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RUSSIA: Building places of worship in Moscow still a struggle

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Moscow's Emmanuel Pentecostal Church had its building plans rejected in 2000 as officials cited popular opposition. In June 2005 a city construction official ordered a swift resolution to their building problems. Yet, as church administrator Bakur Azaryan told Forum 18 News Service, within a week of their acceptance of a new building plot this summer, the plot was hastily withdrawn: "they said it had already been sold, so we understood that they either don't want to solve the issue or are dragging out time." Muslims have complained of eleven cases of building obstruction in Moscow Region. However, the Russian-American Christian University has told Forum 18 of progress on its building after earlier opposition, while the city's Hare Krishna community appears finally to have a plot for a new temple. City officials often cite alleged opposition by local residents to obstruct non-Orthodox communities from building places of worship. Back in 2000, Moscow's then chief architect wrote: "Going by experience, the staunch objection of residents, the location of prayer houses of other confessions (..) in the vicinity of Orthodox Churches is impossible."

A number of Moscow religious organisations continue to find construction of worship buildings in the Russian capital either impossible or permitted only after years of bureaucratic wrangling, Forum 18 News Service has found. Officials often cite alleged opposition by local residents or insist that non-Orthodox communities cannot build places of worship in districts where Orthodox churches are being built or planned.

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 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 (see F18News 29 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1054).

No land for Pentecostals

Emmanuel Pentecostal Church still has property problems in the Russian capital, even though a city construction official ordered their swift resolution in June 2005. "We still don't have a plot of land. They keep offering us very small and bad options – the last one was by a railway line and three times smaller than the one we lost," church administrator Bakur Azaryan told Forum 18 on 18 October. "We believe they're doing this on purpose, so as not to solve the issue."

The 1000-strong church – affiliated to the Russian Assemblies of God union - received a plot of land in Moscow's southern Vernadsky Prospekt district for its church centre in 1996. After its construction plan was approved by all departments, however, the district assembly rejected it in a closed session in November 2000 on the grounds that public opinion was opposed to the project, even though the church subsequently gathered over 6,000 signatures of support from 10,000 of the district's households. After investing many thousands of dollars in the project, Emmanuel was forced to seek another plot (see F18News 24 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=637).

According to Azaryan, the church agreed to accept one plot in the summer of 2007, "but a week later they said it had already been sold, so we understood that they either don't want to solve the issue or are dragging out time."

Konstantin Blazhenov of Moscow's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations insisted to Forum 18 on 29 November that the city authorities are trying to resolve Emmanuel's predicament, but that the church has declined all the plots it has been offered. When Forum 18 suggested that Emmanuel had accepted one plot in the summer of 2007, Blazhenov claimed that this acceptance was only informal.

Azaryan of Emmanuel Church also told Forum 18 that the Moscow authorities have yet to draw up documentation confirming rental of land tied to a building owned by the church in the city's southern Solntsevo District. The church is unable to reconstruct the building for use as a church because it cannot get the necessary state permission without confirmation that it is renting the associated land. The building was gutted in March 2007 in a fire which the authorities have since confirmed was arson, Azaryan told Forum 18.

Emmanuel received assurances that their problems would be quickly resolved after the brief prison sentences handed down to several church members for what the city authorities claimed were unapproved protests outside Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's office attracted widespread media coverage (see F18News 13 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=583). Since then church members have held weekly protests at somewhat more distant sites unimpeded, Azaryan told Forum 18, and will continue to do so until they secure a plot of land. The congregation is currently able to meet for services at rented premises in Moscow.

Azaryan suggested to Forum 18 that Emmanuel had encountered problems "because we are a Protestant and not an Orthodox church." In a 15 August 2000 letter to Ruben Mulkidzhanyan of Moscow's main architectural and planning department, Vladimir Korotayev, the city's chief architect, rules out the construction of non-Orthodox houses of worship in a number of city districts where Orthodox churches are under construction or being planned. "Going by experience, the staunch objection of residents," he writes, "the location of prayer houses of other confessions (..) in the vicinity of Orthodox Churches is impossible."

"Foreign, western aggressors"?

While welcoming non-Protestant students, the Russian-American Christian University has also had difficulty securing permission to build in Moscow. Moscow Arbitration Court upheld an appeal against the construction of the university's new building to the north of the city on 20 March 2007, according to Interfax. Local Orthodox earlier dedicated a prayer service to St Aleksandr Nevsky at the construction site, the Russian news agency reported, "as defender of the Russian land from foreign, western aggressors".

Since then, however, the university's fortunes have changed, its vice-president, David Broersma, told Forum 18 on 27 November. It won a subsequent appeal on 8 May and resumed construction six weeks later, he said. The shell of the three-storey building – which will house offices, classrooms, a cafeteria and gymnasium – is now complete, and the university hopes to begin the 2008-9 academic year at the site, which it bought in 2001.

Founded in 1996, the Russian-American Christian University is a bilingual, bi-cultural liberal arts institution offering programmes integrated with a Christian perspective. It is now mostly staffed by Russians, Broersma told Forum 18.

Similar to the Molokans' case, the challenge to the Russian-American Christian University originated with some 50-100 residents from a neighbouring city district, according to Broersma. Some of these hold an exclusivist Orthodox position, others are more concerned by the university's American connections, while the motivation of still others is simply "not in my backyard", he said. The opposition group collected a petition of some 15,000 signatures and managed to initiate a prosecutor's office investigation into the university. But, as Broersma told Forum 18, this failed to find the institution to be at fault.

In sharp contrast to the Molokans' case in the south of the city, however, the university enjoyed "good support" at the prefect in addition to the city government level. (Prefects head the Administrative Districts which form the intermediary level of government between Moscow city districts and the mayor). Broersma had particular praise for the prefect of the city's north-eastern district, Irina Raber.

Progress for Hare Krishna devotees?

One religious community apparently now finally making progress with its construction plans in Moscow is the Society for Krishna Consciousness. The organisation has now received land on the northern outskirts of the city in accordance with an April 2007 decree signed by Mayor Luzhkov, Krishna Consciousness representative Sergei Zuyev (Radkhar Damodar) told Forum 18 on 23 November. The community is currently at the stage of developing a construction project, he said, and once this is endorsed the plot of land should be approved for construction.

On 29 November Blazhenov, the Moscow religious affairs official, confirmed to Forum 18 that the Krishna devotees have now been allocated city land.

The Moscow authorities suddenly withdrew their permission for a new Hare Krishna temple on 7 October 2005 following strong criticism from the Russian Orthodox Church. International public opinion, particularly in India, appears to have assisted the Krishna devotees' case (see F18News 20 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=746).

"The strictest of bans on any form of co-operation"

On 10 October 2007 representatives of the Muslim community in Moscow Region issued an open letter to its governor, Boris Gromov, alleging that he has barred construction of mosques in a number of towns and cities in the region, including Balashikha, Volokolamsk and Kolomna. "The heads of these and other municipal and district administrations in Moscow Region have been given the strictest of bans on any form of co-operation with Muslims," they wrote.

Governor Gromov rejected the Muslims' statement as having "no foundation" in a response published by Interfax on 17 October: "Moscow Region never dealt with the granting of permission for construction or banning the construction of mosques (..) so all statements about alleged oppression of Muslims in Moscow Region are absolutely untrue."

In their subsequent response published on the Council of Muftis website in October, the Muslims question why only three official mosques function in Moscow Region. They also refer to 11 instances where plans to build more have faced obstruction. In all these cases, they maintain, "the heads of administration in private conversations cite the personal position of the governor of Moscow Region and their reluctance to come into conflict with him." (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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