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BELARUS: State official vetoes foreign Orthodox, Catholic priests

By Olga Glace, Forum 18

In early June the senior state religious affairs official rejected a request from the Catholic Bishop of Vitebsk for permission for a priest from Poland to replace another who is leaving. Leonid Gulyako has already in 2018 rejected another Polish Catholic priest and two Orthodox priests from Russia.

In early June Belarus rejected a request by the Catholic Bishop of Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] in north-eastern Belarus for permission for a priest from Poland to come to serve in the diocese to replace one who is leaving. This brings to four the number of foreign clergy known to Forum 18 so far in 2018 to have been denied the state permission required for foreign citizens to conduct religious work in Belarus. Two were Orthodox priests from Russia and the fourth was also a Catholic priest from Poland.

A further Catholic priest - a Russian citizen - was rejected for the third time in November 2017 and remains in Vitebsk awaiting the result of a further application (see below).

The government's Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Leonid Gulyako takes all decisions to grant or withhold such permission and is not required to give reasons (see below).

The 68-year-old Gulyako has been the senior state religious affairs official since December 2005, since October 2006 as Plenipotentiary. In recent years he has frequently criticised the Catholic Church. In 2016 he accused unspecified Catholic priests of carrying out "destructive" work. He also threatened to revoke the state permission to exist of Jehovah's Witness communities, though he has not done so (see F18News 14 March 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2157).

In spring 2018, Plenipotentiary Gulyako rejected two Orthodox priests from Russia invited by Archbishop Dimitry (Drozdov) of Vitebsk to serve as parish priests in his diocese. Unofficially, the diocese was told the government wants local people to be trained to serve as clergy (see below).

Fr Krzysztof Poswiata, a Polish Catholic priest who ministered in Gatovo in Minsk Region, was forced to leave Belarus on 30 April after the authorities refused to extend his permission. The senior official controlling religion in Minsk Regional Executive Committee said Fr Poswiata's traffic offences were the reason for the decision. Catholic leaders claimed this was an excuse and that the state is pursuing a policy of reducing the number of foreign Catholic priests serving in Belarus (see below).

At least one Orthodox priest and at least four Catholic priests were denied such state permissions in 2017, with many more in earlier years (see below).

Officials in the Ideology, Culture and Youth Departments of Regional Executive Committees in Minsk City, Brest Region, and Mogilev Region denied to Forum 18 on 7 and 8 June that Plenipotentiary Gulyako had issued any such denials in 2017 or 2018 so far to foreign religious workers invited to their Regions. Officials from the Ideology Departments in the other two Regions – Gomel and Grodno - refused to give Forum 18 any information by phone.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako also rejects applications by local religious leaders for foreigners to visit for short-term religious purposes. The Full Gospel Pentecostal Church was denied permission in 2017 for Polish pastor Pawel Godawa to attend a conference (see below).

Young Orthodox and Catholic seminarians of military age were suddenly called up to military service in May due to delays in the Plenipotentiary's Office, but this was soon overturned after protests (see below).

Plenipotentiary's unchallenged power

The state has tight control over foreign clergy. Under a January 2008 Council of Ministers Decree, amended in July 2010, stating the procedure for inviting foreigners for religious purposes, a registered religious organisation should send an application for such permission to the Plenipotentiary's Office a month in advance. The senior religious affairs official has sole discretion in deciding

whether religious work by a foreign citizen is "necessary". He may refuse a foreign religious worker's permission for such work without giving any reason. Only belief communities that have state permission to exist can issue invitations to foreigners to work with them (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

Plenipotentiary Gulyako takes all decisions as to whether to grant or withhold permission for foreign citizens personally, Natalya Kolyadchik, head of the Ideology and Religion Department of Minsk Regional Executive Committee, Sergei Fadeenkov of Vitebsk Regional Ideology Department and Denis Davydov of Gomel Regional Ideology and Youth Department told Forum 18 separately between 7 and 11 June. Such decisions are communicated directly to the religious leader who has applied to invite the foreigners.

A religious leader unhappy with such a denial could challenge the decision – like any other official decision – by lodging a case within a month in the courts. Forum 18 is not aware of any such challenges, at least in recent years.

