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RUSSIA: Step forward for Salvation Army, backward for Pentecostals

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

The Salvation Army's Russian national registration has been restored, but its Moscow city branch is still unregistered. "We're waiting on [the European Court of Human Rights in] Strasbourg," Territorial Commander Colonel Barry Pobjie told Forum 18 News Service. However, the Salvation Army does not face obstruction to its day-to-day Moscow activities, unlike Jehovah's Witnesses in the city, who sometimes face obstruction and are under a local court ban. In contrast, in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don, the Salvation Army has told Forum 18 that it has not had the registration difficulties faced in Moscow. "That didn't affect us at all," Captain Vladimir Tatiosov said, noting that the authorities support the Salvation Army's various social projects. Pentecostal Pastor Viktor Shvedov told Forum 18 that his church can provide social assistance to prisoners, but is unofficially barred from both helping local children's homes and conducting a March for Jesus through Rostov-on-Don city centre. Before 2005, Rostov-on-Don Pentecostals were able to provide clothes, toys and building materials to children's homes.

While the Salvation Army has had the registration documentation for its Russia-wide organisation restored, the legal position of its Moscow branch remains unresolved, Forum 18 has learnt. "After a long-term process, our central religious organisation had its charter accepted about a month ago," Territorial Commander Colonel Barry Pobjie told Forum 18 on 16 May. He added that the Moscow branch's situation is "as it was – we're waiting on [the European Court of Human Rights in] Strasbourg." On 17 May a Moscow city official told Forum 18 that he did not know why the local Salvation Army branch is still without re-registration.

The uncertainty over the status of the Salvation Army's central religious organisation arose a little over a year ago. In late April 2005 Colonel Pobjie told Forum 18 that he had recently been informed by the Federal Registration Service that the organisation's entire registration documentation would have to be redone due to an apparently minor discrepancy between terms on its registration certificate and in its charter (see F18News 18 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=609).

The Moscow branch of the Salvation Army submitted its re-registration application in line with the 1997 Religion Law in November 1998, but this was rejected in August 1999 on the grounds that parts of the organisation's charter and other documentation did not conform to federal legislation and that the Salvation Army's headquarters are situated outside the Russian Federation. Involved in subsequent legal challenges against this ruling – during which the Salvation Army was accused by one district court of being a "militarised organisation" with "barrack-room discipline" - the Moscow branch was unable to file another re-registration application before the 1997 law's re-registration deadline expired at the end of 2000. In February 2002, however, the Constitutional Court ruled that a religious organisation could not be liquidated simply for failing to re-register, but only if "properly proven to have ceased its activities" or to be in violation of its constitutional obligations as a legal personality.

On 1 July 2004 the European Court of Human Rights declared admissible a case filed by the Moscow branch against Russia in 2001. Despite being in a state of legal lack of clarity, the Salvation Army has not reported any obstruction to its day-to-day activities in Moscow (see F18News 22 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=591).

Konstantin Blazhenov of Moscow city's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations told Forum 18 on 17 May that he was unaware of the Moscow branch's current legal status, "they haven't come to us about anything for a long time." Confirming that the expiry of the 1997 Religion Law's end-of-2000 deadline was a possible reason why the Moscow branch had not been re-registered, he said that the matter was for the courts to resolve. Blazhenov also pointed out, however, that to his knowledge the Salvation Army is operating unimpeded in the Russian capital. Forum 18 also has no knowledge of any day-to-day obstruction of the Salvation Army's work.

Russia's deputy foreign minister Grigory Karasin, speaking live on a BBC panel discussion on 30 March, described as "interesting logic" the inaccurate claim made by an audience member that the Salvation Army had been deprived of its registration in Moscow under a 1999 NGO law, due to the word "army" in its title.

