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RUSSIA: Patchy local provision of Orthodox culture classes

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

On 1 September, the start of the school year, a seven-year-old Protestant pastor's son in Voronezh Region was beaten up by fellow-students for refusing to cross himself during prayers in school led by a Russian Orthodox priest. But provision of the controversial Foundations of Orthodox Culture course in state schools remains patchy, Forum 18 News Service notes. Belgorod Region has gone the furthest in imposing it as a compulsory subject for all grades. A Public Chamber survey found that 12 regions have 10,000 pupils or more studying Foundations of Orthodox Culture, though other regions have none. Mukaddas Bibarsov of the Volga Region Spiritual Directorate of Muslims complained to Forum 18 in 2005 that the subject represents "the Christianisation of our children". More recently Vsevolod Lukhovitsky of the Teachers for Freedom of Conviction group cited complaints from Orthodox parents who believe religious education is their and their priest's responsibility. "They don't want some half-trained teacher who is officially secular taking over."

Provision of the controversial Foundations of Orthodox Culture course in state schools has been only patchy, Forum 18 News Service notes. The subject has faced strong objections in many quarters, especially from secularists, Protestants, Muslims and even from some Russian Orthodox parents. President Vladimir Putin has this month also pointed out that Russia's Constitution decrees the separation of religion and the state. In early September a Protestant pastor's son was beaten up by fellow students in Voronezh Region when he refused to cross himself during prayers led by an Orthodox priest at the start of the school year.

The region where the imposition of the subject has gone furthest is Belgorod in south-western Russia. An education official there insists to Forum 18 that Orthodox classes will continue, though she admits that current educational reforms now in the federal parliament could spell the end of the subject (see F18News 24 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1021 and 25 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1023).

The Public Chamber's Commission on Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience Issues notes in its detailed 23 April 2007 survey on the Foundations of Orthodox Culture that ten Russian regions have no religious studies course of any kind. The authorities in the extreme Far Eastern region of Chukotka, for example, responded to a similar survey conducted by the pro-Orthodox Russian People's Council that they were unable to offer the Orthodox Culture classes, adding that "the traditional beliefs of the peoples of Chukotka are shamanism and the practice of magic rituals".

According to the Public Chamber survey, 12 regions have 10,000 pupils or more studying Foundations of Orthodox Culture – the most being in Belgorod, with 134,762 pupils. In Khabarovsk Region, by contrast, only 76 pupils study it in two schools. In addition to Belgorod, the subject is compulsory in at least some schools in Smolensk, Kaluga and Bryansk Regions, according to 2006 reports by the Moscow-based Sova Centre.

The Public Chamber survey expressed concern about how voluntary the course is in some areas. It noted that "the absence of a single set of recommendations devised and adopted at the federal level (...) is leading to tendencies towards and instances of ignoring the principle of free choice."

Robust opposition from both academic and Muslim circles ultimately appears to have been instrumental in preventing broader state patronage of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture (see F18News 24 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1021).

In Voronezh Region, the introduction of a compulsory Foundations of Orthodox Culture course also met opposition. Following its announcement in late May 2007, a coalition of local civic organisations began a petition. "New Russian society needs a moral platform, faith, but everyone should choose it for himself and not aided by imposed extra school subjects," they argued. The petitioners also expressed concern that children belonging to different nationalities and confessions "will either be forced to study a subject against their religious convictions or become black sheep by refusing to attend the Foundations of Orthodox Culture and so hear the displeasure of teachers and intolerant comments of classmates." Soon afterwards, the assistant director of Voronezh Regional Education Department, Gennadi Kozberg, announced that "pupils and parents retain the right not to study the course for any reason," according to a 20 June Blagovest news agency report.

On 1 September, however, the seven-year-old son of Aleksei Perov, a Protestant pastor in Gribanovsky (Voronezh Region), was repeatedly beaten up by classmates on his first day at school, the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice reported. David Perov had refused to cross himself during Orthodox prayers to mark the start of the academic year led at the school by a local Orthodox priest.

Russian Orthodox Church representatives insist that Orthodox Culture classes are culturological and optional (see F18News 24 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1021), but observers question the nature of the course in many regions. Where elective, according to a 22 November 2006 statement on religious education by an expert council attached to the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, it is in practice often made compulsory by being sandwiched between lessons of core subjects.

In a detailed August 2004 survey on the Russian Orthodox Church's influence on state education, Nikolai Mitrokhin of the Institute for the Study of Religions in the CIS and Baltic States notes that a syllabus for the Foundations of Orthodox Culture circulated by Tula Municipal Education Department asks fifth-graders (12-year-olds) "what the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God means to you" and to compose "your message to the Mother of God". According to a report by Tyumen Orthodox deanery, Mitrokhin notes, Tyumen and Tobolsk Orthodox diocese regularly organises excursions to holy sites for state school pupils. "Leaders of the pilgrimage groups speak about the basics of Orthodoxy, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, for 2-4 hours on the way; in short, the pilgrimage includes missionary and catechetical activity."

Speaking to Forum 18 in Saratov in 2005, the head of the Volga Region Spiritual Directorate of Muslims said that the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course has in practice turned out not to be optional since its introduction in Saratov region in September 2004. "Older pupils can choose, but the younger ones end up going." If the course dealt simply with topics such as church architecture, said Mukaddas Bibarsov, the Muslim community would not object to it. "But it isn't being put into the curriculum to teach about architecture – in practice it is mission, the Christianisation of our children."

Bibarsov also pointed Forum 18 to a recent issue of his directorate's newspaper, in which one Muslim mother recalls how she found in her 12-year-old son's Foundations of Orthodox Culture exercise book the phrases: "As one of the branches of Christianity, Orthodoxy is today considered the most perfect religion" and "the Koran orders the killing of infidels, that is, non-Muslims". The evening before her son celebrated his birthday at home in December 2004, she added, he asked her not to tell classmate party guests that the family was Muslim.

Speaking at a Sova Centre round table in March 2007, the head of the Teachers for Freedom of Conviction suggested that regional laws introducing compulsory Foundations of Orthodox Culture would be adopted in other Russian regions if Belgorod's were not annulled this year. Also noting the inconsistent provision of the subject even within regions where it has been introduced, Vsevolod Lukhovitsky maintained that it is not in fact Orthodox Culture, but "a certain surrogate, so-called Orthodox ideology (..) part of the general creation of a new state ideology based upon patriotic quasi-religiosity."

In addition to convinced atheists and adherents of other religions, Lukhovitsky hears complaints from a third group of unhappy parents – Orthodox believers. "Their logic is that they and their priest are responsible for the upbringing of their children, who attend a separate Sunday school. They don't want some half-trained teacher who is officially secular taking over." (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>

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