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RUSSIA: Ghostlike existence for Dagestan's Protestants

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

The Hosanna Church – the largest Pentecostal Church in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan – had a five-year agreement allowing prison visits abruptly cancelled in early 2010, Pastor Artur Suleimanov told Forum 18 News Service. The authorities have also changed their earlier positive assessment of the church's work with drug addicts. He believes such problems result from the personal initiative of individual officials. Rasul Gadzhiyev of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs insists that the authorities impose no restrictions on churches' social work. "If the Protestants' activity is in line with the law, there are no problems at all," he told Forum 18. Three Pentecostal pastors told Forum 18 that their congregations' lack of freedom was overwhelmingly due to public attitudes, which prevent some church members from attending Sunday worship even at openly functioning churches in urban locations. One village police chief who stopped Protestants meeting pointed to the mosque and told Pastor Suleimanov: "That's my law."

Dagestan's largest Pentecostal church is now barred from conducting social projects with even drug addicts and convicts, its pastors have told Forum 18 News Service in the southern Russian republic. A five-year-old agreement granting prison visits stopped without explanation in early 2010, notes Pastor Artur Suleimanov of the church's parent Hosanna congregation, "even though prison governors were glad to receive our people." The authorities' positive attitude towards the church's anti-drugs work in the early 2000s has also changed abruptly, he said. "It's very strange, as in practice we are the only people working with drug addicts – sometimes you get the impression that the state anti-drugs agency is a very real drugs baron."

Asked if there were any restriction on Protestant activity in the social sphere, Rasul Gadzhiyev, departmental head of Dagestan's Ministry for Nationality Policy, Information and External Affairs, maintained that the state authorities do not regulate it or issue special instructions. "If the Protestants' activity is in line with the law, there are no problems at all," he told Forum 18 in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala on 22 April.

Dagestan - a republic in Russia's troubled North Caucasus which borders Azerbaijan and Georgia - is highly ethnically diverse. Most of the population is of Muslim background, the majority of them Sunnis but with a Shia minority. Suleimanov – who is an ethnic Avar – estimates that some 85 per cent of the approximately 3,000 Pentecostals in Dagestan belong to local ethnicities.

Christian churches in Dagestan known for working among ethnic Slavs – including the Russian Orthodox and the Baptists – are unlikely to face state and public opposition. The long-standing Jewish population in and around the southern city of Derbent – estimated by local Pentecostal Pastor Sergei Shakhov at 3,000 – does not face hostility from non-Jews.

Dagestan's authorities also impose restrictions on the religious freedom of Muslims outside the framework of the state-backed Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Dagestan, including in the areas of religious literature and education. However, the authorities are beginning to relax their strict control on Muslim public life (see F18News 3 June 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1454).

Change of attitude

An ethnic Russian, Pastor Ruslan Kornev of Hosanna's daughter Source of Life congregation in Kaspiisk, a port just south of Makhachkala, estimated that Dagestan's authorities switched their attitude towards the Pentecostals' work with drug addicts in the republic around three years ago. "We were very active until 2005 – we did hundreds of music concerts - but then relations became more distant," he explained to Forum 18 on 22 April. "Of course, to our faces every official said 'we completely sympathise with you', 'we are willing', 'we would like to'."

The church then spent several years trying to prove itself, he said. "But then I understood that life's too short – and we decided to work just as individual believers." By closing its separate charitable organisation, Lazarus, in 2007, the church was able to save effort spent on extensive bureaucracy and bookkeeping – in any case liable to frequent state check-ups, Kornev told Forum 18. Scepticism continues to be a common response to even personal charity, however: "People would understand if I were doing this because I need money or some kind of personal glory, but they don't understand that I only need to give glory to God."

Both Suleimanov and Kornev thought the problems were due to individual officials. "The legal authorities have a quite good and correct attitude towards us," Suleimanov remarked to Forum 18 on 16 April. "If there's pressure, it's the personal initiative of an official or law enforcement agent – 'You're x, we're Muslims, you're doing x wrong.' But it's fine if you respond on the basis of the law."

