, sing songs and conduct religious rites," it reported as evidence of wrongdoing. The check-up was conducted to observe whether the Religion Law was being adhered to, the verdict reported.

Pastor Borovik's Pentecostal congregation has some 13 members, and so is ineligible to apply for state registration as it does not have the necessary twenty adult citizen members the Religion Law demands. However, the verdict notes Pastor Borovik's insistence that Article 31 of Belarus' Constitution allows free religious worship.

Pastor Borovik appealed against the fine to Grodno Regional Court, but on 26 June Judge Vladimir Evkhuta upheld the fine, the court record seen by Forum 18 reveals.

Pastor Borovik maintained that the local authorities "don't like what I preach". "All this came from the local Executive Committee," he told Forum 18 on 24 July. "They summoned me and warned me, then twice they came with the local police, intimidating elderly members of the congregation and confiscating religious literature." He reported that the confiscated literature has now been returned.

He insists that all the congregation wants to be able to do is to meet peacefully for worship. He said the congregation has existed for more than a decade, but that pressure began to mount over the past year. "I was given an official warning for meeting without registration last year, then the police raids and the fine."

Pastor Borovik had initially been fined 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (341 Norwegian Kroner, 42 Euros or 66 US Dollars) by the town court on 28 April on the same charges. However, he had succeeded in overturning the decision on appeal to the Grodno Regional Court on 22 May. The court decided the case should be reviewed. However, the eventual fine was more than twice the original fine.

"We've paid the fine – we couldn't do anything else," Pastor Borovik told Forum 18. "We collected money from congregation members, who each paid what they felt moved and able to give." But he warned that if he is brought to trial for a second similar "offence" he will risk a fine of up to 1,000,000 Belarusian Roubles (2,438 Norwegian Kroner, 302 Euros or 474 US Dollars).

In Grodno, the regional centre, Baptist pastor Yuri Kravchuk was summoned on 2 July to the Executive Committee by the senior

state regional religious affairs official, Igor Popov, local Baptists told Forum 18. There he was shown a copy of an official notification that his leadership of the church's Sunday worship service in a private home on 1 June had violated Article 9.9 Part 5 of the Administrative Code, which punishes repeat religious offences within a year with a fine of between 14 and 20 times the minimum monthly wage. The notification pointed out that this was the second time within a year that he had been brought to justice for this. It added that his case had been sent to the city's Oktyabr District Court.

On 1 June, the local police officer and state religious affairs officials arrived as the Sunday morning service was beginning, church members report. They say the officials took several photographs without the home owner's permission and drew up a record of an administrative offence before leaving.

On 21 December 2007 Pastor Kravchuk was fined 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (357 Norwegian Kroner, 45 Euros or 64 US Dollars), two months after the local police officer interrupted the church's Harvest Festival service and established that the church was not registered (see F18News 11 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1070).

Church members told Forum 18 from Grodno on 24 July that two hearings in Kravchuk's case took place earlier in July but that a third is still expected. "No verdict has yet been reached." Church members called for the latest case to be dropped and for the church to be allowed to "hold services and praise God in a private house without obstruction".

Kravchuk's congregation belongs to the Council of Churches, a union of Baptist congregations that refuses on principle to seek state registration in any of the former Soviet republics. Other leaders in Belarus have also been fined in recent years for leading unregistered worship. Vladimir Burshtyn, a Baptist who "organised choir singing and conducted conversations on religious topics" outside a public market in the town of Ushachi (Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] Region) was fined on 5 June. 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).

Orthodox (see eg. F18News 12 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1127) and Catholic (see eg. F18News 14 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1114) Christians, as well as the Jewish community (see eg. F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090) also face ongoing denials of their right to religious freedom. Belarus' political prisoners are also denied religious freedom (see F18News 20 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1103). (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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