

22 October 2008

BELARUS: Why was Protestant bishop deported?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The Ukrainian founder of one of the largest charismatic churches in the Belarusian capital Minsk was deported on 16 October due to his religious activity, he has suggested to Forum 18 News Service. If so, Veniamin Brukh – a bishop in the Full Gospel Church – will be the 22nd foreigner barred from Belarus for religious activity since 2004. Previous cases have involved both Protestants and Catholics. Under the restrictive Religion Law, foreigners require special state permission – on top of a valid entry visa – to perform a leading role in a religious community. Only registered religious umbrella associations have the right to invite foreigners to conduct religious activity. Even if the state's highest religious affairs official decides that religious work by a foreigner is necessary, stringent controls still apply to that person's activities. Asked for the reasons for Bishop Brukh's deportation, a KGB secret police spokesman told Forum 18 that "The person who is supposed to know knows. I'm not supposed to know." The KGB closely monitors religious communities' activity.

The Ukrainian founder of one of Minsk's largest charismatic churches has told Forum 18 News Service he suspects his 16 October deportation from Belarus was due to his continued active participation in the local Protestant community. The KGB secret police and state religious affairs apparatus were monitoring that activity, Veniamin Brukh suggested to Forum 18 from Riga, Latvia, on 17 October. "They probably consider me a danger to the state."

If so, Brukh – a bishop in the Full Gospel Church – will be the 22nd foreign citizen to be barred from Belarus for religious activity in the four years since 2004. Previous cases have involved Protestants and Catholics (see most recently F18News 17 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=958).

International human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief do not differentiate between the rights of citizens and non-citizens legally present in a country. In Belarus, however, foreign citizens require special state permission – on top of a valid entry visa – to perform a leading role in a religious community. Under the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, only religious associations – made up of at least ten registered religious communities, including at least one active on the territory of Belarus for at least 20 years – have the right to invite foreign citizens to conduct religious activity.

Should Belarus' top religious affairs official, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, deem religious work by a foreign citizen necessary, stringent controls apply. The Plenipotentiary can refuse religious associations' applications without explanation. Foreign citizens may conduct religious work only within places of worship belonging to or premises continuously rented by an association's affiliate organisations. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one religious organisation to another – such as between parishes - requires additional state permission, even for a single worship service. Under the latest decree regulating religious work by foreign citizens, they must also attest knowledge of Belarus' state languages, Belarusian and Russian (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090).

No reasons for deportation were given to Bishop Brukh, when he flew into Minsk Airport from the United States on the evening of 15 October. A deportation document issued by the Belarusian Border Police, seen by Forum 18, stipulates only that the reason is "other" than the absence of a valid travel document. A stamp placed in Brukh's passport states simply "Entry Denied", he told Forum 18. "It doesn't even say to what country!"

Border guards maintained that they did not know the grounds for the deportation, continued Brukh, since their computers stated only that he was barred, but not for how long or what reason. After several hours under guard in a cramped, filthy room in the airport, Brukh was deported in the early hours of 16 October, he told Forum 18. At his own request, he flew to Vienna and on to Riga.

Border guards suggested to Brukh that the authorities in Minsk District (Minsk Region) - where he was registered - would know the reason for his removal. At Minsk District Migration and Citizenship Department on 18 October, however, officials insisted to Sergei Shavtsov, Brukh's lawyer, that they were not responsible and knew nothing about the deportation, he told Forum 18 the same day.

Bishop Brukh lived in Minsk Region between 2005 and late 2007, working with a company he part-founded importing items such as children's playground facilities and wheelchairs. While the state authorities took issue with the business, Brukh and Shavtsov insisted to Forum 18 that he has not violated the law in this area.

Instead, Brukh believes his continued active involvement in the 500-strong Jesus Christ Church, which he founded in 1991, was noted by KGB secret police surveillance. Also a participant in the late 2006 high-profile hunger strike in defence of New Life Church's Minsk worship building (see F18News 20 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858), Brukh gave media interviews on that campaign, including to US media, he told Forum 18. "The KGB probably saw that."

Minsk Regional KGB's Information and Public Relations Department directed Forum 18 to the KGB headquarters in central Minsk on 20 October. Answering its Confidential Line, a spokesman told Forum 18 that the reasons for Brukh's deportation would not yet have been released, but provided contact details for the headquarters' Information and Public Relations Department. On querying whether this would have information if it had not yet been released, the spokesman remarked only: "The person who is supposed to know knows. I'm not supposed to know." At the headquarters' Information and Public Relations Department, a spokesman apologised that while he understood Forum 18 was not in Belarus, he was not prepared to discuss anything with journalists not accredited with the Belarusian Foreign Ministry.

Bishop Brukh believes that the late 2006 introduction of the joint Belarus-Russian Federation migration card made it easier to track his movements, and that he was also noted by the religious affairs authorities. He recalled that at the time of the hunger strike in defence of New Life Church's building - a former cow barn - a local pastor was asked by Alla Ryabitseva, Minsk city's top religious affairs official, "what Brukh was doing in the barn." Ryabitseva has been hostile towards New Life Church (see F18News 7 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1084).

Ryabitseva told Forum 18 on 20 October that she knew nothing about Brukh's deportation. It bore no relation to her as he was not in the city of Minsk, she insisted. "I haven't met with Brukh since he left for the USA."

In a 28 March 2000 letter viewed by Forum 18, Vladimir Lameko of the then State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs rejected the Full Gospel Church's request to invite then Pastor Brukh to perform religious work, explaining that Jesus Christ Church "already has highly qualified religious personnel, so there is no need to invite a foreign citizen to engage in religious activity in that community." On challenging this decision in court, Brukh won the right to stay a further six months in Belarus, he told Forum 18, but moved to the USA in 2001 to pursue theological study.

Religious communities believe the KGB secret police keeps a close eye on their activity. In late 2004, for example, KGB officers arrived at a Baptist church in Ratomka (Minsk Region) during a service at which two US citizens were filling in for the local pastor, fining them for having invitations to Belarus from an unrelated organisation. The source for this information suggested to Forum 18 that an informer must have been planted in the congregation for this to happen, since the local pastor had announced in advance when the two Americans would preach, and the KGB officers immediately picked out both them and the piano player for questioning - who that day was a Belarusian but is usually an American (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560).

Similarly, after Polish citizen Fr Antoni Koczko led a single Mass without state permission in Minsk's SS Simon and Helen Catholic Church (known as the Red Church) in September 2006, a man and woman in plain clothes present in the congregation approached him in the sacristy and informed him that he had violated Belarusian law covering religious activity. Responding to a weblog entry of the incident, a Minsk Catholic commented that the pair "are always sitting in our church. You can't fail to spot them - I even bumped into one of them at a demonstration once" (see F18News 3 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849).

Orthodox believers have also complained of KGB intimidation at worship services (see F18News 18 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1187). (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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