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BELARUS: Ideology official attempts to disband church camp

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

A regional Ideology Department official in Belarus has tried to break up a family holiday camp for members of a Minsk charismatic church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Oleg Bobrik demanded that all religious activity and distribution of religious literature cease, church member and lawyer Dina Shavtsova told Forum 18, "even though there wasn't any literature." The local district executive committee [local council] had given written permission for the family holiday camp, but Bobrik claimed that the camp did not conform to either the Religion Law or an Education Ministry instruction regulating health camps. Bobrik then issued an order – handwritten in ballpoint pen on plain paper – ordering the camp to be closed down unless certain points were resolved. These included a list of participants being provided, but "no one is prepared to give him [Bobrik] a list of participants, as that is unlawful," Shavtsova told Forum 18. "And we'll carry on the camp, of course." The family holiday camp continued as planned. Bobrik has refused to answer Forum 18's questions about his actions.

A local Ideology Department official has tried to break up a family holiday camp for members of a Minsk charismatic church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

The official, Oleg Bobrik of Volozhin [Valozhyn] District Ideology Department (Minsk Region), refused to respond to Forum 18's questions on 16 July. "Well, I've never seen you," Bobrik remarked to Forum 18, before maintaining that he could not give information by telephone. A senior religious affairs official similarly refused to comment to Forum 18 on 17 July.

On 10 July, Bobrik arrived at the annual summer holiday camp run by Minsk-based charismatic Jesus Christ Church. He demanded that all religious activity and distribution of religious literature cease, church member and lawyer Dina Shavtsova told Forum 18, "even though there wasn't any literature." Claiming that the camp conformed neither to the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, nor to a December 2002 Education Ministry instruction regulating health camps, she said, the ideology official then issued an order – handwritten in ballpoint pen on plain paper – for it to be closed down by 11am on 11 July.

The order, signed by Bobrik and seen by Forum 18, states that the camp may resume only after the resolution of a number of points. These include providing a list of all participants – including children – and receipt of official permission from Minsk's Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs.

"No one is prepared to give him [Bobrik] a list of participants, as that is unlawful," Shavtsova told Forum 18 on 10 July. "And we'll carry on the camp, of course – it's been planned over six months, and we've been doing this for 11 years." The ideology official's handwritten instruction carries no legal force, she added.

The Jesus Christ Church's annual camp, with some 200 participants, takes place in woodland near the village of Rakov, approximately 20 km. (12 miles) north-west of Minsk. Organised as a summer holiday for church members, Forum 18 visited the camp in July 2006. Then – as in previous years – it did not experience state disruption.

This year, according to Dina Shavtsova, several routine check-ups were undertaken by the local Sanitation and Emergencies departments after the camp began on 30 June. These resulted in a small fine of 62,000 Belarusian roubles [165 Norwegian Kroner, 21 Euros or 29 US Dollars] for what the organisers acknowledged to be a valid hygiene criticism. Then, on 7 July, Oleg Bobrik conducted a further check-up of the camp, citing an instruction received by district executive committees [local councils] throughout Minsk Region on 6 July.

Despite promising on 10 July to return with his handwritten order in an official form the following day, Bobrik did not turn up on 11 July, Shavtsova told Forum 18. Church members noted an unfamiliar car with tinted windows standing near the camp entrance for approximately two hours that morning, she said, but there was no further disruption. The camp finished as planned on 15 July.

Volozhin District Executive Committee granted official permission for this summer's holiday camp for Jesus Christ Church members on 2 April, in a document which Forum 18 has seen. The church's pastor, Boris Chernoglaz, took a copy of this document to Minsk Region's top religious affairs official, Leonid Parkhimovich, on the afternoon of 11 July, lawyer and church member Shavtsova told Forum 18. Pastor Chernoglaz then visited Vladimir Lameko, deputy to the Plenipotentiary for Religious Affairs, with

Vyacheslav Goncharenko, who heads the charismatic Full Gospel Association to which Jesus Christ Church is affiliated. Present at both meetings, Shavtsova told Forum 18 that while they were inconclusive, the authorities appear to have softened their approach as a result.

While recognising the situation near Rakov, Vladimir Lameko maintained that it was "nothing to do with us" when Forum 18 called on 17 July. Asked why the organisers had therefore turned to him following the attempt to close the camp down, he replied, "so what?" When Forum 18 responded that this at least suggested him to be competent to state whether or not the camp had taken place lawfully, Lameko insisted that he did not respond to media questions by telephone.

Volozhin District Executive Committee appears to be particularly diligent in controlling religious activity. Anatoli Kulak, who chairs the Committee's commission ensuring compliance with the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, issued a circular to the district's religious leaders in December 2006. This requested such information as the number of members in each religious organisation, the full names of Sunday school teachers, the number of their pupils and the nature of their timetable.

When a Baptist deacon spoke in a private capacity at an evening on married life held at a state-owned cultural centre in Volozhin in January 2006, Oleg Bobrik arrived to close down the "religious propaganda" meeting (see F18News 3 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=736).

Belarus' extensive religious affairs bureaucracy has continued from the Soviet era. It includes commissions ensuring compliance with the Religion Law attached to each district executive committee (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186). To the chagrin of senior religious affairs officials, however, the efforts of some of these commissions to control religious life are lax (see F18News 9 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=248). But Christians campaigning to change the country's restrictive Religion Law have been detained (see F18News 5 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=989).

In disruption to a similar holiday camp in Smorgon District (Grodno [Hrodna] Region) in 2006, soldiers deported families from a number of Minsk charismatic churches back to the Belarusian capital (see F18News 17 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832). (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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