

8 August 2006

BELARUS: Anti-Protestant education policy persists

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Belarus' state education system continues to teach anti-religious – and particularly anti-Protestant – ideas, Forum 18 News Service has found. Despite protests from religious communities, state textbooks continue to make false allegations such as associating charismatic churches and Hare Krishna devotees with the group behind the fatal gas attack on Tokyo's metro system, claiming that Adventists operate "on the same principle as any fraudster," and depicting the history of Protestantism in Belarus negatively. The impact of such textbooks varies, as does knowledge of them, Forum 18 has found. Forum 18 has spoken to schoolchildren who say that children aged 13 or younger regard one Minsk charismatic church "as a sect," with older pupils adopting a neutral attitude. Some teachers do not share the state's hostile attitude, but others do. In one Minsk school, the headteacher told teachers that 90 per cent of every class must join the Pioneers, a Soviet-style state youth organisation, "but that Baptists and satanists were permitted not to join." In another incident, one teacher told a class that "they shouldn't be friends" with a Protestant pupil.

The Belarusian state education system continues to inculcate its citizens with anti-religious – and particularly anti-Protestant – ideas, Forum 18 News Service has found.

A 2005 Russian-language textbook intended for students in higher education, for example, includes "Christians of the Full Gospel (CFG, neo-Pentecostals), also known as 'charismatics' " along with satanists and Aum Shinrikyo (responsible for the 1995 fatal gas attack in the Japanese capital Tokyo) in a section called "Other Neo-cults". Entitled "Religious Studies" and published in Minsk, Forum 18 recently purchased a copy of the textbook from a large, state-owned bookstore on the Belarusian capital's main street.

A Belarusian-language textbook for secondary school pupils published in 2004, "The Basics of Living Safely" includes six pages on the dangers of "sects" – including Baptists and Adventists. While specific groups are for the most part not named, Baptists are said to have "ignored state obligations such as the registration of marriages and births" and "been characterised by fanaticism and hostility to dissenters." Adventists are alleged to operate "on the same principle as any fraudster."

On 10 November 2004 the leaders of the major Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal and Charismatic unions in Belarus wrote to leading state representatives in protest at this textbook's "false information about Protestant communities" and demanded its withdrawal from schools. They pointed out that a similar complaint about the 2003 Russian-language "Man in the World of Culture" textbook had led to Education Ministry representatives promising to introduce "corresponding changes" on re-publication and when producing future religion-related materials. Hare Krishna devotees were also targeted by this textbook and also complained to the authorities in 2003 (see F18News 24 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=90).

The Education Ministry's 29 December 2004 response, however, rejected the Protestants' complaint. "There is no information in the textbook about the Conference of Churches of Seventh-Day Adventists or the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists in the Republic of Belarus [two of the signatories of the 10 November complaint], only Baptists and Seventh-Day Adventists," states the letter, "and there are known to be many unions and trends among Baptists." The response also claims that the textbook's references to Baptists are purely historical, and that a subsequent passage on "totalitarian sects" bears no relation to their activity. It fails to address the statements claiming that Adventists are associated with fraud.

What is the impact of such textbooks? On 20 July this year Forum 18 interviewed Alina and Yulia, two 17-year-old members of a Minsk charismatic church. They noted that classmates usually have a neutral attitude towards their church, while pupils aged 13 or younger "say it's a sect." Presuming this view to be the influence of teachers and parents – "or the lack of it" – the two girls were not familiar with the textbooks described above. However, Alina told Forum 18 that she had recently studied from a history textbook, whose narrative was accompanied by fictional eyewitness accounts of major events. "The one on how Protestantism came to Belarus in the sixteenth century made out that everything was terrible, when everyone regards it as a golden age. I told the teacher that I was against this view and she said I wasn't the first to say so, and that she agreed."

Some older church members are familiar with the textbooks. Now aged 21, Slava recalled that religion formed a part of the "Man in the World of Culture" course, which he described as "Darwinist". Lena told Forum 18 that she had taken a religious studies course at university: "We even brought [Protestant] Christian music into class, but we had an open-minded teacher and it was 1999." Her friend Tanya described to Forum 18 how she resigned from her teaching post rather than accept the additional role of organiser for

the state-supported Belarusian Republican Youth Union: "It would have meant saying that Protestant churches are bad." Created in 2002, the Youth Union is modelled on the Soviet-era Komsomol Communist Party youth league and is reputed to have some 120,000 members in Belarus.

Also interviewed on 20 July, a Pentecostal mother told Forum 18 of a recent staff meeting in one Minsk school at which the headteacher explained to teachers that 90 per cent of every class must join the Pioneers (who are based on the Soviet-era organisation for 10 to 15-year-olds), "but that Baptists and satanists were permitted not to join." She also described an incident in which one 11-year-old Protestant girl refused to participate in a school game in which a team was called "Jolly Demons": "The teacher made her stand in front of the class and told the other pupils that they shouldn't be friends with her."

As of this September, the same mother told Forum 18, there will no longer be an opportunity for parents to educate children in a religious spirit outside the state system. Signed into law by President Aleksandr Lukashenko on 5 July 2006, "On General Secondary Education" permits home schooling only if a pupil has a sufficiently serious medical condition. Even in such cases, state education representatives are responsible for providing tuition, and the law states in general that parents and guardians "may not interfere in the choice of instruction method (..) made by a teacher in accordance with Belarusian law."

Speaking to Forum 18 in the Belarusian capital on 18 July, the main Baptist Union's elder for Minsk region confirmed continued state intrusion into such religious education as may be legally provided by churches. Gennadi Brutsky described how different state departments conducted up to four checks a day on this summer's Baptist-run youth camp in Kobrin (Brest region), western Belarus, even though all participants held written parental approval: "It made it impossible for us to work."

Brutsky also told Forum 18 that some local authorities continue to try to obtain the names of children involved in Baptist Sunday schools (see F18News 13 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=161). At their congresses, Baptist leaders urge churches not to comply with such illegal requests, he said, but one young pastor recently made the mistake of doing so: "Those children were called into the head teacher's office one by one, threatened and told to leave the Sunday school." Brutsky also described how one state teacher initially spoke to a class positively about church before asking children to raise their hands if they attended Sunday school: "But then the same thing happened." He was unable to provide Forum 18 with further details of these incidents, however: "There is always something like that happening somewhere. We're used to it."

The influence of Soviet-style militant atheism remains strong among state officials (see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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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