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RUSSIA: Southern Protestants' mixed fortunes

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

Protestants in the southern Krasnodar and Stavropol regions have all told Forum 18 News Service that their situation has improved since the 1990s, but several church leaders reported local obstructions in obtaining and using property for worship, similar to the problems faced by a local Christian university in conducting religious education. In early 2004, President Vladimir Putin's then representative in southern Russia praised Protestant social initiatives - especially alcoholism and drug addiction rehabilitation programmes - and one church leader told Forum 18 that his churches encounter no substantial state opposition to their activity. Cossack influence in southern Russia appears to be waning, after sometimes violent attacks in against Protestants during the 1990s. Local leaders of the (Nestorian) Assyrian Church of the East, Mountain Jews, and Yasin Muslims also reported variations in state policy towards their attempts to secure worship premises and provide religious education.

While Protestant representatives in the southern Russian regions of Krasnodar and Stavropol all recently acknowledged to Forum 18 News Service that their situation has improved since the 1990s, several reported obstructions in obtaining property for worship and conducting religious education. Local leaders of other confessions also spoke of mixed fortunes in these areas.

For two years, a Pentecostal congregation in Stavropol region's southern spa town of Mineralnyye Vody has been unable to use its own building due to opposition by the municipal authorities, its pastor, Igor Nikishin, told Forum 18 News Service on 28 September. While "God's Church" has been able to rent a state-owned cultural centre in the meantime, he said, "we can't run a Bible school or do social projects – and any building needs to be heated or else it deteriorates." In addition, Nikishin told Forum 18, the church cannot obtain official approval for architectural alterations to the building while its legal position remains insecure.

With approximately 60 regular members, "God's Church" bought a two-storey former shop in February 2003, Nikishin explained. While the building itself legally belongs to the religious organisation, Russian law requires that the proprietor rent the state-owned plot of land it occupies. A 3 July 2003 decree signed by Mineralnyye Vody's mayor Mikhail Chukavin confirms that, just as was the case with its previous owner, "God's Church" is granted the lease of a plot of land allotted to the building measuring 909.38 square metres (9,788 square feet).

On 29 October 2003, however, Mayor Chukavin issued a second decree altering the area of land offered for lease to that immediately beneath the building – a plot measuring 348.16 square metres (3,748 square feet). For as long as it takes to dispute this decree, Pastor Nikishin told Forum 18, the church is prevented from occupying the building.

Appealing to Stavropol region's arbitration court on 28 March 2004, "God's Church" argued that Mayor Chukavin's second decree was unlawful, since his agreement with the building's previous owner confirms that 909.38 square metres of land are allotted to it. Mineralnyye Vody's municipal administration, in turn, claimed that the reduction in territory was due to the fact that 909.38 square metres was "larger than that occupied by the building and necessary for its use." When the court ruled that Mayor Chukavin's 29 October 2003 decree was indeed invalid, his municipal administration appealed to the same court on 5 July 2004 and again to a higher instance after this appeal failed.

According to Pastor Igor Nikishin, the difficulties faced by "God's Church" are typical for young Pentecostal congregations in the region also registered under the Moscow-based Pentecostal Union led by Pavel Okara. Unable to buy buildings in the name of their church organisations, communities in Armavir and Novokubansk (Krasnodar region) are able to meet only in private homes, he maintained, while renting largely state-owned premises can also be problematic. When "Love of Christ" Pentecostal Church planned to hold Christian events in the spa towns of Pyatigorsk and Yessentuki (Stavropol region) in August 2004, they were denied permission shortly beforehand on the grounds that the local authorities were unable to provide the necessary fire safety and other security arrangements, he said. Pastor Nikitin stressed to Forum 18, however, that current opposition to Protestant activity in the region by both state officials and Cossacks is now much less forceful than in the 1990s, and mostly directed against large-scale events.

Another Protestant institution concerned about obstruction to the use of its property is the Kuban Evangelical Christian University in Krasnodar. Issuing theological qualifications endorsed by the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association of Evangelical Schools, the University's state licence is due for renewal on 15 December 2004, its secretary told Forum 18 on 6 December. While Krasnodar city

procuracy did not make any complaint about the University's activity as recently as early November 2004, she said, local officials subsequently claimed that it was violating the law, and Krasnodar regional procuracy has still to confirm whether or not it has filed an application with the appropriate federal authority for renewal of the University's licence. While the secretary acknowledged to Forum 18 that there has been no formal objection to the University's activity so far, she added that its rejection of "the Russian system of overcharging or expecting gifts" meant that its application might encounter "hidden obstacles". She added, however, that there was no threat to the University's ownership of its large modern building in a Krasnodar suburb, nor a threat of its complete closure, but that the absence of a state licence would mean that the institution would no longer be able to offer formal qualifications.

