FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

20 February 2015

BELARUS: Slander and obstruction to keep foreigners out

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

Catholics responded vigorously to accusations by the senior state religious affairs official that foreign Catholic priests working in Belarus often break the law, Forum 18 News Service notes. "They don't like our country, our laws and authorities. In such cases we don't prolong their stay in our country," Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako had declared in presenting his annual report for 2014. He accused unspecified priests of conducting services outside the regions where they had been given state permission to serve, not understanding either of the state languages (Russian and Belarusian) and drunken driving. Both Gulyako and his deputy refused to explain his accusations to Forum 18, which Catholics described as "slander". It was only with difficulty that Polish priest Fr Roman Schulz' permission to remain in his Mogilev parish was extended for a further six months until 20 June 2015, Catholics told Forum 18. A Protestant seminary failed to get permission for foreign religious lecturers. And a court warned two Jehovah's Witnesses that as foreigners they had no right to speak to people about their faith.

Accusations by the senior state religious affairs official that foreign Catholic priests working in Belarus are guilty of drunken driving and other offences have evoked protest from Catholic leaders and a petition from local Catholics. They object that the claims were unfounded and slanderous, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Catholic bishops reproached the authorities that despite the obvious lack of clergy, they refuse permission to some foreign priests invited to come to serve in Belarus. The leader of Minsk's Baptist seminary told Forum 18 that invitations for foreign lecturers to join the staff often fail. And two foreign Jehovah's Witnesses were officially warned by a court that they have no right to talk to people on the streets about their faith because they are not Belarusian citizens.

The authorities have long expressed an intention to reduce the number of foreigners conducting religious activity in Belarus. Although the Russian Orthodox Church has a number of foreign clergy in Belarus, including its leader Metropolitan Pavel (a Russian citizen), the Catholic Church is the religious community most dependent on foreign religious personnel. However, Forum 18 notes that Catholic leaders have always been highly reluctant to discuss visa denials or denials of the compulsory state permission any foreigner needs to conduct religious activity in Belarus.

The Pro-rector of Minsk's Baptist Theological Seminary, Yakov Timofeyev, pointed out that sometimes foreign professors they have invited, especially from the United States, are denied visas to Belarus. "We try not to make a problem out of it and look for other professors," he told Forum 18 on 26 January. He said they can invite foreigners for short seminars.

In the 2000s, more than 30 foreigners – Catholics, Protestants and Jews – are known to have been barred from conducting religious activity in Belarus (see F18News 15 July 2009 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1326).

Extended with difficulty

Illustrating the Catholic Church's difficulty inviting or maintaining foreign priests and nuns is the case of Fr Roman Schulz. A Polish priest of the Dominican Order, he had served in St. Kazimir and Yadviga church in Mogilev [Mahilyow] for seven years before the state authorities refused him permission to continue to conduct religious work in April 2014. After protests by parishioners, Fr Schulz' permission was extended, initially for ten days to cover Easter, and then until 20 December 2014 (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

It was only with difficulty that Fr Schulz' permission was extended for a further six months until 20 June 2015, Catholics told Forum 18.

Also in 2014, a Polish priest from the Franciscan Order was not allowed to come to Ivanets, Minsk Region.

The spokesman of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, Fr Yuri Sanko, denied to Forum 18 on 26 January that any Polish priests have recently been denied visas. He confirmed that the number of foreign clergy is decreasing, as they come for a limited period and have to leave Belarus as soon as their visas and permission to conduct religious activities expire.

Slander?

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2015

Tension between the State and the Catholic Church increased after the government's Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Leonid Gulyako, published his annual report for 2014 on 22 January 2015. In his report, he accused Catholic priests from Poland of legal violations, including political engagement, and accused the Church of a lack of desire to train national priests.

"Some priests from Poland are trying to go into politics," Gulyako alleged in remarks reported by the state news agency Belta the same day. "They don't like our country, our laws and authorities. In such cases we don't prolong their stay in our country. We are not against inviting foreign clergy. .. But we always stress that they should pursue the issues for which they were invited and signed agreements with religious associations."

Accusing foreign priests of legal violations, Gulyako alleged that some remained outside Belarus for more than 340 days a year, conducted services outside the regions where they had been given state permission to serve, did not understand either of the state languages (Russian and Belarusian) and drunken driving.

Gulyako also accused Jehovah's Witnesses of numerous "violations", using them as justification for rejecting registration applications (see F18News 4 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2035).

