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RUSSIA: No more mosques for Moscow?

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

With only four official mosques in the Russian capital (one of which is being reconstructed), Moscow's Muslim community has long sought to open new places of worship, Forum 18 News Service notes. Police estimated 170,000 worshippers at the end-of-Ramadan festival Eid-ul-Fitr (locally known as Uraza-bairam) in August, close to the numbers who attend Russian Orthodox churches at Easter. Yet one of just two new mosque sites approved in early September was withdrawn on 20 September after street protests. A Council of Muftis official told Forum 18 "we're just asking for the number of mosques to be raised from four to 10 at least – that would be just". Anton Ignatenko, Vice-chair of Moscow's Department for Relations with Religious Organisations, apologised to Forum 18 that he was currently not authorised to comment on this issue.

Moscow's latest U-turn on permission for a new mosque highlights the increasingly volatile situation of the fast-growing Muslim community in the Russian capital, Forum 18 News Service notes. The city's failure to back the property rights of minority faiths is already well known to Hare Krishna devotees and Protestants.

"There are hundreds of Orthodox churches, and we're just asking for the number of mosques to be raised from four to 10 at least – that would be just," Gulnur Gaziyeva, press secretary to the Council of Muftis of Russia, told Forum 18 on 20 September. "Muslims are historic residents of this territory and have equal civil rights."

Obstruction of new mosques is a violation of human rights, agreed Maksim Shevchenko, a television journalist focusing on Islamic issues and until recently a member of the Public Chamber's Commission on Interethnic Relations and Freedom of Conscience, a government advisory body. Moscow needs 20 or 30 new mosques, he estimated to Forum 18 on 19 September. "As long as believers acquire land legally, they should be able to build houses of worship on it, regardless of what religion they follow."

Vice-chair of Moscow's Department for Relations with Religious Organisations, Anton Ignatenko apologised to Forum 18 on 21 September that he was currently not authorised to comment on this issue.

Territorial division

Officials have long promoted mosque construction in regions whose titular ethnicities are traditionally viewed as Muslim, such as Dagestan and Tatarstan, regardless of how many of their inhabitants practise Islam. But Muslims are often barred from building in regions of Russia considered ethnically Russian, even if their communities have a long history there. In many such areas, a recent surge in the Muslim population due to labour migration both from within Russia and ex-Soviet Central Asia means that the need for mosques is now acute (see F18News 3 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1750).

Three official Sunni mosques currently function in Moscow. The fourth, main mosque on Prospekt Mira is under reconstruction; according to Gaziyeva, a temporary prayer hall at the site accommodates 1,500 worshippers. In August this year, the city authorities provided three additional open-air sites at Luzhniki Stadium, Sokolniki Park and in Southern Butovo District for the end-of-Ramadan festival Eid-ul-Fitr (locally known as Uraza-bairam). Yet Moscow police reported that over half of the 170,000 faithful attending came to Prospekt Mira.

In recent years, crowds at major Muslim festivals such as Eid-ul-Fitr have grown so enormous that police close numerous streets around the main mosque site – including Prospekt Mira itself, a major road – for the duration of worship. The thousands arriving for Eid-ul-Fitr prayers at dawn on 19 August 2012 may be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMWz4z3yGvw.

Walking through these streets as worshippers removed paper prayer mats from every available space at the close of this year's ceremony, Forum 18 observed almost all to be young and male, often with traditional head-coverings and T-shirt slogans indicating origins in Central Asia or the North Caucasus.

By contrast, police recorded only 105,000 attending Eid-ul-Fitr prayers across the whole of Tatarstan republic, regarded as one of Russia's Islamic centres. Unlike Moscow, they had access to 1,124 mosques.

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Gulf with Orthodox

In Moscow, numbers attending major Muslim festivals are nearing those for major Orthodox festivals. City police reported 186,000 attending this year's Orthodox Easter services in the Russian capital's nearly 300 churches and monasteries. Unlike mosque construction, however, plans to build a further 200 Orthodox churches in Soviet-planned suburbs - where few worship facilities exist - are enthusiastically promoted by senior state officials.

On 22 November 2011, Moscow City Government announced its approval of this project and the allocation of 200 corresponding land plots to the Russian Orthodox Church. Praising the scheme's progress at a December 2011 fundraising concert, Vice-mayor Aleksandr Gorbenko called it "pleasing to God", Interfax reported.

First Deputy Mayor of Moscow until late 2011, Vladimir Resin is a top adviser on construction to both Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church. Resin – also a member of the State Duma's Land and Construction Committee - called on Muscovites in February 2012 to donate whatever they could towards construction of the 200 new churches, Interfax reported.

Moscow City Government's website described the plans in March 2012 as "the greatest joint construction project between the Church and City Hall since the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour". It includes buildings for missionary work as well as churches, the website noted.

