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RUSSIA: Religious organisations' NGO Law financial accounting simplified

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Following sustained lobbying by religious communities, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov has significantly simplified the accounting procedure for religious organisations under the so-called NGO law, as well as extending the deadline for religious organisations to submit their financial accounts to 1 June 2007. Moscow Islamic University submitted its accounts under the NGO Law even before the simplified procedure was adopted. Its rector, Marat Murtazin, told Forum 18 News Service that "it would be more complex to fill out a form for a visa to visit Norway!" Murtazin, who is also Vice-chairman of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of European Russia, commented that "we wanted maximum simplicity, so that even a village imam would be able to comply." Shortly before the regulations were simplified, the official in charge of religious organisation registration, Viktor Korolev, told Forum 18 that he had not received any financial accounts from the roughly 600 centralised religious organisations due to submit them to his office. Anatoli Pchelintsev, of the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, suggested that this was because plans to simplify the regulations were well-known.

Following sustained lobbying by religious representatives, the government has markedly simplified the financial accounting procedure for religious organisations demanded by the so-called NGO Law, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A 10 April decree signed by Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov also extends the deadline for religious organisations' account submissions to 1 June 2007.

Prime Minister Fradkov's decree introduces a shortened, single accounting form for religious organisations (see F18News 17 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=944). Signed by President Vladimir Putin on 10 January 2006, the NGO Law – "On the Introduction of Amendments to Several Laws of the Russian Federation" – was presented as a means of preventing foreign states from financing political opposition initiatives (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=869).

Moscow Islamic University submitted its accounts under the NGO Law even before the simplified procedure for religious organisations was adopted, its rector, Marat Murtazin, told Forum 18 on 28 March. "It would be more complex to fill out a form for a visa to visit Norway!" he remarked. As vice-chairman of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of European Russia headed by Ravil Gainutdin, Murtazin participated in a 2 February 2007 meeting with presidential aide Vladislav Surkov to discuss the possibility of concessions for religious organisations. "Since we aren't to be left out of the law – once adopted it's very difficult to change – we came to a compromise," he explained. "We wanted maximum simplicity, so that even a village imam would be able to comply." When Forum 18 queried whether some village imams might still find the forms difficult to fill out, Murtazin suggested that they should in that case probably not be imams. "Everyone needs to know how to read and write, after all."

Shortly before the Federal Registration Service sent a proposed simplified procedure for government approval, on 29 March, its official in charge of registration of religious organisations, Viktor Korolev, told Forum 18 that he has not received any financial accounts from the roughly 600 centralised religious organisations due to submit them to his office.

Plans to simplify the accounting procedure were well known to religious organisations via the media, Anatoli Pchelintsev of the Moscow-based Slavic Centre for Law and Justice suggested to Forum 18 on 20 March. This would explain why they have not yet followed the existing procedure, Pchelintsev thought. "Everyone is waiting to see what happens."

Some initially thought that the NGO Law did not apply to religious organisations. The United Methodist Church website, referring to a previous Forum 18 article, stated on 6 December 2006 that "Bishop Hans Växby of Moscow said he doesn't expect the new law to have a direct effect because the United Methodist Church is registered under the Law of Religious Freedom, not the Law of Nongovernmental Organizations." (see F18News 14 November 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=869),

Religious organisations are registered in accordance with the 1997 Religion Law, but they are subject to some provisions of the 1996 Non-commercial Organisations Law, including Article 32, which is amended by the NGO Law.

Some religious communities responded to this towards the end of 2006, by lobbying for the provisions' mitigation. On 8 December

Kommersant national newspaper reported that Adventist, Baptist and Pentecostal leaders had written to Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev requesting that religious organisations be exempted from the new accounting regulations. Muslim and Jewish leaders also told the newspaper that they found the new procedure unacceptable, and the Russian Orthodox Church's lawyer, Kseniya Chernega, announced that she was similarly preparing an appeal against it. As Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Kirill (Gundyayev) of Smolensk and Kaliningrad later explained to Interfax news agency, religious organisations were concerned by "a whole range of provisions impossible to fulfil even with the best will in the world," such as requests for numbers of participants in events.

On 13 December, at a meeting of the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations, religious representatives again raised their objections. Sergei Sobyenin, who heads the presidential administration, reportedly instructed the director of the Federal Registration Service, Sergei Movchan, to devise a new form of accounting in conjunction with religious representatives. On 19 December Federal Registration Service officials duly met with religious representatives.

In addition to Murtazin of Moscow Islamic University, according to the Council of Muftis website, presidential aide Vladislav Surkov met with Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Kliment (Kapalin) of Kaluga and Borovsk and one of the two chief rabbis, Berl Lazar, on 2 February 2007.

On 6 March, the second federal state body dealing with religious affairs, the governmental Commission for Religious Associations, supported the idea of simplifying the accounts procedure. Proposing simplification, Metropolitan Kliment pointed out that religious organisations already have to submit five different declarations and accounts to state organs every three months and a further six every year, as well as to notify the Justice Ministry annually of the continuation of their activities.

On 29 March Viktor Korolev, the official in charge of religious organisations at the Federal Registration Service, confirmed to Forum 18 that his department had until 2 April to prepare proposals for a simplified procedure in accordance with a directive from Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev, who chairs the governmental Commission. He added that several other bodies, including the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Trade and Economic Development, would have to approve the proposals before their consideration by the government, "because they involve finance."

Shortly before the simplified procedure was made public on 13 April, Chenega, the Russian Orthodox Church's lawyer, commented to Russkaya Liniya Orthodox news service that "at this stage we are satisfied with the simplified form of accounting being proposed, although of course, the optimal situation would be to amend Article 32 of the Law on Non-commercial Organisations so that religious organisations are made separate from the NGOs to which that article extends." A Pentecostal representative, Konstantin Bendas, similarly maintained to Kommersant newspaper on 3 April that the 1997 Religion Law, and not the NGO Law, should regulate church activity: "We hope to succeed in obtaining amendments before the end of this year."

Previously known for his strong criticism of construction plans for a Hare Krishna temple in Moscow (see F18News 20 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=746), Russian Orthodox Archbishop Nikon (Vasyukov) of Ufa and Sterlitamak has already refused to comply with the accounting procedure, according to a 29 March Interfax report. In a letter to Bashkortostan Registration Service Department cited by the news agency, the archbishop states: "We understand the state's close interest in the activity of all types of social and so-called 'human rights' organisations which, as has recently emerged, are actively financed by foreign secret services and openly conduct provocative and anti-Russian activity, but it is completely incomprehensible why this interest has been transferred to the activity of traditional religious organisations like the Russian Orthodox Church (..) In our opinion the accounting stipulated amounts to state interference in the activity of religious organisations unprecedented since Soviet times." (END)

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

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