

Textbooks Across Former Soviet Union Label Christian Groups 'Cults'

Observers say the content encourages religious conflict and could lead to attacks against Christians in the mostly Orthodox region

Three countries in the former Soviet Union have introduced new school textbooks that, to varying degrees, portray evangelical Christianity as suspicious at best and at worst a breeding ground for religious fanaticism.

"People are really upset, not just the Pentecostals but the Baptists, too," said Dina Shavtsova, a Pentecostal lawyer in the Belarus capital of Minsk who specializes in religious freedom issues. "The kind of information in that textbook really encourages religious conflict. Maybe something won't happen right away, but when you put this together with the negative television broadcasts, it adds up."

Shavtsova pointed to an early June attack on the charismatic Living Faith Church in the city of Gomel as an example. In the overnight incident, vandals broke windows and painted Antichrist on the church's sign.

Besides Belarus, the former Soviet republic of Georgia uses a high school textbook that paints "foreign sects" with a wide brush. However, the situation there seems to be the least severe.

In Russia, human rights activists are fighting to halt the planned nationwide introduction of a textbook that they claim

promotes Orthodox Christianity above other faiths. All three nations are dominated by Orthodox Christians and have tiny Protestant minorities.

Yevgeny Ikhlov of the nongovernmental for Human Rights organization is leading a court and public relations campaign to stop the further spread of the Foundations of Orthodox Culture textbook in Russia. Although Ikhlov is mostly concerned about the book's anti-Semitic aspects, he said he has no doubt it will be used to denigrate other faiths.

The situation in Belarus, a country of 10 million between Russia and Poland, is the most serious both because of the textbook's 147,000 press run and because every student is obligated to take the course "Man, Society, Government" before graduating high school.

One section of the book reads, "Although every religion claims to hold the absolute truth, all the same fanaticism is especially likely to appear among sects." It goes on to state, "In our republic, some of the most widespread sects include the evangelical Baptists, the Evangelicals, the Pentecostals, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses and others."

So far, despite written pleas to the Belarus ministry of education to recall the textbook, no action has been taken. The only two groups to formally file complaints are a Pentecostal umbrella group and a tiny Hare Krishna organization that objected to the textbook's associating it with Japan's Aum Shinrikyo, a doomsday cult that attacked a Tokyo subway system with nerve gas in 1995. Shavtsova said some Baptist families in western Belarus had taken their children out of government schools.

Ikhlov said it is no coincidence that Belarus, Georgia and Russia are all grappling with similar textbook issues.

“These post-Communist states are all pursuing a nationalist, conservative line of thinking,” he said. “They try to portray themselves as close to the local Orthodox people, who need to be protected against the barbarians.”

Frank Brown in Moscow