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RUSSIA: Religious freedom survey, February 2005

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In its survey analysis of religious freedom in Russia, Forum 18 News Service notes that fluctuation remains the distinguishing feature of state policy. Symbolic appearances of solidarity between President Putin and Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarch Aleksii II - sometimes with representatives of the other "traditional" confessions (Islam, Judaism and Buddhism) - often translate into regional state officials taking decisions in the interests of only these faiths, to the detriment of other confessions. This even takes place in areas, such as eastern Siberia, where Protestants have a longer tradition than some "traditional" confessions. It is unclear how deeply the symbiotic relationship between the state and "traditional" confessions will develop. Should a state policy against "non-traditional" confessions be pursued, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals are likely targets. Some confessions have seen significant improvements in relations with the state, notably Catholic, Buddhist and Jewish religious organisations, but recent developments in state policy appear to be having an increasingly adverse affect upon Muslims.

Fluctuation in religious freedom policy remains its distinguishing feature in Russia. The 1997 federal Religion Law, for instance, requires religious organisations to give local departments of justice annual confirmation of their ongoing activities. While the justice department in Samara (whose officials reportedly have a hostile manner) upset local religious leaders in 2004 by demanding the names, addresses and ages of parishioners as part of this routine procedure, justice department officials in nearby Penza region (whose manner is said to be helpful) reportedly expressed doubt about the action of their Samara colleagues. Notwithstanding the state's more or less uniform approach to re-registration of religious organisations in 1997-2000, Protestants in far-removed areas of Russia have told Forum 18 News Service that their degree of religious freedom now varies not only between regions, but even from village to village. This appears to be particularly the case regarding ministry to those in the armed forces or prisons, where the personal decision of each institution's director – rather than individual citizens, as required by law - is usually the deciding factor.

While it is consequently unlikely to become uniform nationwide – a factor no doubt realised by its proponents – there is one centralising tendency which frequently influences the local situation. Carrying particular weight in Russia, symbolic appearances of solidarity between President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Aleksii II - sometimes with representatives of Russia's other so-called traditional confessions (Islam, Judaism and Buddhism) - often translate into regional state officials taking decisions in the interests of only these faiths, including to the detriment of other religious confessions and non-believers. This takes place even in areas such as eastern Siberia, where Protestants have a longer tradition than some of the so-called traditional confessions.

Over the past two years a trend has emerged for regional state authorities (Moscow, Sakhalin, Stavropol, Sverdlovsk) to stage joint conferences with local representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) on subjects such as the traditional role of Orthodoxy or the danger of "totalitarian sects". In this way they serve as a platform for calls for the introduction of the "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" course into state schools or condemnation of Jehovah's Witnesses, even though there is no difference in the status of the Moscow Patriarchate and Jehovah's Witnesses as centralised religious organisations from the point of view of Russian law.

It is unclear how deeply this symbiotic relationship will develop. On the one hand, Russia's current rulers have elicited more overt support from the so-called traditional confessions over the past year than at any time since the Soviet period. Shown voting in last year's presidential elections - in which it was already clear that Putin would win by a large margin - the Patriarch told television reporters that he was "sure the Russian people will make the right choice." During televised Easter celebrations in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour a month later, he congratulated Putin "on behalf of all God's people" on being elected to a second four-year term, adding "the people believe in you." In October 2004, as traumatised Russians continued to question the handling of the Beslan school hostage tragedy, Putin chaired a meeting of the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations for the first time. Also featured prominently on the state television news, its participants – including the nation's main religious leaders – unanimously endorsed "the actions of the Russian authorities in safeguarding the security of citizens and curbing terrorism."

On the other hand, the state is being asked to give more in return. Its response has so far been piecemeal. The 1997 Religion Law not being implemented in the restrictive way that its initiators intended, the Moscow Patriarchate has in recent years tended to pursue privileges over other religious organisations rather than legal restriction of their rights. Thus, without recourse to the Law, it has forged concordat-style agreements with various organs of state, typically involving special access to the institutions concerned and

emphasis of Orthodoxy as the legitimate ideology of Russian state tradition.

