

2 April 2003

BELARUS: Non-Moscow Orthodox "banned" from registering

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

State officials insist that the True Orthodox Church, which has three parishes and some 300 adherents, does not exist in Belarus. "There are no such parishes. There is no such Church," Aleksandr Kalinov of the government's Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18 News Service. Not only parishes of the True Orthodox Church, but those of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church have been denied the right to register, while Belarus' president has vowed to use all state forces to protect the unity of the Moscow Patriarchate's Exarchate in the country. "Officially there is no ban on registering Orthodox parishes which are outside the framework of the Moscow Patriarchate," Oleg Gulak of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee told Forum 18. "But in practice – of course there is."

After the rejection by a Minsk court of the suit by the True Orthodox parish of St John of Kronstadt challenging the denial of registration (see separate F18News article), Fr Leonid Plyats told Forum 18 News Service on 1 April that he and his communities are determined to carry on in their battle for legal recognition. However, state officials insist that the True Orthodox Church, which has three parishes and some 300 adherents, does not exist in Belarus. "There are no such parishes. There is no such Church," Aleksandr Kalinov of the government's Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs told Forum 18.

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Gulak declined to say whether he believed the authorities would ever register a non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox parish or not. "The authorities are trying to prevent any such registrations, but we must try to use the courts, public opinion and international community to ensure believers' rights."

Aleksandr Antonyuk, a Grodno-based lawyer and human rights activist who has defended the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox parish in the western border village of Pogranichny, was equally pessimistic. "There is no possibility of opening legal non-Moscow Patriarchate parishes at the moment," he told Forum 18 on 2 April. However, he stressed that no new religious communities of any faith can get registration at the moment.

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has been open in his support for the Moscow Patriarchate and its leader in Belarus, Metropolitan Filaret. "Those that today set as their task the schism of the Church will not achieve it," he told Metropolitan Filaret and other members of the Holy Synod on 12 December. "Here all the forces of the state will be deployed, because the unity of the Church is the guarantee of the unity of our society and the security of the state. You can completely depend on my support." He went further on 7 January during the Orthodox Christmas liturgy in Minsk, declaring that the communist ideology in Belarus has been fully replaced by an Orthodox Christian one.

Gulak describes state efforts to protect the Moscow Patriarchate from rival Orthodox jurisdictions as "interference in the internal affairs of religious communities".

The lack of registration impacts seriously on the rights of non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox to practise their faith. As one of only two post-Soviet republics where unregistered religious activity has been criminalised (in violation of Belarus' international human rights commitments), believers of unregistered communities face the constant threat of punishment if they conduct any communal religious activity. "We've been forced not to conduct any services openly," Fr Leonid told Forum 18. "We can observe the fasts, pray in our homes and meet together in homes. But if I served the liturgy I would be punished."

Fr Leonid claimed that the priest of the neighbouring Russian Orthodox parish had denounced him to the secret police, the KGB (which retains the name of its Soviet-era predecessor), calling on it to punish him for conducting "illegal" services. However, he said the KGB had passed on the denunciation to the local police, who were trying to find ways to catch him. "However, they have no evidence I have broken the law."

Antonyuk reported that Fr Yan Spasyuk, whose Autocephalous Orthodox church in Pogranichny was bulldozed by the authorities

last August, fled Belarus at the beginning of the year and is now seeking asylum. "He received information that he would be arrested on charges of inciting religious enmity," he told Forum 18. Fr Yan's wife and three children remain in Belarus. "So far as I know they have not been touched."

Kalinov, head of the religious affairs department of the Committee, explained to Forum 18 that the Belarusian constitution gives the right to faith, but not to found religious organisations. "That has to be done in accordance with the law." He claimed that Orthodox parishes have to be subject to an Orthodox diocese. Told that the True Orthodox St John of Kronstadt parish is under the Crimean True Orthodox diocese, he declared: "But their statute does not allow them to have parishes outside Ukraine." Asked whether if they changed the statute the ban on registering the parish would be lifted, he responded: "No. That was just one of several reasons."

Kalinov insisted that his description of the True Orthodox Church and its three parishes in Belarus as non-existent, despite the fact that they do exist, does not mean that the state was interfering in religious communities' right to organise themselves as they see fit. Nor, he maintained, did his rejection of the validity of Fr Leonid's priesthood. However, he was adamant. "Fr Leonid has not been ordained by any canonical jurisdiction." He admitted that it is the right of the Church to recognise who is and is not canonical, but insisted that "the state recognises only canonical Churches".

His colleague Vladimir Lameka, deputy chairman of the Committee, went much further in admitting the state's interference in internal Orthodox affairs. "We have one Orthodox Church," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 2 April, "only one. The word 'True' in their title says a lot about the way they look at themselves." However, he declined to say what it told about them and put the phone down.

Despite declaring that the True Orthodox Church "does not exist in Belarus" and describing the Autocephalous Orthodox Church as "an artificial creation", Kalinov denied that there is a ban on registering any Orthodox parishes outside the framework of the Belarusian Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate. "Each individual case is considered separately," he told Forum 18. Asked whether he could envisage that any other Orthodox jurisdictions could ever register parishes in Belarus he declared: "Yes, but not for such communities."

Fr Leonid believes that strong pressure from the Russian Orthodox Church has prevented the state from registering any Orthodox communities outside its jurisdiction and expressed concern about Lukashenko's open avowal of support for the Moscow Patriarchate. "Unfortunately the state listens to the Moscow Patriarchate and doesn't want to offend it," he declared. Antonyuk agreed. "It is my personal view that without any discussion, the Russian Orthodox Church has turned into the ideological department of the president."

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