

1 October 2003

BELARUS: Indigenous believers resist state contact

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

As well as dealing with often elderly members of his parishes trying to cope with the compulsory re-registration applications, the head of the priestless Pomorye Old Orthodox Church in Belarus is facing long-standing suspicion within his Church of contact with the state. Petr Orlov cited the parish in Gomel, which refuses to submit detailed personal information required for re-registration. "They are worried that their relatives might lose their jobs as city councillors, collective farm workers or teachers," he told Forum 18 News Service. "There could be more repression and the authorities will say that we submitted those names voluntarily." Officials dislike religious groups that refuse to register. "It is very bad that they haven't decided to switch to civilised forms of performing religious rites," the senior religious official in Brest region complained of Baptists belonging to the Council of Churches, who refuse to register on principle.

"Old Believers don't like being counted," the head of the priestless Pomorye Old Orthodox Church in Belarus, Petr Orlov, told Forum 18 News Service. In addition to the practical difficulties of getting parishes often dominated by elderly people to cope with the paperwork (see separate F18News article), Orlov is currently finding it a strain to comply with the new religion law's compulsory re-registration procedure due to continuing suspicion within his Church of contact with the state.

Speaking to Forum 18 at his parish church in the northern town of Polotsk on 24 September, Orlov explained that, since repression inevitably followed every census conducted by Russia's tsarist regime, "the Old Believers became wary of revealing themselves". The very existence of the Pomorye Concord in this part of Belarus is due to this fact, he added. If a wave of persecution began, he said, the Old Believers would hop across the previously adjacent and poorly guarded border with Poland to find relative religious tolerance.

Now the 2002 religion law requires every religious community to register with the state a list of the full names, addresses, dates of birth, citizenship and signatures of 20 of its members. The priestless Old Believer parish in Gomel is refusing to submit such information, Orlov told Forum 18. "They are worried that their relatives might lose their jobs as city councillors, collective farm workers or teachers," he explained. "Who knows what political changes will take place in the future? There could be more repression and the authorities will say that we submitted those names voluntarily. The parishioners reckon that if we've survived 300 years of persecution, let it continue for a few more."

Even if it did not persist today, the Old Believers' long tradition of seclusion has resulted in a lack of communication between communities which makes it difficult for them to offer information about their activities. Many of the entries on Orlov's list of parishes consist simply of the name of a village, no more. The republic-wide Pomorye Old Orthodox Church in Belarus was formed only in 1998, he told Forum 18: "Up until then we didn't know anything about each other."

Another indigenous religious group with a history of suspicion of contact with the state are the Baptists belonging to the Council of Churches, which broke away from the mainstream Baptist Union over issues of co-operation with the Soviet authorities in 1961. Although they refuse registration, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk puts the number of their communities in Belarus at 29.

Their situation appears to vary from place to place. Pastor Viktor Zdanevich told Forum 18 on 16 September that his autonomous, registered Baptist church in the western city of Brest has its roots in the Council of Churches. Its members remain in close contact with the city's 450-strong unregistered congregation, he said, which gathers at a prayer house without any particular difficulties.

A 21 April Council of Churches statement, however, describes how a municipal official and district police officer visited the Sunday morning service of its Vitebsk congregation on 2 March and afterwards insisted to Pastor Konstantin Yeremeyev that he register the community. When he failed to do so, the statement continues, Yeremeyev was fined 25,000 Belarusian roubles (84 Norwegian kroner, 10 Euros or 12 US dollars) under Article 193 of the administrative offences code, which prohibits "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure".

Speaking to Forum 18 in Vitebsk on 23 September, the region's official in charge of religious affairs confirmed that the unregistered activity of the Council of Churches Baptists was illegal. "I tried to talk to them, but they have existed like that for three decades,"

Nikolai Stepanenko lamented. He also maintained that there were a further two Old Believer communities in Vitebsk region which did not want registration under the new religion law.

The official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region had harsher words for the unregistered Baptists. "It is very bad that they haven't decided to switch to civilised forms of performing religious rites," Vasili Marchenko complained to Forum 18 on 16 September. "I wish their leadership would recognise that the time of misunderstanding between the state and their organisation has passed." Nowadays, he maintained, the state's relations with religious organisations were "reasonable and businesslike".

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