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BELARUS: Christian music festival banned

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Belarus has banned a Christian music festival, initiated by Catholics, minutes before it was due to begin, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The organisers had obtained written state permission for the festival. But, ten minutes before the first concert was to begin, local Ideology Department head Lyudmila Gornak arrived at the festival and announced that it was banned. Gornak refused to explain to Forum 18 why the event was banned, claiming – falsely – that she had told the organisers of unspecified "mistakes." Asked repeatedly by Forum 18 for examples of the "mistakes," she would not name any. During a recent visit to Belarus, Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone gave the government the thanks of Pope Benedict XVI "for the religious liberty that Belarus enjoys," and praised the 2002 Religion Law as "a good law." However, Belarusian Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant human rights defenders have collected a 50,000 signature petition against the Law. Taking note of the human rights defenders' concerns, the European Parliament passed a resolution observing that the 2002 Law "contravenes international principles of religious freedom and human rights, including those laid out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)."

A Belarusian ideology official in Borisov [Barysaw] (Minsk Region) halted a Christian music festival minutes before it was about to begin on 16 September, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

Overtly Christian bands such as Salvation – who were due to headline the first evening of the Borisov event – have not previously been targeted by the authorities. Some are even among Belarus' most popular performers (see F18News 20 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=842).

The six-day free festival – a local Catholic initiative in conjunction with Orthodox and Protestants – "was to be our joint witness to Borisov, to show we're not just on our own, but believe in one God," one of the organisers, Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, told Forum 18 on 24 September. A Polish citizen, Fr Zbigniew is priest at Borisov's Nativity of the Virgin Mary Roman Catholic parish.

More than 30 Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant bands from across Belarus whose music mostly touches on Christian themes had agreed to play for free at the festival, Fr Zbigniew told Forum 18. Three concerts a day were planned for children, adults and young people, 20,000 invitations had been sent out and 5,000 balloons ordered for the children, he said.

The organisers obtained written state permission for the festival – in accordance with the 2003 Demonstrations Law – a week beforehand, Fr Zbigniew stressed to Forum 18. According to Article 6 of that Law, the authorities must notify the organisers in writing no later than five days in advance should they not permit an event, giving reasons for their decision.

Just ten minutes before the first concert was to begin, however, the head of Borisov Municipal Executive Committee's Ideology Department, Lyudmila Gornak, arrived at the marquee venue, announced the event was banned and then left, Fr Zbigniew told Forum 18. Following prayer by church leaders, Psalmyary [Psalms] - the band due to open the festival - played one song called "There is a God in Belarus". The organisers then distributed copies of St John's Gospel to the approximately 500 people in the audience before winding up the event, said the Catholic priest.

Subsequently, state representatives claimed that the original permission was no longer valid, that they had made a mistake in granting it, and that not everything was in order with the event's preparations, but did not specify further, said Fr Zbigniew. "When you organise something like this you also need approval from the police, fire service, health and safety officers," the priest explained to Forum 18. "But we had all of that."

The Christian festival was not banned but temporarily stopped, Lyudmila Gornak, the local ideology official, insisted to Forum 18 on 25 September. This was because the organisers' application for permission to hold the event did not correspond with legal requirements, she explained. Asked in what way, Gornak said that it contained "mistakes". Asked repeatedly for examples, she maintained that she had told the organisers what they were, that they had agreed with her and did not have any further complaint.

The Christian festival was to be the first event of its kind in Borisov, and the churches will try to hold it again, Fr Zbigniew vowed. The organisers are currently considering filing suit for compensation.

Fr Zbigniew Grygorcewicz replaced Fr Robert Krzywicki, another Polish priest, after he was expelled from Belarus without explanation at the end of 2005. Fr Robert had headed Borisov's Descent of the Holy Spirit Roman Catholic parish for more than a decade. Shortly after leaving, Fr Robert told Forum 18 that he attributed his expulsion to his work with young people in the town – both Catholics and non-Catholics – and his involvement with other Christian Churches in ecumenical and humanitarian events (see F18News 13 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=715).

Just over half of Belarus' 381 Catholic priests are foreigners, most of whom are Polish. Under a 30 January 2008 decree controlling foreign clergy, they may conduct religious activity only within houses of worship belonging to or premises continuously rented by their community. The transfer of foreign religious personnel from one religious organisation to another - such as between parishes - requires permission from the relevant state official dealing with religious affairs, even for a single worship service (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090).

During a recent official visit to Belarus, Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone passed Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako the thanks of Pope Benedict XVI "for the religious liberty that Belarus enjoys," according to the official website of the Catholic Church in Belarus. The cardinal also told a 22 June press conference that he believes the 2002 Religion Law to be "a good law reflecting the necessary protection and respect for the rights of the five main confessions traditional to Belarus."

In what they believe to be "the largest non-political civil campaign in Belarusian history," Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants collected a 50,000 signature petition against the 2002 Law in 2007-08. They affirmed that "we are defending the rights of all Christians (Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants), all citizens of Belarus. The Law violates the rights of all people, even atheists" (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957).

Taking note of Belarusian human rights defenders' concerns, a 22 May 2008 European Parliament resolution "deeply regrets the 2002 Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations, which contravenes international principles of religious freedom and human rights, including those laid out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)." It recognises that as a result of the Law, "the activities of many religious communities have been restricted and their leaders are being subjected to constant harassment, prosecution, fines, and imprisonment." The Parliament's resolution also calls on the Belarusian government to revise the 2002 Law and "to restore procedures guaranteeing respect for freedom of religion." (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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