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RUSSIA: Religious leaders' concern as intrusive state check-ups rise

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

Samara regional Pentecostal leader Vasili Lyashevsky is among religious leaders complaining about the local justice department's request to religious organisations for full names, ages and addresses of church members. "Everyone knows that the aim of the request was to get hold of the names of parishioners in order to put pressure on them later," he told Forum 18 News Service, citing similar requests by justice departments in the regions of Irkutsk, Perm, Tambov, Udmurtia and Yekaterinburg. The Catholic priest in Samara told Forum 18 he refused to give the names, ages and other details of all his parishioners. Although a justice department official appeared in a Samara television programme in May to defend the move, the justice department official in charge of registration denied the practice to Forum 18.

In a throwback to the Soviet era, a local justice department asked religious organisations for the full names, ages and addresses of their "participants (members)", an independent local television station in the Russian region of Samara reported on 7 May. "Everyone knows that the aim of the request was to get hold of the names of parishioners in order to put pressure on them later," regional Pentecostal leader Vasili Lyashevsky – who was interviewed for the broadcast – told Forum 18 News Service from Samara on 13 July. He set the request in the general context of attempts by the state to gain leverage over independent media and social organisations, which it presented as routine procedure. "Many people just go along with it," he said, and cited similar requests by justice departments in the regions of Irkutsk, Perm, Tambov, Udmurtia and Yekaterinburg.

In its May broadcast, Samara Cable Television also carried objections to this request by local religious leaders. Orthodox Archbishop Sergi (Poletkin) of Samara and Syzran commented that, while it was "important to create order," this should not be done "in such a way as to violate human rights and freedoms". Regional Muslim representative Minnakhmet Sagirov maintained that his spiritual directorate had not submitted the information requested and would not do so. "It is entirely private. The Ministry of Justice should not be conducting operational activity." Lyashevsky of the Pentecostals remarked that "if the state continues to demand personal details of Christians, we will go underground".

Department of justice official Aleksei Shashkov defended the request in the Samara television report. "We are not counting those who attend ceremonies. We are interested in participants. We are not talking about a census of parishioners."

Yet contacted on 13 July, the head of registration of social and religious organisations at Samara's department of justice claimed that she was hearing about a request for members' details "for the first time" from Forum 18. "We only need to know that religious organisations have ten founders in a particular settlement," said Lyudmila Obukhova, and pointed out that these might variously be described as "founders", "participants" or "members" in a religious organisation's charter.

Article 25 of Russia's 1997 religion law does give the Ministry of Justice and its departments the authority to monitor the compliance of a registered religious organisation's aims and activities with its charter. A separate provision in Article 8 obliges a religious organisation to inform its local justice department annually about the continuation of its activities, giving such information as is contained in the state register of legal personalities.

While state registration does require the details of ten founders of a religious organisation – who subsequently take legal responsibility for it – the 1997 religion law refers to these people mostly as "founders" (eight times) and once as "participants" – but never as "members".

After consulting Archbishop Sergi on the issue, a representative of Samara and Syzran Orthodox diocese told Forum 18 on 6 July that the archbishop could not recall being asked for parishioners' details by the regional department of justice, but added that the diocese did not have the information to give in any case. "We don't keep count of who comes to church."

Regional Pentecostal leader Lyashevsky pointed out that while the justice department may have put objections to its request down to a simple "misunderstanding" over terminology, Samara Cable Television had subsequently come under pressure from the local authorities due to its coverage of the issue.

An Irish Catholic priest who ministers to parishes both in Samara and neighbouring Ulyanovsk and Penza regions told Forum 18 on 6 July that he sends annual letters to all three regional justice departments informing them of the continuation of parish activities, giving their legal addresses and the details of their parish priest and diocese. Fr Philip Andrews added, however, that for the past two years Samara's justice department alone has claimed that this information is inadequate and demanded further details - including the addresses and ages of parishioners. Fr Philip told Forum 18 that he disputes the justice department's right to request the personal details of anyone other than the ten legal founders of a religious organisation, and that officials in Penza region have also expressed doubt to him about the actions of their colleagues in Samara.

In an April 2004 letter to Resurrection Baptist Church, Chelyabinsk region's justice department cites Article 25 of the 1997 religion law in requesting "a list of members of the religious organisation, including their full names". The letter requests numerous other details, such as decisions made by the ruling organs and leaders of the religious organisation between 2001-04, materials concerning the creation of representative bodies and/or commercial organisations and the nature and order of their activity, documentation relating to check-ups by government inspectorates, and information given to tax inspectorates between 2001-04.

Pastor Vitali Sobolev of the church told Forum 18 on 30 June that he had assumed that the request for a list of members referred to the ten founders stipulated in the 1997 law, "so I didn't make any fuss and just put down those names". This was the first time he had received such a request, he said, and added that, while the justice department had subsequently asked follow-up questions about some of the other information supplied by the church, these had not concerned the point about members.

Also speaking to Forum 18 on 30 June, Nikolai Zhimurshchik of Chelyabinsk's Jehovah's Witness community said that his congregation had not received any request for information from the regional department of justice since it finally won its legal battle for state registration in April 2003.

Last year Kostroma's regional department of justice requested church membership records as part of a check-up on Family of God Pentecostal Church (see F18News 4 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=97).

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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