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RUSSIA: Property struggles of Protestants, Muslims and Hare Krishna devotees

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

"A negative attitude towards Evangelical churches" is blamed for the Russian city of Krasnodar's demand for the demolition of a private home intended to host worship. Its owner, Aleksei Yeropkin, told Forum 18 News Service that many religious communities, regionally and nationally, meet for worship in the legal residence of a member. No deadline has yet been set for the demolition, as a court appeal is pending. A linked church in Kalmykia complains of slander on local regional state TV, leading to hostility from local people. But a threatened mosque demolition in Astrakhan has not yet been carried out and an appeal has just been lodged with Russia's Supreme Court. In the Russian capital Moscow, there may be progress in a Hare Krishna temple's struggle for land, following an agreement between the city governments of the Indian capital Delhi and Moscow. But there has been no progress in resolving the similar struggle of a Pentecostal congregation to build a church.

"A negative attitude towards Evangelical churches" in the southern city of Krasnodar, near the Black Sea, lies behind the recent demand by a local court for the demolition of a private home intended to host Protestant services, its owner Aleksei Yeropkin told Forum 18 News Service on 8 June. No deadline has yet been set for the demolition, however, as Krasnodar's Regional Court is due to hear Yeropkin's appeal on 20 June.

Although Krasnodar City Administration first filed suit for the demolition of the large private house in July 2005, Pervomaisky District Court only decided in favour of the city on 24 April 2006. Yeropkin – who heads the Krasnodar diocese of the Evangelical Christian Missionary Union (ECMU) – intends to hold services for its 300-strong Gospel House congregation in the building.

The 24 April court decision - which has been seen by Forum 18 - maintains that the two-storey building is not a residential property but a "non-residential prayer house", and that Yeropkin "is violating the interests" of Krasnodar City Administration "with his illegal actions". While a representative of the city's Architectural Department confirmed to the Court that the construction plans for the property were fully approved in August 2005, he also maintained that "de facto a prayer house is being built rather than a residential property" and that such a change of designated purpose requires the prior approval of Krasnodar City Parliament.

In his 28 April appeal against the court's decision, Yeropkin points out that Article 16 of Russia's 1997 Religion Law specifies that worship services may be held in private homes, and that "the fact that a large room has been built into the residential house, in which the owner intends to meet with his fellow believers for joint profession of faith, does not prove that the designated purpose of the building has changed." As he pointed out to Forum 18, many religious communities both in Krasnodar region and throughout Russia meet for worship unimpeded in buildings which are legally the private residence of one of their members.

Contacted on 15 June, Krasnodar regional affairs official Aleksandr Babskov explained that construction issues were the competency of the city administration and directed Forum 18 to two officials on Krasnodar's Municipal Commission for the Termination of Unauthorised Construction who, he said, were dealing with the situation. Viktor Bondar had been away sick for the past week, however, and Yevgeni Tverdoi maintained that he "hadn't got a clue" about Yeropkin's allegedly illegal construction of a prayer house in the city. "Shouldn't you be aware of such developments," Forum 18 asked, "after all, you are a member of the Municipal Commission for the Termination of Unauthorised Construction?" "So what if I am," Tverdoi replied.

In 2004 an ECMU representative told Forum 18 in Krasnodar that his organisation then faced no obstruction to use of worship property (see F18News 7 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=470).

Another ECMU church encountering problems is in Kalmykia, north-west of the Caspian Sea. Pastor Vladimir Gololobov of Lord's Love Church - which also belongs to ECMU – told Forum 18 on 9 June that on 25 April, he made a formal complaint in response to a local Kalmykia state television news report. Among other allegations, the brief 10 April news item claimed that Gololobov "does not hide the fact that he is continuing the activity of his father, who practised satanism." His complaint will be heard by the Municipal Court in the Kalmykian republic's capital, Elista, on 24 June.

Gololobov stressed in his complaint to the court that Lord's Love Church upholds the law and that his father "had nothing to do with

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either religion or satanism." He also pointed out that on the day after the news report "people climbed over the church fence and started banging on the door, shouting 'Open up, satanists!'" Kalmykia's state press has previously accused ECMU of being a "sly and mobile enemy" engaged in espionage (see F18News 14 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=31).

In another case of threatened demolition in southern Russia, north of the Caspian Sea, worshippers at Astrakhan's Mosque No 34 are glad that the authorities have not touched their building so far, "but they could come at any time," its mosque council chairwoman Asya Makhmudova told Forum 18 on 14 June, "we're keeping watch around the clock."

After losing a 1 March regional court appeal against a 23 January lower ruling that Mosque No 34 qualified as "unauthorised construction", its community had until 1 May to demolish their worship building themselves or face its destruction by the state authorities (see F18News 20 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=746). According to Makhmudova, the community submitted a further legal challenge to Russia's Supreme Court in Moscow on 10 June.

Asked if and when Mosque No 34 would be demolished by the city authorities, a spokeswoman for Astrakhan City Administration's Press Service told Forum 18 on 15 June that only Mayor Sergei Bozhenov's Press Secretary Olga Dyakova dealt with "that sort of information". Olga Dyakova's telephone went unanswered on 15 or 16 June, however.

The Black Sea city of Sochi's Muslim community is continuing its long struggle for permission to construct a mosque (see F18News 18 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=782).

In the Russian capital Moscow, some religious communities continue to fight for the opportunity to build places of worship. Last autumn, the Moscow authorities withdrew their permission for the construction of a new temple in the city by the Society for Krishna Consciousness (see F18News 20 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=746). However, on 1 June, India Abroad reported that Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister of the Indian capital Delhi, stated that a clause concerning allocation of land for a Krishna temple in Moscow had been included in an agreement between the city governments of Delhi and Moscow, signed during her May visit to the Russian capital. No-one was available for comment at the Indian Embassy on 16 June.

Problems continue for a Pentecostal church however. Pastor Aleksandr Purshaga of Emmanuel Pentecostal Church wrote an open letter on 13 June to Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov complaining that, although church members have been able to stage demonstrations unimpeded over the past six months, "we have seen almost no movement towards resolving our property issues," and city centre police are now requesting that the protests be scaled down.

Over a year ago, on 6 June 2005, a city construction official ordered a swift resolution to the church's property problems by 30 June 2005. The order was given after brief prison sentences served by several of its members - for what the authorities claimed was unapproved protest - attracted widespread media coverage (see F18News 13 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=583). Despite obtaining the necessary approval from all relevant state departments for construction on a plot of land allocated in 1996, a Moscow district assembly rejected Emmanuel Church's plans for a new prayer house in 2000 (see F18News 24 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=637). (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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