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BELARUS: An Orthodox state?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Belarus' President Aleksandr Lukashenko publicly stresses the role of Orthodoxy. However, Forum 18 News Service has found little evidence that state support for the Moscow Patriarchate is more than nominal. For example, every month a network of Ideological Departments sends state policy on topics such as youth, trade or housing to every state organ in the country. However, there appears to be no insistence upon familiarity with Orthodox doctrine. One Orthodox priest commented to Forum 18 that the 12 apostles would be illegal under Belarus' Religion Law. He also noted that registered religious organisations are banned from using state school premises, even outside school hours, and that there have been no substantial moves to introduce Orthodox instruction into state education. Discussing why the state gives nominal support for Orthodoxy, rather than a more active pro-atheist policy, the priest pointed out: "You can make a reservation for it, in which it is tolerated as a museum of culture and turns into something that fulfils 'religious needs' instead of preaching the Gospel."

While President Aleksandr Lukashenko stresses the role of Orthodoxy in Belarus and there is an accepted view among Protestants that the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) is becoming a pillar of state ideology, Forum 18 News Service has found little evidence for this to be the case.

The Baptist Union elder for Minsk region, for example, recently joked to Forum 18 that the Orthodox Church had replaced communist ideology: "They attend all state events," Gennadi Brutsky remarked. "I wouldn't be surprised if we soon see priests blessing intakes of children into the Pioneers!" (Based on the Soviet-era youth organisation.) Musing on the possibility of optional lessons on Orthodoxy in state schools, a Minsk Pentecostal maintained that in Belarus "optional" meant "having to fight for the right not to take part in it. You can't even call your child what you like, the name has to be in the registry office directory. When I suggested Dominic, they said 'How about Dmitri?'"

Despite the prominence of different confessions at different stages in Belarusian history (see F18News 13 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=183), President Aleksandr Lukashenko has repeatedly affirmed his support for Orthodoxy. In recent years he has variously described the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) as "the basis of our faith," "the most important origin of correct decision-making at state level" and, prospectively, "one of the most important pillars of our state." In addition to similar sentiments expressed during his November 2005 meeting with the Church's synod, the Belarusian leader's official website notes, Lukashenko referred to state support for both Orthodox church construction and seminary education. In the absence of much commercial advertising in Belarus, Forum 18 noted collection boxes for the Belarusian Orthodox Church prominently sited in every Minsk metro station and most major shops.

According to the 2002 Religion Law, the Orthodox Church plays "the defining role in the state traditions of the Belarusian people," something which government officials are obliged to take into account in their dealings with other religious organisations. In its 2003 concordat-style co-operation agreement, the Belarusian state also guarantees the Orthodox Church "the right of ecclesiastical jurisdiction on its canonical territory" and endorses its collaboration with a broad range of government ministries (see F18News 24 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=89).

While the Belarusian Orthodox Church is certainly spared the restrictions on worship premises encountered by many Protestant churches (see most recently F18News 28 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=819), for example, Forum 18 has found government support for it to be largely nominal, however.

Recently speaking to Forum 18 in Minsk, for example, a former Belarusian state television employee described how, revived approximately three years ago, a network of Ideological Departments now sends state policy on topics such as youth, trade or housing to every state organ in the country, "only private commercial structures are exempt." Every month, according to the former employee, these organs then hold "information days" at which their staff members are addressed about the current topic. Forum 18 presumed that, in the case of state television, journalists would subsequently have to prepare material based upon the information received from the Ideological Department. "No, the material is already prepared!" the employee replied, before describing how the Orthodox Church's state-supported, majority position in Belarus featured during a month focussing upon nationality issues.

While the method is Soviet, coverage in one month's topic does not amount to a new state ideology, and there appears in practice to

be no insistence upon familiarity with Orthodox doctrine. Although a Minsk mother told Forum 18 that a recent questionnaire from her child's kindergarten included "Will your child learn Christian culture of the Orthodox tradition?" among more innocuous questions, young Protestants reported that tuition in schools is anti-Protestant rather than pro-Orthodox (see F18News 8 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=824) and that very few of their fellow pupils regularly attend Orthodox worship.

