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BELARUS: Lingerin g legacy of militant atheism

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has found indications that the influence of Soviet-era atheist ideology on Belarus remains strong. Many of the officials who worked for the Soviet-era Council for Religious Affairs reportedly continue to staff the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, which has a far more extensive network of officials than similar bodies in Russia. Also, texts used for instruction in state education maintain, for example, that "Religion's promises to give a person everything that he seeks in it are but illusion and deception." and that "no religion was accorded any preference or subjected to any form of oppression" in Belarus after 1918. Pentecostal Assistant Bishop Naum Sakhanchuk has told Forum 18 that the current repression of non-Orthodox confessions is much more closely connected with this atheist legacy than with state support for the Belarusian Orthodox Church. An anonymous Orthodox source agreed, commenting to Forum 18 that the 2002 religion law was not in fact designed to benefit the Patriarchate. "Now the atheists say it is against sects, but they are waiting for the day when they can persecute everybody."

The influence of Soviet-era atheist ideology upon the Belarus remains strong, several Orthodox and Protestant representatives in the republic have recently suggested to Forum 18 News Service.

According to Baptist Union press secretary German Rodov, Belarus "was a sort of testing ground for the latest weapons in the Soviet anti-religious armoury." Orthodox dean of Grodno (Hrodna) city Fr Aleksandr Veliseichuk similarly pointed out to Forum 18 that the republic was designated to be the first in the Soviet Union "to become 100 per cent atheist." Correspondingly, Grodno's Pentecostal assistant bishop Naum Sakhanchuk maintained, "there were more atheists who were simply indifferent towards religion" running Soviet Russia, whereas Belarus "had more of the 'militant godless' type." Their legacy is so prevalent, according to one anonymous Orthodox source, that Belarus is currently witnessing "the rebirth of dark communist times."

While a statue of Lenin stands in front of Belarusian government buildings on Minsk's Independence Square, this is a not unusual sight in most former Soviet towns and cities. Perhaps uniquely in the former Soviet Union, however, the square's metro station has recently had its name changed BACK to Lenin Square, presbyter of Minsk Reformed Church Aleksei Frolov (Alaksiej Fralou) remarked to Forum 18. And while Belarus may have no government body bearing the Soviet-era name of the Council of Religious Affairs, many of the officials working for the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs are "from the old days," according to German Rodov. Orthodox representatives similarly remarked to Forum 18 that they were often "the same people" who worked in the field prior to 1991, and maintained that the State Committee's Expert Council is staffed largely by former teachers of scientific atheism.

Again, this is not unheard of in the former Soviet Union. By contrast with Russia, however, Forum 18 found the extent of the network of religious affairs officialdom in present-day Belarus to be quite remarkable.

In Russia, there is no centralised national body of full-time officials dealing with religious affairs. The nearest equivalent is the presidential Council for Relations with Religious Organisations, which meets several times a year and over half of whose members are representatives of religious organisations. A typical Russian region has one state official responsible for liaison with religious organisations, often as part of a wider brief of non-related issues.

In Belarus, to Forum 18's knowledge, there are no representatives of religious organisations on any state body dealing with religious affairs, with the exception of Andrei Aleshko, a lawyer to the Belarusian Orthodox Church, who sits alongside approximately 14 academics on the Expert Council attached to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. The State Committee itself – which has at least five specialists at republic level – normally has two full-time officials in each of Belarus's six regions and the capital city of Minsk, Forum 18 was also told. Each of these regions is subdivided into approximately 20 administrative districts, Pentecostal bishop of Vitebsk (Vitsyebesk) Arkadi Supronenko further explained, each of which has its own Department for Relations with Religious and Social Organisations. Typically made up of two or three state officials, its head – who is usually the vice-chairman of the district executive committee – normally deals with religious issues, he said. In addition, said Supronenko, each district has a "commission which monitors compliance with Belarusian legislation on freedom of conscience." According to Vitebsk region's religious affairs official, this body is also usually headed by the district executive committee vice-chairman, but meets "on a social basis." Its approximately four other members are not state officials, Nikolai Stepanenko explained to Forum 18, but might be "a teacher, a doctor or the president of the local collective farm." The task of this body, he said, was to monitor compliance with the

Belarusian law on religion, such as by informing an unregistered religious community that they should register. "The main thing is to ensure that the state doesn't interfere [in religious life] and the Church doesn't become politicised," Stepanenko maintained.

