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RUSSIA: Widespread protests at new "Inquisition"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Widespread protests by Russian religious communities and human rights defenders followed the appointment of "anti-cultists" and controversial scholars of Islam to a state body with sweeping powers to investigate religious organisations, Forum 18 News Service notes. Particularly striking opposition to the Justice Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis has come from the Old Believers, a group not directly threatened. They view the body's re-organisation as "a direct threat to the constitutional rights of the citizens of Russia to freedom of confession [which] could serve as a dangerous catalyst for inter-confessional strife, a prologue to the beginning of struggle against religious dissent, oppression of believers, the restoration of religious censorship and inquisition." The Old Believers have called for the complete abolition of the Council. The Justice Ministry has failed to respond to Forum 18's questions, including why the Council is needed. The state's position is not unanimously supportive of the Council, and if the authorities heed the widespread protests its activity may be significantly curtailed.

The appointment of renowned "anti-cultists" and controversial scholars of Islam to a government body allocated sweeping powers to investigate religious organisations has provoked an unprecedented outcry from many religious representatives and human rights defenders, Forum 18 News Service notes.

Particularly striking opposition to the Justice Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis has come from the Union of Old Believer Theologians, a group not directly threatened. The developments are "a direct threat to the constitutional rights of the citizens of Russia to freedom of confession [which] could serve as a dangerous catalyst for inter-confessional strife, a prologue to the beginning of struggle against religious dissent, oppression of believers, the restoration of religious censorship and inquisition," they state. "Professing pre-schism, Old Russian Orthodoxy (..) Old Believers had to experience the terrible fruits of religious violence as no one else."

The Old Believers also go further than simply calling for the removal of some Council members; they suggest that the best course of action would be the complete abolition of the Council. "Otherwise, the religious life of Russia will always depend upon the subjective opinion of whichever people have ended up on this body," they argue. "Questions of the existence of religious associations should be regulated by relevant civil law, without the interference of any 'councils' 'committees' or 'departments'."

The Council's members and powers

Orders signed by Russia's Justice Minister Aleksandr Kononov on 18 February and 3 March 2009 appointed 24 members – all but one new – to the Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis. They also greatly expanded the Council's powers, allowing it to investigate the activity, doctrines, leadership decisions, literature and worship of any registered religious organisation and recommend action to the Ministry (see F18News 26 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1299).

The appointees include figures notorious for their virulent opposition to certain religious groups. One is the author of a leaflet linking Hare Krishna devotees with murder and child abuse that was recently declared extremist by a court in the Russian Far East. Another has urged Muslims to burn Islamic books banned as extremist – even as prominent Muslim leaders press for a review of such rulings (see F18News 27 May 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1300).

Will the authorities reconsider the Council's members and powers?

If the unprecedented indignation expressed by many leaders of Russia's religious communities – Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, Muslim, Old Believer and Pentecostal – and human rights defenders is heeded by the authorities, the protests may put a check on the Council's activity.

The developments around the Council caused "a big shock" within the Presidential Administration, "as they have been trying to follow a balanced policy there, pressing for peace and co-existence between confessions," Maksim Shevchenko, a member of the Public Chamber's Commission on International Relations and Freedom of Conscience and well-known television journalist, told Forum 18 on 20 May. The initiative for the Council's re-organisation originates with Justice Minister Kononov, he believes.

One of the Council's vice-chairs, Roman Silantyev, maintained that the main credit for reviving the Council belongs to Konovalov, the Russian news agency Interfax reported on 3 April.

Among Forum 18's written questions submitted to the Justice Ministry before the start of the working day on 22 May were: whether the two orders appointing new members to the Council and expanding its powers were the initiative of Minister Konovalov or the result of consultation with another state organ. Forum 18 also asked the Ministry on 29 May why the Council exists at all. However, the Ministry failed to respond to any of the questions by the middle of the working day in Moscow on 2 June.

The state's position is not unanimously supportive of the Council. Andrei Sebentsov, head of the Russian government's Department for Relations with Religious Associations, remarked to Portal-Credo religious-affairs website on 9 April that the appointments of Aleksandr Dvorkin – "not a religious-studies scholar and de facto representing the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)" - and Silantyev were "a very strange fact which could have far-reaching consequences."

