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RUSSIA: Putin sounds final bell for Orthodox culture classes?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Non-Orthodox parents – whether of other faiths or no faith – have long complained that the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course in schools is compulsory and catechetical, not culturological. But Forum 18 News Service notes that the Russian Orthodox Church's efforts to promote it could now flounder after President Vladimir Putin's remarks in mid-September in Belgorod – the region where imposition of the subject has gone furthest. Stressing Russia's constitutional separation of religion and state, Putin added, "if anyone thinks that we should proceed differently, that would require a change to the Constitution. I do not believe that is what we should be doing now." But it remains unclear how religion will be taught in state schools. Reforms now in parliament would abolish the regional mechanism through which the Foundations of Orthodox Culture has been introduced. In a position paper sent to Forum 18, however, the Education Ministry says that the reforms will also allow each individual school to determine curriculum content, "taking into account regional or national particularities, school type, educational requirements and pupils' requests".

The Russian Orthodox Church's ambitious attempt to make inroads into the state education system appeared to flounder this month when President Vladimir Putin publicly rebuffed the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course. Forum 18 News Service notes that parents of other faiths or no faith have long complained that – contrary to Church assurances – the subject is in practice compulsory and catechetical rather than elective and culturological.

Previous Orthodox Church efforts to co-opt the state in restricting rival religious influence – such as through the 1997 Religion Law – would not have been felt by most citizens. Forum 18 points out that - with a potential audience of millions of schoolchildren - Russia's political leadership cannot afford to treat the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course lightly.

Putin made his remarks in response to fears that the subject could be jettisoned under current reforms to the educational system: "Our Constitution says that the Church is separate from the state. You know how I feel, including towards the Russian Orthodox Church. But if anyone thinks that we should proceed differently, that would require a change to the Constitution. I do not believe that is what we should be doing now."

The president was speaking during a 13 September visit to Belgorod, the region that has gone furthest in embracing the Foundations of Orthodox Culture. For the past academic year the course has been compulsory for all its pupils (see F18News 25 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1023).

Putin's comments also come shortly after Russia's parliament began consideration of educational reforms Church supporters say are designed to sideline the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course. Passing their first reading on 11 September, the amendments to various laws would allocate responsibility for setting educational standards to the federal government from 1 January 2008. In particular, they would abolish post-Soviet provisions granting regional authorities and individual schools the right to determine up to 25 per cent of the core curriculum. It is at the regional level that the Russian Orthodox Church's drive to introduce the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course has been most successful.

Asked about the impact of the proposed reforms on the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course on 20 September, an Education Ministry spokesperson would not enter into discussion but gave Forum 18 a copy of the Ministry's position.

While under the reforms the scope of the school curriculum would be decided on the federal level, the undated statement confirms, each individual school would determine its content "taking into account regional or national particularities, school type, educational requirements and pupils' requests." In this way, maintains the Ministry, "the choice of spiritual and moral upbringing (..) will be made as close as possible to the recipients of educational services."

The precise content of such tuition remains unclear, however. According to the Ministry's statement, the Russian Orthodox Church's November 2006 proposal for two hours per week of Orthodox Culture to be included in the basic curriculum for all grades was referred to the Russian Academy of Education for consideration as part of the "spiritual-moral component" of the new state standard. Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant centralised religious organisations were also asked for their proposals. Then, in May 2007, Academy representatives reported the start of ongoing work on "a new educational field – Spiritual-Moral Culture".

Aleksandr Krutov, a pro-Orthodox deputy elected to represent the nationalist Rodina faction, insists that the underlying aim of the educational reforms is to scrap the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course. The Education Ministry's assurances to the contrary are unsupported and so unconvincing, he told parliament on 11 September, especially "taking into account the negative position on this issue repeatedly uttered by Ministry bosses."

Previously an assistant director at the Education Ministry's Department of State Policy and Normative-Legal Regulation in Education did maintain that the proposed amendments would make study of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture possible only within the framework of a more general subject, the Foundations of World Religions. "Children will also study the foundations of Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Protestantism," Natalya Tretyak told the daily newspaper Kommersant in November 2006.

The Education Ministry at first appeared to be behind the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course. In 2002 it issued a recommended syllabus that included a detailed examination of Orthodox ethics and worship practice. "The Education Ministry believes it is one of its tasks to make it possible for all those who wish to study the foundations of Orthodox culture, which for many years was inaccessible to many generations of Russian citizens," then Education Minister Vladimir Filippov told RIA Novosti news agency in February 2004. On Ekho Moskvyy radio the same month, he suggested that "every school should decide whether to introduce it or not, taking into account the position of parents."

