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RUSSIA: Will Moscow mayor help Molokans?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

In what Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights has called "a scandalous case," plans by Moscow's Molokan community to build a prayer house have met persistent obstruction. "There was no constitution or religion law back in 1805, but then it took the tsar just ten days to sort out our problem. Now we have all that, but we're nowhere after ten years!" Yakov Yevdokimov, of Moscow's Molokan community, remarked to Forum 18 News Service. The Molokans are an indigenous Russian Christian confession closely resembling Protestants. Moscow's Molokans first requested land in December 1996. The first active – and initially positive – response by the city authorities came in November 2000, but since then some city officials have blocked plans, citing various reasons. One reason cited has been a survey of 1,142 out of 1,829 local residents that found public opinion to be opposed to the prayer house. Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights found that only 297 people took part in the survey, and that some of those recorded as opposed did not participate at all. The Ombudsman suggests that the poll – "in any case only recommendatory" – was "probably crudely falsified."

"There was no constitution or religion law back in 1805, but then it took the tsar just ten days to sort out our problem. Now we have all that, but we're nowhere after ten years!" the 80-year-old council chairman of Moscow's Molokan community, Yakov Yevdokimov, remarked to Forum 18 on 21 November. "And this is supposed to be a country where human rights are defended? Awful!"

The Molokans, also known as Spiritual Christians, are an indigenous Russian confession closely resembling Protestants. Their worship consists in turn of Bible reading, preaching and psalm singing in traditional Russian style. Long persecuted for their faith, on 12 July 1805 three Molokans petitioned Tsar Aleksandr I for religious freedom, which he granted them by a 22 July 1805 decree. Many Molokan communities had previously been exiled to the Caucasus by Tsarina Catherine II (Catherine the Great). Almost all their 70-strong Moscow community are refugees from 1990s ethnic conflicts in that region.

"A scandalous case"

The Moscow Molokans currently rent premises for worship because – in what Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights has called "a scandalous case" – their plans to build a prayer house in the city have met with persistent obstruction. "We pray that the Lord will open the hearts of our rulers to give us a little plot of land for a prayer house," members of the community continued to petition at a recent Sunday service.

"There is a land deficit in Moscow, the situation is very difficult," Konstantin Blazhenov of Moscow city's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations told Forum 18 on 29 November. Agreeing that the Molokans' case had gone "very long" without being resolved, he insisted that the city authorities were still trying to locate a plot of land for their prayer house, however. "We're offering them one now, but they don't think it's suitable."

The Molokans first requested land in Moscow on 25 December 1996. Article 22 of the 1997 Religion Law grants religious organisations the right to use plots of land provided by the state and transferred to them free of charge. In a later appeal, the Molokans asked for 600 square metres of land in the southern part of Moscow close to the metro and a suburban railway station, since many of their number are elderly and live scattered across Moscow Region. The Moscow city authorities' first active response came on 3 November 2000, when Nikolai Merkulov, who chairs the city's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, informed the city's chief architect, Aleksandr Kuzmin, of his department's support for the Molokans' application and asked him to order the selection of a suitable plot. Merkulov also noted that the Molokans are "a traditional trend" on Russian territory. On 24 January 2001 a department within the city's Architecture Committee proposed a plot at 28 Kaspiiskaya Street.

"You Americans have bought our land!"

"We were completely happy with it," Yevdokimov told Forum 18. During a 10 May 2001 meeting attended by some 200 local residents, however, "people leapt out of their seats and jumped on us when we tried to address them," he said. Among the threats and accusations were: "We'll burn everything you bring here and try to build!"; "We're Orthodox and we have a church, let them come over to our Orthodoxy!" and "You Americans have bought our land!" On the basis of this meeting and the opinion of residents in the

apartment blocks nearest to the proposed plot, Tsaritsyno District Assembly voted on 15 May 2001 to recommend that its chairman not approve the planning and construction of the Molokans' prayer house.

According to Yevdokimov, the nearest apartment blocks are in fact 100 metres from the proposed construction site, while residents from further afield in Tsaritsyno District attended the public meeting. The 1997 Religion Law contains no requirement for public consultation when allocating land to religious organisations, he pointed out to Forum 18. Nor does Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's 9 July 1999 decree on the procedure for approving the construction of religious buildings, which states that authorisation for allocating land for this purpose belongs exclusively to the city government. Prefects (who head the Administrative Districts which form the intermediary level of government between Moscow city districts and the mayor) and other lower tiers of municipal authority must agree their decisions in this area with the city's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, it stipulates.

"What are the law and that decree for?"

"What are the law and that decree for, if a district authority can overturn it all?" Yevdokimov exclaimed to Forum 18. In response to the Molokans' complaints, Moscow's Southern Administrative District proposed an alternative plot at nearby 31 Bakinskaya Street. "We really liked the second plot too," said Yevdokimov. Alongside a blood transfusion centre, there are no residential blocks near to it, he pointed out.

On 15 January 2002, however, Tsaritsyno District wrote that "on the basis of residents' wishes and taking into account the majority of views expressed by members of the District Assembly, it has been decided to refuse construction by Molokans on any plot of land located on the territory of Tsaritsyno District." Subsequently kept waiting for an appointment with local officials for more than three hours, said Yevdokimov, four Molokan elders were informed by a Tsaritsyno District representative that they would not be received after all, with the remark: "Luzhkov issued the decree, let him give the land himself!"

