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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

13 June 2005

RUSSIA: Five-day prison for "illegally" demanding believers' rights

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

Three Pentecostals have been jailed and nine fined by a court for "illegally" demonstrating against the Moscow city authorities' refusal to allow Emmanuel Pentecostal Church to build or acquire a building, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Since the demonstration, Emmanuel Church appears to be making progress, as the vice-chairman of Moscow's Department for Building Policy, Development and Reconstruction, Aleksandr Kosovan, has reportedly ordered that a plot of land be found where Emmanuel can build a church centre, with all planning work paid for by the Moscow government. The demonstration was also to protest about discrimination against Protestants in Russia. Such discrimination has had the support of the Russian Orthodox Church's St Tikhon Theological Institute, which, in a letter seen by Forum 18, wrote to the local authority complaining that "unknown persons are collecting signatures in your district in support of a prayer house" and alleging that Pentecostals use "suggestive (hypnotic) techniques, trance occult-mystic practices and methods of controlling the consciousness of its adepts which endanger their mental health."

A third member of the 1000-strong Emmanuel Pentecostal Church has been sentenced to five days' imprisonment by a Moscow court for taking part in what the city authorities maintain was an unapproved demonstration in support of believers' rights. Church members were protesting against discrimination Protestants now face, and specifically the Moscow authorities' refusal to allow their own church to build or acquire a building in the Russian capital. In what lawyer Vladimir Ryakhovsky described to Forum 18 News Service outside the courtroom on 10 June as "a parody of justice", church administrator Yuri Popov joined pastors Ilya Astafyev and Aleksandr Purshaga – sentenced on 6 and 7 June – in temporary detention cells in central Moscow.

Judge Aleksandra Kovalevskaya has also handed down fines of 500 and 1000 roubles (114 and 228 Norwegian kroner, 15 and 29 Euros or 18 and 35 US dollars) to other church members who took part in the demonstration – administrator Bakur Azaryan, Aleksandr Solovyev, pensioner Ernest Gaman, Tatyana Zaitseva, Sergei Svindkin, Aleksandr Kucheinik, Yuri Puchkov, Oleg Koledov and Aleksei Pankov.

At the start of the 10 June court session observed by Forum 18, Judge Kovalevskaya ignored Ryakhovsky's calls for it to be postponed until after a separate appeal determined whether the church's daily demonstration opposite Moscow's mayor's office from 30 May to 3 June was lawful. While Emmanuel Church submitted notification of the demonstration ten days in advance, as required by Russia's 2004 demonstrations law, they claim not to have received objection by the authorities to its location within three days of the notification, which the law also requires.

Church administrator Bakur Azaryan told Forum 18 on 3 June that only in police detention on 30 May did demonstrators first see such a document. Issued by the Moscow city authorities and viewed by Forum 18, it states that, since the area opposite the mayor's office has been designated as a car park, the event must be moved to the site where the church held a much larger demonstration on 22 May. Azaryan pointed out, however, that this document bore the date 26 May – three days after the demonstrations law's requirement – as well as an official's handwritten note requesting security measures be taken to prevent demonstrators from gathering opposite the mayor's office. "Why would they do that unless they knew we hadn't been informed of the change?" Azaryan remarked to Forum 18. "It was a provocation."

Later in the 10 June court hearing the official who received the church's notification on 20 May, Yelena Polyakova, maintained that she had told the organisers when they submitted it that the site opposite the mayor's office was not available for demonstrations: "We never give that place to anyone," she told the court, "because it is a car park." While acknowledging that there was no official document to support this, Polyakova also claimed not only that it qualified as a well-founded reason to move the meeting but also that she was authorised to convey it. However, she was unable to explain why, if what she said were true, the church's notification was officially processed and a formal reply drafted by a senior official on 26 May. Later in the court session a police officer admitted that the precise area where the demonstration had taken place was not in fact part of the car park.

Judge Kovalevskaya passed sentence on church administrator Yuri Popov nevertheless. He tried in vain to show that he had been unlawfully detained half an hour before the declared starting time for the 30 May demonstration when he approached fellow church member Sergei Matveyenko in order to clarify the law with a police officer questioning him. Popov pointed out that Matveyenko was demonstrating alone - for which no notification is required - and the police officer, Major Aleksandr Krylov, had acknowledged

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that this was the case in the same circumstances some time earlier.