"You need 20 people for a community to become legal, so the apostles wouldn't have qualified," a Belarusian Orthodox critic of the 2002 Religion Law commented to Forum 18 on 22 July. He noted that this and some of the law's other provisions have not actually helped the Belarusian Orthodox Church, despite enjoying its backing. In particular, he pointed out, Article 9 prohibits registered religious organisations from using state school premises even outside school hours. Due to a shortage of suitable premises for religious instruction attached to their church buildings, he said, Orthodox parishes used to do this quite frequently prior to the Law, "but now we don't have any possibility to rent state schools for Sunday school classes."

Despite the 2003 Concordat and subsequent agreements with the Belarusian Education Ministry, the Orthodox priest reported that there has in practice been no substantial move to introduce Orthodox instruction into the state education system. Both the Religion and Education Laws emphasise the secular character of state education, and the latter permits state education institutions to work with registered religious organisations only outside school hours. In an echo of Gennadi Brutsky's fears, the priest described to Forum 18 how pupils at a school run by the Orthodox Church under the auspices of an ordinary Minsk state school were taken to pay their respects at the grave of Belarusian Communist Party leader Petr Masherov, after whom the state school is named. He added, however, that the Church has found it difficult to find enough pupils to make up the few classes of the Orthodox school.

Distributed in Minsk by Vladimir Chertovich's Orthodox Initiative, a leaflet picked up by Forum 18 vaunts the fourth publication in Belarus of "The Law of God" by Fr Seraphim Slobodsky of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. In publishing 90,000 copies of the catechism since 1994 with the blessing of Belarusian Orthodox leader Metropolitan Filaret (Vakhromeyev) of Minsk and Slutsk, it states, the organisation hopes that "our great thousand-year-old Orthodox culture will be treasured by every Belarusian and every citizen of Belarus. And above all, that 'The Law of God' will become a book in constant use in every Belarusian home."

Forum 18 discovered that the work – a thick volume preserving pre-1917 Russian orthography and prefaced by a photograph of President Lukashenko flanked by Russian patriarch Aleksii II and Metropolitan Filaret – is on sale at state bookstores in Minsk in addition to Orthodox Initiative's shop, "Orthodox Book". Notably, however, it does not carry any state endorsement. The Orthodox priest with whom Forum 18 spoke doubted that the book would ever be employed in state schools, especially as the Belarusian Orthodox Church severed its links with Orthodox Initiative in December 2005. According to a March 2006 statement signed by Metropolitan Filaret, this was partly because the organisation – famously sued in 2000 for publication of antisemitic literature – circulated "ideas and views sometimes incompatible with an Orthodox worldview and causing division in Church and society."

No longer enjoying Metropolitan Filaret's blessing, Orthodox Initiative has been operating as Christian Initiative since January 2006. Over the past decade the government has largely succeeded in crushing all Orthodox communities that function outside the framework of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), which has even registered the term "Belarusian Orthodox Church" as a trademark (see F18News 6 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177). The government has refused registration to parishes of all rival jurisdictions, including the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463 and 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

The Orthodox priest with whom Forum 18 spoke noted the continued emphasis upon atheist ideology in the higher education system, with Orthodox theology graduates reportedly unable to find employment there. (On the state's atheist influence in general, see F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186). Forum 18 asked why, given the prevalence over religion of what Belarusian textbooks describe as "free-thinking", the state would choose nominal support for Orthodoxy rather than a more pro-atheist policy. Joseph Stalin opened churches after finding that he couldn't destroy Orthodoxy, the priest pointed out: "You can make a reservation for it, in which it is tolerated as a museum of culture and turns into something that fulfils 'religious needs' instead of preaching the Gospel." (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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