In response to the Molokans' 11 February 2002 complaint, Mayor Luzhkov ordered various city officials to work out "realistic options agreed with the [Molokan] community" and placed the whole situation under his special control. While noting that the prayer house could have been built on the previous two plots, the city's Architecture Committee on 27 March 2002 proposed a third site, 3 Makeyevskaya Street, since its then tenant, a veterinary clinic, was soon to move to a new building. In a subsequent letter, an Architecture Committee official confirmed the plot's isolation from residential accommodation. On 12 September 2002 Southern Administrative District's Land and Planning Commission approved the Makeyevskaya Street proposal.

Two years later

The Molokans spent the next two years and 150,000 Roubles (33,734 Norwegian Kroner, 4,167 Euros or 6,140 US Dollars) drawing up construction plans and securing approval for them from all the necessary city departments, said Yevdokimov, obtaining the final signature from the acting head of Tsaritsyno District on 23 November 2004. On 30 March 2005, however, the acting prefect of Southern Administrative District, Yuri Bulanov, refused to allow the Molokans use of the former veterinary clinic, arguing that Mayor Luzhkov had ordered the transfer of the building to a club of young animal lovers on 12 February 2005.

On 18 August 2005 Yevdokimov copied by hand a document shown to him by Konstantin Blazhenov of the city's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations. Signed by Mayor Luzhkov, it ordered that another site be found for the young animal lovers' club. On 7 October 2005, however, Yuri Bulanov, the acting prefect, told Yevdokimov that "taking into account the collective complaint of residents and with a view to avoiding social conflict (..) it has been decided to build an establishment of social significance – an ambulance station" at 3 Makeyevskaya Street. On 28 May 2007 Mayor Luzhkov issued a decree authorising construction surveys for an ambulance station at the site.

Konstantin Blazhenov, the Moscow religious affairs official, insisted to Forum 18 that the Molokans' construction project for the Makeyevskaya Street site had never got beyond the preliminary planning stage. "They never had that plot. They were offered it, but then the town-planning situation changed, and it was decided to develop an ambulance station there."

Poll "probably crudely falsified"

"What happened to the mayor's 'special control'? Why did we go through all this if they want to build an ambulance station?" Yevdokimov remarked to Forum 18. "Maybe if the state authorities worried more about spiritual values, there wouldn't be so much alcoholism and drug addiction, and they wouldn't need so many ambulance stations!" Over the past two years, the Molokans have written four times to President Vladimir Putin, as well as to other federal officials, he told Forum 18. "But our complaints are always kicked back to Bulanov, and we get the same answer about avoiding 'a social conflict situation'."

In a 23 May 2007 response to the Molokans' complaints, Yuri Bulanov, the acting prefect, referred to a survey of 1,142 out of 1,829 local residents that found public opinion to be opposed to the prayer house. "This is pure hypocrisy and deception!" Yevdokimov remarked to Forum 18. A 2006 report by Russia's Ombudsman for Human Rights found that only 297 people in fact took part in this survey, and that some of those recorded as opposed to the prayer house did not in fact participate at all. The Ombudsman's report suggests that the poll - "in any case only recommendatory" - was "probably crudely falsified".

The Ombudsman asked the Moscow city authorities to resolve the Molokans' situation six times in 2005, according to the report, finally receiving a response from Mayor Luzhkov in November of that year. This again cited residents' opposition and proposed three alternative plots, all of which were found by the Ombudsman to be close to residential blocks. In the Molokans' case – "scandalous, but unfortunately typical" – the Moscow city authorities "have adopted an irresponsible position and are consciously dragging out their decision," the report maintains.

"How long are they going to oppress Molokans, Pentecostals?"

The Molokans are now demanding the return of the Makeyevskaya Street plot, which is still vacant. Other "terrible" sites offered to them this year – including a cemetery, a bomb shelter and a plot between railway tracks – are technically and/or legally unsuitable, they argue, "and who's to say we wouldn't go through all that planning and the same thing wouldn't happen again?" Yakov Yevdokimov dismissed the idea of turning to a Moscow district authority other than Tsaritsyno for the same reason. City officials' approach is "idiocy", he maintained. "I can't find any other word for it. It's an outrageous way to deal with people." He believes such treatment amounts to discrimination against religious minorities: "How long are they going to oppress Molokans, Pentecostals? They build Orthodox churches wherever they like – aren't we people too?"

On 22 October 2007 the Russian branch of the International Religious Freedom Association urged Mayor Luzhkov to keep to the original decision granting the Molokans the Makeyevskaya Street plot. A number of religious representatives – Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, Rabbi Zinovi Kogan, Catholic priest Fr Igor Kovalevsky, Pentecostal bishops Pavel Okara and Sergei Ryakhovsky, Baptist Union leader Yuri Sipko and Adventist leader Vasili Stolyar – added their signatures. The decision to locate an ambulance station at the site failed to take into account the Molokans' interests, they argued.

Several other cases in which religious communities have long tried to secure permission to build in Moscow are at various stages of resolution (see F18News 3 December 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1056). (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=947.

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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