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RUSSIA: Whose side are the police on?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Pentecostals, Catholics and Baptists are among religious communities to complain recently of police failure to protect them from attacks or other unwarranted intrusions during services or of police raids to prevent them conducting religious activity – such as giving out religious literature – which they regard as legitimate, Forum 18 News Service notes. Police failed to respond when 300 Pentecostals in Spassk in Siberia were terrorised by 20 drunken youths who attacked their service in April or when a Catholic service in St Petersburg was disrupted by intruders in late May. Only when church leaders complained did the authorities take belated action. In Ivanovo near Moscow, the FSB security service initiated a raid on a 14 May Baptist evangelisation event at a rented cinema and an investigation is underway over the fact that copies of the New Testament being handed out did not include the name of the publisher. "We are still trying to find out what will happen," Pastor Aleksandr Miskevich told Forum 18. "I can't imagine how they are going to check the authenticity and authorship of the Gospels!"

Recent incidents in disparate parts of the Russian Federation illustrate a tendency for local state representatives to obstruct the activity of some religious communities while failing to protect them from criminal assault, Forum 18 News Service notes. Police in Siberia failed to protect a Pentecostal Easter celebration attacked by drunken youths in April, while in St Petersburg police stood by in late May while participants in a gay and lesbian street event entered the porch of a prominent Catholic church during a service to drink alcohol and urinate. By contrast, in May police raided a Baptist event in a rented local cinema where church members were giving out religious literature.

While unregistered Baptists have most consistently reported such obstruction (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=791), possession of state registration appears no guarantee either against prosecution or of protection in case of attack (see also F18News 27 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=617).

In the southern Siberian settlement of Spassk (Kemerovo region), 300 members of the local Reconciliation Pentecostal Church were celebrating Easter on 23 April (in accordance with the Julian Calendar, also followed by the Russian Orthodox Church) when approximately 20 drunken youths entered their rented house of culture, the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice reported on 26 April. After attacking church members who escorted them outside, the youths forced their way back into the building in an attempt "to sort out the sectarians," according to the report.

Summoned from the nearest police station - some 7km (4 miles) away in the district centre of Tashtagol - officers reportedly either did nothing to capture the assailants as they left the scene or else maintained after pursuit that they could not catch up with them. According to the church's pastor, Andrei Kaidalov, only a few of the youths were captured, of whom some were freed once the police were at a distance from the house of culture.

In the police officers' absence, according to the report, the assault continued inside the house of culture. As Sunday school children about to perform their Easter concert looked on in terror, youths closed in on the remaining church members, encircling them in the centre of the hall and beating up those who attempted to resist. Switching on the microphone, the youths reportedly continued to issue threats and insults, calling the Pentecostals "sectarians" and "demons" and insisting that "the only Easter we have here is Orthodox". When one church member managed to turn off the microphone, the youths began to wreck the audio equipment before leaving the building. According to the report, parents of the assailants then began to arrive and explain to police officers that their children had acted quite properly, since "we need to fight against sectarians".

According to a 28 April report on Portal-Credo religious affairs website, three of the Pentecostals subsequently sought hospital treatment for a broken rib, ripped ear and spinal damage.

Affiliated to the Russia-wide Pentecostal union headed by Pavel Okara, Reconciliation Church appears to have obtained a response from the state authorities only after appealing at the regional level. On 2 May the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice reported that a criminal investigation into the incident was placed under the personal supervision of Kemerovo regional governor Aman Tuleyev after Pastor Kaidalov and regional Pentecostal representative Andrei Khoroshchenko met Tuleyev's assistant on religious issues. At the meeting, Yekaterina Stas reportedly telephoned Tashtagol mayor Vladimir Makuta to demand that he take measures and make a

formal apology to Reconciliation Church – which he subsequently did. Also according to the report, Tashtagol district public prosecutor's office was found to have opened a criminal investigation on 25 April - without informing Pastor Kaidalov – which is expected to last six weeks.

The telephone of Governor Tuleyev's press secretary went unanswered on 8 June. Contacting the region's culture and nationality policy department the same day and requesting co-ordinates for Yekaterina Stas, Forum 18 was given a number which also went unanswered.

