

6 June 2005

BELARUS: Orthodox priest under "pressure" or "just an explanation"?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Russian Orthodox Church Abroad priest Fr Leonid Plyats has had four lengthy "discussions" with officials, in the space of just over a week, and threats to punish him with jail or a massive fine if he holds any services outside his home. But local police chief Valentin Nikolaenok has denied to Forum 18 News Service that this is "pressure". Aleksandr Kozmin of the district Ideology Department told Forum 18 that "The warning was just an explanation of the law." Kozmin did not believe Forum 18 that other European states did not have Ideology Departments. But he insisted that Fr Plyats has no right to conduct any religious activity except private gatherings in his own home. Bishop Agafangel (Pashkovsky) told Forum 18 that "I can't believe that in our time, in the centre of Europe, believers are being banned from gathering together to worship God. This is discrimination against our Church. They don't get involved in politics or opposition activity – it is a purely religious organisation."

Valentin Nikolaenok, the local police chief who is threatening a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad with up to two weeks' imprisonment or a massive fine if he conducts "illegal religious activity", has refused to tell Forum 18 News Service why he is threatening Fr Leonid Plyats. "This is not the subject for a telephone discussion," he told Forum 18 from the town of Smolevichi near the capital Minsk on 6 June, before putting the phone down. Aleksandr Kozmin of the Smolevichi district Ideology Department denied to Forum 18 that Fr Plyats has been threatened. "There is no persecution of him – or pressure," he told Forum 18 on 6 June. "Plyats is innocent. No court has found him guilty. The warning was just an explanation of the law." But Kozmin insisted that as a representative of an unregistered faith, Fr Plyats has no right to conduct any religious activity except private gatherings in his own home.

"Like everywhere in Europe we have a department which promotes state ideology," Kozmin told Forum 18, when asked to explain the role of the Ideology Department. "State ideology includes patriotism, faithfulness to the constitution, and obedience to the country's laws. Our department works with political, social and religious organisations to promote this." Kozmin did not believe Forum 18's assurances that other European states did not have ideology departments at the local and national levels.

The influence of militant atheism on officials is strong (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186), and close supervision by officials of religious communities is an integral part of central state policy (see F18News 9 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=248).

Defending the rights of Fr Plyats and his parishioners is his bishop, Agafangel (Pashkovsky), who is based in the Ukrainian city of Odessa. "I can't believe that in our time, in the centre of Europe, believers are being banned from gathering together to worship God," he told Forum 18 from Odessa on 6 June. "This is discrimination against our Church there. They don't get involved in politics or opposition activity – it is a purely religious organisation." He says the threats against Fr Plyats have now gone quiet, but he fears the next step could be a large fine.

Belarus has the harshest controls on religious activity of any European state. In defiance of its international human rights commitments, the government has rendered all unregistered religious activity illegal and has cracked down on religious communities that have been refused (like the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad), failed to or do not want to receive registration. New Life charismatic church in Minsk has so far faced the greatest pressure to halt its activities after being denied registration, with repeated fines on church leaders for allegedly organising what the authorities insist is "illegal" religious worship (see F18News 19 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=565).

Over the past decade the government has largely succeeded in crushing all Orthodox communities that function outside the framework of the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has even registered the term "Belarusian Orthodox Church" as a trademark to prevent communities of other Orthodox jurisdictions gaining registration (see F18News 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177). The government has refused registration to parishes of all rival jurisdictions, including the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Three of its parishes in Minsk region unsuccessfully mounted court challenges against registration refusals in 2003 (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463).

Fr Plyats' latest troubles began on 17 May, when a commission arrived at his home in the village of Zabolotye near Minsk on the orders of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. The commission included not only Marina Vul and Lidiya Nayden, chair and secretary of the village Soviet, but also Kozmin of the Ideology Department of the Smolevichi District Executive Committee and the fire inspector.

The Russian religious news website portal-credo.ru reported that the commission was keen to investigate Fr Plyats' "illegal religious activity" and tried to examine his home under the pretext of a fire inspection, searching for "premises for prayer to conduct underground illegal services". On leaving, the ideology official promised to return for a further search.

That same evening, local police officer Ivan Lushchik came to Fr Plyats' home and, on instruction from the State Religion Committee, interrogated him on his religious activity.

Lushchik returned on 23 May with a senior colleague, but Fr Plyats was out. However, for more than an hour they interrogated his wife and a fellow parishioner. When Fr Plyats returned, the officers continued interrogating him about his "illegal religious activity". Portal-credo.ru said it appeared a high-level directive had been issued to uncover the "underground religious sect" and punish Fr Plyats.

On 24 May district police chief Nikolaenok and his deputy, Vyacheslav Strochinsky, summoned Fr Plyats and two of his parishioners for further questioning about "illegal religious activity". The officers officially warned Fr Plyats that if he conducts unregistered religious services he will be sentenced under Article 167 part 1 of the code of administrative offences, which punishes "violating the established procedure for holding religious events" with either a warning, a fine ranging from 20 to 150 times the minimum wage, or detention for between three and 15 days.

Lidiya Nayden, one of the two local officials on the commission that visited Fr Plyats on 17 May, told Forum 18 that the visit had been initiated after a complaint from a Minsk resident that Fr Plyats had put her son under "psychological pressure". "We went to talk to him about the complaint and he explained what had happened," she told Forum 18. "I believe he didn't do anything wrong. There is no pressure on Fr Plyats."

Told that he had subsequently been interrogated by the police and threatened with a large administrative fine, she said she did not know about this. "The village Soviet has nothing against him," she assured Forum 18. "We don't see any violations of the law in his religious activities."

Kozmin of the Ideology Department was less sympathetic. "According to our religion law a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad can function only once the community is registered," he told Forum 18. "Unregistered religious activity is illegal – we simply explained this to Plyats." Kozmin denied that banning unregistered religious activity defies international human rights commitments to freedom of speech, assembly and religion. "There can't be freedom without abiding by the law."

He said the commission had visited Fr Plyats after receiving complaints that he had conducted services in other villages, adding that the priest had insisted he does not conduct worship services, but merely meets privately with friends. "When we went to see him on 17 May we just talked with him. We didn't interrogate him. Nor did the police when they invited him in. He didn't have to go to see them," Kozmin claimed. "So please don't talk about summonses, interrogations or persecution." He denied that four lengthy "discussions" in the space of just over a week and threats to punish Fr Plyats if he holds any services outside his home constitute "pressure".

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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