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BELARUS: An Orthodox Nation?

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

President Aleksandr Lukashenko has implied that Belarus is an Orthodox nation. However this is strongly disputed by those who point to the long history and present existence on Belarusian territory of other confessions. It has been suggested to Forum 18 News Service by an anonymous Orthodox source that the reason for the President's claim is that he "can't reject religion outright as it is too significant, so he needs to be able to rely on it." So, "he takes the first thing which comes to hand and is the largest – the Orthodox Church – not because he is Orthodox or because he cares about the Church but only because of that." An anonymous Protestant source agreed that politicians in Belarus were trying to use the Orthodox Church for political purposes.

"The Orthodox Church is the basis of our faith," Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko told parliamentarians during his four-hour state of the nation address in April this year. According to the republic's 2002 religion law, the Orthodox Church plays "the defining role in the state traditions of the Belarusian people", something which government officials are obliged to take into account in their dealings with other religious organisations. In its 2003 concordat-style co-operation agreement, the Belarusian state also guarantees the Orthodox Church "the right of ecclesiastical jurisdiction on its canonical territory" – in this case, the Republic of Belarus.

Is Belarus in fact an Orthodox nation? Representatives of the republic's non-Orthodox confessions don't think so. "You can't get away from the fact that Belarus is a multi-confessional country," the Pentecostal bishop of Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk), Arkadi Supronenko, insisted to Forum 18 News Service. According to the priest of Brest's Greek Catholic parish, Fr Igor Kondrasev (Igar Kandrazjeu), "there just isn't the same identification between Belarusian and Orthodox as there is between Russian and Orthodox."

The reason, argues Fr Igor, is that Belarus has been markedly Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Calvinist and Greek Catholic during different periods in its history. He – as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox representatives – pointed out to Forum 18 that two of the most important religious sites in the country – St Sophia Cathedral in Polotsk (Polatsk) and the Dormition Monastery in Zhirovitsy, Grodno (Hrodna) region – belonged to the Greek Catholic Church from soon after its creation by the 1596 Union of Brest until it was banned in 1839 following the incorporation of Belarus into the Russian Empire. Yet, as the leader of the Pomorye priestless Old Believers in Belarus pointed out to Forum 18 at his church in Polotsk, the Greek Catholics are nowhere mentioned in the 2002 religion law. "They looked after St Sophia's," Petr Orlov remarked, "they ought to be given their due." So too, he argued, should the Old Believers, large numbers of whom began to flee from Russian Orthodox-sponsored persecution to the then Polish territory of Belarus in the late seventeenth century, but who similarly do not figure in the new law's preamble. "You can't do such things to the Old Believers," exclaimed Orlov, "not say that we have contributed anything to the history of Belarus!"

The official Belarusian government website does point out that both Judaism and Islam have a 400-year history in the republic, and the preamble of the 2002 law lists these confessions below the Orthodox Church as being "inseparable from the common history of the Belarusian people." Calvinism, however, does not figure in the law's preamble, even though the same website notes that there were 85 Calvinist communities in Belarus by the mid-seventeenth century. Prefaces to the early sixteenth-century Belarusian scriptural translations of national hero Francysk Skaryna contain his Reformation views, the presbyter of the present-day Minsk Reformed Church told Forum 18. Aleksei Frolov (Alaksiej Fralou) added that today's Orthodox and Catholic representatives in Belarus do not usually acknowledge Skaryna as a figure of the Reformation, however, even though the Orthodox and Catholic Churches did not permit translations into the non-canonical vernacular so early, and "Skaryna's books were burnt when he tried to distribute them in Moscow in the early 1520s." Indeed, Orthodox dean of Grodno city Fr Aleksandr Veliseichuk cited to Forum 18 Skaryna's publication of the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles in Belarusian in addition to the life of St Yevfrosinya of Polotsk as evidence of the republic's long-standing Orthodox tradition.

According to Fr Aleksandr, whose own parish church of SS Boris and Gleb was built in the twelfth century, Orthodoxy pre-dates Catholicism in Belarus by 200 years. Today, the Catholic diocese of Grodno corresponds to the area covered by the two Orthodox dioceses of Grodno and Novogrudok, where, he said, both Churches have approximately 180 parishes. Asked whether the Orthodox Church is here more tolerant than in Russia towards a Catholic presence on what it considers to be its canonical territory, Fr Aleksandr confirmed that it was. "It's not as if they were going into Siberia where they never were," he replied. Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Grodno Aleksandr Dziemianko, however, told Forum 18 that "it is difficult to say whether the Orthodox here are more or less understanding than in Moscow." Told of the Russian Orthodox Church's inclusion of Grodno region within its canonical

territory, he commented that "there was a network of Catholic parishes here before the Moscow Patriarchate existed."

Similarly asked whether the Orthodox are more accommodating than in Russia of the Catholic presence in western Belarus, the Orthodox dean of central Vitebsk in the north-east of the republic maintained that "Orthodox opinion is the same throughout Belarus – there are more of them [Catholics] in the West due to Catholic expansion." According to the local official in charge of religious affairs, Nikolai Stepanenko, there are currently 198 Orthodox and 86 Catholic parishes registered in Vitebsk region. Fr Aleksandr Rakhunok, however, maintained that the city contains only one historic Catholic church. "The Intercession and Dormition cathedrals were Catholic but they were given to the Orthodox in the tsarist period as no one went to them," he added. Now, however, the Catholic Church is building three more, said Fr Aleksandr. "Vitebsk is 0.2 per cent Catholic, so why build? They are duping people."

While certainly held by some in Belarus, Forum 18 found that such views do not appear to be universal. Moreover, as a result of the republic's chequered religious past, according to Fr Igor Kondrasev, "our Belarusian mindset now thinks that God is one." On being told by an elderly female parishioner that Orthodox believers could enter St Nicholas Orthodox church within Brest Fortress, Forum 18 observed a local Baptist ask whether non-Orthodox were also allowed. "Of course - all souls are God's," she replied. "God is one." Petr Orlov repeated the same phrase as he commented on his lack of concern over whether others belonged to a different confession. "If God continues to permit everyone on this one sinful Earth to exist then we can't insist that they are all of the same faith," he declared.

Given the array of established faiths in Belarus, why should the Belarusian government give preference to Orthodoxy at all? The reasons appear to have little to do with religious belief. One Orthodox source who wished not to be named explained to Forum 18 that President Lukashenko "can't reject religion outright as it is too significant, so he needs to be able to rely on it." Consequently, said the source, "he takes the first thing which comes to hand and is the largest – the Orthodox Church – not because he is Orthodox or because he cares about the Church but only because of that." An anonymous Protestant source agreed that politicians in Belarus – possibly influenced by Russia - were trying to use the Orthodox Church for political purposes. "Belarus would be a normal European country with an established Protestant Church in the context of western civilisation," this source remarked, except that those in power "see that [Protestant] churches are growing fast and they fear that the foundations and ideology of society will change and that Belarus will go outside the Russian orbit. They are trying to prevent this from happening." It should thus come as no surprise that, during his presentation of the national order of Francysk Skaryna to Belarusian Orthodox leader Metropolitan Filaret (Vakhromeyev) last month, President Aleksandr Lukashenko described the Orthodox faith as "one of the bases of unity between the Belarusian and Russian brethren peoples."

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY