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RUSSIA: One Nation, one Orthodox Church?

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

Despite Russia's constitutional guarantee of equality before the law for all religious associations, some regional state officials support the Moscow Patriarchate against other Orthodox organisations, Forum 18 News Service has found. Orthodox groups can experience unfair treatment in seeking state registration or in property disputes. Another example is the description of a Russian Orthodox Church of the New Martyrs priest, Fr Aleksandr Ganzinin, as a "common swindler," in a press release by a regional authority. This was after Fr Ganzinin had given the required notification of the church's intent to preach, distribute icons and candles and collect donations at a town's markets, and the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese's "confirmation" of Fr Ganzinin as an "impostor" not found among its clergy. An example of property problems is the transfer by a local authority of a church, in Zheleznovodsk, from the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC) to the Moscow Patriarchate. Local officials are often reluctant, in Forum 18's experience, to discuss favouritism of one Orthodox church over another.

Despite the constitutional guarantee of equality before the law for all religious associations, the state still tends to support the Moscow Patriarchate against other organisations also claiming to represent the authentic Russian Orthodox tradition, Forum 18 News Service has found.

These Orthodox groups can experience unfair treatment at the hands of officials, when seeking state registration or attempting to resolve property disputes (see F18News 25 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=287 and 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=290).

Occasionally, state preference for the Moscow Patriarchate is very clear. The activity of "uncanonical offshoots of Orthodoxy on the territory of the republic, especially the True Orthodox Church," is noted among "current problems" in a report on the religious situation in the north Caucasus republic of Karachai-Cherkessia. The report was written by Karachai-Cherkessia religious affairs official Yevgeni Kratov, and dated 13 January 2006.

In the Krasnodar region of south-western Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church of the New Martyrs priest, Fr Aleksandr Ganzinin, was described as a "common swindler" in a 30 May press release from Nevinnomyssk's Department for Social and Religious Organisations and in the media of neighbouring Stavropol region, "warning" residents and guests of the town "not to be deceived" by him. The warning came after Fr Ganzinin - in accordance with federal law - informed the authorities of Tikhoretsk (Krasnodar region) on 25 April about the church's foundation as a religious group and its intention to preach, distribute icons and candles and collect donations at the town's markets. The official press release and Stavropol's media cited the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese's "confirmation" of Fr Ganzinin as an "impostor" not found among its clergy.

More frequently, however, officials are less ready to reveal their loyalties. In the southern spa town of Zheleznovodsk in Stavropol region, the authorities transferred St Olga's Church from the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC) to the Moscow Patriarchate. Snezhana Arefyeva, press secretary to Mayor Viktor Lozovoi, declined to comment to Forum 18 on 13 July about the transfer earlier this year. "This is too serious a conversation to have by telephone," she remarked, before requesting all queries by fax. A faxed enquiry sent on 17th July has not received a response.

On 3 April 2006 court bailiffs finally facilitated the transfer of the Zheleznovodsk church from the ROAC to the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese following a ruling almost a year before in which Stavropol Regional Arbitration Court determined the Moscow Patriarchate to be its lawful owner, and higher courts rejected the ROAC's subsequent appeals. Following an earlier, similarly protracted legal battle, however, Stavropol Regional Arbitration Court in 2004 established "the legal fact of ownership" of the church by the ROAC parish, taking into account its use and upkeep by the community since its construction in 1989 (see F18News 3 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=504).

In comments published on the religious affairs website in the wake of the April property transfer, Arefyeva told Portal-Credo that the ROAC parish would be offered alternative premises on request. When initially contacted by Forum 18 on 13 July, however, she said that although this had been "a live issue two or three months ago", no such offer had subsequently been made to her knowledge.

"We have been promised a lot – like freedom of conscience", the ROAC's Archbishop Feodor (Gineyevsky) of Borisovskoye and

Otradnensk told Forum 18 from Suzdal (Vladimir region) on 11 July. "But we don't get much." He confirmed that the Zheleznovodsk ROAC parish has not been offered compensatory premises or land and questioned whether it would build another church even if it were. "All the parishioners' energy went into that church, and there is no guarantee that the same thing wouldn't happen again."

Old Believer communities have similarly told Forum 18 that contested historical churches and church property are routinely withheld from them or "returned" to the Moscow Patriarchate (see F18News 30 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=533).

The Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC), based in Suzdal north-east of Moscow, was formed after its leading hierarchy, Metropolitan Valentin (Rusantsov), broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate in 1990. It is unusual among alternative Orthodox organisations in Russia in having use of some historical church properties.

Archbishop Feodor of the ROAC told Forum 18 that a possible threat to its use of historical churches was thwarted on 18 May, when a regional state commission confirmed that the ROAC is using 15 federal architectural monuments in Vladimir region "appropriately, especially in the absence of state support". The commission, which included regional officials dealing with cultural monument use, as well as ROAC representatives, was set up on 12 May following an earlier query by then member of parliament Pavel Pozhigailo to President Vladimir Putin's representative in the Central Federal District, Georgi Poltavchenko.

In January 2006, Portal-Credo reported that FSB security service officers seized documents supporting the ROAC's rights to historical properties in the region in December 2005. The source of the report was given as Irina Matushevskaya, of Vladimir's State Centre for the Use and Restoration of Cultural and Historical Monuments. However, no consequences have ensued for the ROAC other than the May commission, Archbishop Feodor told Forum 18.

But the ROAC continues to have registration problems, according to Archbishop Feodor, particularly over the past six years. In particular, he said, when the Presentation of the Mother of God parish finally registered in April 2005 in Dolisitsy village (in Bryansk region, which borders Ukraine), officials insisted that "no more schismatics" would obtain registration in Bryansk region. "And this is when all citizens are supposed to have equal rights," Archbishop Feodor complained.

Dolisitsy's parish priest, Fr Mikhail Dudarev, was visited at home by Sergei Gavrikov, religious affairs adviser to Bryansk regional governor Nikolai Denin, and told that although the ROAC holds federal registration, it is "outside the law". Gavrikov also told Fr Dudarev that the Church was a "schismatic American" Church, whose members aim to divide and ruin Russia by destroying the Russian Church and who work for former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, Portal-Credo reported in May 2005. Brzezinski is a Catholic, with no links with the ROAC.

Sergei Gavrikov's telephone went unanswered when Forum 18 rang on 12, 13 and 14 July.

Gavrikov admitted that he had spoken with the ROAC "schismatics" and "explained the policy of the regional authorities and the way in which religious processes in the region and country as a whole are interrelated," in a June 2005 interview with Portal-Credo. He stated that Bryansk region's situation is "not simple" as it borders Ukraine – where there are three large rival Orthodox factions, two of which, he maintained, "are trying to break up and destroy the Moscow Patriarchate, acting in parallel with those political processes taking place in Ukrainian society".

Another organisation recently facing a challenge to its activity is the Russian True-Orthodox Church, one of several groups in the former Soviet Union continuing to recognise the authority of Metropolitan Vitali (Ustinov) of the US-based Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) and rejecting the process of reconciliation with the Moscow Patriarchate initiated by his replacement, Metropolitan Lavr (Shkurla). The ROCA was formed as a temporary church administration by exiled bishops in 1922 in response to the new atheist regime's manipulation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union.

In Kurgan region in the Urals, the head of Mylnikovo district, Valentina Maramygina, was told by Fr Vladimir Karelin, on 6 April 2005 (in a letter reproduced in August 2005 on the ROCA website), that the activities of Mylnikovo village's ROCA priest, Fr Valeri Soldatov, are "fraudulent deception". Fr Vladimir also claimed that the village's 30 strong ROCA Prophet Elijah parish is "an illegally functioning grouping not registered with the Justice Department".

Fr Vladimir is an ex-Moscow Patriarchate priest now under the Ishim and Siberia diocese of ROCA Bishop Yevtikhi (Kurochkin), who supports Metropolitan Lavr and rapprochement with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Following Fr Vladimir's letter, the Mylnikovo parish suffered an inordinate delay in receiving registration papers. But Archbishop Tikhon (Pasechnik) of Omsk and Siberia told Forum 18 on 12 July that state registration was eventually given. The Archbishop has been President of the Russian True-Orthodox Church's Synod since the death of Archbishop Lazar (Zhurbenko) in June 2005.

The Mylnikovo parish also managed to defend its legal right to its church building – a converted cafeteria held on terms of long lease - two months ago in Kurgan's regional court, Archbishop Tikhon told Forum 18.

Other faiths that are experiencing problems in acquiring or regaining property for worship, include Protestants, Muslims and Hare Krishna devotees (see eg. F18News 16 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=800), and Catholics (see eg. F18News 18 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=783). (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

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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