However, in the city of Rostov-on-Don [Rostov na Donu] 1,130 kilometres [700 miles] south of Moscow, Captain Vladimir Tatiosov of the Salvation Army's local branch told Forum 18 on 9 April that he has not encountered any of the registration

difficulties experienced in Moscow, "that didn't affect us at all." The only difficulties they have experienced is the September 2000 bar from Russia of his Canadian colleague Geoff Ryan, which has to this day prevented him from returning to Russia (see F18News 3 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=773). The Rostov-on-Don branch is one of three local religious organisations making up the Salvation Army's central religious organisation, all of which were registered with charters identical to that deemed unacceptable in Moscow.

In contrast to some other local religious communities, such as Catholics and Pentecostals (see F18News 18 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=783), the Salvation Army's property position in Rostov-on-Don also appears to be relatively strong. Captain Tatiosov told Forum 18 that the organisation owns its "huge" premises – a four-storey building on a central street provided by a US donor some eight years ago – and that the rent for the land beneath the property is not expensive, at about 40,000 roubles [8,997 Norwegian Kroner, 1,153 Euros, or 1,485 US Dollars] a year.

Not having enough funds to pay its various employees, however, Tatiosov said that the Rostov-on-Don branch has decided to allow its premises to be used each week for worship by 12 local Protestant churches, who are otherwise unable to acquire worship premises in the city, in return for a donation to the Salvation Army's charitable activities.

Captain Tatiosov also told Forum 18 that the local authorities are supportive of the Salvation Army's various social projects for the homeless, the elderly, alcoholics, drug addicts and those suffering from HIV/AIDS. The only Christian pastor invited to a regional forum on the issue of HIV/AIDS in December 2005, he maintained that it was "very rare for the [state] health sector to recognise a social organisation in that way," and suggested that this might be because the Salvation Army's "Bridge" project for AIDS sufferers in Rostov-on-Don is run by fully qualified doctors.

Pastor Viktor Shvedov, of Rostov-on-Don's 600-strong Christ the Saviour Pentecostal Church, told Forum 18 on 10 April that church members are able to provide social assistance to prison inmates, but they were in 2005 unofficially barred from local children's homes. Before the bar, they had been providing clothes, toys and building materials to the homes. Pastor Shvedov likened the situation to a Soviet joke that a citizen has the constitutional right to do an activity, but is not allowed to do it.

Shvedov also told Forum 18 that, since the late 1990s, his church has been unable to conduct a March for Jesus through Rostov-on-Don city centre, again unofficially: "We were told we could do it in principle but that we would need to agree it with the police, fire and ambulance services – one official said that we could try but it would be a waste of time, we would be endlessly directed from one office to another."

There was no response from either Rostov-on-Don's city or regional Religious Affairs Offices to Forum 18's calls on 17 May.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Moscow – who unlike the Salvation Army are legally banned from working in the city – are still encountering more practical difficulties than the Salvation Army (see F18News 22 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=591). Banned by Moscow City Court in 2004 (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289 and F18News 17 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=344), 200 Jehovah's Witnesses meeting in the Lyublino district of the Russian capital on 12 April 2006 for their annual commemoration of Christ's death had their worship service disrupted by police. Police spokeswoman Olga Yegorova told the Moscow Times newspaper on 14 April that the organisers were detained for routine document checks after "vigilant" citizens reported the meeting. She then stated that they were released once it was established who they were and that there were no warrants for their arrest.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses on 17 April, 22 similar commemorations of Christ's death held in Moscow on 12 April went ahead without incident.

In Moscow City Court "consideration of almost all cases concerning non-Orthodox religious organisations is biased," according to lawyers Anatoli Pchelintsev and Vladimir Ryakhovsky of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice. In an open letter of 20 April, they call upon the state authorities to investigate the 2004 construction using public funds of an Orthodox chapel within the grounds of the Moscow City Court, beside the court building. The lawyers point out that Moscow City Court both refused to allow the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army to be re-registered and upheld the liquidation of the Moscow community of Jehovah's Witnesses, "although these organisations function in Russia as in the rest of the world."

Konstantin Blazhenov, of the Moscow city Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, told Forum 18 that he was not in a position to comment on the legality of an Orthodox chapel on the grounds of the Moscow City Court. The court's telephone number was engaged throughout the day, when Forum 18 called on 17 May. (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=509

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

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