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RUSSIA: Governor orders church land grab

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Apparently unaware that he was giving a public address, the governor of Kaluga Region has ordered that land legally owned by Word of Life Pentecostal Church be seized by "any" means, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The order, made at a recent local government meeting broadcast live via the regional administration's website, has been captured and posted on the internet site YouTube by a church member. No official was prepared to comment to Forum 18. Word of Life has complained of frequent bureaucratic harassment ever since its land and building became an impediment to shopping mall construction plans in Kaluga. In Udmurtia, Philadelphia Pentecostal Church is the latest congregation to report similar bureaucratic obstruction, which state officials usually insist is lawful and routine. Such problems are usually encountered by Protestants, who are more likely to have unsecured worship premises.

In an exceptional insight into the behind-the-scenes mechanisms employed by state officials to restrict disfavoured religious communities, a regional governor has ordered the seizure of a Pentecostal church's land by "any" means, Forum 18 News Service has learnt.

Protestants have repeatedly suggested to Forum 18 that they are targeted with undocumented instructions and unduly stringent state check-ups, but evidence is rare.

Apparently having forgotten that the 9 February meeting of Kaluga Regional Government was being broadcast via the regional administration's website, however, Governor Anatoli Artamonov ordered Vice-Governor Maksim Akimov to do whatever it takes to seize land belonging to Word of Life, a local Pentecostal church.

"That church of ours there, not ours, some kind of Swedish church," Artamonov declares in a video of the meeting captured by a Word of Life parishioner who happened to be watching. "Find ways of confiscating that land – any! you have two weeks to deal with this issue."

The footage, with English subtitles, may be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-JWFTZN9PQ>.

Word of Life's parent church is based in Uppsala, Sweden. Ironically, Centrumutveckling, the company whose shopping mall construction plans in Kaluga are inconvenienced by Word of Life's existing church building, is also Swedish.

Artamonov's secretary said the Governor was unavailable for comment on 24 February and directed Forum 18 to Vice-Governor Maksim Akimov's assistant, Aleksandr Kashkin. Kashkin said he was unable to comment as he was hearing about the order to seize the land for the first time from Forum 18. He added that Vice-Governor Akimov was in a meeting and unavailable for comment.

On 25 February, a second assistant said Akimov was away for a couple of days but promised to call back. Expressing surprise that Aleksandr Kashkin had said he knew nothing about the order, she added that he had in fact dealt with architectural and construction issues, specifically Word of Life's case.

After contacting Governor Artamonov, the same assistant told Forum 18 on 26 February that he had suggested contacting Maksim Shereikin, Kaluga Region's Minister for Economic Development. In the footage of the regional government meeting, Artamonov also suggests that Shereikin be involved in executing his order.

Minister Shereikin's assistant told Forum 18 on 26 February that he was in a meeting, but promised to call Forum 18 with an explanation of the land seizure later that day. There was no response by the end of the working day.

Word of Life has not encountered any fresh challenge to its property rights since the 9 February order, its pastor, Albert Ratkin, told Forum 18 on 18 February. A new wave of check-ups by the local Public Prosecutor's Office, Justice Department and Building Inspectorate began in December 2008, however, he added. Forum 18 has not been able to reach Pastor Ratkin since 18 February.

Then mayor of Kaluga, Maksim Akimov issued a decree confiscating Word of Life's land and building on 23 November 2006, but

this was ruled unlawful by Kaluga Regional Arbitration Court in 2007. The church has subsequently faced numerous bureaucratic check-ups and threats to cut off its power supplies. Purchased in 2002, Word of Life's building – a former sports centre – and associated plot of land found itself in the middle of the shopping mall construction site in 2006 (see most recently F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040).

Meanwhile, in a more familiar example of bureaucratic pressure, one of Udmurtia's largest Pentecostal churches is unable to meet as a single congregation. In May 2008 the 1,400-strong Philadelphia Church was forced out of a house of culture in the republic's capital, Izhevsk, Pastor Pavel Zhelnovakov told Forum 18 on 18 February. There – similarly to the approximately ten other houses of culture suitable for rent in Izhevsk – the church was told that it was "no longer possible" to rent the building, he explained: "It's unofficial, there's no document. All Protestant churches here encounter this."

Philadelphia currently worships in two shifts at a factory conference hall. Until December 2008, the church met unobstructed in its own building, started in 1998 and not yet declared fit for use. Pastor Zhelnovakov insists that the building is close to completion and in good enough condition for meetings. A 27 January check-up by the republic's Building Inspectorate, however, found 43 violations, for which the church could face a fine of up to 500,000 Roubles (94,760 Norwegian Kroner, 10,867 Euros or 13,904 US Dollars) if it continues to use the building. Pastor Zhelnovakov refused to accept and sign these charges on 9 February, claiming that only three or four of the violations have foundation. "Check-ups are typical for a building, and it's one thing when they're done right," he remarked to Forum 18. "But these demands are unjust, and we will protest them and defend our rights."

Rais Khalimov, the regional Construction Inspectorate official who conducted the check-up, was unavailable for comment when Forum 18 rang on 24, 25 and 26 February.

Protestants in particular – but sometimes also Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims – point to an apparently inordinate level of state interest in the fire safety and other technical aspects of worship buildings, resulting in fines, temporary closures or demolition threats (see F18News 18 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=783, 15 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=908 and 15 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=932). Glorification Pentecostal Church in the southern Siberian city of Abakan (Khakassia Republic) was forced to demolish its prayer hall in 2007 (see F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040).

Protestant churches also report being routinely barred from rented premises without explanation (see most recently F18News 18 December 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1232).

In a separate case, Samara Regional Court on 13 January rejected a suit to dissolve Light to the World Pentecostal Church, local news website Dobryye Samaryanye reported on 29 January. Following a check-up on the church's Awakening Bible Institute – which has only a handful of students - Samara city's Kirov District Public Prosecutor's Office concluded that Light to the World was conducting unlicensed educational activity and filed for its liquidation (see F18News 30 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1151).

Confusion has persisted over what type of religious activity requires an education licence. A Pentecostal Bible centre in the Volga republic of Chuvashia lost its legal personality status for unlicensed educational activity in August 2007 and sent an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg on 15 April 2008 (see F18News 15 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1048).

In March 2008, Smolensk Regional Court dissolved a local Methodist church for running a Sunday school - which has only four pupils - without an education licence (see F18News 26 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1104). A landmark 10 June 2008 ruling by Russia's Supreme Court overturned the Smolensk ruling, however. It also established that a licence is required for educational activity only if it is "accompanied by confirmation that the student has attained levels of education prescribed by the state" (see F18News 30 June 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1151). (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <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=1196.

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>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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