Over the past year the Moscow Patriarchate has continued to gain some significant ground, particularly the government's U-turn on the use of historical places of worship. Since the end of the Soviet period, the state has offered these free of charge for use by religious organisations - in most cases, the Moscow Patriarchate. When Moscow Patriarchate representatives at a May 2004 parliamentary hearing complained that the Church could not afford to pay to use the buildings under new land legislation, pro-Kremlin United Russia deputy and religion committee chairman Sergei Popov insisted that the new law's structure was based upon two concepts - ownership and paid rental - and "could not be destroyed just for the sake of one amendment." In October of the same year, however, President Putin signed a supplementary law doing just that.

In other areas, however, the Moscow Patriarchate is meeting with state resistance. After initial government endorsement of the introduction of the "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" course into state schools in 2002, the official Kremlin website reported in February 2004 that, "in the opinion of the president, young people should study common human values, including those linked with traditional religions." To the consternation of church hierarchs, a general religious studies course was introduced in Moscow schools instead of "Foundations of Orthodox Culture" the same autumn. The Moscow Patriarchate has also made slow progress in restitution of a number of pre-1917 key church sites currently providing revenue as state museums, such as in central Kostroma, Vologda and Yaroslavl.

Since, at the highest level, gestures towards one another by the so-called traditional confessions and the Russian state are not always reciprocated - as shown by the Patriarch's recent criticism of the government's package of state benefit reforms - it is thus difficult to determine where the former's concern about the influence of rival confessions will feature in future religious affairs policy. Earlier successes for the Moscow Patriarchate in this sphere have not proven unequivocal. Even though the March 2004 ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow city should mean the cessation of all their religious activity under the 1997 Religion Law, in practice the effect has been closer to a loss of legal personality status, notwithstanding the cancellation of some rental contracts and the inclusion of Jehovah's Witnesses by a member of the Russian Federation's official delegation at a June 2004 meeting of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) among those "non-traditional religious teachings and sects disseminating xenophobic propaganda via the Internet" who "inculcate fanatical devotion and rejection of other religions in their followers".

Clearer, however, are the future targets should a state policy against so-called non-traditional confessions be pursued. Public procuracy officials have already begun to follow up a recent complaint against the St Petersburg headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses lodged by the Committee for the Salvation of Youth, which sought the original Moscow ban. After viewing footage of "neo-Pentecostal" Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev (a Latvian resident whose visa to Russia was revoked by the Russian authorities in 2002), participants in a January 2005 Orthodox Church conference issued a formal appeal to President Putin to exclude Pentecostal Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky from the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations.

Subsequent to the state-endorsed introduction of a second chief rabbi of Russia in 2000, there has been renewed Kremlin interest in the top-level decisions of other of the country's so-called traditional confessions over the past 18 months. In February 2004, Old Believer representatives of the Belokrinitsa Concord reported that FSB security service officials summoned their clergy on the eve of the Church's leadership election and made it clear that they preferred one of two candidates, although this candidate was not subsequently elected. The Church has since gone on to make particular progress in acquiring pre-1917 Old Believer church property in Moscow, and one source has indicated to Forum 18 that rival financial interests of the federal and Moscow authorities lay behind the FSB incident.

While members of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad - including within Russia - are divided over the issue of reconciliation with the Moscow Patriarchate, President Putin has adopted a public stance in favour of the process, and Forum 18 has received reliable indication that its initial stages - with high-level state support - took place without the involvement of the Moscow Patriarchate's official leadership. It is difficult to describe this as state interference in the otherwise free functioning of a religious organisation, however, since the Moscow Patriarchate's top hierarchs and its present power structure are themselves the result of decades of state influence.

Some confessions have seen significant improvements in their relations with the state over the past 18 months. Before the four Catholic apostolic administrations in Russia were turned into dioceses in 2002 (to the distress of the Orthodox Church), two had long been denied state registration, meaning that their bishops were unable to act in a legal capacity. In 2004, however, one of the two - the Saratov-based St Clement diocese - was finally granted state registration.