If Plenipotentiary Gulyako grants such permission to conduct religious work, he also specifies the time for which such permission is valid. The maximum time period is one year, but can often be as short as three months. This means that religious leaders seeking to renew such permission for foreign citizens have to lodge paperwork frequently, with no guarantee that Gulyako will approve their application, even if an individual has served in Belarus for many years.

If Gulyako grants such permission to a foreign citizen, the Regional Executive Committee's Ideology, Culture and Youth Department will then issue a certificate. This specifies in which single religious community the individual can work, and the exact dates for which permission is given (usually three months, six months or one year).

"On halting work in the above parish," a typical certificate seen by Forum 18 tells the individual, "the certificate is subject to return to the Ideology, Culture and Youth Department" in the Region which has issued it.

This effectively confines the religious activity of the foreign citizen to one registered religious community. This prevents, for example, a foreign Catholic priest saying Mass even in a neighbouring parish (see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1997).

Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, Baptist and Seventh-day Adventist leaders have been able to get such permission for foreign citizens to serve in their local communities.

Catholic priest Fr Vyacheslav Barok insists that it is wrong that the government chooses who can or cannot lead a religious community. "They decide whether to give permission or a denial looking at photos and names of the priests," he told Forum 18 on 23 May. "They have no right to do this – it's the Bishop who should make the choice."

Fr Barok suggested that the function of the Plenipotentiary's Office is to liaise between the State and religious communities, but in fact "the Plenipotentiary's Office is the weakest link which impedes our work".

Latest Catholic priest rejection

On 4 June, Plenipotentiary Gulyako rejected the application by Bishop Aleg Butkevich of Vitebsk for Catholic priest Fr Karol Prandzioch to come from Poland to serve in the diocese to replace another Polish priest who is leaving voluntarily.

The bishop intended Fr Prandzioch to serve in the parish of the Mother of God of Fatima in the town of Shumilino, 40 kms (25 miles) from Vitebsk, the parish priest Fr Andrzej Juchniewicz told Forum 18 on 12 June. The parish is in the care of a religious order, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and Fr Prandzioch is also a priest of this order.

"This is a hard blow for us, as there are only four Oblate missionaries serving in Belarus," Fr Juchniewicz lamented to Forum 18. "Now we'll have to clone ourselves twice or three times."

Fr Prandzioch said he was given no reason for the denial. But he has not given up hope of coming to serve in Shumilino and hopes a further attempt will be made next year. "God has his own way," he told Forum 18 from Poland on 12 June.

Fadeenkov of Vitebsk Regional Ideology Department refused to tell Forum 18 the reason for the denial to Fr Prandzioch. "Send all your questions to Minsk, to the Plenipotentiary," he told Forum 18 with apparent irritation on 13 June. He then put the phone down.

Two Russian Orthodox priests rejected

Archbishop Dimitry (Drozdov) sought to invite two priests from Russia to serve as parish priests in his Vitebsk Diocese. "They were not yet serving in the country – the Archbishop wanted them to come to serve," Fadeenkov of Vitebsk Regional Ideology Department told Forum 18 on 7 June. "He applied for each of them for one year, but this was rejected." Fadeenkov said Gulyako gave no reason.

Asked why Gulyako had rejected the applications for the two Russian priests, Fr Vladimir Rezanovich, secretary of Vitebsk Diocesan administration, responded: "Ask Gulyako." He then told Forum 18 that unofficially, officials pointed to what they saw as the need for local religious communities to train local citizens as clergy.

"This is not the first time for us," Fr Rezanovich added. "And we know it happens to the Catholics also." He said that when such permission is given, their foreign priests generally get permission to serve for one year at a time. He could not recall cases where they received permission only for three months.

Fadeenkov of the Ideology Department told Forum 18 that Gulyako had denied permission to one foreign Orthodox priest in 2017 also, without giving a reason.

Traffic violations an excuse for expulsion?

Fr Krzysztof Poswiata served from 2012 in the parish of St Michael the Archangel in the small town of Gatovo, about 8 kms (5 miles) south east of Minsk, where he was building a church. The town has not previously had a Catholic church. He also headed a pastoral centre for children and youth.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako decided to refuse an extension to Fr Poswiata's state permission to work in the area of religion in the country as a foreign citizen because of his speeding offences, Kolyadchik of the Ideology and Religion Department of Minsk Regional Executive Committee told Forum 18 on 7 June.

