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RUSSIA: Charismatics targeted as would-be Orange Revolutionaries?

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

In the run-up to Russia's 2 March presidential election, a Ukrainian-based church involved in that country's 2004 "Orange Revolution" has twice been the object of hostile attention by the Russian authorities, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The Ukrainian founder of the Embassy of God's Moscow community was turned back from the Russian capital's Sheremetyevo Airport on 3 February. Pastor Aleksandr Dzyuba believes he was barred for religious reasons. "For a long time Russia has been afraid of the Orange Revolution, and they connect me with it because I am a pastor of that church." FSB security service officers broke up an Embassy of God Bible school graduation ceremony in the Volga city of Tolyatti on Sunday 20 January. They interrogated all the church leaders present. "They asked us everything – where I'm from, what I teach, my link with the school, with the Orange Revolution," the church's Kiev-based bishop, Anatoli Belonozhko told Forum 18. The Orange Revolution was the issue which most interested the FSB officers according to another of those questioned, Pastor Ivan Semenets.

In the run-up to Russia's 2 March presidential election, the FSB security service have twice struck at a Kiev-based charismatic church due to its support for Ukraine's Orange Revolution, affected pastors have suggested to Forum 18 News Service. The Ukrainian founder of Embassy of God's Moscow community was deported from an airport in the Russian capital on 3 February, he told Forum 18. On 20 January an Embassy of God Bible school graduation ceremony in southern Russia was reportedly disrupted by the FSB. FSB representatives have denied involvement to Forum 18.

The Ukrainian capital Kiev's Embassy of God church - which claims 25,000 members - gave practical support to demonstrators during the country's 2004 Orange Revolution, the church's Nigerian founder, Pastor Sunday Adelaja, states on its website: "We got involved with the Orange Revolution because the communist people were trying to come back and they were dominating and we took all the people to the streets and they stood their ground that no we are not going to allow any oppression to come back." Pastor Adelaja was deported from Russia on 31 May 2006 (see F18News 7 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=794).

The Ukrainian founder of Moscow's Embassy of God community was turned back from the Russian capital's Sheremetyevo Airport on 3 February, he told Forum 18 from Kiev on 12 February. Intending to lead Triumphant Zion's church's Sunday worship service, Pastor Aleksandr Dzyuba was instead told by border guards that he was barred according to their database: "One said I posed a threat to the Russian Federation, but wouldn't explain why."

After an hour's detention at the airport, Pastor Dzyuba was told his passport was with airline staff and would be returned in Kiev, "so I didn't run away." His passport returned unmarked, the pastor did not receive any documentation confirming deportation, he told Forum 18.

Pastor Dzyuba believes he was barred for religious reasons. "Through my own channels, I found out it was because I am a leader of Pastor Sunday's church. For a long time Russia has been afraid of the Orange Revolution, and they connect me with it because I am a pastor of that church."

With a valid Russian residency permit – Ukrainian citizens do not require visas – Pastor Dzyuba had been making similar monthly visits to Moscow since handing over leadership of Triumphant Zion church to a local pastor a year ago, he told Forum 18. Believing responsibility for his deportation lies with the FSB, he suggested that the timing of the incident could be due to Russia's imminent presidential election.

"We don't bar anyone from entering Russia," an FSB representative at Sheremetyevo Terminal 1, where Pastor Dzyuba was detained, insisted to Forum 18 on 13 February. "We don't deal with such things." He added that the Federal Migration Service was the responsible body.

The Federal Migration Service questioned why Forum 18 was turning to them on 13 February, however. "We aren't even at the border," a press spokesperson remarked. "It isn't us – it would be the Border Service."

A press spokesperson at the Border Service, which comes under the FSB, directed Forum 18 to its public relations department on 13 February. A spokesperson there insisted he did not have any information about Aleksandr Dzyuba's case and did not know where it could be found. "Look on Interfax [a Russian news agency]!" he exclaimed, before slamming the phone down.

12 FSB officers also broke up an Embassy of God Bible school graduation ceremony in the Volga city of Tolyatti on Sunday, 20 January, according to the church's Kiev-based bishop, Anatoli Belonozhko. After identifying themselves and showing an order to conduct a check-up from Samara Regional Public Prosecutor's Office, the FSB claimed that the school, diplomas and rental agreement for the hall where the event was taking place were all illegal, Bishop Belonozhko told Forum 18 from Kiev on 12 February. They then interrogated all the church leaders present and the hall's landlord, he added. "They asked us everything – where I'm from, what I teach, my link with the school, with the Orange Revolution."