The 1997 Religion Law permits religious organisations to teach religion to state school pupils outside the framework of the educational programme with their and their parents' or guardians' consent (Article 5, Part 4). The Russian Orthodox Church argues that the Foundations of Orthodox Culture is not religious instruction and so may form part of the educational programme. However, as the 1992 Education Law prohibits activity by religious organisations in state educational institutions (Article 1, Part 5), regular teachers - rather than clergy - take lessons.

With growing reports that the Foundations of Orthodox Culture amounts in practice to compulsory religious instruction (see F18News 25 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1022), the positions of the Education Ministry and Russian Orthodox Church diverged. When he tried to talk about progress on a History of World Religions textbook, current Education Minister Andrei Fursenko was catcalled at the Russian Orthodox Church's January 2006 Moscow Christmas Lectures. Shouts of "Who needs that?" and "Do you live in Russia, or where?" subsided only after Patriarch Aleksii II appealed for calm.

By late 2006 the Education Ministry acknowledged that it could not influence regional educational authorities over the teaching of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture and requested the Public Chamber's view. A 27 November meeting of three relevant Public Chamber committees produced a statement stressing the plurality of ethnicities, religions and worldviews in Russia, all of which "have equal rights to realisation of their educational requirements in state schools". Free choice should be the guiding principle in the study of one or other religious culture in state schools, it recommended, and course content "should respect the lawful interests and rights of citizens irrespective of their attitude towards religion". By early 2007, the Education Ministry's Social Committee was recommending a single culturological World Religions course taught using a textbook compiled by the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Sensing the state's shift, Orthodox Church leaders leapt to the defence of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course. At the January 2005 Christmas Lectures, the patriarch dismissed the Foundations of World Religions proposal as offering "knowledge that is purely informational, which cannot sow the seeds of goodness in a child's soul". The head of the Department of External Church Relations, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, maintained that it was "a dubious religious studies course taught by people distant from what they teach".

At the same time, Church leaders continued to insist that their own course provided knowledge about Orthodoxy rather than religious instruction, and that the cultural foundations of the three other faiths commonly regarded as traditional in Russia – Islam, Judaism and Buddhism – could be taught in areas where their adherents predominate. "We do not at all wish to create our own ideological monopoly in education," the patriarch told Orthodox newspaper Pravoslavnaya Moskva in June 2004. "Still less do we wish to transfer the responsibility of the moral and spiritual upbringing of children and teenagers to state schools, as is sometimes alleged."

Not all Orthodox representatives agree. "Despite the patriarch's repeated statements that the subject should be culturological, it is obvious that Divine Law [pre-1917 Orthodox catechism] is being dragged into schools, and in its most unfortunate form," Fr Petr Meshcherinov of the Patriarchal Centre for the Spiritual Development of Children and Youth at Moscow's Danilov Monastery remarked at a November 2006 round table on church youth work. While in favour of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture featuring in school curricula, Metropolitan Mefodi of Astana and Almaty (Kazakhstan) does not agree "with what we see in Russia in particular – that it takes place by force and under pressure," according to a 4 April 2007 Interfax report.

In addition to the way in which the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course is taught in some regions (see F18News 25 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1022), such concerns are sparked by views held by some clergy. Addressing the January 2003 Christmas Lectures, for example, Fr Yevgeni Sheshin from Samara and Syzran diocese insisted that the term "the Russian people" ["rossiisky narod", encompassing numerous ethnicities] was "social heresy". "It isn't true what we are told, that the

Russian people is multicultural," he remarked. "This is a mononational state." Arguing that all state schools should be "culturally Russian" ["russky", denoting ethnic Russians], Fr Yevgeni described the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course as "an enlightenment tool" that "summons children and their parents to church".

Robust opposition from both academic and Muslim circles ultimately appears to have been instrumental in preventing broader state patronage of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture. "Even if one accepts that the course really is 'the Foundations of Orthodox Culture' and not 'the Foundations of Orthodox Belief'," representatives of the Russian Academy of Sciences wrote in a 23 July 2007 open letter to President Putin, "such a course should not be introduced into a multiethnic, multiconfessional country."

According to the Council of Muftis chairman, the idea that every Russian citizen should know the Orthodox culture and history of Russia means "foisting upon the whole of society the idea of the superiority of one culture and one people over the rest". The Foundations of Orthodox Culture course runs counter to the 1993 Constitution, Ravil Gainutdin maintained at a 30 January 2007 Moscow meeting of regional social organisations.

The rector of Moscow Islamic University stresses that Muslims in Russia are not recent immigrants. "All our generations – as far back as I know – are buried here," Marat Murtazin told Forum 18 in March 2007. However, he rejected parallel tuition of the Foundations of Islamic Culture as "a disastrous road for Russia". He said those advocating the Foundations of Orthodox Culture course are either trying to make everyone Orthodox – "and we're categorically opposed to that" - or to divide Russia into spheres of influence. "'These are our Orthodox and that's your Muslim area.' But that doesn't correspond with the principle of one Russia, unity." (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>

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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