So far there has been no public move by a state representative to counter the changes to the Council. Shevchenko told Forum 18 that his Commission currently has no hearing planned to press the issue. "I can only suggest things to them - but we are following the situation closely," he remarked. "As a Russian citizen, I don't want this kind of justice." Shevchenko co-ordinated the 3 March Public Chamber hearing at which Ravil Gainutdin, Council of Muftis chair, questioned recent bans on Islamic literature.

Widespread opposition to the Council

In addition to the Old Believers, there have been unusually strong responses to the Council from many religious representatives and human rights defenders over the past few weeks, as reported by Interfax, Portal-Credo and the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice.

Roman Lunkin, who heads the Institute of Religion and Law at the Slavic Centre, called the Council's formation "a declaration of war" to religious associations other than the Moscow Patriarchate, "at the very least, an inquisition." He subsequently published an open letter to Minister Konovalov – intended as a petition – calling for Dvorkin, Aleksandr Kuzmin, Yevgeny Mukhtarov, Fr Lev Semenov and Andrei Vasilchenko to be removed from the Council. Lunkin also reported that Igor Yablokov, who heads the faculty of Religious Philosophy and Religious Studies at Moscow State University and is the only previous Council member, vowed at its first, 3 April meeting that he would not attend in future as it did not bear "even the remotest resemblance to a meeting of scholars".

The head of the Baptist Union, Yuri Sipko maintained that the changes to the Council sought to reduce religious freedom to a level at which "everything is controlled and subordinate to a single ideology and freedom itself is banned (..) this only underscores the helplessness of our state authorities, who, instead of following constitutional principles of freedom - including religious freedom – constantly feel the urge to curb these freedoms." In a later statement on his Union's website, Sipko claimed that whereas President Dmitry Medvedev criticised "legal nihilism", he had appointed a Justice Minister "who clearly doesn't understand the essence of law."

Apparently in response to Minister Konovalov's criticism of disquiet over the new Council, Sipko also insisted that the authorities should not evaluate the actions of "citizens in pain, and wishing to speak about their pain" as actions against the authorities. "This is the same as if a doctor were to evaluate the actions of a patient who is complaining of his indisposition as actions against his authority as a doctor (..) only talentless officials evaluate protests as actions directed against the authorities. The voice of citizens is the expression of higher authority, behind which is the voice of God."

Pentecostal Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky remarked that the appointment of Dvorkin – "a thoroughly odious personality in Russian religious circles" – was "a huge provocation by the Justice Ministry." He later told the Protestant TBN television channel that he expected "very unpleasant actions" from the new Council and urged Konovalov to resign.

In response, Council vice-chair Silantyev suggested that Ryakhovsky should not make "rash offensive statements". The Council was "not created to flatter the gaze of the US State Department," he continued, maintaining that Council recommendations would instead be taken seriously by major government organs. "That they won't have any authority with Sergei Ryakhovsky and Ravil Gainutdin will not harm the work of the Council in any way," Silantyev maintained. Dvorkin interpreted Ryakhovsky's call for Konovalov to resign as "his yearning to get into power, painfully reminiscent of the events of the 'Orange Revolution', when the same neo-Pentecostals in Ukraine came out [to demonstrate] on Maidan [Independence Square] in Kiev."

In an open letter to Minister Konovalov, Viktor Vitko, vice-chair of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Euro-Asia Division, supported Lunkin's call for Council members to be removed, and suggested that allocating the right to make recommendations on the state's behalf to "people renowned for their fight against non-Orthodox organisations and movements in Russia" would inevitably result in future conflicts and court cases.

Mufti Ravil Gainutdin maintained that the newly formed Council contains no Islamic scholars capable of giving an objective evaluation of Islamic literature, so that Muslims "will hardly pay due attention to its conclusions, still less follow them." Co-chair of

the Council of Muftis and head of the Volga Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, Mukadas Bibarsov described the development as "either a bad joke or positive mockery of the religious sentiments and civil rights of Russian believers."

However, the Russian Orthodox Church has expressed support for the Council. Fr Vsevolod Chaplin, who heads the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for Relations between Church and Society, has defended the new Council, claiming that it obviously now contains "specialists at a serious level, active, well-known in society." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.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.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287) and 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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