By contrast, Pastor Vadim Goryachkin of the Evangelical Christian Missionary Union, which embraces 54 registered churches throughout southern Russia, told Forum 18 in Krasnodar on 24 September 2004 that they experience almost no obstruction. While up to 40 per cent of member churches have their own buildings, the majority of the remainder do not solely for financial reasons, he maintained, and none has recently been refused rental of state premises. Referring to occasional opposition by officials to showings of the Jesus Film, Goryachkin emphasised that repressive measures were local: "Our structured union and registration in line with legislation gives us certain protection, if not 100 per cent."

Pastor Goryachkin also pointed out to Forum 18 that President Vladimir Putin's then representative in southern Russia, Vladimir Yakovlev, praised Protestant social initiatives - especially alcoholism and drug addiction rehabilitation programmes - at a meeting with church leaders in April 2004. Like Pastor Nikishin, he suggested that Cossack influence was on the wane after sometimes violent attacks against Protestants during the 1990s. Despite the October 2002 official agreement between Krasnodar regional education department and the local Orthodox diocese, which pledges teachers to offer in-depth study of Orthodoxy while barring "illegal activity by non-traditional religious organisations," Goryachkin also reported that optional Orthodox lectures were not widespread in the region's schools. At the school frequented by his own children, for example, a Leninist banner is still paraded as part of celebrations marking the start of the new academic year every 1 September, he told Forum 18.

Also affiliated to the Moscow-based Pentecostal Union led by Pavel Okara, the 3,000-strong Bethany Church and its 20 daughter churches in Krasnodar region encounter no substantial state opposition, one of Bethany's pastors, Sergei Vychuzhanin, told Forum 18 on 25 September. The congregation meets for worship in a marquee on the outskirts of Krasnodar because there are no halls large enough in the city, he maintained, and described how the congregation holds summer camps for state children's homes, distributes 25,000 copies of a Christian newspaper every two weeks and broadcasts 20-minute local television programmes twice a week for a reasonable fee: "What we can do depends only upon our resources and efforts – the laws work." When Forum 18 pointed out that the October 2002 local education agreement was also a legal document, Vychuzhanin maintained that the state authorities do not admit Protestants into schools because "we don't have the necessary higher education." While examples existed of individual attacks against his church, he said, "we accept and welcome whatever happens as being in God's hands."

Forum 18 found that representatives of other confessions in Krasnodar and Stavropol regions also reported variations in state policy towards their attempts to secure worship premises and provide religious education. A 150-strong parish of the (Nestorian) Assyrian Church of the East has been building the Mar Gewargis (St. George's) Church in Krasnodar since 1998 with pauses only due to financial difficulties, according to its chairman, Ruben Aleksanov. Showing Forum 18 the semi-completed church on 25 September, Aleksanov said that Krasnodar's mayor, Valeri Samoilenko, had helped the community find an appropriate construction site, and that, despite some theological differences, Assyrian Christians were free to receive sacraments in Russian Orthodox churches while they waited to be assigned their own priest. Although an application for land by a second Assyrian community in Rostov-on-Don has been refused, he added, this was "clearly for technical and not political reasons."

Speaking to Forum 18 in Pyatigorsk on 29 September, Rabbi Shertil Shalumov said that his community of Mountain Jews was refused a plot of land for a new synagogue two years ago on the grounds that its architecture was "unsuitable". He added, however, that officials had also assured the community that they would grant permission for a new synagogue, and that the community's construction difficulties were mainly financial. The Mountain Jews – of whom there are approximately 10,000 in the Kavkazskiy Mineralnyye Vody spa-town area of southern Stavropol region – acquired their current synagogue in Pyatigorsk in 1990 and have run a state-licensed school for 200 children since 1994.

On 28 October Ravza Ramazanova, who heads the Yasin Muslim community in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, maintained to Forum 18 that the town's authorities have consistently stalled the organisation's plans to construct a new mosque, even though its rented premises barely accommodate the approximately 30 members who attend Friday prayers. A 16 July 2002 letter to the community from Krasnodar region's department for relations with social organisations explains that, in the absence of an area in Sochi populated largely by those "oriented towards the Muslim faith", allocation of land must be accompanied by a survey of public opinion in the area where the mosque would be situated "so as to avoid conflict situations". Although membership of a larger religious association is not compulsory under Russian law, the letter also demands documentation from a Muslim spiritual directorate guaranteeing funding and upkeep of the Yasin community's would-be mosque. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY