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BELARUS: Old Believers cry SOS

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

As religious organisations across Belarus face compulsory re-registration under last year's restrictive new religion law, the head of the 50,000-strong priestless Old Believer Church has complained that the whole procedure is unnecessary and unduly burdensome. "Who needs this? We don't," Petr Orlov told Forum 18 News Service in Polotsk. He must now compile a new charter for his Church and arrange a synod to approve it, before submitting the final re-registration application to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk. Many of the 38 priestless Old Believer parishes are dominated by people in their 70s or 80s, and Orlov fears many will be unable to complete the necessary paperwork. "There's no one to write their charters."

"Who needs this? We don't," the head of the priestless Old Believer Church in Belarus complained to Forum 18 News Service, lamenting that the compulsory re-registration procedure under the country's new religion law is unnecessary and unduly burdensome. In addition to heading the 38 communities of the Pomorye Old Orthodox Church in Belarus, Petr Orlov is, in his own words, "elder, administrator, architect, builder, bookkeeper and caretaker" of his parish in Polotsk, 200 kilometres (125 miles) north-east of the capital Minsk, where around 60 regularly attend worship.

Under the new religion law, which came into force last November, all religious organisations in Belarus must re-register by the deadline of 16 November 2004 (see F18News 11 September 2003) if they wish their activity to remain legal.

Thanks to the new law, Orlov must now compile a new charter for the Pomorye Old Orthodox Church in Belarus, arrange a synod in Polotsk to approve it and then submit a final re-registration application to the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk. The parish charter also requires approval by the local authorities, which may involve several visits to the regional executive committee in Vitebsk, Orlov told Forum 18 in Polotsk on 24 September. "By the time they've finished it's their charter, not ours, but everyone functions according to their own internal arrangement anyway."

A retired sailor who has journeyed as far afield as Antarctica, Orlov's good health allowed him to design and supervise the construction of his Church of the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God in as little as 18 months. The majority of the faithful in half a dozen priestless Old Believer parishes along Vitebsk region's border with Lithuania, however, are nearly 80 years old: "There's no one to write their charters."

Even if Orlov does find local parishioners able to draw up documentation for these communities, they would face further time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. A charter must first be approved by the local village council, then by Orlov some 140 kilometres away in Polotsk, he explained to Forum 18, and finally by the regional executive committee in Vitebsk. "That's two buses to Polotsk and a train to Vitebsk - what if they ask for more changes after that?"

All this travelling and paperwork takes place against a backdrop of minimal financial support, Orlov points out. While, he maintains, the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) receives massive state aid – "driveways tarmacked, fences painted, everything" – and Catholics and Protestants are assisted by the West, "no one helps the Old Believers." Although there are approximately 50,000 Pomorye priestless Old Believers in Belarus, he says, "the donations still don't match up to the costs."

According to Orlov, local Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) representatives claimed at a meeting in Vitebsk on 15 September that the 2002 religion law was intended to counteract "new, destructive" religious organisations, an aim with which he is broadly in agreement. On 23 September, Vitebsk CRA plenipotentiary Nikolai Stepanenko indeed maintained to Forum 18 that the 1992 religion law "opened the doors wide for pseudo-religious sects and neo-cultic organisations." He also pointed out that the majority of the registration details submitted under the old law required updating.

In line with the state's view, the Orthodox dean of the north-western city of Grodno likens the new law's effect on unfamiliar religious groups to that of a moratorium on the use of genetically modified seed. Fr Aleksandr (Veliseichuk) also acknowledged to Forum 18 that the law benefited the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) by granting legal personality status, the right to hold a bank account and to put forward an opinion as an organisation. Otherwise, however, "it is difficult to say who the law is for," he remarked on 18 September.

The auxiliary bishop of Grodno's Catholic diocese, Aleksandr Dziemianko, suggested to Forum 18 on 17 September that the state simply "considered such a law to be necessary". Recent press articles maintained that it would exclude small "sects" from Belarus, he added.

Speaking to Forum 18 in Minsk on 19 September, Vladimir Martinovich of the Belarusian Orthodox Church's Venerable Iosif of Volotsk Consultation and Information Centre suggested that the 2002 religion law would not prove effective against groups such as Aum Shinrikyo and the White Brotherhood, since they did not register as religious communities anyway.

The Pentecostal bishop of Vitebsk region, Arkadi Supronenko, surmised that nobody needed the new law. "We could have got along just fine with the old one," he remarked to Forum 18 on 22 September.

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