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RUSSIA: State restrictions on Mosques in south's minority Muslim areas

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

Only eight out of 47 Muslim communities in the southern Stavropol region have obtained state registration so far. The head of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region, Mufti Ismail Berdiyev, told Forum 18 News Service that "the authorities don't want to register them because they think that if they don't, a problem will disappear." But he argued that "if you register communities then you can monitor them, but the authorities haven't grasped this yet." Mufti Berdiyev's assistant, Abubekir Kurdzhiyev, suggested to Forum 18 that the 39 unregistered Muslim communities in the region could not obtain registration because some of their members had fought with Chechen separatists: "When their corpses returned, the mosques came under suspicion." But he estimated that no one from about 60 per cent of these communities had fought in Chechnya, and rejected the idea that a whole mosque could be held responsible for one person's decision.

In Russia's southern Stavropol region, only eight out of 47 communities affiliated to the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region have obtained state registration, according to that organisation's head, Mufti Ismail Berdiyev. "The authorities don't want to register them because they think that if they don't, a problem will disappear," he remarked to Forum 18 News Service on 16 September. Mufti Berdiyev argued, however, that the opposite was the case: "If you register communities then you can monitor them, but the authorities haven't grasped this yet."

In the neighbouring Russian republic of Karachai-Cherkessia, where the majority population of ethnic Karachais and Cherkessians have traditionally adhered to Islam, the Spiritual Directorate's communities all hold state registration, according to Berdiyev. (See F18News 1 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=442) In Stavropol region, however, where ethnic Russians account for 80 per cent of the population, Muslims form a minority of approximately six per cent.

Visiting one of Stavropol region's unregistered mosques in the southern spa town of Pyatigorsk on 29 September, Forum 18 was told by Mufti Berdiyev's assistant that its approximately 50-strong community had tried some five times to register. "They just kept asking for more details in the application," Abubekir Kurdzhiyev explained. "What is 'imam khatib' (preacher of Friday sermons) in Russian? The next time: Please explain what "madhhab" (school of Islam) is. And so on." Abubekir Kurdzhiyev maintained that in this way it was impossible to mount a legal challenge to the authorities' retention of registration.

According to Russia's 1997 religion law, religious communities without such registration are able to worship on their own premises and instruct existing members. They are not entitled to a number of rights key to the attraction of new members, however, such as creating educational institutions or mass media organs and producing or distributing religious literature.

Abubekir Kurdzhiyev suggested to Forum 18 that the 39 unregistered Muslim communities in Stavropol region could not obtain registration because some of their members had gone to fight with Chechen separatists: "When their corpses returned, the mosques came under suspicion." In fact, however, he estimated that no one from approximately 60 per cent of these communities had fought in Chechnya. Regarding the remainder, Kurdzhiyev rejected the idea that the whole mosque could be held responsible in any case. "How is a priest responsible if a person goes to confession and later kills someone?" he remarked to Forum 18. "Or can you blame the Bible?"

Speaking to Forum 18 on 29 October, Stavropol regional religious affairs official Vasili Shnyukov declined to respond to questions by telephone.

Non-registration is not the only obstacle faced by Muslim communities in Stavropol region. According to its March 2004 statement, the Council of Muslim Religious Organisations in Stavropol City has been unsuccessfully seeking the return to believers of the city's historical mosque for more than ten years. On 29 October Mufti Ismail Berdiyev told Forum 18 that no progress has since been made towards recovering the mosque, which currently houses Stavropol's regional museum. (See F18News 9 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=448)

And while the mosque in the region's southern spa town of Kislovodsk, approximately five kilometres from the boundary with

Karachai-Cherkessia, is one of the eight to hold state registration, its activity is restricted in other ways, Abubekir Kurdzhiyev, its imam, maintained on 29 September. Viewed by Forum 18, the mosque is a two-storey building in secular architectural style containing three separate prayer halls linked by an intercom system, one of which is in a musty cellar with no source of natural light. According to Kurdzhiyev, even these fail to accommodate the some 500 worshippers who attend on Fridays, so that some are obliged to lay their prayer mats on the ground outside.

Despite these conditions, the community has been refused permission to extend the premises by Kislovodsk's municipal authorities for over a decade, Kurdzhiyev told Forum 18. Neither are the Muslims permitted to build a separate toilet block, he added, pointing out that this could easily be achieved by connecting to the drainage system of the neighbouring public sauna's outdoor toilet block. The authorities' suggestion of installing toilets inside the mosque, Kurdzhiyev explained to Forum 18, is unacceptable to Muslims. Nodding his head towards a brand new Orthodox cathedral a short distance from the mosque, Kislovodsk's imam mentioned that this had replaced a small chapel, reportedly with the help of state funding. "The state doesn't allow us to build, but it helps the church," he remarked.

Forum 18 has been unable to obtain any response from telephone numbers for a state official identified by a secretary at Kislovodsk's municipal administration as being competent to comment on this situation. Addressing a 28 September anti-sectarian conference in Stavropol, Governor Aleksandr Chernogorov stated that, despite certain difficulties over the past decade, the region's leaders and the Orthodox diocesan administration had managed "to find the right solutions in any situation, upholding the interests of citizens. During the last seven years alone wonderful new churches have been built in Nevinnomyssk, Kislovodsk, Mineralnyye Vody and Neftekumsk."

In neighbouring Krasnodar region, whose population is similarly predominantly Russian, Muslim communities may also encounter state restrictions, according to Ravza Ramazanova, who heads the Yasin Muslim community in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. Directly affiliated to the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of European Russia led by Mufti Ravil Gainutdin, she acknowledged to Forum 18 on 28 October that the community does have state registration. Even though its rented premises barely accommodate the approximately 30 members who attend Friday prayers, however, Sochi's municipal authorities have consistently stalled the organisation's plans to construct a new mosque in the town, she maintained (see F18News 7 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=470)

Speaking to Forum 18 on 14 September, Mufti Nurbi Yemizh of the Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Adygea and Krasnodar Region reported no such difficulties, stating that the organisation has 41 mosques in his native Adygea (a predominantly Muslim landlocked republic within the borders of Krasnodar region) and a further three in Krasnodar region. He added that while the Spiritual Directorate's Muslim community in Krasnodar city has not yet obtained registration, it plans both to do so and start mosque construction by the end of 2004. While in Krasnodar city on 25 September, Forum 18 was told by a representative of the local Tajik community that some 300 practising Muslims meet in three house mosques in the city, but that, as far as he knew, their lack of registration was due to their own late initiative and not state policy.

On 29 October Krasnodar's regional religious affairs official, Aleksandr Babskov, told Forum 18 that there are currently nine registered Muslim organisations in the region, and that five of them have mosques.

For background information see Forum 18's Russia 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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