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BELARUS: How serious is official call to phase out foreign clergy?

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The Catholic Church is unsure about the implications of remarks by Belarusian Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets about foreign clergy. With about 190 foreign priests plus more than 100 nuns, the Catholic Church is by far the religious community in Belarus which relies most heavily on foreign clergy. Kosinets told a 19 September round table with Belarus' religious leaders that the Catholic Church should end the use of foreign clergy over the next few years. However, Forum 18 News Service has been unable to clarify whether this is a recommendation or an order. "The Vice-premier's words arouse questions and perplexities rather than outright concern," a senior Catholic told Forum 18. Religious affairs official Aleksandr Kalinov, who was also present at the round table, refused to tell Forum 18 if action will be taken if the Catholic Church does not end the use of foreign priests, but insisted: "No-one is preparing to expel them." The Catholic Church – like the Orthodox Church – also has a number of foreign-born bishops, while other religious communities – including Jews – have foreign religious leaders.

Amid a lack of clarity over whether Vice-premier Aleksandr Kosinets was suggesting or requiring that all foreign religious leaders should leave Belarus within five or seven years, Catholic sources say they are unsure about the implications for their Church. The Catholic Church is the religious community in Belarus which relies most heavily on foreign clergy by far. "The Vice-premier's words arouse questions and perplexities rather than outright concern," a senior Catholic told Forum 18 News Service on condition of anonymity. "This was not an attack on the Church but it would be wise to watch this very carefully." The Catholic points out that the Church depends on about 190 foreign priests as well as nuns and that it is a long way before it reaches self-sufficiency in local priests.

Forum 18 notes that the Catholic Church – like the Orthodox Church – also has a number of foreign-born bishops, while other religious communities – including Jews – have foreign religious leaders.

Kosinets made his comments at a round table of religious leaders at the new National Library in Minsk on 19 September. He also insisted during the four-hour meeting that the highly restrictive 2002 Religion Law will not be changed (see F18News 27 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1025).

According to a 19 September Interfax report of the meeting, Kosinets said: "We are in favour of religious personnel in our republic being natives of Belarus (...) people may not conduct religious activity if they do not know either Belarusian or Russian, or the mindset and customs of Belarus (...) it is pleasing that we have the understanding of the Roman Catholic Church on this issue (...) there should be a substitution of foreign religious personnel by natives of Belarus in the course of the next seven years."

The Catholic who requested anonymity told Forum 18 that adding to the Church's questions was the fact that Kosinets has already made remarks which "intrude into the life of the Church". "The Vice-premier said earlier that six or seven years' seminary training is too long and that the bishops should reduce this," the Catholic noted. "Of course the bishops will not do this. The preparation and formation of priests belongs to the specific domain of religious denominations."

While conceding that seven years is a long time, the Catholic does not believe that at the present rate there will be enough local clergy to supply all the country's parishes within seven years.

In his 26 September statement to the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Warsaw, Yuri Uralsky of the office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs maintained that the Belarusian state supports the invitation of foreign citizens for religious and non-religious activity.

Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities are increasingly being barred from the country (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856).

Two Polish Catholic priests were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2005 (see F18News 13 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=715). A year later, seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2006 (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899). According to the latest official figures, 192 out of 381 Catholic priests in Belarus are foreigners with a further 105 nuns. Most of these foreign priests

and nuns are Polish.

In 2007, a Polish Pentecostal and a US Baptist have both been deported for their religious activity on "national security" grounds (see F18News 17 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=958). The Pentecostal was also fined (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=967).

Also in 2007, seven US citizens were deported from Belarus following a local police warning that they had been conducting illegal religious activity. A further three left voluntarily (see F18News 28 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=922).

Forum 18 has been unable to find out whether the Vice-premier's remarks were designed as an order or a recommendation. After stating that Kosinets was unavailable for comment on 26 September, his assistant directed Forum 18 to Leonid Gulyako, the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. Gulyako's telephone was engaged whenever Forum 18 rang on 26 September and went unanswered on 27 September and 1 October.

Gulyako's colleague, Aleksandr Kalinov, who was also present at the round table, insisted that reports of Kosinets's comments on foreign priests were "distorted". He claimed to Forum 18 on 1 October that the law requires foreign priests to know the state languages, Belarusian and Russian (though it does not in fact do so). "Regarding the Catholic Church, within seven years the work of the seminaries in Pinsk and Grodno will allow the Church to have enough local priests so that there won't be a deficit," Kalinov maintained.

