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BELARUS: Believers pressured to withdraw registration signatures

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Belarusian state officials, with local Moscow Patriarchate priests, are pressuring Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) parishioners to withdraw their signatures from state registration applications, Forum 18 News Service has been told. Unregistered religious activity is illegal. Part of the registration procedure is that at least 20 Belarusian citizens must sign applications and give personal data. If even one signature is withdrawn, the application process has to start again. Officials have apparently given Moscow Patriarchate priests and parishioners, in the city of Brest, details of the signatories on ROCA parish registration applications. "Very great pressure is put on them," ROCA Bishop Agafangel (Pashkovsky) of Odessa and Tavriya told Forum 18. Baptists and Pentecostals have described to Forum 18 similar pressures on their new communities. One Baptist described how local state officials typically threaten all 20 names on the list of founding members of a new church. "In rural places people need something from them - wood, peat or a horse for ploughing - they are afraid to lose this, so they withdraw their names."

Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) have complained to Forum 18 News Service that Belarusian government officials - in conjunction with local Moscow Patriarchate priests - are pressuring their parishioners into withdrawing their signatures from registration applications. Baptists and Pentecostals have told Forum 18 that their new communities encounter similar pressure from state officials.

Under Belarus' restrictive 2002 Religion Law, which was strongly backed by the Belarusian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), state registration is compulsory for all religious communities, and unregistered religious activity is illegal - against international human rights standards. Part of the registration procedure is that a minimum of 20 Belarusian citizens are required to form a religious organisation, who must submit their full names, addresses, dates of birth and signatures.

Moscow Patriarchate priests and parishioners in the western Belarusian city of Brest have recently been visiting the apartments of those who submitted their names for ROCA parish registration "and encouraging them to recant - very great pressure is put on them," Bishop Agafangel (Pashkovsky) of Odessa and Tavriya told Forum 18 from the southern Ukrainian city of Odessa on 17 October. The bishop assumed that the ROCA parishioners' addresses had been passed to the priests from the state organ responsible for registration, since the apartments visited "belong to the very same names as on the application list." He pointed out that if just one person rescinds his or her name, the application has to be made "all over again".

The US-based Russian Orthodox Church Abroad severed ties with the Moscow Patriarchate in 1927, after the latter declared its loyalty to the Soviet Union. Since the collapse of communism there, the ROCA has established approximately 150 parishes in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. Following the controversial replacement of its leader, Metropolitan Vitali (Ustinov), by Metropolitan Lavr (Shkurla) in 2001, the Church has been engaged in rapprochement with the Moscow Patriarchate. This abrupt change in policy has led to a schism, which has seen some ROCA structures - particularly in the former Soviet Union - insist upon their continued loyalty to the late Metropolitan Vitali and his legacy of opposition to the Moscow Patriarchate. Despite having reservations about the rapprochement process, Bishop Agafangel and his diocese have remained under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Lavr, however.

Since August 2006, two Moscow Patriarchate priests - Fr Yevgeni Likhota and Fr Ignati Lukovich - have been threatening local residents who submitted their personal details as part of registration applications for two ROCA parishes in the Vulka and Kovaleva suburbs of the city, local ROCA priest Fr Ioann Grudnitsky stated to Forum 18 from Brest on 23 October. These priests and their supporters have told his parishioners that the ROCA is "an illegal, uncanonical sect" and that if they continue to associate with it they will not be allowed to attend or receive sacraments from Moscow Patriarchate churches, Fr Ioann reported. As a result, he said, some members of the ROCA parish of SS Antoni, Ioann and Yevstafi, Martyrs of Vilna in Kovaleva have withdrawn their names from its registration application.

Fr Ioann, like Bishop Agafangel, also maintained that the government organ charged with registering religious organisations - the Department for Religious Affairs - passed on the relevant information from the parishes' registration applications to the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese.

Fr Yevgeni Likhota insisted to Forum 18 that he knew of no Orthodox in his area other than his own Moscow Patriarchate

community. Told of the claims that he had worked with state officials to persuade people not to sign up to another Orthodox jurisdiction, he stressed on 24 October that he was subject to his bishop "and not to officials." After stating that he was "not prepared to discuss such issues with you," Fr Yevgeni then urged Forum 18 to address further questions to his diocese.

A secretary at the Moscow Patriarchate's Brest diocese told Forum 18 that its priests could not possibly have met with ROCA parishioners as "there are none - there are no registered ROCA parishes here." For further details, she suggested that Forum 18 contact the Department for Religious Affairs.

Answering the number she provided, Aleksandr Tsyrelchuk of Brest's regional Department for Religious Affairs maintained that the ROCA parishioners had withdrawn their signatures when they brought their registration applications to his office. "We talked to them, explained that it [the ROCA] was a different church, and they said they didn't want to go to it." Tsyrelchuk then read to Forum 18 the text of a statement, which he said had been signed by 13 of the 26 founding members of the ROCA parish of SS Antoni, Ioann and Yevstafi, Martyrs of Vilna. In it, the signatories request their signatures on the registration application to be considered invalid, since they did not realise to what church the parish belongs, "and we do not wish to sow ecclesiastical strife on the territory of Brest region."