Importantly in Russia, there has also begun to appear neutral or favourable state media coverage of Catholic activity, including prominent news footage of President Vladimir Putin and his entourage visiting the Vatican in late 2003 (during which Minister for Trade and Economic Development German Gref was seen to kiss the Pope's hand), the Catholic Church's return of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God from the Catholic to the Russian Orthodox Church in the Kremlin, and a recent organ recital in Moscow's Catholic Cathedral. Significantly, unlike the 2002 Catholic dioceses affair, there has been no reaction to date from either the Moscow Patriarchate or the Russian state to the Vatican's January 2005 announcement that Bishop Iosif Werth of the Novosibirsk-based Transfiguration diocese is to be appointed ordinary of Eastern-rite Catholic communities in Russia, thus

regularising their position. Representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate have recently stepped up their criticism of the existence of these communities, which the Catholic Church had previously been reluctant to acknowledge precisely for fear of upsetting Catholic-Orthodox relations.

Foreign Catholic clergy in far-removed parts of Russia have told Forum 18 of notable improvements in their visa regime from the middle of 2004 onwards. Far Eastern restrictions remain tight, however, with foreign Catholic priests in the Pacific Primorye region unable to invite others to assist them, for instance. None of the seven foreign Catholic clergy barred from entering Russia by the state authorities from 2001-2 – five of which cases were evidently triggered by the dioceses controversy – has since been allowed to return.

The Catholic Church continues to have mixed success in obtaining its historical church property. The Karelian authorities recently joined those in regions such as Kursk, Tatarstan and Tyumen in returning the historical Catholic church in the regional centre. In other regional capitals, such as Barnaul (Altai region), Irkutsk, Khabarovsk, Smolensk, Vologda and Yaroslavl, Catholic parishes have failed to regain historical Catholic churches, but are able to meet elsewhere. In Belgorod and Blagoveshchensk, historical Catholic church buildings have been turned into Orthodox churches despite appeals by local Catholics.

Russian Buddhists' main objection to state policy towards them – the repeated denial of a visa to the Dalai Lama since his last visit to Russia in 1994 – was also removed in 2004. Very short notice and an almost complete lack of publicity about his brief November visit to only one predominantly Buddhist area – Kalmykia – meant that most were unable to benefit from it, however.

While the short-lived official January 2005 request by prominent Russian nationalists to ban all Jewish religious organisations in the country featured prominently in the international media, opposition towards Muslim communities now appears to be comparatively more widespread among the Russian populace, it has resulted in state obstruction of construction or return of mosques in cities such as Kostroma, Kaluga, Sochi (Krasnodar region), Stavropol and Tolyatti (Samara region).

Recent developments in state policy also appear to be having an increasingly adverse affect upon Muslim believers. Non-violent pursuit of sharia standards in Muslim society or the view that Islam is the only true belief could be interpreted as "planning the appropriation of state powers" or "propaganda of exclusivity... of citizens according to their relation to religion" according to the definition of extremist activity in Russia's 2002 Extremism Law. Since an unpublished February 2004 Supreme Court decision banned several radical Islamic political organisations as terrorist (terrorist activity being automatically extremist under the 2002 Law's definition), dozens of Muslims have been arrested and/or charged under this and terrorist legislation. Those arrested and their communities have categorically rejected the charges, typically claiming that weaponry uncovered during searches was planted and that those arrested were simply "explaining Islam".

While it is difficult to verify these arguments, some accusations appear particularly doubtful. In Omsk, one Muslim was charged under the Extremism Law in September 2004 for distributing brochures which, according to the expert analysis of a local academic, contained "open propaganda about the inferiority of citizens due to their religious affiliation" because they maintained that Islam was superior to other religious systems. (Notably, a public procuracy report compiled before this expert analysis was conducted had already determined that the seized brochures "displayed extremist content.") In December 2004, Mufti Airat Khaibullov of Cheboksary (Chuvash Republic) complained that the home of his financial assistant was searched on his suspicion of being a member of banned terrorist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir, and that the allegedly banned literature uncovered by the search was in fact acquired legitimately at mosques. (For an outline of Hizb-ut-Tahir's views see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=170.)

