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RUSSIA: Church, mosque and synagogue kept by southern authorities

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

In southern Russia, three confessions regarded as "traditional" – the Greek Orthodox, Muslims and Jews – have all failed to win back places of worship confiscated by the state in Communist times, Forum 18 News Service has found. The Greek Orthodox community in the city of Krasnodar is part of the Moscow Patriarchate and has the support of its local Russian Orthodox bishop. Yet it has failed to get the authorities to return a church it can prove belonged to it, which now houses a state sanitation and disease control department. The city's Progressive Jewish community has now abandoned its nine year struggle to win back a pre-revolutionary synagogue in the city centre the community once used, which is now a government trade department. In the neighbouring region of Stavropol, the local Muslim community has similarly fought in vain for over ten years for the restitution of a pre-revolutionary city mosque, now used as the Stavropol city museum.

Despite having the backing of its local Russian Orthodox bishop, the Greek Orthodox community in the southern Russian city of Krasnodar has unsuccessfully fought to win back its historical church building for eight years. "Greeks are not scandal-mongers," Yuri Amanatov of the Greek Orthodox Brotherhood of SS Helen and Constantine explained to Forum 18 News Service in Krasnodar in late September. "It doesn't seem to help us that, as part of the diocese, we formally have good relations with the local authorities."

Currently scattered among Russian Orthodox parishes, there are approximately 1,000 practising Greek Orthodox in Krasnodar region, Amanatov estimates. While they are content to be under the Moscow Patriarchate and currently have access to priests who have a reasonable knowledge of Greek, he told Forum 18, the Greek Orthodox would be able to worship as one parish led by an ethnic Greek priest if they had their own church. In particular, pointed out Amanatov, parishioners could then make their confessions in Greek and obtain commemoration services for the thousands of Greek victims of the 1915 genocide in present-day eastern Turkey and local Stalinist purges directed against Greeks in 1938.

Amanatov has proof from Krasnodar Regional State Archive that a building in the centre of the city - whose façade retains a frieze of crosses - belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation from 1906-24. His community, however, has received only refusals from state representatives ever since local Russian Orthodox metropolitan Isidor (Kirichenko) first formally requested its return on 8 February 1997. In 1998 a representative of Krasnodar mayor's office wrote that it was not possible to return the building because Russia's federal law on the rehabilitation of repressed peoples applied only to nationalities violently repressed by the state, which "bore no relation" to Krasnodar's Greek community of 1924. In 2000 another mayor's office representative added that legislation specifically stating that the Greek people had been repressed would be required before the building could be returned. Moreover, argued the official, President Yeltsin's April 1993 decree ordering property restitution to religious organisations related only to federal property, and Krasnodar's municipal authorities in any case had no alternative premises for the current occupants, a state sanitation and disease control department.

Encouraged when a June 2001 Russian government decree on the procedure for returning federal property to religious organisations mentioned municipal as well as federal property, Amanatov wrote to mayor of Krasnodar Nikolai Priz in early 2002 with yet another request for the building. A month later, however, he received a response from the city's property department stating that the decree was only a recommendation, and that, since it currently housed the state sanitation and disease control department, "the administration of Krasnodar city has no grounds to review the question of returning the given property to other persons".

In the neighbouring region of Stavropol, the local Muslim community has similarly fought in vain for over ten years for the restitution of a pre-revolutionary city mosque, which currently houses Stavropol's regional museum. According to a March 2004 statement from the Council of Muslim Religious Organisations in Stavropol City, the region's arbitration court finally refused to hear a case set to decide the issue - after seven months of preliminary deliberations - on the grounds that it was "outside its competency". The local Muslim community was forced to file suit with the court in the first place, explains the statement, because the Stavropol regional authorities repeatedly refused to acknowledge receipt of a 31 December 1999 instruction issued by Russia's Ministries of Culture and State Property demanding the return of the former mosque to local Muslims.

In late October 2004 Mufti Ismail Berdiyev of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Karachai-Cherkessia and Stavropol Region

maintained to Forum 18 that the Stavropol regional authorities' apparent support for the creation of a local muftiate separate from his own was due to his insistence upon the return to believers of the historical mosque in Stavropol city. "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" (see F18News 9 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=448).

Also contacted by Forum 18 in late October, Stavropol regional religious affairs official Vasili Shnyukov declined to respond to questions by telephone.

Another confession usually counted as "traditional" in Russia, Krasnodar's Progressive Jewish community gave up trying to win back a pre-revolutionary synagogue in the city centre after approximately nine years, its chairman Georgi Gonik remarked as he showed Forum 18 the building in late September. Now a government trade department and formally a youth radio school, Gonik recalled that the local authorities had said that the Jews would have to build new premises for the school in order to receive the building, "but we didn't have the means". Currently the 70-strong Progressive Jewish congregation is able to meet for worship at nearby rented premises, he added, "although there isn't enough space at festivals."

In late October 2004, Krasnodar region's religious affairs official, Aleksandr Babskov, said that he did not have official confirmation that the building in question had ever been a synagogue, and claimed to be unaware of any official claim to it by a religious community. (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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