FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

6 June 2005

RUSSIA: State-sponsored local Muslim monopoly in St Petersburg?

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

The Al-Fatkh Muslim community has told Forum 18 News Service that St Petersburg local authorities are supporting a rival mosque community by preventing Al-Fatkh – in contrast to the rival Cathedral Mosque community – from acquiring land to build a mosque. The St Petersburg Funeral Services Department stated to Forum 18 that Muslim religious funerals can only be conducted with the permission of the imam of the Cathedral Mosque community, not Al-Fatkh's imam. Al-Fatkh maintained to Forum 18 that one reason why it wants to build a separate mosque is that the Cathedral Mosque is only opened once a day, even during the final period of Ramadan, when a mosque should be open constantly. Forum 18 observed one Friday that the Cathedral Mosque was emptied of worshippers and closed 30 minutes after the main Friday meeting began. (Friday is the Muslim holy day.) Islam.ru reported that it was told that the mosque was normally closed "because it needs to be - who needs to know knows why." Forum 18 was unable to ask the same question as the phone was slammed down.

Representatives of the 200-strong Al-Fatkh Muslim community have claimed to Forum 18 News Service that the St Petersburg municipal authorities are preventing them from organising separately from the city's only functioning mosque. "It's to both their and the mufti's advantage," vice-chairman of the community Jamaletdin Makhmudov explained to Forum 18 in the Russia's northern capital on 20 May, "they support him and he supports them." Opposition to the Al-Fatkh community goes back to 1978, he added, when its imam Khafiz Makhmutov was removed from his position as head of the historical Cathedral Mosque for failing to co-operate with the Soviet secret services and subsequently replaced by the present mufti, Jafyar Ponchayev.

While registered in 1993, Al-Fatkh has unsuccessfully petitioned the St Petersburg municipal authorities for ten years for a plot of land on which to build its own mosque. Viewed by Forum 18, extensive correspondence on the issue with different municipal departments includes claims by several St Petersburg districts that no suitable plot exists on their territories, which Al-Fatkh members dispute. While several other city districts have offered possible sites, acknowledged Makhmudov, they either set an unrealistic time limit of six or twelve months for all the necessary construction plans to be drawn up and approved, or bar the possibility of construction by citing negative local public opinion.

Thus, in response to a June 2004 query regarding the possible construction of a second mosque from Yuri Savelyev, a Russian member of parliament for the nationalist Fatherland party, governor of St Petersburg Valentina Matviyenko points out that two sports complex projects are competing with Al-Fatkh's application for a certain plot. She adds that Al-Fatkh is "in a state of conflict" with and follows a different trend of Islam from the Cathedral Mosque community, which "has functioned since 1956 and belongs to the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of St Petersburg and North West Russia." In view of these considerations, as well as the "social significance" of the various projects for the given plot of land, Matviyenko goes on to recommend "public discussion" about Al-Fatkh's building application.

In a September 2004 letter to Al-Fatkh, Valeri Eggi, first assistant to the chairman of St Petersburg's Construction and Architecture Committee, stresses that such public discussion is a legal requirement for the allocation of land.

The Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of St Petersburg and North West Russia by contrast appears to have encountered no obstacles to construction. In November 2003 Ekho Moskvy radio station's website reported local Mufti Jafyar Ponchayev's announcement that the organisation would build a second mosque in St Petersburg having obtained the necessary state approval earlier the same year.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 20 May, Imam Makhmutov's assistant Marat Ishtilryakov stressed that Al-Fatkh does not represent either a separate trend in Islam or even a different nationality than the Cathedral Mosque community. While the organisation is affiliated to the Russia-wide Council of Muftis chaired by Ravil Gainutdin, the Cathedral Mosque comes under the rival Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims led by Talgat Tadzhuddin.

Ishtilryakov also explained to Forum 18 that, while the community currently continues to attend the Cathedral Mosque because "there is no alternative, and we don't want to be confrontational," it has serious grounds for wishing to organise separately. Mufti Ponchayev permits the mosque to open for worship only once a day, he said, even during the final period of Ramadan, when a

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2005 - Page 1/2

mosque should be open constantly: "Imagine – the mufti himself is violating a pillar of Islam!" A correspondent for the Russian Islam.ru website who in March 2005 asked why the mosque was normally closed was reportedly told at the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims in St Petersburg and North West Russia that it was "because it needs to be - who needs to know knows why" and that latecomers or those unable to attend at the precise time should pray outside.

While Forum 18 observed the Cathedral Mosque to be open half an hour before what a nearby Islamic bookseller said was the main Friday meeting at 3pm on 20 May, the building was emptied of worshippers and closed by 3.30pm. The same bookseller maintained that the mosque was open five times a day. There is no timetable indicating opening hours.

Contacted on 2 June, a spokesman at the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of St Petersburg and North West Russia told Forum 18 that "life is fine" for Muslims in St Petersburg, and that his organisation would soon have a second mosque in the city centre. He then either put the phone down or the line broke off (a not uncommon occurrence when telephoning long distance in Russia). When Forum 18 called back and continued by asking why the second mosque was being built, the spokesman replied, "that's our problem – mind your own business" and slammed the phone down.

Also on 2 June, Valeri Eggi's secretary directed Forum 18 to the chairman of St Petersburg's Construction and Architecture Committee, Aleksandr Viktorov, whose secretary said that questions would be accepted only in writing.

Al-Fatkh representatives have also complained to Forum 18 that the St Petersburg authorities support Mufti Ponchayev's exclusive handling of funeral arrangements. When Muslims contact the municipal Funeral Services Department following the death of a relative to request a plot in a Muslim section of the city's cemeteries, they maintained, they are told to obtain official approval from Mufti Ponchayev, who grants this only on condition that he perform the funeral rite. "This means our imam can't conduct funerals," Jamaletdin Makhmudov remarked to Forum 18, "but bereaved relatives are afraid to argue because of the Islamic requirement of burying the dead as soon as possible."

On 3 June a secretary at the St Petersburg Funeral Services Department explained to Forum 18 that, while it administers the Muslim sections of the city's cemeteries, a private application - without reference to the Spiritual Directorate – is sufficient to secure a plot there. If religious rites are also required, however, these are arranged entirely separately with Muslim clergy, she said, confirming to Forum 18 on clarification that this meant the local Spiritual Directorate.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

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

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2005 - Page 2/2