Fr Poswiata confirmed that he had committed speeding offences. "My head is often full of worries about the ministry and the parish, and when putting the foot down you cannot always see the speed," he told the Catholic Church's website catholic.by. "If I broke the speed limit they could seize the car, or revoke my driving licence for a while. But why should they deport me from the country which I have come to love?"

According to catholic.by the official explanation for the denial was that Fr Poswiata violated the speed limit three times in 2018.

Kolyadchik insisted to Forum 18 that Fr Poswiata had committed five speeding offences for which he was fined. On questioning she admitted that for two of these the time for which they were relevant had expired.

The Head of the Religious Department of the Plenipotentiary's Office, Andrei Aryayev, absolutely refused to discuss why the punishments already given for the speeding offences were not enough and whether the additional punishment was connected with the priest's nationality. "We do not give any comments," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 8 May.

The Migration Department in Minsk refused to comment to Forum 18 on 12 June on whether foreign Catholic priests who have committed administrative offences are treated differently to any other foreign citizens legally present in Belarus.

The 2008 Council of Ministers Decree allows the Plenipotentiary to cancel or to refuse to renew permission for foreign religious workers who have committed two or more administrative offences within a year.

In contrast, Article 30 of the 2010 Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens and People without Citizenship states that foreigners can be denied a visa or entry to the country if they commit five or more administrative offences within a year.

Diocesan leader Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz met Plenipotentiary Gulyako on 27 April to push for him to overturn his rejection of Fr Poswiata. Gulyako rejected his request.

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz points to the different treatment of foreign citizens in the Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens. "The law speaks about five offences and not two or three. This is real discrimination against foreign clergy," the Archbishop complained to catholic.by. "It means that foreigners are divided into two sorts: an ordinary individual and a priest."

Archbishop Kondrusiewicz insisted that "nobody questions that Belarusian laws are to be obeyed, but this legal aspect should be taken into consideration".

Human rights lawyer Dina Shavtsova argues that, while the issue is complex, the Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens should prevail over the Council of Ministers Decree, as the Law covers all foreign citizens. "For foreign religious workers, permission for religious activity can be withdrawn after two offences, while for foreign businesspeople the limit is five," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 12 June. "This is discrimination."

The Apostolic Nuncio in Belarus Gábor Pintér confirmed that the problem with foreign priests in Belarus exists. "The Catholic Church respects the law. It's not up for discussion," he insisted to Christian news website krynica.info on 22 May. "But there are situations when the application of the law is not clear."

Fr Yuri Barok, a Catholic priest in Vitebsk Diocese, also suggested that the deportation of Fr Poswiata has a political subtext. "If it were a Belarusian priest, his driving licence would be suspended," he told Forum 18 on 24 May. "But since it's a Polish priest, there's no proportion in punishment. The issue is not his speeding - it's just a good excuse to get rid of him."

His brother and fellow Catholic priest Fr Vyachaslav Barok commented to Forum 18 that Fr Poswiata received a double punishment for the same violation, which he said contradicts common practice: the first when he was fined for speeding, and the second when he was deprived of the possibility to serve and was driven out of the country.

Building a church, but no right to lead worship

Since 2015, Catholic priest Fr Klemens Werth – a Russian citizen - has been working in Vitebsk Diocese, but without permission to perform religious services since late 2016. Bishop Butkevich appointed Fr Werth to the recently-created parish of St Vladislav in Bilevo, where there is no church yet (see F18News 7 December 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2237).

Fr Werth said that he currently has permission only to build a church. "I am supposed to serve in this church, but so far I cannot work in it as a priest," he lamented to Forum 18 on 25 April 2018.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako initially rejected the Bishop's application for Fr Werth in 2015. However, in November 2015 he finally granted permission for six months after intervention by then Vatican nuncio Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti. Gulyako twice more granted Fr Werth permission, each time for a further three months. Gulyako rejected all further applications to extend the permission from November 2016, when the earlier permission expired.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako most recently rejected Bishop Butkevich's application for Fr Werth on 30 November 2017, Fadeenkov of Vitebsk Regional Ideology Department told Forum 18. "We know Werth's still here waiting for permission."