Societal pressure

All three Pentecostal pastors with whom Forum 18 spoke reported that their congregations' lack of freedom was overwhelmingly due to public attitudes, which prevent some church members from attending Sunday worship even at the openly functioning churches in urban locations. Pastor Kornev said that in Kaspiisk church members who do not attend worship are mostly young people or wives whose husbands are opposed, "and we don't want them to be in conflict".

In Makhachkala, Hosanna has been able to meet at a commercial building it purchased in 2000, but was previously able to rent only due to his friendship with the landlord of a local social club who resisted community pressure to evict the church, Pastor Suleimanov told Forum 18.

In Derbent, local proprietors are afraid to rent to Pentecostals for fear of pressure from the Muslim community, Pastor Shakhov (an ethnic Russian) of Hosanna's daughter Vineyard congregation told Forum 18 there on 17 April.

Clandestine communities

When Pentecostals gather in a village, however, "it is almost on the level of a whisper", Pastor Suleimanov told Forum 18. The members of the two house churches to which Pastor Shakhov ministers are mostly women, who sometimes cannot attend worship for fear of alerting their husbands. One group at first included some men, but they left due to very strong pressure from the village community, he said.

Pastor Suleimanov explained to Forum 18 that, due to strong family ties and public opinion, people who become Christian are often cast out of the community. Often, they are first attracted to Christianity after coming to Christians for physical healing "as they know that the Prophet Isa [Jesus] healed people and then they want to know more."

There is little reaction if the community perceives Pentecostals simply as followers of Isa's teaching, Suleimanov continued. But if they are identified as Christian, this is commonly associated with either Russian Orthodoxy or the West - which has negative connotations of the Iraq War or Hollywood culture – and conflict arises. "The whole village thinks that if they have a Christian among them, that means he is kafr [an unbeliever] and so unclean. They worry that this curse could extend to the whole village and blame all misfortune on this person."

Asked whether this attitude was shared by the village authorities, Pastor Suleimanov replied: "Well, the police are the very same neighbours and the very same Muslims." He recalled visiting a village house group some two years ago and being detained by police while preaching: "When the church elder pointed out that our activity was lawful, the chief police officer pointed to the mosque and said: 'That's my law'."

This situation has not changed since Hosanna was founded in 1994, said Pastor Suleimanov: "All these 17 years it's been like the ninth month of pregnancy - carrying a burden which is never resolved."

Conditions are the same all over Dagestan except for the more open capital, he said. Still, there are periods when Pastor Suleimanov receives threats even in Makhachkala: "For the past three months I haven't answered the phone at night, as I know it will be some kind of verbal abuse or threat."

Pastor Suleimanov does not believe that highlighting particular problems will bring results, however, particularly for village house churches. "How can it help? It doesn't help at all," he maintained to Forum 18. "People have to live there, their roots and families are there. You can't influence situations like these by any official means whatsoever. Sometimes - in very concrete circumstances, if a person is being oppressed or harassed or is in prison - we can fight for him. But if you drag him out of that place he'll never live there again."

Neighbouring republics

Senior representative in the North Caucasus for the Russia-wide Pentecostal Union headed by Bishop Eduard Grabovenko, Pastor Suleimanov nevertheless favourably contrasted the situation in Dagestan with that of the nearest traditionally Muslim republics. "Here there is some kind of democracy and secularity at least," he told Forum 18, "in Chechnya and Ingushetia it's quite different - there are no open [Pentecostal] churches." Describing the situation in Chechnya as "dictatorship", he estimated there to be around 100 Pentecostals, but no organised congregation.

Pastor Suleimanov had no figure for Ingushetia, where he said clan influence is particularly strong: "I know Ingush believers who

came to faith via the internet or other means, but they can't take any independent steps, especially if they are young," he told Forum 18. "Even if they leave, it's death for them, as they will be tracked down anyway." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 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=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287 - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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