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BELARUS: Praying in homeless shelter a crime

By Olga Glace, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

A young Catholic layman, who turned his home in a western Belarus village into a shelter for homeless people with a prayer room, is being accused of leading an unregistered religious organisation, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Aleksei Shchedrov – who says he has helped about 100 local people since December 2011 – is being investigated on criminal charges under Article 193-1, and faces a maximum possible sentence of two years' imprisonment. The criminal investigation against 28-year-old Shchedrov followed police raids on the shelter in February and April. "I am a Christian and I started to help those who are in need," he insisted to Forum 18 from the village of Aleksandrovka, Grodno Region. "I give them food, a bed, a bath and clothes and I pray together with them. But this is no religious organisation, just charity." A priest used to visit the shelter, but stopped after the authorities pressured the Bishop of Grodno into ordering the visits to stop. Police refused to discuss the case with Forum 18.

A young Catholic layman who turned his home in a western Belarus village into a shelter for homeless people, with its own prayer room, is being accused of leading an unregistered religious organisation, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Aleksei Shchedrov – who says he has helped about 100 local people since December 2011 – is being investigated on criminal charges which carry a maximum possible sentence of two years' imprisonment.

Shchedrov denies the authorities' accusation of founding an unregistered religious organisation. "I am a Christian and I started to help those who are in need," he insisted to Forum 18 on 24 June from the village of Aleksandrovka, Grodno [Hrodna] Region. "I give them food, a bed, a bath and clothes and I pray together with them. But this is no religious organisation, just charity."

Local police launched the criminal investigation against the 28-year-old Shchedrov following raids on the shelter in February and April. He is being investigated under Criminal Code Article 193-1. This punishes "organisation of or participation in activity by an unregistered political party, foundation, civil or religious organisation" with a fine, or imprisonment for up to two years.

Asked what he was going to do now the criminal investigation has been launched, Shchedrov told Forum 18 that in the past he would have campaigned against such action against him. But nowadays, he said, his faith teaches him to "trust God who teaches me to forgive and love enemies and those who persecute us".

The authorities have been hostile to publicly visible faith-based actions for social justice, and this appears to have been a key factor in decisions on which Catholic priests and nuns to expel (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1796).

Homeless shelter "a headache which we don't need"

Shchedrov set up the shelter in his private home in Aleksandrovka on 1 December 2011. Since then, he estimates that he has provided 97 people with accommodation, food and spiritual support, praying together with them in a special prayer room. Shchedrov pointed out that the prayer room was available to everyone, including local villagers, regardless of their belief.

"There was even a Roman Catholic priest who used to come regularly with the permission and blessing of the Bishop" [of Grodno, Aleksander Kaszkiewicz], Shchedrov told Forum 18. "The priest helped with religious literature, clothes and food." He noted that after talking with the priest, many of the residents applied for a job and left the shelter.

"The authorities knew about my charitable activities and didn't care much, until the number of shelter residents increased to 27 people last winter," Shchedrov complained to Forum 18.

Police came to the shelter during times of prayer in February and in April, photographing and filming everyone present. Shchedrov recalled that Major Sergei Osovik, Head of the local police Criminal Investigation Department, told him to move to another region of the country and open the shelter there. Major Osovik stated that this was "because it's a headache which we don't need".

Criminal investigation launched

The order instituting a criminal investigation, dated 11 June and seen by Forum 18, was prepared by Major Osovik and approved by the head of Shchuchin District Police Aleksandr Shastailo. It claims that since July 2012, Shchedrov "has organised at his place of residence an unregistered religious organisation and secured the condition for its functioning without registration in accordance with the procedure established in law". It says he gathers "a stable group of fellow believers from among local residents and those with no permanent home".

The order notes that "in his private home, Shchedrov specially equipped one room for carrying out religious rituals and fulfilling other religious needs, where icons, religious literature, display material and times of worship services were placed". The order makes no mention of any other activity the authorities did not like at Shchedrov's home.

Shchedrov is not under any travel restrictions while the criminal investigation proceeds, he told Forum 18.

Reached by Forum 18 on 27 June, police Lieutenant-Colonel Shastailo refused to answer any questions on the phone. "We have no materials on the case here at the police, so I can't tell you anything," he claimed.

Church pressured to stop priest's visits?

