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TRANSDNIESTER: Car returned but not Christian magazines

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

As several Protestants were about to give out Christian magazines to students on 8 October in Tiraspol in Moldova's breakaway Transdniester republic, two State Security Ministry officers pounced. "It was all over in three minutes," Igor Velikanenko of New Life mission told Forum 18 News Service. The literature and his car were seized. "They must have known in advance that we would be coming, maybe through intercepted phone calls." After Velikanenko and two colleagues were interrogated and threatened over successive days, he was accused of bringing "contraband" material into Transdniester and fined. "Anyone would think I had smuggled in illegal cigarettes, alcohol or drugs." He received his car back on 17 October but State Security officials refuse to give back the literature. State Security and religious affairs officials refused to discuss the case with Forum 18. Jehovah's Witnesses say 200 copies of a magazine were seized in Bendery after a Witness tried to bring them into Transdniester from Moldova in early October.

Nine days after his car and Christian magazines were seized by the State Security Ministry in his native Transdniester, a breakaway republic in Moldova, Igor Velikanenko today (17 October) managed to retrieve his car. "The Ministry just called me this morning and to my surprise said I could have my car back," he told Forum 18 News Service from Tiraspol, Transdniester's main city. "But they refused to give back the copies of our Christian magazine they seized on 8 October, despite the fine I have already paid." Transdniester officials have refused to explain to Forum 18 what is illegal about offering Christian magazines to students on the street and why Velikanenko and two colleagues have faced repeated interrogation.

Velikanenko insists they did nothing wrong. "We just aim to talk to students about God," he told Forum 18. "We did nothing wrong - we're law-abiding."

Reached on 16 October, the spokesperson for the State Security Ministry, who gave his name only as Andrei, told Forum 18 that he had no information about the case. After Forum 18 explained what had happened to Velikanenko, Andrei said he would seek further information. Reached on 17 October, he responded immediately: "I can't comment on anything." Asked why Velikanenko's magazines and car were seized he refused to say. "You can publish what you like," he told Forum 18 before putting the phone down.

Likewise the office of Transdniester's Commissioner for Religious Affairs, Pyotr Zalozhkov, refused to comment. The secretary, Natalya Verchenko, said Zalozhkov is away. "I am hearing about the case for the first time from you," she told Forum 18 on 16 October, despite the fact that the local tiras.ru internet news agency reported the confiscations on 12 October. "We have no information on this so I can't tell you anything. Why didn't the people you say were detained come and talk to us? They should have told us first."

Told that the State Security Ministry was questioning Velikanenko and his colleagues, Verchenko responded: "The State Security Ministry informs us about a case if they feel it is necessary."

Velikanenko, who works for the New Life mission, was about to begin distributing copies of the Protestant magazine Boom with colleagues outside Tiraspol's Shevchenko University early on 8 October when two men in civilian clothes pounced on the group. "We didn't even have time to give out one magazine," he told Forum 18. "They took us over to my car, where they found 800 copies of the magazine in the boot." He said the two men presented cards identifying them as State Security officers. "It was all over in three minutes. They must have known in advance that we would be coming, maybe through intercepted phone calls."

The two men ordered Velikanenko and two colleagues to accompany them to the Ministry. "We were held from 9 am to 3 pm that Monday and were summoned back for a further three hours of questioning and threats on the Tuesday and Wednesday," he reported. "We were all interrogated individually. I was summoned again on Friday for yet more questioning."

Velikanenko said that the State Security officers eventually accused him of bringing the magazines into Transdniester "illegally" from the Moldovan capital Chisinau. "I told them the Transdniestran customs had been perfectly happy when I brought them in as I said they were not to be sold but to be given out free of charge," he told Forum 18. "But they insisted they were illegal because they did not include the address of the printing house or an indication of how many copies were printed."

