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RUSSIA: Unregistered Baptists pressured

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

Baptists in different parts of Russia have experienced state harassment in recent months, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This has included interrogation by the FSB security service, defamatory state television coverage, a warning for home worship and a fine for preaching in public. The congregations concerned all belong to the Baptist Council of Churches, whose communities do not register with state authorities. In one example, two FSB security service officers in Kurgan Region separately questioned two Yurgamysh church members for four hours about internal church matters. Regional state TV later broadcast a programme on the church called "Criminal News". This made unsubstantiated allegations, such as that children from the church are "retarded, downtrodden, dress differently from other [school] pupils and often have to repeat the year," and that church members live off illegal business. The region's parliament is to consider proposals "to protect citizens from religious sects" on 30 September. Proposals include compulsory notification of the existence of an unregistered religious group and compulsory registration for communities with ten or more members.

Baptist communities in different corners of Russia have experienced state harassment in recent months, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. This has included interrogation by the FSB security service, defamatory state television coverage, a warning for home worship and a fine for preaching in public.

The congregations concerned all belong to the Baptist Council of Churches, which broke away from the Soviet-recognised Baptist Union in 1961 in protest at regulations preventing missionary activity and religious instruction to children. Its communities refuse on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries.

In the town of Yurgamysh (Kurgan Region, approximately 1,800 km or 1,120 miles east of Moscow), a congregation of 18 adults and some 50 children is alarmed by recent state intrusion detailed in a 27 August statement. Two officers from Kurgan municipal FSB security service – as they introduced themselves – separately questioned church members Marina Kondakova and Galina Smetanina for four hours about internal church matters on 9 July, the Baptists report. That same evening, the FSB officers attended worship at the church's prayer house - a private home - where they placed their bags on a bench: "As it turned out, the service was secretly filmed."

On 23 July, congregation members spoke with a television crew outside the prayer house, but refused to allow them to film a service, "even though they were insistent". Then, repeated on regional state television over three days in late August, a programme called "Criminal News" portrayed the Yurgamysh church "in a completely distorted light." According to the Baptists, a local head teacher spoke indignantly about how their children are "retarded, downtrodden, dress differently from other pupils and often have to repeat the year." An elderly woman was shown in tears, moaning that her children "have ended up in the terrible Baptist sect. They beat their children, and when I try to intervene, they beat me!" The pastor of a registered Protestant church suggested that the Yurgamysh Baptists "distort the Bible and refuse to follow the law regarding registration." Between these statements, excerpts from the secretly filmed service were shown, the Baptists say, while the narrator claimed that instead of working, church members live off illegal business. "How long can this go on?" the programme concluded. "Something must be done!"

There was no secret recording of the Baptists' service by either the FSB or state television on the "Criminal News" programme, Kurgan Region's senior religious affairs official, Vladimir Ufimtsev, insisted to Forum 18 on 16 September. "There was only footage of a conversation with the head of the congregation – probably without his prior agreement – but it wasn't secret." A local school teacher did voice her opinion about how the Baptists' children are not smartly dressed and fall behind other pupils, he added, maintaining that this was because they choose not to attend sports or computer lessons on religious grounds.

Also featured on "Criminal News", the head of the Yurgamysh congregation was asked whether he beats his children, Ufimtsev noted to Forum 18. The question arose, he said, due to a recent investigation of the church by Kurgan Regional Public Prosecutor's Office, opened under Article 239 of the Criminal Code (organisation of a religious or social association infringing the person and rights of citizens). The state representatives who questioned the two female church members were investigators from the public prosecutor's office, the religious affairs official claimed. The women denied that the congregation's children had been physically abused, said Ufimtsev, and the criminal investigation was closed due to lack of evidence.

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Aware that the Yurgamysh Baptist community is unregistered, Ufimtsev confirmed to Forum 18 that this incurs some limitations to their activity under the 1997 Religion Law, including a ban on visiting prisons and operating mass media. He insisted, however, that Council of Churches Baptists are able to worship freely and spread their beliefs in Kurgan Region: "They refuse to co-operate with the authorities, but we don't insist that they do."

Kurgan Region's parliament is to consider an appeal for measures "to protect citizens from religious sects" on 30 September, Regions.ru Russian news agency reported on 11 September. The proposals include compulsory notification about the existence of an unregistered religious group and compulsory registration for communities with ten or more members. Kurgan regional parliamentarians believe that the measures would allow "sectarians' dangerous activity" - including their telephone conversations - to be monitored, according to the report.

