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RUSSIA: Compulsory Orthodox lessons to continue, Belgorod official insists

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Pastor Andrei Karchev of Kingdom of God Pentecostal Church objects to the compulsory Orthodox Culture classes which have just begun again in schools in his home region of Belgorod for the second year running. "When only one confession is taught - when the textbook emphasises that only Orthodox Christians are Christians while others are sects - in our opinion, this is bad," he complained to Forum 18 News Service. However, Karchev notes that although the subject is officially compulsory, unofficially he and other parents have been able to withdraw their children from the classes. Such children's grades suffer as they get no mark for the subject. Another local Protestant pastor pointed out to Forum 18 that not all teachers in Belgorod Region follow the Russian Orthodox line. "One said openly that she doesn't believe in God, but they've been told to teach the subject." Olga Yeliseyeva, the specialist on Orthodox Culture at Belgorod Regional Education Authority, insisted to Forum 18 that the region has no intention of halting teaching of the subject.

The authorities in the south-western region of Belgorod have no intention of halting compulsory instruction in Orthodox Culture to some 140,000 state school pupils, a local educational official has insisted to Forum 18 News Service. Olga Yeliseyeva, the specialist on Orthodox Culture at Belgorod Regional Education Authority, pointed out to Forum 18 that educational reforms currently under review in Russia's federal parliament passed only their first reading on 11 September. "They could still be changed," she remarked to Forum 18 on 24 September.

Belgorod is the Russian region that has gone furthest in promoting the Foundations of Orthodox Culture subject, the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church. Elsewhere in Russia, the situation is more patchy, with some regions or cities imposing the subject, others offering it as a voluntary subject and others refusing to do so at all (see F18News 25 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1022).

Yeliseyeva acknowledged that the proposed education reforms could spell the end of Orthodox Culture classes in Belgorod Region if adopted in their current form. This is because they would remove the post-Soviet division of the curriculum into federal, regional and individual school components by giving the federal authorities sole responsibility for setting educational standards.

As elsewhere in Russia, classes on Orthodox Culture have been introduced into Belgorod Region as part of the regional component (see F18News 24 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1021).

According to Yeliseyeva, however, there are to date no plans to change the 3 July 2006 local law that introduced Orthodox Culture or to drop it from the curriculum. The Education Ministry has promised that the subject can continue even if the latest educational reforms are adopted, she added. "Although we don't know what form it will take. They say there will be a culturological subject called 'Spiritual-Moral Culture', but it isn't clear what will be in it, or whether it will be compulsory." Her understanding of the situation corresponds with the Education Ministry's position as sent to Forum 18 on 20 September (see F18News 24 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1021).

While noting his personal attachment to the Russian Orthodox Church during his 13 September visit to Belgorod, President Vladimir Putin publicly rebuffed the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course, as it is more commonly called, by stressing his belief that Russia's constitutional separation of religion and the state should not be altered (see F18News 24 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1021).

Opposition to compulsory Orthodox Culture classes within Belgorod Region has come from the Protestant community. "Religion should be a matter of conscience for each individual," Pastor Andrei Karchev of Kingdom of God Pentecostal Church in the town of Shebekino remarked to Forum 18 on 24 September. While in favour of Christians being able to have a say in what is taught in state schools, he thought religion should not be compulsory. "When only one confession is taught - when the textbook emphasises that only Orthodox Christians are Christians while others are sects - in our opinion, this is bad. It is all presented as the state religion - if you are Russian you should be Orthodox. What will children who are taught this come to think about others who believe in the same God and read the same Bible?"

While Orthodox Culture is legally compulsory in Belgorod Region, Pastor Karchev told Forum 18 that in practice parents are able to withdraw children from classes by submitting a written statement to the headteacher. His own three children do not follow the subject in this way: "They either go to another lesson or sit in the school library, depending upon the situation." While they are the only three pupils in the school not to follow Orthodox Culture, added the pastor, the teachers and other children do not make them feel like pariahs, "thank God".

Pastor Karchev acknowledged that the absence of a mark for the compulsory subject will influence his children's overall grades, but he was more concerned about its legal status. While the course is a legal requirement, parents are able to withdraw their children only under an oral agreement, he pointed out. "How will it be in a year or two? I would like to proceed in a civilised way and go to court with a view to making the subject elective. This should be fixed in law, not on oral promises."

Based in Belgorod city, Pastor Vladimir Rybant of New Life Pentecostal Church also told Forum 18 on 24 September that in practice parents there may withdraw their children from Orthodox Culture classes. Highlighting the considerable variation in the way the subject is taught even within Belgorod Region, he said that his own nine-year-old son is following the subject for the second year. "He really likes it. There isn't anything particularly Orthodox about it, just emphasis on the need to be good. He also has to draw a lot – little houses and Orthodox churches – and he likes drawing." The lack of detailed instruction, thought Pastor Rybant, was either due to the pupils' young age or because "the teachers themselves don't know anything. One said openly that she doesn't believe in God, but they've been told to teach the subject."

Pastor Rybant told Forum 18 that he and his wife are nevertheless monitoring what their son is taught. "If we begin not to like it we'll write and withdraw him from classes."

Both Pentecostal pastors confirmed to Forum 18 that the Orthodox Culture course sparked friction when it was first introduced a year ago, but that they and other Protestant pastors have not heard of any problems in Belgorod Region more recently. Yeliseyeva, the regional educational authority official, maintained to Forum 18 that parents have been able to withdraw their children from the twice-weekly classes ever since their introduction. She also pointed out that only 60 pupils have been withdrawn so far.

The original intention appears to have been to introduce a strictly compulsory subject, however. Soon after the course began on 1 September 2006, children at Belyanka village school in Shebekino district – including from Pastor Karchev's church – were forced to dig potatoes on the fields of a local Orthodox women's monastery, the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice reported. Belyanka pupils also began to call classmates whose parents attended Kingdom of God Church "sectarians", according to church administrator Olga Zis. Regional teaching materials seen by Kommersant newspaper the same month recommended that pupils should know various Orthodox prayers by heart, as well as urging the opening of Orthodox prayer rooms in schools.

"During the study of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture our children and the children of our church members will be instilled with an Orthodox worldview, and we are raising our children according to a different worldview," a group of Protestant pastors from Belgorod Region wrote in a 12 September 2006 open letter to President Putin. "We are opposed to our children attending and studying the Foundations of Orthodox Culture, as study of this subject is not only about culture, but to a great extent about the religious traditions of the Orthodox Church."

The Foundations of Orthodox Culture course is secular, culturological and gives pupils factual knowledge about Orthodoxy as "the traditional national culture", Aleksandr Sergeev, Belgorod Region's assistant regional prosecutor, responded to the Protestants on 27 September 2006.

Parents of Belyanka village pupils also leapt to the course's defence. A 24 September 2006 statement signed by 227 of them urged the regional authorities to ignore "machinations by opponents of the rebirth of patriotism in future generations" and suggested that it was beneficial for "pupils professing a different faith to know the culture of the country and the people among whom they are living." Published by Belgorod and Stary Oskol Orthodox diocese, it also suggests that there is nothing improper about state school pupils digging potatoes for an Orthodox monastery.

"Why do you call the evangelical Kingdom of God Church 'opponents of the rebirth of patriotism in future generations'?" Belyanka's Protestant parents responded in their own October 2006 open statement. "Do you think that people who have no connection with Orthodoxy cannot be patriots of their country?" They acknowledged that pupils of a different faith should know the culture of the country in which they live. "But, take note, we live not in the Orthodox Church, but in a multiconfessional state." (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>

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