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RUSSIA: Allegations against Komi Patriarchate diocese ignored, but breakaway Orthodox allegations investigated

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Local state officials in Komi are said to be assisting the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese in its dispute with the local Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community, according to the abbot of the Votcha-based breakaway monastic community, Fr Stefan (Babayev). Forum 18 News Service has confirmed that neither the monastery nor its associated parish have received state registration. Claims have also been made that, in contrast to local state authorities investigation of allegations against both the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and Baptist (See F18News 22 July 2003) communities, allegations of criminal practices within a local Moscow Patriarchate monastery have not been investigated.

In addition to repeated interrogations and attempting to seize their church building (See separate F18News articles), state officials in the north-eastern European Russian republic of Komi are claimed to be assisting the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese in its dispute with the local Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community in other ways, according to the abbot of the Votcha-based breakaway monastic community, Fr Stefan (Babayev).

In an interview on 7 July, Babayev told Forum 18 that both the monastic community and its parish of St Prokopii of Ustyug in the Komi capital Syktyvkar cannot obtain state registration. In 1999, he said, they had tried to create an "Orthodox Unity" movement but were told by the authorities that to register using the word "Orthodox" they must have the blessing of Moscow Patriarchate Bishop Pitirim. So the monastery used part of the Nicene Creed, "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." "We couldn't collect money using the word 'Orthodox,' so one of our monks, Fr Zosima, stood in central Syktyvkar with that name and 'Votcha' in much larger letters on the collection box," remarked Babayev. "He was taken to the police station twice." The breakaway priests estimate that they have approximately 20 constant parishioners in Votcha, 40 in Syktyvkar and a further 25 in Vorkuta, most of whom, like their clergy, are in their mid-thirties. Over 150 attended the community's Epiphany service on the frozen River Sysola in January 2003.

According to Fr Stefan (Babayev), supporters of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community in Komi have also been harassed by the authorities. When still a Moscow Patriarchate priest in Vorkuta, Fr Andrei (Sherbakov)'s parish collection box was subject to a random check by the diocese in 1998, said Babayev. After the diocesan commission multiplied its contents to arrive at an annual sum not accounted for and demanded it, he said, drunk local police officers forced priests and monks out of the church: "We warned them that local police shouldn't enter into a religious dispute." Claiming that they were a "sect of western orientation", according to Babayev, the state authorities even tried to chase two monks out of the Votcha monastery's mountain skete in Komi's Troitsko-Pechorsk district, where they have lived in almost total isolation for the past three years. The police failed as the skete is only accessible by river.

According to prominent member of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community Yuri Yekishev, he and Babayev are on a list of people who are forbidden from appearing on air on Komi state radio. While he may be interviewed about his literary activity by other state media, Yekishev told Forum 18 on 7 July, he may not be asked about the Votcha situation. However Forum 18 noted that the republican Komi Television and Radio Company has featured positive television interviews with Babayev, as has republican newspaper "Molodezh Severa."

Writing in "Molodezh Severa" in August 2001, journalist Andrei Vlizkov recounts numerous claims from local residents and former monks concerning brutal practices within the Moscow Patriarchate Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Monastery, Vazhkurye (approximately 60km east of Syktyvkar), including armed threats and punishment burials to the neck. When Vlizkov questioned the monastery's abbot, Mikhail (Vetoshkin), about these allegations, he laughed them off, states the article. In an interview with Forum 18 on 8 July, an active member of a Moscow Patriarchate parish in Syktyvkar described how at least three former monks at the monastery in Vazhkurye had confirmed such practices. "A couple of months ago one who was shot at ended up in hospital," the parishioner said. Since they were too frightened to complain, the parishioner wrote to ask the head of Komi republic to investigate in early 2002, but did not receive a reply. A few months later the parishioner visited the republic's department for relations with the public and received assurances that the allegations would be investigated, but has since heard nothing.

Forum 18 was not able to speak to either diocesan secretary Fr Filip (Filippov) or Bishop Pitirim as shortly after speaking to Fr Filip,

Forum 18 was told that both had to leave on an "urgent work-related trip." An informed source told Forum 18 that the diocese only spoke to journalists it had accredited.

In an interview with Forum 18 News in her office on 8 July, the current adviser on religious issues to the assistant head of Komi republic, Galina Gabusheva, said that she did not know if a local Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community had ever tried to register, "they have never had registration according to my documents." She said that because of her comparatively recent appointment just over a year ago, she had not yet met members of the Votcha community and was unable to comment further on their situation. She cited a 1996 agreement signed by Bishop Pitirim and the head of Komi republic as the basis for collaboration between the Patriarchate diocese and various state organs in the republic.

Fr Stefan (Babayev) believes the local Patriarchate diocese opposes the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community partly due to their "serious attitude towards the Church – we don't accept money for administering sacraments," and partly because their presence hampers Bishop Pitirim's prospects for promotion. But Babayev could offer no reason for the active involvement of the secular authorities.

Yuri Yekishev (main defendant in the wooden church case) suggested collaboration between the Moscow Patriarchate and Soviet-era security services as a reason. According to the priest of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad parish in Syktyvkar, Fr Maksim (Savelyev), Votcha monk Fr Afanasi (Zhyugzhda) was approached for information about the rest of the community by the state authorities, but responded that it was "due to the kind of informer which you are trying to make out of me that my parents went to labour camp." Most of the young priests in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad community are from non-religious parents exiled during the Soviet period to camps in the Vorkuta area of Komi, where sentences typically ranged from 15-25 years. As a result, commented Savelyev, "we value our freedom."

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