Before Forum 18 posed any questions, one of the two local officials dealing with religious affairs in Brest region stated that, with a broad spectrum of 653 registered religious organisations, Brest was the "most religious region in Belarus," and that the religious situation there was "quiet and peaceful." Asked why it was therefore necessary for the regional administration to employ two full-time religious affairs officials, Vasili Marchenko replied that "mutual understanding [between them] demands constant liaison with the state." This was refuted by Auxiliary Catholic Bishop of Grodno Aleksandr Dziemianko, for example, who assured Forum 18 that "the different confessions can find a common language on their own."

German Rodov pointed to the State Committee's Expert Council as being particularly influential in religious affairs. According to the 2002 law on religion, this body analyses registration applications from religious communities whose creed is "previously unknown" in Belarus and vets imported religious literature and related audio and video material. The Expert Council may also be directed to analyse the ongoing activity of a registered religious organisation, however: In 1997, for example, it concluded that the Minsk Krishnaite community was "a destructive totalitarian sect." (For details of more of its analyses, see F18News 4 and 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=175 and http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177). While none of the representatives of religious confessions with whom Forum 18 spoke reported any problems importing literature, Pastor Viktor Zdanevich of Brest's Fortechnaya Street Baptist Church remarked that state analysis of religious literature was "like getting a car mechanic to perform an operation instead of a surgeon – those experts write God with a small letter but their own with a capital."

Indeed, in a typical passage from his 2002 book "The Basics of Religious Studies," Expert Council chairman Professor Anatoli Kruglov writes: "Religion does not teach a believer to strive to lead a dignified life, to fight for his freedom or against evil and oppression. This is all supposed to be performed for him by supernatural forces, above all, god. All that is left for the believer to do is to be his pathetic petitioner, to behave as a pauper or slave... Religion's promises to give a person everything that he seeks in it are but illusion and deception." Following a section which considers atheism as "the highest form of free thought," Kruglov declares the Marxist-Leninist definition of freedom of conscience to be "authentic" (unlike that of "bourgeois ideology") and claims that, following the incorporation of this principle into Soviet legislation in 1918, "no religion was accorded any preference or subjected to any form of oppression" in Belarus.

While Professor Kruglov's book is intended as an introductory course for students in higher education institutions, a similar tradition of scholarship informs the latest Belarusian study aids for younger pupils. One example acquired by Forum 18 is a 2003 question-and-answer textbook for final-grade high school pupils designed to accompany the new "Man in the World of Culture" course. (See F18News 24 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=90) Here, pupils are asked to choose the correct definitions of "religion" from various options, including "a particular form of social consciousness in which dominant external forces are reflected in a fantastical way in a person's consciousness, and earthly forces take the form of the non-earthly" (correct), "a system of scientific knowledge concerning the salvation of mankind" (incorrect) and "teachings of the 'church fathers' which aim to substantiate the existence of God" (incorrect).

Pentecostal assistant Bishop Naum Sakhanchuk told Forum 18 that he believes the current repression of various non-Orthodox confessions in Belarus to be much more closely connected with this atheist legacy than with state support for the Belarusian Orthodox Church. One anonymous Orthodox source agreed, maintaining that the 2002 religion law was adopted in the interests of the state, and not those of the Church. "It was made out to be for the benefit of the Church so that society would accept it," this source remarked to Forum 18. "Now the atheists say it is against sects, but they are waiting for the day when they can persecute everybody."

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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