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BELARUS: Orthodox complain of KGB intimidation at village funeral

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Fr Ioann Grudnitsky – who has already been fined for conducting services without state registration – faced further intimidation when he conducted the funeral of a parishioner in the village of Ruzhany, he told Forum 18 News Service. Village Council leader Leonid Moskalevich showed him an order from the KGB secret police banning him from leading the funeral as his parish – he is under the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Provisional Supreme Church Authority – is not registered. However, he went ahead while Moskalevich and a police officer observed. "After working our whole lives in factories and on collective farms, sacrificing our health and receiving a tiny pension, we've reached a point where we have to ask permission from the local KGB secret police to organise a funeral!" the parishioners complained in an open letter to the President. "The local KGB has no right whatsoever to interfere in the life of the church." Moskalevich denied to Forum 18 that the document had come from the KGB or that it was a ban. Meanwhile, Grodno-based Baptist pastor Yuri Kravchuk is the latest pastor to be fined for leading unregistered worship.

The KGB secret police in Pruzhany District, close to the border with Poland, has tried to stop an Orthodox priest from leading a funeral in the local village of Ruzhany, the priest, Fr Ioann Grudnitsky, told Forum 18 News Service on 16 September. "They're starting to meddle in believers' affairs again." Yet Leonid Moskalevich, who heads Ruzhany Village Council (Brest Region), denied to Forum 18 that this was the case on 17 September: "It wasn't like that at all."

In Belarus, religious activity not approved by the state is subject to prosecution under Soviet-era provisions of the Administrative Violations Code. Yuri Kravchuk, a Baptist pastor in the north-western regional centre of Grodno, is the latest to be fined.

After displaying a document from Pruzhany District KGB prohibiting Fr Ioann from conducting the funeral of Ruzhany parishioner Nina Levizarovich on 23 July, Moskalevich and a local police officer remained for the service's duration at the village cemetery, Fr Ioann told Forum 18. While the state representatives did not stop the funeral from going ahead, said the priest, they refused to give him a copy of the KGB instruction.

Fr Ioann Grudnitsky belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Provisional Supreme Church Authority, a body of Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) members who refused to support the May 2007 reunification of their church with the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate).

The authorities in Belarus do not permit any Orthodox body to function outside the Moscow Patriarchate (see F18News 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177). The ROCA Provisional Supreme Church Authority's website states that its seven parishes in Belarus do not hold services. Orthodox believers who belong to the Moscow Patriarchate have also experienced harassment by the authorities (see F18News 12 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1127).

Ruzhany parishioners are "indignant" that Moskalevich, the village council chairman, threatened Fr Ioann with the KGB secret police instruction forbidding him to conduct the funeral. Before her death, Levizarovich had specifically requested that Fr Ioann lead her funeral, they point out in an open letter to President Aleksandr Lukashenko published on the Russian religious affairs website Portal-Credo on 10 September.

"After working our whole lives in factories and on collective farms, sacrificing our health and receiving a tiny pension, we've reached a point where we have to ask permission from the local KGB secret police to organise a funeral!" the parishioners exclaim in disbelief. "The local KGB has no right whatsoever to interfere in the life of the church – first and foremost they should shed tears of repentance on behalf of their Chekist predecessors who swam in human blood."

The Belarusian KGB – which has not changed its name since Soviet times - has made no attempt to distance itself from its Soviet past. It proudly traces its history back to the first Soviet secret police, the Cheka, which was founded by Felix Dzerzhinsky.

In the 1920s "Chekists stood shoulder to shoulder with the entire Belarusian people in resolving the most difficult and pressing economic and social tasks before them," the KGB's official website maintains, before claiming that the organisation was actually a

victim of Stalin's purges in the 1930s: "23,000 Chekists were repressed - the very best professionals, moreover, Dzerzhinsky's comrades, outstanding people with rich and sensitive souls, selflessly serving the Motherland and fighting for a bright future for their country."

Moskalevich, the chairman of Ruzhany Village Council, insisted to Forum 18 on 17 September that the document he had shown Fr Ioann Grudnitsky was not from the KGB secret police, but simply confirmation of the fact that Fr Ioann was conducting the funeral. Stressing that he and a local police officer had not taken any measures against Fr Ioann, Moskalevich then explained that they had drawn up the document at the request of the village council. Asked if this was because Fr Ioann's Ruzhany parish of SS Sophia and her Three Daughters, Faith, Hope and Charity is unregistered, Moskalevich responded that the funeral had taken place at the request of Nina Levizarovich's daughter and did not therefore qualify as an illegal religious gathering in his view.

Under Belarus' restrictive 2002 Religion Law, which was strongly backed by the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), state registration is compulsory for all religious communities and unregistered religious activity is illegal – against international human rights standards.

Due to this law, Fr Ioann Grudnitsky was fined a total of 4,080,000 Belarusian Roubles (12,106 Norwegian Kroner, 1,555 Euros or 1,825 US Dollars) for celebrating the Orthodox liturgy without state permission on three occasions in 2005 in private homes in Ruzhany village. A parishioner, 65-year-old Liliya Yukhnovskaya, was also fined 72,000 Belarusian Roubles (214 Norwegian Kroner, 27 Euros or 32 US Dollars) for making her home available for a fourth service (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

Fr Ioann told Forum 18 that he has not been fined since 2005 – but no longer conducts home worship in Ruzhany. In their recent open letter, the Ruzhany parishioners point out that they did not receive any response to a state registration application submitted in that year. "According to the Constitution, every person in the Republic of Belarus is free in belief, religion and its practice," they complain. "Why are we deprived of this right?"

Brest region's top religious affairs official, Vasili Marchenko, wrote to Liliya Zasimovich of Fr Ioann's parish in 2005 urging the 120-strong community to attend the village Moscow Patriarchate church of SS Peter and Paul instead. There, "normal conditions have been created for the performance of religious rites by all who wish," he maintained (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

In a leaked January 2005 report, the same official bemoaned the fact that for two years, "state representatives have found neither the time nor the opportunity to influence these believers [Fr Ioann's Ruzhany parishioners] or to assist the local priest in returning them to the fold of the [Moscow Patriarchate] church" (see F18News 18 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=691).

Marchenko's colleague Aleksandr Tsyrelchuk has maintained to Forum 18 that ROCA parish registration applicants were practising deception. In 2006 – when they were still united with ROCA members seeking rapprochement with the Moscow Patriarchate - Fr Ioann's parishioners in Brest city reported being pressured by local state officials and Moscow Patriarchate priests to withdraw their names from registration applications (see F18News 26 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=862).

In the latest punishment for unapproved religious activity, Baptist pastor Yuri Kravchuk was fined 525,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,463 Norwegian Kroner, 175 Euros or 250 US Dollars) by Grodno's October District Court on 25 July 2008 for leading home worship without state approval, the Baptist Council of Churches reported on 5 August.

On 1 June a local police officer and religious affairs officials arrived as Kravchuk was beginning the Sunday morning service, took several photographs without the home owner's permission and drew up a record of an administrative offence, church members said (see 25 July 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1163).

The Baptist Council of Churches, to which Kravchuk's community is affiliated, is a union of congregations that refuses on principle to seek state registration in any of the former Soviet republics.

Other Council of Churches 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 2008. 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). (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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