Major Krylov, however, insisted to the court that "Popov was with Matveyenko – it was a group of citizens, two. I told them to stop demonstrating and they didn't." When Ryakhovsky asked whether he was sure there were two demonstrators as detention statements claimed there to be three, Krylov replied: "Now there'll be a third. There'll be however many there needs to be."

Despite the consequences for individual members of the demonstrations, however, Emmanuel Church does now appear to be making headway in resolving the main reason for their protest – the authorities' refusal to allow them to build or acquire a building. According to the Moscow-based religious affairs website SOVA Center, Pentecostal bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky informed head of presidential administration Dmitri Medvedev about Emmanuel's plight following a meeting of the presidential Council for Relations with Religious Organisations on 1 June. On 6 June Bakur Azaryan and Pastor Aleksandr Purshaga met the vice-chairman of Moscow's Department for Building Policy, Development and Reconstruction, Aleksandr Kosovan. According to a church statement, the meeting was convened by personal order of Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

At the 6 June meeting Kosovan reportedly told his assistant Valeri Belyayev to find a plot of land by 30 June where Emmanuel could build a church centre, for which all planning work would be paid by the Moscow government in view of the church's previous losses. In addition, he ordered officials to approve the necessary documents for reconstruction of a building purchased by Emmanuel in Solntsevo district by 15 June. Speaking to Forum 18 on 9 June, Azaryan was optimistic that the second issue would be resolved positively, but thought that the allocation of land would be "more complicated". The church currently rents a house of culture for services.

Azaryan explained to Forum 18 that Emmanuel Church – affiliated to the Russian Assemblies of God union - received a plot of land in Moscow's Vernadsky Prospekt district for its church centre in 1996. After its construction plan was approved by all departments, however, the district assembly rejected it in a closed session in November 2000 on the grounds that public opinion was opposed to the project, even though the church subsequently gathered over 6,000 signatures of support from 10,000 of the district's households. When Moscow's vice-mayor Valeri Shantsev decided that Emmanuel should thus find another plot - after they had invested many thousands of dollars into the project – the church tried to file suit, But, Azaryan reported, a local court ruled that the city's decision was correct because Emmanuel had allegedly not drawn up certain planning documents correctly: "A completely different reason."

After twice being refused alternative sites, continued Azaryan, the church bought a building in Solntsevo district, but the local authorities refused to allow it to be rebuilt or to register the church's rights to the land beneath it "except for five square metres". On 1 June, he added, arson was attempted on the building and its windows smashed.

Emmanuel's plight has received broad coverage in the Russian media. Azaryan maintained to Forum 18 that the church's problems had arisen "because we're Protestants", pointing to a Solntsevo district official's comment to a woman – whom he did not know attended another evangelical church – that she would "do better to organise people against the Protestants who want to build here" when she complained about the noise created by a new shop in the locality.

Quoted in the English-language Moscow Times on 10 June, International Religious Freedom Watch president and Orthodox Christian Lawrence Uzzell states that Protestant churches throughout Russia report being denied rental of rooms for religious services because of opposition from local Orthodox clergy. In response, Mikhail Moiseyev, chief spokesman for Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksi II denied such practices, insisting that Emmanuel's problems were "by no means connected to the Orthodox Church".

However, a 6 March 2001 letter viewed by Forum 18 from the department for the study of sects at the Russian Orthodox Church's St Tikhon Theological Institute suggests otherwise. Addressed to the head of Vernadsky District assembly, it states that "unknown persons are collecting signatures in your district in support of a prayer house calling themselves representatives of Emmanuel Church. This appears to be a mission of the American neo-Pentecostal sect 'Assemblies of God'." The letter goes on to allege that Emmanuel Church also belongs to the "Faith Movement", which has analogous groups in Sweden and uses "suggestive (hypnotic) techniques, trance occult-mystic practices and methods of controlling the consciousness of its adepts which endanger their mental health".

Quoted in the 11 December 2001 issue of Russian religious affairs publication NG-Religii, Vernadsky Prospekt district newspaper explains that the district assembly decided not to support Emmanuel's construction project because the church's representatives were "exerting psychological pressure upon local officials and misleading local residents as to their true intentions". The newspaper also claims that the church is "a Russian mission of the neo-Pentecostal 'Faith Movement' brought to us from the USA via Sweden".

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News 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=509

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

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