The November 2017 denial was to the third of Fr Werth's applications, all rejected with no explanation, Fr Vyacheslav Barok from Vitebsk Diocese told Forum 18 on 12 June. "The diocese re-applied for permission at the beginning of 2018 and we are still waiting for the results," he added. "It is not a question of security: if Fr Werth poses a danger then he should be expelled from the country, if not he should be allowed to work as a priest."

Long pattern of denials

The latest denials of permission to foreign clergy invited by local religious leaders are part of a long pattern.

In July 2016 Plenipotentiary Gulyako refused to grant permission for Fr Roman Schulz, who serves in Mogilev, Fr Lech Bochenek in Ivanets in Minsk Region and Fr Jerzy Kotowski in Kolodishchi to continue religious service. He overturned this refusal only after Archbishop Kondrusiewicz issued a public complaint, allowing the three priests to remain until July 2017 (see F18News 5 June 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284).

Plenipotentiary Gulyako denied permission to Fr Kotowski to continue religious activities in October 2017, only three months after his earlier permission expired, Fr Juchniewicz of Shumilino parish in Vitebsk Region, where Fr Kotowski had served before his transfer to Kolodishchi, told Forum 18 on 1 June 2018.

Plenipotentiary Gulyako refused in 2017 to grant permission to continue religious service for Polish citizen Fr Robert Maciejewski, who had served as Catholic parish priest in Mstislav in Mogilev Region for almost 10 years. He had to leave Belarus in April 2017 (see F18News 5 June 2017 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2284).

In addition to Fr Werth (see above), in 2017 Plenipotentiary Gulyako rejected two other priests invited to serve in Vitebsk Region. One was Catholic priest Fr Krzysztof Witwicki, who served in the village of Glubokoe, Fadeenkov of Vitebsk Regional Ideology Department told Forum 18. The other was an Orthodox priest, but Fadeenkov refused to identify him.

Official denies short-term visits also

Plenipotentiary Gulyako also rejects applications by local religious leaders for foreigners to visit for short-term religious purposes. The Full Gospel Pentecostal Church was denied permission for Polish pastor Pawel Godawa to visit to attend the Church's annual women's conference in Minsk in April 2017, Bishop Leonid Voronenko, head of the Full Gospel Church, told Forum 18 on 8 June.

Pastor Godawa, who led Water of Life Church in the Polish city of Koszalin, died in February 2018.

"We asked for permission for Pastor Godawa for three days," Bishop Voronenko told Forum 18. "They rejected the application, claiming our documentation was not correct, even though we had fulfilled all the requirements. They always try to find some reason to make it look like it is your fault."

In 2016 Plenipotentiary Gulyako similarly denied state permission to Catholic priest Fr James Manjackal from India (see F18News 30 June 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2194).

Priests' and seminarians' conscription announced – then cancelled

Dozens of students of Catholic and Orthodox seminaries and priests under the age of 27 received call-up notices from Conscription Offices from early May ordering them to report for military service on 28 May. After the Catholic Bishops' Conference appealed to President Aleksandr Lukashenko on 23 May requesting exemption and public petitions were launched, the authorities announced the cancellation of the call-up notices.

The spokesman of the Catholic Pinsk Diocese, Fr Andrei Ryulko, confirmed to Forum 18 on 28 May that the call-up notifications were cancelled and the situation has been resolved.

"We prepared the lists of students eligible for exemption from the army and handed them to the Plenipotentiary's Office of Religious and Ethnic Affairs. They prepared a draft of the decree to be signed by the Presidential Administration or the President himself," the Head of the Synodal Information Department of the Belarus Orthodox Church Fr Sergi Lepin told Radio Liberty on 23 May. He stressed that the Church had submitted the lists on time.

Though the Catholic Church sent the lists of seminarians and young priests on time, the Plenipotentiary's Office was slow in approving them, Fr Vyacheslav Barok explained to Forum 18 from Vitebsk. "Under the law, without approved lists everyone should be called up and Gulyako should have notified Conscription Offices of the delay," he commented. He remarked that no dialogue exists between the Church and the State.

Only in July 2016 did Belarus introduce an alternative civilian service for those who cannot serve in the military on grounds of conscience. Before its introduction, conscientious objectors were often fined or jailed. Jehovah Witness Viktor Kalina was the last person known to have been punished as a conscientious objector when he was convicted and fined the equivalent of 100 days' average wages in May 2016 (see F18News 3 August 2016 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2204). (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1997.

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Belarus>.

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