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BELARUS: Belarusian Orthodox Church®

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox Christian communities can only gain Belarusian state registration if they have the approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop, a government official has told Forum 18 News Service. Also, a church official told Forum 18 that the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) has registered its title as a brand name "so that no other organisation can register with that name." The 2002 law on religion says that registration is compulsory, but does not require Orthodox applications to have the approval of a Moscow Patriarchate bishop. This non-legal, state-enforced requirement restricts the Russian True Orthodox Church, which comes under the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox (People's) Church and catacomb True Orthodox communities.

Orthodox Christian communities may register with the Belarusian state only with the approval of a local Moscow Patriarchate bishop, the official in charge of religious affairs in Brest region, Vasili Marchenko, told Forum 18 News Service on 16 September. Vladimir Martinovich, the Belarusian Orthodox Church's main researcher on new religious movements, confirmed that this was the case on 19 September. Moreover, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) registered its title as a brand name some two years ago, he told Forum 18 in Minsk, "so that no other organisation can register with that name." While the 2002 Belarusian law on religion states that registration is compulsory, it makes no mention of approval by a Moscow Patriarchate bishop in the case of Orthodox applications.

The Simferopol and Crimea diocese of the Russian True Orthodox Church, which comes under the jurisdiction of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad headed by Metropolitan Lavr (Skurla) of East America and New York, has three parishes in Belarus, all of which have been refused registration and are now "illegal," their priest Fr Leonid Plyats told Forum 18 on 20 September. The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad severed ties with the Moscow Patriarchate in 1927 after the latter declared its loyalty to the Soviet Union. Its Synod has somewhat softened its stance towards Moscow following the controversial departure in 2001 of its previous leader, Metropolitan Vitali (Ustinov), and Metropolitan Lavr recently discussed prospects for church reunification with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Abbot Tikhon (Shevkunov) of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Speaking from the village of Zabolotye in Minsk region, Fr Leonid told Forum 18 that court appeals against registration refusals by his parishes in Minsk city and Poddubye village, also in Minsk region, were rejected on 7 and 25 August 2003 respectively. His St John of Kronstadt parish in Zabolotye was refused registration for the second time following a November 2002 state expert analysis, a copy of which has been received by Forum 18. While the document notes that the official Simferopol and Crimea diocesan website lists former Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) priest Plyats among its clergy, it maintains that the Zabolotye parish failed to provide documentation proving its membership of either the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad or the Soviet-era underground Orthodox Church or the Russian Orthodox Church prior to 1927. The analysis also claims that Belarusian law does not provide for "the creation by foreign religious organisations of parishes on the territory of Belarus" and that the charter of the Simferopol and Crimea diocese does not outline any procedure for the formation of parishes outside Ukraine. Fr Leonid, however, insisted to Forum 18 that the diocese does allow for foreign parishes and described how a local judge rejected as unproven even the courtroom assurances of his bishop, Agafangel (Pashkovsky), that the three Orthodox communities were "his people." While the parishes now have three years in which to appeal to the Belarusian Supreme Court, the diocesan website maintains that this does not stop the registration refusals from operating in the meantime. (For further details regarding the three parishes' attempts to register, see F18News 2 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=24).

The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad's parishes are not the only unregistered Orthodox communities in Belarus rendered illegal by the 2002 law. While they "adhere to all Orthodox canons," the state authorities refuse to register the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox (People's) Church, the priest of its 20-strong Minsk parish, Fr Leonid Akolovich, told Forum 18 on 19 September. Led by US-based Archbishop Yuri (Ryzhy) and locally by Bishop Petr (Gushcha) – who is currently in hiding after being convicted of what he claims are trumped-up charges in 1999 – this Church has an unknown number of parishes in Belarus. Prepared to give Forum 18 details concerning only three, Fr Leonid said that the registration application submitted by his own parish in 1995 was rejected by religious affairs officials on the grounds that the Church was "non-traditional and anti-constitutional." Asked whether he had experienced state restrictions more recently, Fr Leonid said that this year local police drew up a protocol accusing him of holding an illegal public gathering when he conducted an outdoor service at a Minsk cemetery to mark Radonitsa (the ninth day after Easter, on which the Orthodox Church remembers the dead.)

Another non-Patriarchate priest out of favour with the Belarusian authorities is Fr Yan Spasyuk, who filed for political asylum in the United States earlier this year after the Grodno regional authorities demolished his church building in the town of Pogranichny in July 2002. According to Fr Leonid, Fr Yan initially joined the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox (People's) Church after leaving the Moscow Patriarchate but has since been accepted by Bishop Aleksandr (Sologub) of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. On attempting to contact the Pogranichny parish on 16 September, Forum 18 was told by a colleague of its legal adviser that Aleksandr Antonyuk was currently in the United States and that no other church representative remained in Belarus. (The US-based Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church was formed by bishops fleeing the Soviet occupation of an area covering present-day western Belarus, previously part of Poland. The group belonged to the Polish Orthodox Church that was granted autocephaly by Constantinople following the First World War. On 30 August 2003 a meeting of its New Jersey synod encompassing all but one parish rejected the validity of Sologub's consecration. The Church is not connected with Archbishop Yuri (Ryzhy) and has no structure in Belarus.)

Various sources in Belarus have told Forum 18 that, quite apart from these various groupings, there are small communities of True Orthodox believers scattered throughout the republic. In the words of one, however, "they have no wish to advertise their presence." On its official website, the Belarusian Orthodox Church's lawyer Zhanna Zhdanovich writes that the local authorities in Gomel region returned a registration application to a True Orthodox community in Svetlogorsk headed by Metropolitan Epifani (Kaminsky) with a request for additional materials, "in particular, supporting the canonicity of the community and its membership of the Russian Orthodox Church prior to 1927." She concludes that "it is clear that the Belarusian state has taken a more principled stance towards religious groups claiming the title 'True Orthodox' than Russia and Ukraine. The groundlessness of the claims of these communities to exclusivity or 'true-ness' is obvious."

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