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RUSSIA: Presbyterian church to be confiscated?

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

Its registration liquidated in 2003 for "administrative violations" and with subsequent registration applications denied, the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Mozdok in Russia's North Caucasus now faces the confiscation of its "beautiful Gothic-style" prayer house, church administrator Olga Mazhurova told Forum 18 News Service. The local administration told the congregation in early September that there is enough evidence to file suit for its confiscation, though no date for a court hearing has been set. The church admits it "made mistakes" over the way the church was built without planning permission, but claims it has been blocked from regularising its position due to local suspicion of its foreign connections. Officials at Mozdok district prosecutor's office have refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they are seeking to confiscate the church.

A 600-strong Presbyterian church in the Northern Ossetian town of Mozdok in Russia's North Caucasus looks set to have its prayer house confiscated by the local state authorities. Emmanuel Church's administrator Olga Mazhurova acknowledged to Forum 18 News Service on 20 September that her community had "made mistakes" in the past over the way the church was built, primarily due to a lack of legal expertise, but claims it has been blocked from regularising its position due to local suspicion of its foreign connections. Mozdok is close both to Beslan – where Emmanuel has given material support to victims of the September 2004 school siege – and to the conflict zone of Chechnya and Ingushetia. Officials at Mozdok district public prosecutor's office have refused to discuss with Forum 18 why they are seeking to confiscate the church.

The Mozdok Presbyterians – who are predominantly Russian, Ossetian and Korean but also Armenian and Chechen – have been able to gather freely for worship at their building since the church's registration was liquidated in 2003, Mazhurova told Forum 18. At the beginning of September 2005, however, they were informed by the local administration that there is now sufficient evidence to file suit for the confiscation of their prayer house, she said, although no date for a court hearing has yet been set.

Founded by South Korean missionaries, Emmanuel Church bought two adjacent plots of land in Mozdok in approximately 1997, according to Mazhurova, and then knocked down the two village houses located there. Repeatedly refused planning permission – in her view due to its foreign connections – the church nevertheless completed construction of its 1000-seater "beautiful Gothic-style" prayer house at the site in approximately 2000, she said, hoping to legalise it post factum. "We decided on that course of action because we had no lawyer at the time."

Instead, however, the local authorities began to take note of the church's administrative violations in an atmosphere increasingly hostile towards the Presbyterians, Mazhurova continued. "We didn't have much contact with the local authorities, so they thought the church might be a cover for espionage – there is an aerodrome near here – or conducting anti-Russian activity. Local press articles began to maintain that we were turning people into zombies, almost killing them." When laws became more complex, she added, what had seemed like minor technical violations "snowballed against us".

As well as pointing to the absence of planning permission, Mazhurova told Forum 18 that local officials claimed Emmanuel's English-language classes and medical centre were not properly registered. Pavel Bak of the Moscow-based Pentecostal union to which the church is affiliated told Forum 18 on 20 September that a further violation was considered to have taken place when South Korean and US missionaries working with the Mozdok Presbyterians some years ago overstayed the validity period of their Russian visas. As a result, according to Mazhurova, a local Mozdok court liquidated Emmanuel Church in September 2003. For the next two years, she added, the community tried to register anew without success.

Protestant communities in Russia are increasingly reporting bureaucratic opposition to their church building projects (see F18News 24 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=637).

On 21 September, a secretary at Mozdok district public prosecutor's office who was clearly familiar with the situation asked Forum 18 to ring a different number at the same office in several hours' time. He declined to name the official dealing with the Presbyterians' case, but claimed that anyone answering the given number would be able to respond to Forum 18's query, promising to warn staff so that they could seek out relevant documentation in the mean time. Telephoning the number at the appointed time, however, Forum 18 was told that the person dealing with the Presbyterians' case was on holiday. The person who answered claimed that he did not know anything about the case and refused to discuss anything by telephone.

To Forum 18's knowledge, Emmanuel's is the first case in which a religious organisation has been liquidated for purely administrative violations since - and contra to - a 7 February 2002 ruling by Russia's Constitutional Court. Concerning, but not limited to, the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army, this stipulated that a religious organisation may be liquidated only if found to be conducting anti-constitutional activity or "properly proven to have ceased its activities". In August 2002 an independent Baptist community in the Pacific port of Vanino founded by US missionary Dan Pollard avoided liquidation as a result of this ruling. Latterly, however, a charismatic church in the Tuvan capital Kyzyl similarly escaped liquidation for minor administrative violations only by voluntarily disbanding (see F18News 18 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=609).

Forum 18 notes that last year's liquidation of the Moscow organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses was ordered on the basis of alleged anti-constitutional activity (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289).

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

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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