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BELARUS: Baptists to lose property after Easter hospital visit

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Two Baptists are set to have personal property confiscated - in one case a car - while a third is having his pay docked after the three visited a hospital at Easter to sing hymns and hand out New Testaments, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Local regional religious affairs official Vladimir Klevtsov told Forum 18 that the Baptists had broken the law because - amongst other violations - they did not get the hospital authorities' permission to hold "a mass event with music and give out literature". Their other offences included the fact that two of the Baptists are from Brest, which is outside the region where the hospital is located, and that they do not belong to a registered church. Asked by Forum 18 what the legal position is for individual Belarusian believers wishing to visit or give religious literature to hospital patients, Klevtsov said that he knew of no such precedent, as "we normally get requests only from registered religious organisations."

Local courts have ruled to confiscate personal property from two Baptists and to dock the pay of another after the three sang hymns and distributed New Testaments during an Easter visit to a hospital in the south-eastern town of Mozyr (Mazyr). While commenting to Forum 18 News Service that the measures taken against the Baptists "could indeed have been softer," Gomel (Homyel') regional religious affairs official Vladimir Klevtsov maintained on 1 September that the three had violated Belarusian law.

According to a 24 July report received by Forum 18 from the International Union of Baptist Churches, a district court in the south-eastern Belarusian region of Gomel issued a 16 July order to traffic police to confiscate a 1988 Volkswagen car from Vasili Bilas, a Baptist resident in Mozyr. On 6 July, continued the report, Lenin District Court in the south-western city of Brest instructed the accountant at the workplace of fellow Baptist Leonid Martynovich to dock his pay by one fifth every month, while court bailiffs threatened to remove valuables from the home of another Brest Baptist, Nikolai Krynts.

These measures follow the trio's refusal each to pay fines of 20 times the minimum wage, or 380,000 Belarusian roubles (approximately 1200 Norwegian kroner, 153 Euros or 175 US dollars). The fines were handed down on 17 April by Mozyr City Court in accordance with Article 167, Part 1 of the Belarusian Administrative Violations Code, which punishes infringements of legislation on the staging of "religious, sports, mass cultural or other spectator events," as well as "gatherings, mass meetings, street processions, demonstrations and pickets," with either a warning, a fine ranging from 20 to 150 times the minimum wage, or detention for between three and 15 days. On 21 May Gomel Regional Court rejected an appeal against the lower court's decision.

"The brothers cannot agree that Easter greetings could be classified as a mass meeting," the Union contended in its latest statement. "It was just a meeting with the sick - entirely peaceful - which did not disturb public order." The Union's 18 April report similarly described how the Baptists conveyed Easter greetings to patients and visitors at the Mozyr hospital on 17 April: "People listened to singing, poetry and the Word of God warmly and attentively. All who wished were given New Testaments and brochures." Although the Baptists informed the hospital administration in advance about their visit, according to the earlier statement, a staff member called the police, who initially found nothing amiss but then surrounded and threatened the group after the arrival of a senior officer: "Those who had been listening began to protest and defend the believers, but the representatives of the authorities roughly pushed them away." The group were then reportedly detained for questioning at a local police station, following which the three who were subsequently fined were brought before Mozyr City Court.

In their latest statement, the Baptists argue that their hospital visit was lawful according to Article 25 of the 2002 Belarusian religion law, under which "religious rites, rituals and ceremonies" may take place in a hospital or similar institution "on premises specially designated by its administration for such purposes" at the request of the citizens there, who may also receive religious literature and other items "if this does not harm their health or violate the rights and legal interests of others." According to the same article, religious rites and other mass events are subject to prior receipt of permission from the local state authorities if they are not held on specially designated premises.

Speaking on 1 September, Gomel regional religious affairs official Vladimir Klevtsov explained to Forum 18 that the Baptists had violated the law in three ways. "They can visit people in hospitals, but it has to be at their request, which it wasn't. Also, they had to agree it with the hospital administration, which they did, but the agreement they had was to chat with the people there, not to hold a mass event with music and give out literature - for that there has to be prior permission from the local authorities. And thirdly, a Mozyr church would be entitled to hold such an event if it were in accordance with its charter, but there were people there from

Brest – which is beyond the boundaries of Gomel region." (Under Article 14 of the 2002 religion law, a religious organisation is formed by at least 20 members living in the same local area or adjoining local areas, and may function only on this territory.)

Klevtsov further outlined to Forum 18 that distribution of religious literature may take place only in houses of worship or on officially designated premises (Article 26 of the 2002 law), while both this and the right to conduct religious ceremonies in hospitals and similar institutions are the preserve of religious organisations – which are subject to compulsory state registration. Article 26 states that religious organisations "have the right to distribute literature." On the latter point, Article 25 cited above is contained in a chapter of the 2002 law similarly detailing the rights of religious organisations. The International Union of Baptist Churches, however, adheres to a rigid principle of separation of church and state according to which none of its congregations throughout the former Soviet Union are registered.

When Forum 18 queried, therefore, where individual Belarusian believers wishing to visit or give religious literature to hospital patients stood in relation to the law, Klevtsov maintained that he knew of no such precedent: "We normally get requests only from registered religious organisations."

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom

survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

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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