In St Petersburg, St Catherine's Catholic parish website reported that police failed to intervene when the church's 27 May Saturday evening service was disrupted by a gay and lesbian event – incorporating a strip show and amplified music – on the square directly outside its Nevsky Prospekt entrance. While officers idly looked on, according to the report, participants in the event rushed noisily into the church, where they drank alcohol and urinated in the porch. "We consider those who organised this repulsive show and gave permission for it to proceed at this location to bear full responsibility," the website declares.

In the wake of an appeal by parishioners to St Petersburg's municipal administration and public prosecutor's office, city vice-governor Viktor Lobko reportedly met Catholic leader Metropolitan Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz on 5 June and offered his assurances that such an incident would not happen again.

By contrast, in Ivanovo, a town approximately 250km (155 miles) north-east of Moscow, police recently moved to prevent members of Resurrection Baptist Church from disseminating their faith at a 14 May evangelisation event. Three were detained by plain-clothes officers as they handed out copies of the New Testament to an audience of 500 at a rented cinema in the city, Pastor Aleksandr Miskevich of the church confirmed to Forum 18 on 6 June. While they were released without charge after three hours, he said, an investigation opened under Article 13.22 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes "violation of the regulations on the disclosure of publication data" with a fine of up to 100 times the minimum wage and confiscation of the literature concerned. The investigation is still ongoing. "We are still trying to find out what will happen," Pastor Miskevich remarked to Forum 18, "I can't imagine how they are going to check the authenticity and authorship of the Gospels!"

The telephones of the press services of both Ivanovo's regional administration and regional FSB went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 7 and 8 June. Pastor Miskevich told Forum 18 that Baptist Union leader Yuri Sipko has yet to receive a response to a written enquiry about the check-up addressed to the recently-appointed governor of Ivanovo region, Mikhail Men.

Posted on the website of the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, the text of a 14 May Ivanovo police report states that the object of the cinema search was "a brochure of religious content entitled 'New Testament and Psalms'. The brochure measures 7 by 12 cm, has a blue cover and 659 pages. The said publication contains the following violations of the regulations on the disclosure of publication data - no information about its chief editor, edition number, date of publication, index, circulation quantity or the address of its editorial offices, publisher or typographer." The text of the 15 May police instruction in which this report appears states that the search was initiated on the basis of a report by Ivanovo regional FSB.

Pastor Miskevich cited to Forum 18 other recent moves by the Ivanovo authorities against his church, including a night police search of the family apartment of a missionary from Moldova and fines handed down to ten American Baptists for allegedly violating Russia's visa regime. He explained that the elderly Americans all held religious work visas at the invitation of Resurrection Church, but were detained by police for eight hours in early February and fined a total of 10,000 roubles (approximately 2,259 Norwegian Kroner, 290 Euros or 373 US Dollars) on the grounds that their talks held on church premises - "a mixture of culture, faith and language" - constituted teaching rather than religious activity.

The Moscow-based Sova Centre religious affairs website reported that Ivanovo's regional court on 6 June rejected Resurrection Baptist Church's appeal against a previous district court ruling upholding the police action against the ten US missionaries.

In the latest missionary expulsion case, Pastor Sunday Adelaja of the Kiev-based charismatic Embassy of God Church was refused entry to the Russian Federation at a Moscow airport on 31 May as he travelled to take part in an edition of a national television talk show devoted to questions of faith. The Nigerian pastor's personal assistant, Carolyn Veldbloem, explained to Forum 18 on 6 June that Adelaja held a Russian business visa which he had used on several previous occasions, and was not given any reason for his deportation by the Russian authorities. She added that Pastor Adelaja believes the reason to be that "the Russian government thinks that we were responsible for the Orange Revolution". According to the Embassy of God website, the newly elected mayor of Kiev, Leonid Chernovetsky, is a church member.

Pastor Adelaja is the 56th foreign religious worker - including Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and a Jew – known to Forum 18 to have been barred from Russia since 1998. If a reason is given by the authorities for such action, it is normally "in the interests of state security" under Article 27, Part 1 of the federal law on entry to and exit from Russia (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644). Only in some of the most recent cases have those barred managed to return (see F18News 3 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=773).

In a statement posted on the Ukrainian Yedinoye Otechestvo (One Fatherland) website, the press secretary of the Moscow-based

Union of Orthodox Citizens, Kirill Frolov, maintained that "the detention of the dangerous sectarian Adelaja is the Third Rome's answer to the new Carthage of Washington." Frolov was himself officially denied entry to Ukraine after flying into the Crimean airport of Simferopol for a conference on 27 January. (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News 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=509

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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