Asked by Forum 18 whether the insistence on a local clergy was an order or a recommendation, Kalinov repeatedly avoided answering. Asked what the government would do if after seven years foreign Catholic priests are still serving in Catholic parishes he responded: "No-one is preparing to expel them." However, he would not say what action would be taken. He then said he was being called away and put the phone down.

However, two other religious leaders also present at the 19 September meeting were certain that Vice-premier Kosinets had not made any threat to ban or deport foreign Catholic priests over the next few years.

"He said that in five years there shouldn't be any foreign clergy in Belarus, only natives of Belarus [vykholdtsy]. That other countries wouldn't accept our clergy, so why should we accept theirs?" Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the Minsk-based New Life Church, who heads the charismatic Full Gospel Association, told Forum 18 on 25 September. "But he didn't say anything about a ban, or other state measures that might be used to achieve this. He was just speaking about the need to concentrate on training up our own clergy."

Yakov Basin, the chairman of the Religious Association of Progressive Jewish Communities, told Forum 18 on 26 September that he could not recall a specific number of years being mentioned in relation to training homegrown clergy. Vice-premier Kosinets had maintained in general that foreign religious personnel coming to work in Belarus ought to know the local language, mindset and circumstances, he said. He added that Kosinets had not referred specifically to Catholic priests, "although of course he was mostly referring to the Catholic priests here".

Basin did not sense that Kosinets' preference for natives of Belarus [vykholdtsy] rather than Belarusian citizens was deliberate. If it were, the recently appointed Grodno-born Catholic Metropolitan Archbishop of Minsk-Mogilev diocese, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, would qualify. However, Moscow-born Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk, who heads the Belarusian Orthodox Church, would not.

The 2002 Religion Law stipulates that teachers at religious educational institutions must know both Belarusian and Russian (see F18News 30 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=67), but no language requirement is made of foreign religious personnel invited to Belarus under the 23 February 1999 Council of Ministers decree that regulates them. Vice-premier Kosinets has categorically rejected calls led by a nation-wide petition campaign to change the Law (see F18News 27 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1025)

Kosinets also raised the question of places of worship at the wide-ranging 19 September meeting. Both Yakov Basin and Pastor Goncharenko confirmed to Forum 18 that he criticised both the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church at length for requesting new plots of land for church construction instead of renovating existing historical church buildings. "My impression was that the state doesn't want to give up any more land," said Pastor Goncharenko. Displaying examples of unfinished new, mostly Orthodox churches on four monitor screens in the centre of the table, Kosinets made a not particularly forceful threat to confiscate them if they were not completed soon, recalled Basin. Neither Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret nor Catholic Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek responded to the vice-premier's remarks, he added.

According to a 19 September Interfax report of the round table meeting, Kosinets said: "Very unfortunately, a certain number of monuments belonging to religious organisations require attention (..) the restoration of these cult buildings must be put in order (..) there are architectural monuments which should be restored, but you take plots of land for the construction of new objects, which

arouses the displeasure of the population, donations go towards this, after all."

Forum 18 is not aware of any previous instance of a Belarusian state representative criticising the Belarusian Orthodox Church or Roman Catholic Church in the presence of representatives of other confessions.

In his 26 September statement to the OSCE meeting in Warsaw, Uralsky of the office of the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs maintained that the Belarusian state supports the construction of new worship buildings.

Last year Forum 18 noted collection boxes for the Orthodox Church prominently sited in every Minsk metro station and most major shops (see F18News 10 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=826). Catholic and Orthodox representatives have pointed out to Forum 18 that historical church buildings are usually not located in the Soviet-planned towns and cities where they are most needed.

Protestant communities in Belarus – who do not normally own historic church buildings - have great difficulty in renting public buildings for worship meetings. A consistent pattern has emerged, in which those who control premises available for rent regularly back out of contracts with Protestants soon after the authorities are informed (see F18News 29 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=965). The authorities also severely obstruct attempts to rebuild churches, get land and buildings formally redesignated for use for worship buildings, or meet together for worship in private homes (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966). (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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