Forum 18 tried to reach Gulyako on 24 January for specific examples of the law-breaking he alleged. However, his secretary - after briefly consulting him - said that he did not talk to the media by phone. The secretary directed Forum 18 to his Deputy, Vladimir Lameko. However, he too refused to discuss Gulyako's report. "Gulyako made the report - ask him. If not, it's your turn to make comments," he told Forum 18. He ignored other questions and put the phone down.

Fr Sanko of the Catholic Bishops' Conference absolutely refused to comment on Gulyako's statement. "Please ask my superior to comment on this," he told Forum 18. Forum 18 was unable to reach Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk.

President Aleksandr Lukashenko also expressed his displeasure about the work of some Polish Catholic priests during a press conference on 29 January. He said he was "not particularly satisfied with the service of some Polish [priests] in our lands" and that he had told Pope Benedict in April 2009 that sometimes they "do things they should not do", Belta reported the same day. Lukashenko accused some of committing unspecified "administrative violations".

"Without their help, many Catholics would be without pastoral care"

On 30 January the Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned the accusations against foreign Catholic priests as groundless. "We, together with Catholic laypeople, with deep concern, consider these allegations as an unjustified insult to the Catholic Church and incitement of ethnic and religious hatred," according to the Church's website Catholic.by. The Catholic bishops requested Gulyako to provide facts supporting his public allegations and asked that he discuss further similar problems directly with them.

"Our Church still needs the help of priests from abroad," the bishops stressed. They added that foreign priests are working to revive the Belarusian Church and build and restore shrines "which they won't take with them". "Without their help, many Catholics would be without pastoral care."

Prior to the official reaction of the Catholic bishops, Catholics outraged by Gulyako's allegations launched a petition, accusing the Plenipotentiary of slandering Polish Catholic priests without facts to back up his allegations. The petition accuses Gulyako of "stirring up relations between the Catholic Church and the State and escalating religious tension," Belarusian religious news website Krynica.info noted on 26 January.

The Apostolic Nuncio in Belarus Claudio Gugerotti raised concerns with the Foreign Ministry. On 23 January he met Deputy Foreign Minister Yelena Kupchina, but the Foreign Ministry website gave no specifics on the themes discussed.

However, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei invited Archbishop Gugerotti back to the Foreign Ministry on 30 January. The Archbishop expressed "certain concerns regarding possible interpretations of recent statements about the Catholic Church in Belarus", according to the Foreign Ministry website. Makei assured the Archbishop of "the very constructive and well balanced role of the Catholic Church in raising patriotism and supporting culture in Belarus".

The two also discussed the Catholic Academy due to be built in Minsk which, at that point, had twice been denied state registration (see below).

Foreign priests "under complete control"

Poland's Ambassador in Belarus, Leszek Szerepka, defended the Polish Catholic priests. He explained that those who had been slandered are Polish citizens and that the authorities' accusation that some are engaged in politics is very serious. He noted that many Catholics in Belarus are ethnic Poles and that Polish priests should be ready to help care for them. He complained that the authorities never expressed their gratitude to priests from Poland for helping the local Catholic Church.

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2015 - Page 2/4

"I often hear from Polish priests that it is more difficult to work in Belarus than in Africa," Ambassador Szerepka told the Charter 97 news website on 16 February. "Here these people are under the authorities' complete control. If a priest arrives to build a church, they give him permission for three or six months. What can he build in this time? The attitude to these people, who come with good intentions, is completely inexplicable."

Inviting foreigners

According to statistics given by Gulyako in recent months, the number of foreign Catholic priests is constantly declining. On 24 September 2014, he spoke of 126 Polish priests out of a total of 430 Catholic priests. On 22 January 2015 he mentioned 113 foreign priests, mostly from Poland.

Foreign religious personnel of any faith are under tight state restrictions while working in Belarus. The transfer of a foreign religious worker from one religious organisation to another - such as between parishes of the same denomination - requires permission from a state official dealing with religious affairs, even to conduct a single worship service.

Under a January 2008 Council of Ministers Decree, amended in July 2010, Belarus' top religious affairs official has sole discretion in deciding whether religious work by a foreign citizen is "necessary". He may refuse a foreign religious worker's visit without giving any reason. Foreign citizens must also demonstrate knowledge of Belarus' state languages (Belarusian and Russian) in order to perform religious work.

Under the Regulation governing the procedure for inviting foreigners to carry out religious activities in Belarus, approved by the Council of Ministers in January 2008 (and amended in July 2010), the Plenipotentiary defines the period of permission, has the right to shorten it and is not obliged to communicate the reasons for a refusal (see F18News 12 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1969).

Do foreigners have right to freedom of religion?

