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LATVIA: New hope to change religion law?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Ringolds Balodis of the Latvian Justice Ministry has told Forum 18 News Service that he has formally proposed removing from Latvia's religion law a clause banning registration of more than one association of any one denomination. The Saeima (Latvia's parliament) may decide the issue within the next two months. Balodis' proposal has been welcomed by leaders of some religious minorities contacted by Forum 18, as full state registration grants rights such as being able to conduct officially-recognised marriages or teach religion in state schools. But Russian Orthodox Church Metropolitan Aleksandr (Kudryashov) of Riga opposes the proposal and wants it to apply only to churches such as the Lutherans and the Catholics, as the proposal would allow full state registration of other churches with the title Orthodox.

The leader of Latvia's Confessional Lutheran Church, Gundars Bakulis, has welcomed a proposal to remove from the country's religion law a clause banning registration of more than one association of any one denomination. "Nothing has changed so far," he told Forum 18 News Service on 17 September, "but we are hopeful." Ringolds Balodis, head of the Justice Ministry's Religious Affairs Board, said he presented the proposal for comment on 8 September to the Spiritual Affairs Council, an advisory group consisting of the leaders of the eight recognised religious confessions. "I believe the proposal will reach parliament in the next one or two months," he told Forum 18 on 15 September.

The Confessional Lutheran Church has long been pushing for this clause to be abolished, as has the Autonomous True Orthodox Church in Latvia, headed from Daugavpils by Archbishop Viktor Kontuzorov. Each has about a dozen parishes. The Confessional Lutheran Church has only gained lower-level registration, while the Autonomous True Orthodox Church has been denied all forms of official registration (see F18News 26 May 2003). Smaller Orthodox jurisdictions have also been barred from registering because of this clause.

Balodis sent his one-line proposal to abolish the clause (contained in Article 7 part 3 of the 1995 religion law) to the Justice Ministry on 19 June, which has approved the measure. He then sent the proposal to the Spiritual Affairs Council. "The Religious Affairs Board and the Justice Ministry will discuss their point of view before putting the proposal to the government and then parliament," he reported. "We would have sent the proposal to the Council two months ago, but there were questions over our Board's very existence which had to be dealt with urgently." He said that at the end of August the ministry approved a reduced budget of 40,000 lats (514,364 Norwegian kroner, 62,812 Euros or 70,540 US dollars) for the Board for next year, so its continued existence has been guaranteed.

But it remains unclear when the Spiritual Affairs Council will discuss Balodis' proposal. A spokesperson for the Cabinet of Ministers, Agnese Korbe, told Forum 18 that the next meeting of the Council has not yet been timetabled. Founded in September 2001, the Council is headed by Prime Minister Einar Repse and includes members of the Saeima, Latvia's parliament, chosen by him, as well as the leaders of the Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, Baptist, Methodist, Jewish and Adventist faiths. "The council's aim is to coordinate cooperation between the state and the Churches, and normally meets about once every two months," Korbe told Forum 18 on 17 September. She stressed that the Council has only an advisory capacity.

Any removal of the clause seems likely to face opposition from other denominations, especially the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Aleksandr (Kudryashov) of Riga met officials of the Latvia First party (also known as the "Clergymen's Party") on 16 June, and said his Church would not object to removing the clause from the law, provided the amended law declared specifically that this referred only to denominations such as the Lutherans and Catholics and not to the Orthodox Church. He told party officials these churches – unlike his own – did not have the dogma that there can be only one canonical jurisdiction on any one territory.

Janis Dimza, manager of the Riga-based Augsburg Institute which is connected to the Confessional Lutherans, said that during a meeting with them in the summer, Orthodox Church representatives tried to persuade his Church not to cooperate with the Autonomous True Orthodox Church. "They said we could be registered, but said Orthodox law did not allow another Orthodox Church to be registered," he told Forum 18 on 17 September.

As part of its campaign, the Confessional Lutheran Church has prepared a legal challenge to the Constitutional Court, its head

Gundars Bakulis told Forum 18, but has not yet filed the papers. "We will see what happens." He said that even if the law is amended, his Church will have to reregister each year for the next ten years to achieve the status of a recognised religious association on a par with the eight current associations. "You need ten congregations to have been registered individually for ten years before you can get this status," he explained. "As our tenth congregation was only registered less than a year ago, we have a long time to wait."

Ringolds Balodis of the Justice Ministry expressed concern that, as the religion law grants rights to recognised religious associations, such as being able to conduct officially-recognised marriages or teach religion in state schools, any group that attains this status will automatically get these rights. "Freedom of religion is one thing, but responsibility is quite another," he told Forum 18. "I am against the automatic granting of such rights. This is not a good idea now." He said he believed any new association should exist for some time before being allowed these extra privileges.

Gundars Bakulis insisted the Confessional Lutheran Church would like to be able to conduct state-recognised marriages and to teach in schools. "We have teachers and pastors willing to teach," he added.

Forum 18 has been unable to reach Autonomous True Orthodox Church Archbishop Viktor Kontuzorov. He was injured in a fire in his cathedral in Daugavpils in the early morning of 28 August. The local fire service said two canisters of petrol were found at the site, suggesting the fire may have been started deliberately. The archbishop told journalists after the fire that over the two months he had received several threats because of his leadership of the Church. He complained that the police had failed to provide adequate security in response to his reports of the threats.

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