In the hope of resolving the problem Velikanenko said he paid a fine of 1,171.20 Transdnistran Roubles (749 Norwegian Kroner, 97 Euros or 139 US Dollars) to the Customs Service on 15 October. "They gave me a document confirming that I had paid the fine for violating Article 360 of Transdnistran's Customs Code, which punishes people for bringing in contraband goods. The document makes clear the Customs Service was acting on information from the State Security Ministry."

Velikanenko rejects accusations of wrongdoing. "Anyone would think I had smuggled in illegal cigarettes, alcohol or drugs," he complained. "But the magazine is only about God and morality. It teaches people about God, and says they should not take drugs or engage in sex before marriage. It is nothing to do with politics."

When Velikanenko asked the State Security officer on 17 October when he could get back the confiscated magazines the officer told him: "You're not going to get them back. I don't decide on that - we've had an order from higher up."

Transdnistran - which rejects the authority of the Moldovan government - has a restrictive religious policy that makes religious activity outside approved places of worship difficult. Officials routinely use bureaucratic means to deny legal status to communities they do not like. Communities functioning without legal status are at risk of harassment.

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that more than 200 copies of a magazine were seized in Bendery [Bender] after a Jehovah's Witness, Daniil Podolyan, tried to bring them into Transdnistran from Moldova in early October. "Officials say that without fiscal registration our communities are not authorised to import literature," Anatolii Cravciuc told Forum 18 from the Moldovan capital Chisinau on 17 October. "And when people bring in literature individually it can be seized."

Cravciuc added that among other recent cases, about ten magazines were seized from two Jehovah's Witnesses preaching on the street in the village of Krasnogorka on 17 September. "They've not been fined - yet," he added.

Cravciuc reports that only two of their more than 30 congregations in Transdnistran have legal status. "The congregations in Grigoriopol and Bendery lodged registration applications back in 2005, but there has been no progress. The religious affairs commissioner keeps saying this is wrong with the application or that, and without his approval they can't pass them on to the Justice Ministry. Both cases have been lingering in court with little progress."

The Jehovah's Witnesses have also been unable to enforce a Supreme Court judgment that religious affairs commissioner Zalozhkov must "accredit" the local Jehovah's Witness leader, a process the Transdnistran authorities insist is necessary before leaders can lead a religious organisation. "We won at Tiraspol court on 4 July and, after Zalozhkov lodged an appeal, won in the Supreme Court on 16 August. Even a letter from the court executor on 2 October has not been enough to make him do this."

Verchenko of the Religious Affairs Commissioner's office refused to discuss the Jehovah's Witnesses' problems with Forum 18 on 17 October. "These cases are being handled by the courts," she insisted.

After Orthodox leaders objected to the accreditation system in 2006, an official in Zalozhkov's office vigorously defended the system to Forum 18. "All religious leaders must be accredited. We need to know who the leader of any religious organisation is," Tamara Kovalchuk told Forum 18 back in 2006 (see F18News 4 August 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=823>).

Other Protestants and Muslims have also faced problems in the unrecognised entity. One Protestant told Forum 18 that after a student in Tiraspol joined a Protestant church in 2006 she was warned that if she continued to associate with church members her university marks would suffer.

However, a member of the Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 on 17 October that threats to demolish their church in Tiraspol issued seven years ago have now subsided. He added that police occasionally ban young church members from preaching on the streets, but said that in contrast to earlier years street libraries generally are able to function (see F18News 10 September 2003 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=138>).

Religious Affairs Commissioner Zalozhkov tried to have a new Religion Law introduced in Transdnistran in 2004 to replace the 1995 Religion Law, which remains in force. Widely criticised by politicians and religious communities, the planned new Law was abandoned (see F18News 5 May 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=313>). However, a new draft Religion Law was presented to Transdnistran's parliament, the Supreme Soviet, in mid-September (see F18News 31 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1041>). (END)

A printer-friendly map of Moldova, including the unrecognised entity of Transdnistran, is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=moldov>>

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