That one of Russia's main Muslim organisations, the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, stated publicly soon afterwards that it had nothing to do with this "so-called mufti" in Cheboksary points to a further way in which the new extremism legislation is open to abuse. In a recent case in Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk region), a Muslim leader apparently used his close relations with the local state authorities to initiate the arrests of two rivals based upon similar literary "evidence" to that in Omsk. In the southern Russian republic of Karachai-Cherkessia, Muslim representatives have told Forum 18 of restrictions on sending students abroad for religious education, receiving foreign funding for mosque construction and registering new communities, as well as victimisation by local officials during mosque searches similar to that reported in nearby Kabardino-Balkaria.

Despite some media suggestions to the contrary during autumn 2004, the Russian parliament's religion committee is not currently considering any amendments to the 1997 Religion Law, one of its consultants has assured Forum 18. However, those drawn up over the past three years by the working group attached to the Russian government's religious organisations commission are due for final review by that commission in March-April 2005. Following its earlier criticism of working group chairman Andrei Sebentsov and the results of his work to date – in particular a proposal to scrap the 1997 Law's provision restricting religious organisations active in Russia for fewer than 15 years - the Moscow Patriarchate now has three participants in the working group. While this makes it difficult to predict the direction of any final proposed text, it seems likely that formal changes to the 1997 Religion Law will follow in the near future.

In a throwback to the 1990s, several Russian regions have adopted local laws restricting missionary activity over the past 18 months. Protestant missionaries in these areas say that they have remained unaffected by the changes, however, while regions with a stricter

visa policy for foreign religious workers, such as Sakhalin, do not have a corresponding local law. Although the wave of foreign missionary expulsions which reached a peak in 1998-2002 appears to have subsided, this could be because foreign Protestants are now less likely to conduct their ministry in Russia on an official basis.

The 1997 Religion Law divides religious communities into two categories, restricting the rights of those with the unregistered status of "group". By requiring independent religious groups seeking registration to have existed for 15 years, the Law effectively forced new individual religious communities to join older unions, often a burdensome and expensive formality and not an option for some communities. Registration can be denied on arbitrary grounds, as for example with 39 of Stavropol region's 47 mosques. Denied registration, Belgorod's Catholic parish cannot reclaim its historical church. Communities that choose not to register can function freely, but only if they remain inconspicuous, Forum 18 has found. Council of Churches Baptists "who reject state registration in CIS countries on principle - are often denied the possibility to rent property for services and fined for holding evangelistic campaigns.(see F18News 14 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=543).

The most significant such Council of Churches Baptist case was opposition to their large-scale meeting on a privately rented field in August 2004 and apparently also in the subsequent burning-down of a nearby prayer house. While they do not normally encounter state obstruction if their activity is discreet, local policy often restricts Protestants in far-removed areas of Russia to premises in city suburbs while providing state subsidy for prominent Moscow Patriarchate construction projects. Several Protestant communities have had earlier municipal agreements allocating land inexplicably rescinded in recent years, as have Orthodox not affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate.

Approximately since the introduction of the 2002 extremism law, FSB security service officials have more regularly featured in descriptions of alleged religious freedom violations. Forum 18 has found this to be the case for a wide variety of religious confessions and circumstances, not only suspected Islamic extremists. In 2003, for example, a Bible school reported "constant FSB checks", a young Pentecostal complained that "people from the FSB even called my parents, asking whether I am a sectarian and hate them" and the FSB judged one Baptist missionary's activity "extremist". In early 2004, FSB officers reportedly participated in a check-up on a Russian Orthodox Church Abroad breakaway parish and interrogated Old Believer clergy on the eve of their Church's leadership election (see above). In the summer of the same year, FSB departments in both the Urals and southern regions claimed that unrelated Protestant stadium events could not go ahead due to a lack of available security. (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

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>

The previous Forum 18 Russia religious freedom survey is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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