According to Tsyrelchuk, those behind the registration of the ROCA parishes were practising deception, "and you can't build anything good on deception, especially a church."

In 2005 Brest region's top religious affairs official, Vasili Marchenko, wrote to the head of the ROCA parish council in the village of Ruzhany and urged the community to attend the local Moscow Patriarchate parish, "where normal conditions have been created for the performance of religious rites by all who wish" (see F18News 9 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684>). In a leaked January 2005 report, the same official bemoans the fact that for two years, "state representatives have found neither the time nor the opportunity to influence these believers [the Ruzhany ROCA community] or to assist the local priest in returning them to the fold of the [Moscow Patriarchate] church" (see F18News 18 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=691>).

Fr Ioann Grudnitsky also told Forum 18 that the registration application for the ROCA parish of the Protection of the Holy Veil of the Mother of God in Brest's Vulka suburb is currently undergoing expert analysis by the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk, "even though they know who we are, of course - the ROCA and the Moscow Patriarchate are part of the same Church, it's just that we don't accept ecumenism or collaboration with the KGB secret police."

Under the 2002 Religion Law, registration applications from religious communities "previously unknown" in Belarus are subject to scrutiny by religious studies experts for up to six months.

Also known locally as the Russian True-Orthodox Church, the ROCA's three parishes in Minsk and Minsk region were denied registration in late 2002 after just such an expert analysis. They have unsuccessfully tried to challenge the state's action in the courts (see F18News 2 April 2003 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=23> and <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=24>, and 6 November 2003 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177>). Their priest, Fr Leonid Plyats, has been threatened with jail or a massive fine if he holds services (see F18News 6 June 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=577>).

Bishop Agafangel told Forum 18 that ROCA members in Belarus are reluctant to take their case to an international court, as they fear "some kind of repercussion." They are also unwilling to risk meeting for services, he said, "just like in Soviet times." Both the bishop and Fr Ioann Grudnitsky stressed that this was particularly the case since November 2005 amendments to the Criminal Code made organisation or leadership of a religious organisation found to "harm the rights, freedoms and legal interests of citizens, or prevent their fulfilment of state, social or family duties" punishable with imprisonment for up to three years.

Fr Ioann Grudnitsky has had two fines imposed on him totalling 4,080,000 Belarusian Roubles (12,106 Norwegian Kroner, 1,555 Euros or 1,825 US dollars) for holding unregistered worship in Ruzhany village (see F18News 9 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684>). He told Forum 18 that he has not paid these, however, "as I consider them illegal."

Fr Ioann was once a vocal supporter of the 2002 Religion Law, as a prominent priest in the Moscow Patriarchate's Brest diocese before an internal dispute led to his departure. In a September 2002 interview with the diocesan newspaper "Spiritual Herald", for example, he urged the law's adoption by parliamentary deputies, and suggested that the legal minimum membership of a religious organisation should be raised from ten to 500.

In addition to opposing the establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, the state has also opposed attempts to establish other Orthodox churches. The Belarusian Orthodox Autocephalous Church even suffered the bulldozing of its church building in Pogranichny (Grodno [Hrodna] region) in August 2002. The Moscow Patriarchate has also registered "Belarusian Orthodox Church" as a brand name in order to prevent alternative Orthodox jurisdictions from gaining official status (see F18News 6 November 2003 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=177>).

Protestants have also recently told Forum 18 about state pressure on the signatories of registration applications. The main Baptist Union's elder for Minsk region described how local officials typically telephone all 20 names on the list of founding members of a new church and issue threats. "In rural places people need something from them - wood, peat or a horse for ploughing - they are afraid to lose this, so they withdraw their names." Gennady Brutsky also related how, if one of the founders is a teacher, officials call the school director, who informs the teacher that his or her leisure activity is "incompatible" with working in a school. "Exactly the same method was used in Soviet times."

Unprompted, a Minsk Pentecostal representative, who preferred to remain unnamed, also told Forum 18 of new communities' difficulties in registering. "If a grandmother repents, for instance, and signs a registration application for a new church, the head of the village soviet [council] will come and tell her she won't be given a tractor, wood for her stove or a cow. So she then withdraws her name."

Religious communities continue to face state pressure for religious activity without state permission, including Protestants (see eg. F18News 20 October <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858> and 28 September 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=847>) and Catholics (see eg. F18News 3 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=849>).

Amongst the forms of pressure - on communities as diverse as Protestants, Catholics and Hare Krishna devotees - is that foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities are increasingly being barred from Belarus (see F18News 18 October 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856>). Independently-run congregations, outside centralised religious bodies, face acute restrictions (see F18News 12 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560>). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>.

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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