Roman Catholic priest Fr Aleksandr (who did not want to give his surname) used to visit the shelter regularly. He praised Shchedrov's work, and regretted that the authorities chose to ignore homeless people, alcoholics and drug addicts. Fr Aleksandr confirmed that there was no religious community in Aleksandrovka, but that people came together just for prayer. "So according to the law it's a crime to pray together and one should do it alone hiding under the blanket or under the bed," the priest remarked ironically.

Fr Aleksandr no longer visits the shelter. He insisted that the Catholic Church did not voluntarily turn away from Shchedrov, but bowed to pressure from the authorities not to get involved. "I don't go to the shelter any longer following the Bishop's order," he told Forum 18 on 26 June.

The Vice Chancellor of Grodno Diocese, Fr Antony Gremza, stressed that opening the shelter was a private initiative. "You should understand the difference between official blessing and just words," he told Forum 18 on 28 June. Fr Antony confirmed that a priest had visited the shelter regularly but emphasised that it was just visiting sick and dying people, which is the duty of every priest.

Fr Antony added that since Christmas 2012, the priest has not had the bishop's permission to go there. When Forum 18 pointed out that there are still sick people there who need support, Fr Antony changed the subject. Asked if the Bishop's order was connected with the police raids, Fr Antony said this was possible.

Confiscated literature not returned

During the February raid, police confiscated three Bibles and about six other religious books from the shelter, Shchedrov complained. Igor Popov, head of the Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs at Grodno Regional Executive Committee, then sent the books to Minsk for "expert analysis" by the "Expert Council" attached to the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. The books underwent four such "analyses".

"The Expert Council didn't find anything illegal, but the religious literature - the Bible, prayer and mass books - were not returned," Shchedrov complained.

Forum 18 tried to reach Popov or his assistants at the Department of Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Grodno, but the phones went unanswered between 27 June and 2 July.

The "Expert Council" attached to the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs is the body charged with enforcing the state's censorship of religious literature published in or imported into Belarus. When Jehovah's Witnesses tried to challenge its ban on the import of a May 2012 issue of their magazine "The Watchtower", the Plenipotentiary's Office insisted such bans cannot be challenged (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1796).

Criminal Code Article 193-1 condemned

Article 193-1, under which Shchedrov is being investigated, has been subjected to severe criticism by Belarusian and international human rights defenders as it breaks both the Belarusian Constitution and international human rights standards. Local human rights defenders, such as the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Right to Belief, and the Assembly of Non-governmental Democratic Organisations, have campaigned for the Article to be abolished (see F18News 27 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1672).

The Council of Europe's European Commission for Democracy through Law (known as the Venice Commission) has also

condemned Article 193-1. In an 18 October 2011 Opinion, it stated that: "The right to freedom of association is intertwined with the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion and expression. It is impossible to defend individual rights if citizens are unable to organize around common needs and interests and speak up for them publicly."

The Venice Commission went on to note that "merely by its existence, Article 193-1 has a chilling effect on the activities of NGOs, its members and its leaders. It is intimidating for social mobilisation and civic activism.". The Venice Commission also condemned "penalizing actions connected with the organization or management of an association on the sole ground that the association concerned has not passed the state registration.." (see F18News 27 February 2012 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1672).

Human rights defender Aleksei Shein of the Right to Belief, and the Assembly of Non-governmental Democratic Organisations told Forum 18 on 30 June that the application of Article 193-1 is still quite alarming. He noted that, since the 2012 campaign for it to be abolished, nothing has changed.

Earlier threats

Earlier threats to use Criminal Code Article 193-1 against people manifesting their freedom of religion or belief include:

in February 2011 by police detaining members of a Council of Churches Baptist congregation, who met for worship without state permission in Kostyukovichy, Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region (see F18News 30 March 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1556);

in April 2011 by Gomel [Homyel] Railway District Prosecutor's Office threatening a Council of Churches Baptist, Nikolai Varushin, with prosecution if he continued to lead meetings for worship without state permission (see F18News 19 May 2011 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1572);

in November 2011 by a Prosecutor's Office in issuing an official written warning to a leader of a religious community (who did not wish to be identified for fear of state reprisals);

and in May and June 2012 by Mozyr District Public Prosecutor's Office, Gomel Region, warning various Pentecostal members of the Suzko family for meetings for worship without state permission. The Suzkos did not get the warnings rescinded, but their church went on to obtain registration in November 2012 (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1796). (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=1796.

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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