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BELARUS: Close supervision of religious life is central policy

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has definitively found that close supervision of religious life in Belarus by local officials is an integral part of current central policy. It is not either a dwindling vestige of Soviet practice or the result of individual arbitrariness. The evidence for this is contained in a letter which Forum 18 has seen from the vice-chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Vladimir Lameko. The letter sharply criticises lower-level state officials for not diligently monitoring religious communities.

A recently published document issued by a senior religious affairs official reveals that close supervision of religious life in Belarus by lower-level state representatives is neither a dwindling vestige of Soviet practice nor the result of individual arbitrariness, but an integral part of current central policy.

The document, a copy of which has been received by Forum 18, is a letter dated 28 October 2003 from the vice-chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, Vladimir Lameko. It consists of recommendations to the executive committee governing Nesvizh, a south-western district of Minsk region. (Each of the six administrative regions (oblasti) in Belarus is divided into approximately 20 districts.)

Lameko notes "crude violations" of the law in Nesvizh district between 1998 and 2002, "predominantly by Protestant communities." He cites the absence of state registration by Pentecostals in the village of Seilovichy and Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Gorodeya. In addition, he maintains, a number of Protestant communities are using residential accommodation, functioning outside the confines of the territory fixed in their charters, staging "unapproved religious events" in public places and teaching religion to minors without the permission of their parents.

Forum 18 has already reported how, in addition to one or two officials dealing with religious affairs at the regional (oblast') level, each administrative district has both a department for relations with religious and social organisations and commissions monitoring compliance with legislation on religion. (See F18News 18 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=186) It is these commissions which Lameko upbraids for "not fully performing their function." Four village councils, he complains, have not even set up such commissions, while others exist only on paper.

With the aim of improving efforts towards "regulating the ethnic-confessional situation," Lameko calls for the work of commissions monitoring compliance with legislation on religion to be activated. Warning that re-registration by Nesvizh district's Pentecostal communities might be jeopardised by the stand taken by their regional (regional'noye) leadership, he emphasises that "work on re-registration issues with the leadership of religious organisations should take priority at the present time."

In addition, the vice-chairman of the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs recommends that the commissions adopt various measures, such as: increased monitoring of the activity of religious organisations, especially Protestant communities (including regular visits during worship services and conversations with leaders and activists); regular check-ups on unregistered religious structures in order to terminate their preaching, teaching and religious events; stopping premises belonging to the Catholic Church from being used by the Union of Poles of Belarus; "systematic work" with the leadership of Catholic communities aimed at the primary use of state languages (Belarusian and Russian) by foreign Catholic personnel.

Reluctant to comment on 6 February, Vladimir Lameko nevertheless told Forum 18 that there are Polish priests in Nesvizh district who do not know either Belarusian or Russian very well, and that the state authorities are encouraging them to use these languages for worship, including sermons. He stressed that this was "strictly at the request of believers."

On the same day, a sister told Forum 18 from St Antony's Catholic Church, Slutsk, that Nesvizh deaconate has five priests: one local and four from Poland. She added, however, that masses in the area - including sermons - are in Belarusian, which the Polish priests speak reasonably. While she thought that a number of parishioners in Nesvizh town preferred Polish, she said that this was where the indigenous priest was based.

On 9 February the Pentecostal bishop of Belarus told Forum 18 that, while his union did contain unregistered regional (regional'nyye) subdivisions, their status was purely internal. Sergei Khomich explained that they formed a tier between individual

churches and regional (oblastnyye) unions, all of which intended to re-register in accordance with the 2002 law on religion.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

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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