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BELARUS: State subsidies for "traditional" Confessions?

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

A Belarusian religious affairs official has told Forum 18 News Service that Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism and Lutheranism are "clearly defined as traditional religions" by the republic's new law on religion and so receive state support. However, the law does not call these confessions "traditional," but describes the Orthodox Church as "playing the defining role in the state traditions of the Belarusian people." The official also said that a religious organisation given access to a school "will be Orthodox, Catholic or Lutheran and not New Apostolic, Krishnaite or Baha'i." Catholic representatives, however, have criticised the new law as it contains no provision for religious education in state schools. While the Belarusian Orthodox Church's access to state institutions appears to vary from region to region, it does receive state financial aid, unlike other confessions. A Belarusian Orthodox spokesman implied that this was justified since Protestants build churches "with western money." Forum 18 found little evidence of significant contact between western churches and Belarusian Protestants, however.

Now that Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism and Lutheranism are "clearly defined as traditional religions" by the preamble of the new Belarusian law on religion, they receive corresponding state support for their development, the official in charge of religious affairs in Vitebsk (Vitsyebk) region remarked to Forum 18 News Service on 23 September. Asked how the preamble is applied in practice, Nikolai Stepanenko said that the state confines its choice of partners for spiritual and moral work in the educational and social spheres to the five confessions it cites. Forum 18 notes that the 2002 religion law's preamble does not in fact call any of the aforementioned confessions "traditional," although it does describe the Orthodox Church as "playing the defining role in the state traditions of the Belarusian people."

If a religious organisation is granted access to a state school, according to Stepanenko, "it will be Orthodox, Catholic or Lutheran and not New Apostolic, Krishnaite or Baha'i." Speaking to Forum 18 on 17 September, however, in Grodno (Hrodna) the auxiliary Catholic bishop's principal criticism of the new law was that it does not contain any mechanism for the introduction of religious education into state schools. Religious instruction is currently not permitted in Belarusian Ministry of Education institutions, maintained Auxiliary Bishop Aleksandr Dziemianko. Consequently, he said, the two catechism classes that Grodno's Catholic cathedral of St Francis Xavier is presently able to offer on its premises fall well short of catering for the approximately 3,000 Catholic pupils in the parish's 12 state schools.

Mikola Sharakh, the parish council chairman of the Greek Catholic Church of St Paraskeva in Polotsk (Polatsk), Vitebsk region, similarly remarked to Forum 18 on 24 September that, despite being registered, his community does not have access to schools, the army "or anyone who is not already a member of the church." A Roman Catholic source who wished not to be identified further complained that the Catholic Church is not allowed access to the state media, hospitals or prisons in Belarus: "We can visit in individual cases but not in any schematic way."

While some non-Orthodox interviewees assumed that the Belarusian Orthodox Church enjoyed privileged access to state institutions throughout Belarus, Forum 18 found some variation in this situation. Echoing the Catholic representatives, the Orthodox dean of the city of Grodno, Fr Aleksandr Veliseichuk, complained that, unlike in neighbouring Poland, the religion law did not allow catechism in state schools. By contrast, the dean of the central district of Vitebsk city, Fr Aleksandr Rakhunok, reported that his diocese currently provides courses in "the Foundations of Orthodox Culture" and religious studies in four secondary schools in the city under an experimental agreement with the Belarusian Ministry of Education.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 23 September, Fr Aleksandr also outlined the extensive social work carried out by Vitebsk Orthodox diocese. Over a dozen brotherhoods and sisterhoods visit children's and old people's homes and six prisons, he said, while the diocese also runs various projects providing material and medical support to the poor, including a monastery hostel for the homeless. Orthodox priests are permitted to hold services at one military base, added Fr Aleksandr, emphasising, however, that all this activity was "solely down to our own efforts."

While the more immediate concern of most of the Protestant representatives with whom Forum 18 spoke was securing and ensuring the right to worship of their own members, the Pentecostal bishop of Vitebsk region did point out on 22 September that positive relations with the local state authorities allowed Pentecostal communities to carry out significant social ministry within that area. Every year Arkadi Supronenko's own Good News church in central Vitebsk supports 30 school pupils from low-income families

selected by the local district executive committee, he said, while it has also held a summer camp for 100 similar children without obstruction. Also on 22 September, Natalya Kozelova of Vitebsk's Baha'i group notably reported that her community had encountered no obstacles to holding cultural events at state institutions for the elderly and disabled.

When it comes to state support for construction of places of worship, the discrepancy between the Belarusian Orthodox Church and all other confessions appears more marked, however. Evangelical Protestant churches often face opposition from the state authorities to building new places of worship (See F18News 8 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=157), and the Catholic Church receives "no financial aid whatsoever" from the state, according to Auxiliary Bishop Aleksandr Dziemianko. In Vitebsk, by contrast, the state provides most of the funding for the "restoration" – in fact the almost complete reconstruction - of the Orthodox churches of the Annunciation, Resurrection and St Olga and the cathedral of the Dormition, Fr Aleksandr Rakhunok told Forum 18.

Fr Aleksandr also maintained that Protestant churches are built "with western money" and so were not in need of material assistance. Vladimir Martinovich of the Belarusian Orthodox Church's Venerable Iosif of Volotsk Consultation and Information Centre further claimed to Forum 18 that the Protestants are "creating the myth that they are persecuted, that they aren't allowed to build" in order to attract the sympathy and donations of western sponsors. "They say, 'we are growing, despite difficulties, thanks to your help,'" he remarked. Forum 18 found little evidence of significant contact with western churches by Belarusian Protestants, however, and one commented that the state's policies were now in fact "effectively keeping Protestant churches to a minimum."

A printable map of Belarus may be found at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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