The Orange Revolution was the issue which most interested the FSB representatives, suggested another of those interrogated, Pastor Ivan Semenets. While they also asked about the rented hall and diplomas, "any sensible person realises the FSB doesn't deal with that kind of stuff," he pointed out to Forum 18 on 13 February. At the end of the interrogation, he said, "they asked about our connection with Pastor Sunday's activity – were we planning an Orange Revolution?" Pastor Semenets was surprised by the officers' level of knowledge, and deduced that they must have an informer in the church. "They knew the names of all the pastors, elders, administrators, what they do, who visits from Ukraine, who advertised 'Civic Position', when the church was founded, when the diploma ceremony was to be."

"Civic Position" is a Russian-language book by Pastor Sunday Adelaja which "not only explains the importance of every believer playing a part in the reformation of society, but also shows how to do it."

A press spokesperson at Samara Regional Public Prosecutor's Office was initially doubtful that it had ordered the check-up when contacted by Forum 18 on 13 February. The Public Prosecutor's role is supervisory, she pointed out, and such a move would usually only follow a court ruling establishing illegal activity. After checking with relevant colleagues, she told Forum 18 that they knew nothing about it: "Try the FSB."

A spokesperson for Samara Regional FSB told Forum 18 on 13 February that he had no information about the check-up. He insisted that he would know if it had taken place, even if conducted by the local FSB in Tolyatti rather than his department.

Following the recent change of regime in Ukraine, concern has risen in Russia about Protestant influence in particular. Commenting on a local evangelical missionary initiative in the wake of the Orange Revolution, for example, a spokeswoman for Arkhangelsk Regional FSB maintained: "Experience shows that this type of religious project is usually used as a cover for activity by the secret services of foreign states" (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644).

Faith Harvest, Pastor Ivan Semenets' Embassy of God church in Tolyatti, now faces prosecution for conducting commercial activity without a licence, he told Forum 18. A hearing at Samara Regional Arbitration Court has been set for 27 February. While the FSB officers maintained the church requires a licence for educational activity, the pastor rejects this, stressing that only existing members of the church are students. This is in line with the 1997 Religion Law's stipulation that an unregistered religious group has the right to teach its existing followers (Article 7, Part 2). Pastor Semenets also pointed out that an educational licence is required only by a professional religious educational institution seeking to have publicly recognised qualifications (Article 19). While the FSB officers were particularly displeased by the school's receipt of a 600-rouble (132 Norwegian Kroner, 17 Euros, 24 US Dollars) donation from each student, he remarked to Forum 18, "I told them this doesn't even cover our costs."

Begun in May 2007, Faith Harvest's Bible school offers four-month weekend courses on church organisation, mission and social work. While the FSB confiscated its diplomas, a computer, posters, tests, enrolment documents and pastors' recommendations during the 20 January check-up, these have since been returned.

Confusion persists over what type of religious educational activity requires a state licence. Moscow-based religious rights lawyer Vladimir Ryakhovsky has maintained to Forum 18 that only educational institutions require licences for educational activity, a view broadly supported by Viktor Korolev of the Federal Registration Service. However, an informal Pentecostal Bible school in the Volga republic of Chuvashia was dissolved for being unlicensed in September 2007 (see F18News 15 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1048).

A charismatic Bible college in the Pacific region of Primorsky Krai was similarly shut down in 2003 (see F18News 21 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=35).

Elsewhere, two Pentecostal congregations continue to resist threats to their church buildings. Told on 30 January to evacuate their church within five days to make way for the construction of a music theatre, members of Astrakhan's Jesus Christ Church vowed to go on hunger strike should eviction occur, Pastor Aleksandr Kalinin of the church confirmed to Forum 18 on 12 February. The congregation's stance proved effective, he believes, as on 11 February the regional authorities offered a good quality building as compensation, to which the church has orally agreed. "We decided on a hunger strike as we couldn't have asserted our rights

otherwise," Pastor Kalinin explained to Forum 18. "No one would have listened."

Pastor Kalinin previously complained to Forum 18 that the authorities had been offering compensation premises far inferior to the church's present building, a former cinema in a central city park (see F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040).

Despite ongoing fire safety, tax and other inspections in a similar case, Word of Life Pentecostal Church in Kaluga continues to occupy its building, Pastor Albert Ratkin of the church told Forum 18 on 12 February. Bought in 2002, the church's building and land are now situated in the middle of a shopping mall construction site (see F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040).

In Russia, threats to demolish places of worship are most usually encountered by Muslims and Protestants. However, the state authorities may also stop other confessions - including the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) - from retaining or acquiring worship premises (see F18News 23 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1038). (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

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