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BELARUS: Religious freedom campaigners detained

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Belarusian police have, within two days, detained 19 Catholics and Protestants petitioning to change the harsh 2002 Religion Law. The detentions happened after signatures were collected at a prominent Catholic pilgrimage site, Budslav, and in the capital Minsk. One of those held, Sergei Lukanin, told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk's Frunze District Police Station that he and five other campaigners were "sitting in an office with three policemen who refuse to allow us to leave or to explain why we are here." Two of those detained, 16-year-old Feodora Andreyevskaya and 14-year-old Yuliya Kosheleva, were held as they collected campaign materials on freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Also detained was Denis Sadovsky, secretary of the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement. Much literature was confiscated by police and has not been returned. This included 7,000 newsletters and 500 copies of a booklet, "Monitoring Violations of the Rights of Christians in Belarus in 2006," detailing religious freedom violations reported by independent Belarusian media sources and Forum 18 News Service. Petitions to change the law require at least 50,000 signatures to be considered by the Constitutional Court, and over 25,000 signatures have so far been collected.

In the space of just two days, police have detained 19 Christian activists petitioning to change the harsh 2002 Religion Law at a prominent Catholic pilgrimage site and in the Belarusian capital. Speaking to Forum 18 News Service from Minsk's Frunze District Police Station on 3 July, Sergei Lukanin said that he and five other petitioners had been held there for the past four hours. "We're sitting in an office with three policemen who refuse to allow us to leave or to explain why we are here." Officers have also confiscated a large amount of literature related to the campaign for freedom of thought, conscience and belief, which so far has over 25,000 signatures.

The six were finally released at approximately 7.30pm on 3 July, the lawyer and member of the charismatic New Life Church told Forum 18 the following day. "They didn't charge us – and they didn't apologise either," Lukanin remarked. "Nor did they issue any documentation supporting our detention or the confiscation of our literature."

Contacted by Forum 18 on 4 July, a spokesman at Frunze District Police Station categorically refused to provide information by telephone.

According to Sergei Lukanin, he and Aleksei Shein, a petition coordinator who is also co-chairman of the organisational committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement, visited a Minsk flat rented by Denis Sadovsky at approximately 3pm on 3 July. They had heard that police had detained Sadovsky, who is a Minsk Pentecostal and secretary of the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement <http://www.bchd.info>.

Once at the flat, Lukanin told Forum 18, two police officers – one in uniform and one in plain clothes - arrived and ordered himself and Shein to go under escort to Frunze District Police Station. Police threatened the use of force when Lukanin and Shein initially refused. At the police station they met Denis Sadovsky, detained at the same flat an hour earlier by one uniformed and four plain-clothes police officers – and Tatyana Usinovich, a 22-year-old member of New Life Church.

According to Lukanin, the plain-clothes police officers who detained Sadovsky also searched his flat and confiscated some 7,000 newsletters introducing the campaign against the 2002 Religion Law. They also took 500 copies of a booklet, "Monitoring Violations of the Rights of Christians in Belarus in 2006". None of this literature has been returned.

Published in Minsk in Belarusian and Russian, "Monitoring Violations of the Rights of Christians in Belarus in 2006" is an 80-page booklet detailing religious freedom violations in Belarus as reported by a number of independent media sources within Belarus, as well as by Forum 18 News Service.

At approximately 4pm on 3 July, continued Lukanin, two members of New Life Church, 16-year-old Feodora Andreyevskaya and 14-year-old Yuliya Kosheleva, called at the same flat for fresh copies of petition forms for the religious freedom campaign. They were likewise detained and taken to Frunze District Police Station.

The day before, 2 July, 14 out of a group of 50 Christian activists – including Sergei Lukanin - were detained by district police after collecting over 2,300 signatures against the 2002 Religion Law at the annual Catholic pilgrimage to Budslav (Myadel District,

Minsk Region).

The 14 were released without charge after three hours. Lukanin told Forum 18 that a protocol drawn up against him, as petition organiser, maintained that he had distributed literature without publication details. For this he was warned to expect prosecution in Minsk, he said, but no one has contacted him so far.

In Belarus, a person may legally distribute up to 300 copies of a piece of literature without publication details. While police confiscated 650 copies of the booklet "Monitoring Violations of the Rights of Christians in Belarus in 2006", Lukanin pointed out that its 14 distributors were carrying fewer than 50 copies each. The booklets have not been returned.

A spokesman at Myadel District Police refused to comment on either detention or confiscation when contacted by Forum 18 on 4 July. He would state only that none of the petitioners was still being held and that no criminal case had been opened.

Many thousands of Catholics from Belarus and beyond congregate in Budslav every 2 July for the feast day of the seventeenth-century Budslav Icon of the Mother of God. The icon was brought to Budslav from Rome in 1613 and is housed in a local church where Catholics reported a vision of the Virgin Mary in the sixteenth century.

Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants across Belarus have been gathering signatures to change the 2002 Religion Law since 22 April 2007. As the campaign's promotional material states, "we are defending the rights of all Christians (Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants), all citizens of Belarus. The law violates the rights of all people, even atheists." Petitions to change the law require at least 50,000 signatures in order to be considered by the Constitutional Court (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957).

After exhausting other methods of negotiation with the state authorities, some Belarusian religious believers are adopting tactics more usually associated with secular political activism in their pursuit of freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Mainstream opposition activists are in their turn drawing on religious ideas (see F18News 29 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=880). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

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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