In January 1996, Kurgan joined the dozens of Russian regions that enacted local laws on missionary activity between 1993 and 1997, when a less restrictive federal law superseded them. Then President Vladimir Putin ordered regional public prosecutors to bring local laws into line with federal law by the end of June 2000, and most were consequently annulled. Several regions - such as Belgorod and Smolensk – have subsequently again adopted such laws, but they appear to be unenforced (see F18News 12 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=360).

In the town of Bolkhov (Orel Region, approximately 300 km or 190 miles south of Moscow), police detained four Baptist preachers for four hours on Sunday, 13 July, according to a 17 August Council of Churches statement. The four were part of a group of 22 who "sang Christian hymns and read from the Bible" close to Bolkhov market square, after which the mayor, two police officers and an Orthodox priest approached and demanded the group's identification documents. During questioning the local head of police reportedly warned the group: "If you don't want problems, forget about Bolkhov and don't ever come back. God could abandon you for 20 minutes, and that would be quite enough for something to happen to you."

On 14 August Bolkhov magistrate Nikolai Turmanov fined one of the four detained, Andrei Novikov, 1,000 roubles (224 Norwegian Kroner, 27 Euros or 39 US Dollars) under Article 20.2, Part 2 of the Administrative Violations Code (violation of regulations on holding demonstrations). But "sincere and open preaching about Christ" does not come under the 2004 Demonstrations Law, the Baptists maintain. "The local authorities' actions blatantly contradict generally recognised principles and norms of international law."

Bolkhov magistrate Nikolai Turmanov repeatedly insisted to Forum 18 on 16 September that the Baptists require the permission of the local authorities in order to preach in public. This is in accordance with Article 5, Part 5 of the 2004 Demonstrations Law, the magistrate pointed out, as was confirmed in a 29 August Bolkhov District Court ruling which upheld his earlier decision.

Under Article 5, Part 5 of the 2004 Law, "the organiser of a public meeting does not have the right to conduct it" if the relevant authorities have not been notified in advance. Turmanov insisted to Forum 18 that the term "public meeting" covers all types of events.

Confusion persists over whether religious gatherings are indeed subject to the regulations for holding demonstrations. Ambiguously, the 2004 Demonstrations Law states that "religious rites and ceremonies" are regulated by the 1997 Religion Law, which in turn states that "public worship services, other religious rites and ceremonies" are regulated by the law on demonstrations (see F18News 31 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=791).

"But we need to know in advance," Judge Turmanov argued. "What happens if some drunks pick a fight with them, or there's an accident, and we don't know anything about it?" The Baptists' preaching had also disrupted the market – which is particularly busy at weekends – the magistrate claimed. "I told them, 'Friends, I'm not against your preaching, but there are limits." Turmanov had tried to be lenient by fining Novikov the lowest possible sum, he pointed out to Forum 18.

In the city of Norilsk (Krasnoyarsk Region, 3,000 km or 1,900 miles north-east of Moscow), a magistrate warned the local 25-strong Baptist Council of Churches congregation that it could no longer use a ground-floor flat belonging to a church member for services after the end of August 2008, a spokeswoman for the community told Forum 18 on 3 June. While the authorities claim this is because the flat must be used according to its designation – for residential purposes – she said, "They just don't like people praying."

Forum 18's calls to the congregation spokeswoman over the past week have gone unanswered.

Under Article 288, Part 3 of the Civil Code, an organisation may be sited at a residential address only after it has been turned into non-residential premises. Some regions, such as Belgorod, consequently refuse to register religious organisations at private flats. Even in Belgorod, however, a local official has confirmed to Forum 18 that religious gatherings may legally take place at residential premises with the consent of those who live there (see F18News 10 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1098).

The Norilsk church spokeswoman assured Forum 18 in June that its home worship does not disturb anyone, as the congregation has been meeting at the flat for over ten years without complaints. There are no alternative places to meet in Norilsk – a former Gulag

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labour camp mining centre - she told Forum 18: "There are only blocks of flats in this town." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the http://www.samstar.ru Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 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=947.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10.

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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Copyright Forum18 News Service 2008 - Page 3/3