Heated protests

Senior officials' enthusiasm for the 200 new Orthodox churches continues despite strong popular opposition in some Moscow districts. The same week that demonstrators chanted, "We don't need a church!" in Kronshtadtsky Bulvar neighbourhood, Resin argued for 600 instead of 200 more churches in an April 2012 interview with official government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta. Footage of the demonstration can be seen at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j9tHkjg09Q&feature=plcp.

When encountering similar public opposition to mosques, officials are reluctant to back Muslims' property rights, however. Moscow government's Committee for Ensuring the Realisation of Investment Projects in Construction announced the allocation of two land plots to Muslim organisations for new mosques on 6 September 2012.

Just two weeks later on 20 September, the city authorities cancelled permission for one of the mosques "due to the objections of a portion of residents", Interfax reported. The previous evening, some 2,000 demonstrators had gathered in Mitino District, one of the proposed mosque locations. Arguing Moscow to be "a fundamentally Russian city", some maintained that a mosque would bring bloody animal sacrifice, crime and conflict, IslamNews reported on 20 September. Footage of the 19 September demonstration can be seen at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsTFDdL0giU&list=UUyjM-8bcTcXHHVPmvfx0C_g&index=1&feature=plcp.

Airing this footage, a 20 September report on national Channel 1 TV evening news featured the chair of Mitino District Assembly, Igor Kononov, admitting that the demonstration "gave us information and food for understanding the opinion of residents". It also showed Vladimir Goverdovsky, prefect of Moscow's North-western Administrative District, announcing the cancellation of the mosque site in Mitino and "the future selection of other land plots taking into account the opinion of residents".

Yet Gaziyeva, Council of Muftis press secretary, maintains that such popular opposition is largely artificially created. Of four people detained at the demonstration, she noted, only one was a local resident. "All the others were just representatives of organisations and had nothing to do with residency there - there's the same proportion among the demonstrators." In September 2010, she added, similar action prevented the construction of a mosque in Moscow's Tekstilshchiki District, where a land plot and building plan had earlier been approved.

Asked how the Moscow authorities react to mosque proposals, Gaziyeva would tell Forum 18 only that Muslims have been working with them "very closely" since 1991 to get more mosques built, "and we're counting on their understanding". She acknowledged, however, that currently no building projects are being pursued other than the reconstruction of the main mosque at Prospekt Mira.

Protestants, Krishna devotees squeezed

Disfavoured faiths have long battled for their property rights in the Russian capital. Legally, the state – which still controls most land – may allocate a plot to a religious organisation in order to build a house of worship. Under Article 30.3 of the 2001 Land Code such a plot is given for use free of charge during construction (bezvozmezdnoe srochnoe polzovanie). Once the building has been declared fit for use (prinyato v ekspluatatsiyu), the land beneath it becomes the religious organisation's private property (Article 36).

In practice, however, the process depends upon the continued goodwill and co-operation of the authorities, as the very different outcomes for different faiths demonstrate.

Moscow City Government gave the green light for Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church to receive land and building rights in

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compensation for the loss of its late Soviet-era premises to city planning back in 1992. In the years since, however, the authorities have refused to support the Pentecostals' building plans, culminating in the state's 6 September 2012 bulldozing of the Church's "temporary" structure as unlawful (see F18News 6 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1738).

Even those who retain their worship property after similarly long battles suffer significant losses of material and other resources.

In April 2012 Emmanuel Pentecostal Church was finally granted the rights to use land beneath a former workers' club it purchased in Solntsevo District in 2002, the church's administrator Bakur Azaryan told Forum 18 on 25 September. This means Emmanuel's 1,000-strong congregation may legally use the building for worship. Azaryan added, however, that they have still not been offered a viable alternative to land allocated in Moscow's Vernadsky Prospekt District in 1996 but later withdrawn. "We're still fighting (..) we spent a lot of money on that project."

After all relevant departments approved Emmanuel's construction plan for the land plot, Vernadsky Prospekt District Assembly rejected it in November 2000 citing public opposition, even though the church subsequently gathered over 6,000 signatures of support from 10,000 of the district's households (see F18News 24 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=637).

The Society for Krishna Consciousness hopes to begin building a temple on its land plot next year, six years after its allocation by the Moscow authorities in 2007, Society representative Radkha Damodar told Forum 18 on 19 September.

Like Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church, the community lost its late Soviet-era premises – where it had a long-term rental agreement – due to city planning. With the building's final demolition in 2004, the Krishna devotees were allocated a nearby land plot for construction, but in October 2005 Moscow City Government suddenly withdrew its permission following strong criticism from the Russian Orthodox Church (see F18News 3 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1056).

Even if built, however, Moscow's new Krishna temple will be at the city's northern limits and a 20-minute bus ride from the nearest metro station, Radkha Damodar acknowledged. The community's original premises were 25km closer to the city centre and only 50 metres from the nearest metro. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis http://www.sova-center.ru, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

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, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More 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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia.

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