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RUSSIA: Are Stavropol regional authorities interfering in Muslim affairs?

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

The head of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region has claimed to Forum 18 News Service that the Stavropol regional authorities' are supporting the creation of a local muftiate separate from the Spritual Directorate. This is said to be due to the latter's insistence on the return of Stavropol city's historical mosque, which currently houses a museum. Apparent confirmation of the authorities' displeasure is their failure to invite the Spiritual Directorate to a major regional conference, addressed by Governor Aleksandr Chernogorov and other key officials, which was also attended by representatives of the muftiates of both Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. Stavropol regional religious affairs official Vasili Shnyukov declined to respond to Forum 18's questions by telephone.

Stavropol regional authorities' apparent support for the creation of a local muftiate separate from the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region is due to the latter organisation's insistence upon the return to believers of Stavropol city's historical mosque, the Spiritual Directorate's mufti, Ismail Berdiyev, claimed to Forum 18 News Service on 29 October. (See F18News 9 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=447) "They offered us other premises but we didn't agree because I can't pass up on an existing mosque building under sharia law," he explained, "so they have found others who would go along with them." Mufti Berdiyev added that he would be in favour of an independent muftiate for Stavropol region if it were the initiative of Muslims there, "but it is that of the regional administration."

In a 22 July 2004 interview with the state-founded "Stavropolskaya Pravda" newspaper, Mukhammat Rakhimov, "one of the most likely candidates" to head a Stavropol regional muftiate, stressed that dialogue with the region's authorities about the return of the city mosque must take place without resorting to the courts. It would be dangerous to turn the building - which currently houses a museum - back into a mosque, he maintained, "but it might well be used as a spiritual directorate or medressah (Islamic educational institute)."

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

Confirming what appeared to be a sign of the disfavour in the eyes of the Stavropol authorities of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region, Mufti Berdiyev's assistant Abubekir Kurdzhiyev told Forum 18 on 29 September that no representative of the organisation had been invited to a major regional conference the previous day: "Totalitarian Sects – the Path to the Destabilisation of the North Caucasus". Addressed by Governor Aleksandr Chernogorov and other key officials, this conference was attended by representatives of the muftiates of both Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, however, as well as Asan Koibaliyev, the head of the Council of Imams of Stavropol region's eastern districts, who Mukhammat Rakhimov described as his proponent in the 22 July "Stavropolskaya Pravda" interview and who denied at the conference that those seeking an independent muftiate were "instigating a schism".

According to Mufti Berdiyev, a failed attempt to create an independent muftiate and elect its leader was made at a Stavropol regional Muslim congress in July 2004. Abubekir Kurdzhiyev told Forum 18 that irregularities at that congress meant that Berdiyev's supporters were deliberately underrepresented. While communities with over a thousand members were meant to have five delegates and those under a thousand, three, he explained, "our opponents had 15 for some mosques with under a thousand," while delegates from others were not admitted. "The organisers said their papers were submitted too late, but I sent them myself by fax a week in advance," he told Forum 18, "I told them that if they wanted to have a state department for Muslim affairs in Stavropol region then they should openly call it that."

In the 22 July "Stavropolskaya Pravda" interview, Mukhammat Rakhimov claimed that the creation of an independent muftiate and the election of its leader had been postponed at the congress due to a "disagreement". In explaining what happened, he maintained that his opponents' leader represented ideas "harmful to a true Muslim, the complete rejection of traditional Islam" and had practised "the open intimidation of delegates". As a result of this evident "negative influence of alien ideas," a separate Stavropol muftiate would be better off under the auspices of Talgat Tadzhuiddin, he suggested. Tadzhuiddin and other representatives of his Soviet-era

successor Muslim body, the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims, have consistently maintained in recent years that Islamic extremism is rife in Russia outside their own organisation (see F18News 14 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=410).

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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