Foreign Jehovah Witnesses have been punished for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief while legally in Belarus. On 7 August 2014, Olga Shulepova from Crimea and Yulia Prokhopova from the Ukrainian city of Kherson were detained in the town of Drogichi, Brest Region, as they spoke to passers-by on the streets about their faith. The literature they distributed was confiscated.

The following day the town court found them guilty of violating Article 23.34, Part 1 of the Administrative Code, which punishes those who conduct illegal demonstrations or other mass public events. The court handed them both an official warning. On 9 October 2014 Judge Natalya Surma of Brest Regional Court rejected their appeal against the decision.

The Regional Court decision, seen by Forum 18, noted that Shulepova and Prokhopova did not plead guilty, insisting that they merely shared their belief. However, Judge Surma concluded: "Reference in the appeal to the Law on Freedom of religious belief and religious organizations and their religious activities are not well grounded, as Shulepova and Prokhopova are not citizens of Belarus."

Academy registered on third attempt

Despite Gulyako's strong criticism of the Catholic Church for what he claimed was its lack of interest in training Belarusian priests, the Plenipotentiary's Office made it difficult for the Church to gain the necessary state registration for a new Catholic Academy to be established in Minsk.

According to the 2002 Religion Law, religious educational institutions are not accredited by the state, but require registration from the Plenipotentiary's Office. Belarus has two Catholic seminaries, in Grodno and Pinsk, as well as two theological colleges, in Minsk and Baranovichi.

The Catholic bishops announced in September 2014 that the John Paul II Theological Academy would be established in Minsk, the first Catholic higher educational institution in Belarus. However, the Plenipotentiary's Office twice denied registration, for the second time in December 2014.

"How can I have a building, ask for the land for construction or buy it, were money available, while not being a legal entity?" Archbishop Kondrusiewicz was quoted by the tut.by news agency on 23 December 2014 as declaring.

Catholic Bishops' Conference spokesman Fr Sanko told Forum 18 that the Academy does not yet exist and could be opened only after registration at the Plenipotentiary's Office. He explained that a legal entity registration requires a legal address assigned to a certain building which the Bishops' Conference does not have. He maintained to Forum 18 that the refusal was justified as "everything should be done according to the law" and it is hard to find suitable premises. "It's not an office and the requirements are stricter," he complained to Forum 18.

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2015

Plenipotentiary Gulyako brushed off all criticism of the rejections. "The state is for the opening, but when the documents are submitted and it is declared that they are going to open the academy on 50 square metres as part of the curia building, excuse me. It's not even funny," he declared on 22 January. "To say nothing that according to the statute the students should also be accommodated in this building."

However, on 13 February, Plenipotentiary Gulyako finally signed the Academy's registration certificate, a copy of which was published on the Church's website.

One fine upheld, another case dropped

Meanwhile, local people continue to face court proceedings for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, most recently a Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna devotees, who faced administrative cases (see F18News 4 February 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2035).

Jehovah Witness Andrei Kuzin, accused of holding unauthorised public activity by hosting a religious meeting at his home in Borisov on 20 November 2014, has failed to overturn a fine of 25 base units or 3,750,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,850 Norwegian Kroner, 200 Euros or 250 US Dollars) handed down the following month. Judge Liliya Gurinovich of Minsk Regional Court rejected his appeal on 13 February. "It seemed that it was all already decided before the hearing," he complained to Forum 18 the same day. "The Judge didn't listen to me and everything was over very quickly."

Kuzin is ready to take his case even to the Supreme Court. "Last time [in 2009] we won a lawsuit there and hopefully this time it will be the same, but you never know," he told Forum 18.

Meanwhile, charges against a Hare Krishna devotee who was detained together with another devotee in Polotsk on 28 December 2014 were dropped at a court hearing on 11 January 2015. The court classified his actions as a misdemeanor. The devotee could not get to the hearing as he is based in Minsk, but was informed about the ruling by phone, the leader of Minsk's Hare Krishna community Sergei Malakhovsky told Forum 18 on 17 February. (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=1997.

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.

Follow us on Twitter @Forum_18 (http://twitter.com/forum_18)

Follow us on Facebook @Forum18NewsService (http://www.facebook.com/Forum18NewsService)

All Forum 18 text may be referred to, quoted from, or republished in full, if Forum 18 is credited as the source.

All photographs that are not Forum 18's copyright are attributed to the copyright owner. If you reuse any photographs from Forum 18's website, you must seek permission for any reuse from the copyright owner or abide by the copyright terms the copyright owner has chosen.

© Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved. ISSN 1504-2855.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY