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RUSSIA: State opposition to Kostroma Pentecostals continues

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

In the latest incident of what Pastor Andrei Danilov regards as continuing state pressure, the regional justice department in Kostroma near Moscow ordered a "check-up" on the Family of God Pentecostal church in June. The church was given just days – three of which were public holidays – to provide documentation on church funds, church activity, congregation membership records and minutes of meetings. "Other churches haven't been asked," Danilov pointed out to Forum 18 News Service. But local religious affairs official Marina Smirnova defended such action against the church, which included a failed court case on accusations of conducting hypnosis. "This concerns the lives of OUR people... hopefully we caused Danilov to think twice, I call that a result."

On the eve of public holidays on 12, 13 and 14 June, Pastor Andrei Danilov of the Family of God Pentecostal Church in the city of Kostroma 400 kilometres (250 miles) north-east of Moscow received a demand from his regional department of justice for numerous internal church papers. A "check-up" on the church's activity was planned, it explained, which required documentation pertaining to the acquisition of church funds, confirmation of engagement in educational and charitable activity, congregation membership records and minutes of recent church meetings to be submitted – all by 16 June. "Other churches haven't been asked," Danilov pointed out as he showed the demand to Forum 18 News Service on 15 June. Pastor Vladimir Denisychiev of the neighbouring Kostroma Christian Church confirmed this later the same day.

This is just the latest incident in a stand-off between the Kostroma authorities and Pastor Danilov's church which dates back to 15 May 2000, when Family of God and a second local Pentecostal church, Grace, were denied state re-registration. In October that year Kostroma regional state broadcasting company showed a film of the two churches' services as part of a local news bulletin. According to Danilov the footage, which showed scenes of his parishioners "falling in the Spirit" when blessed by visiting US preacher Bill Norton, was taken in secret and accompanied by a commentary containing accusations of hypnotism.

In November 2000 Kostroma regional justice department filed suit for the liquidation of the two churches but failed to prove that, as stipulated by Russia's 1997 religion law, damage to the health or morality of citizens had occurred as a result of hypnosis. The two churches went on to receive confirmation of re-registration just two days before the same law's deadline of 31 December 2000.

Despite having full legal status, however, "the opposition continues," Pastor Danilov told Forum 18 on 15 June. After the two churches tried to prevent the use of secret film as evidence becoming legal precedent in Russia, he said, Kostroma's regional public prosecutor ordered a retrial of the 2000 case. While the regional court upheld the previous verdict on 28 January 2003, his church has otherwise not been so successful: over the past 18 months, the 200-strong congregation has had to change its rented worship premises on three occasions.

In early 2002, Danilov told Forum 18, Family of God was forced to leave Kostroma's philharmonic hall after its director came under pressure from various parties, including the local Orthodox diocese and the security services. After a few summer months at an educational institute, the church was again asked to leave, in Danilov's view due to Orthodox pressure.

Over the winter the congregation rented the city's Patriot military house of culture until once more being asked to move on, this time, thinks Danilov, as a result of a friendship between the local assistant military commander and Orthodox Archbishop Aleksandr (Mogilyov) of Kostroma and Galich. The church's current rental agreement is with a city cinema. "The FSB (former KGB) has already had a word with the director," Danilov remarked.

Pointing to "Pastors with a Pocket Calculator," an article published by local state-controlled newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda Kostroma" on 18 April, Danilov maintained that articles similarly attacking his church appear in the local press approximately every two or three months. According to this latest one, Pastor Danilov's true aim in attracting numerous "adepts" by showing the Jesus Film is to increase his church's fabulous wealth.

In common with many other Russian Protestants, Danilov believes such articles not to initiate with the newspapers themselves, but to be "ordered" by other structures, in his view the Orthodox Church and the FSB: "They work together against so-called sects." A

further form of state pressure, he said, was that of depriving his church of visits by US preacher Bill Norton, who is now unable to obtain a Russian visa (see separate F18News article).

Speaking to Forum 18 in her office on 16 June, the Kostroma region official dealing with religious affairs insisted that the state authorities' concern about the Family of God Church was justified. Referring to the film shown in the October 2000 news bulletin (which, she maintained, should not be regarded as having been taken in secret, since the service was open to the general public), Marina Smirnova maintained that "a pastor shouldn't conduct such activity". In what was clearly hypnosis, she maintained, the film showed people falling to the floor and then coming round. "It was clear they didn't know where they'd been – what if one of them had had a heart attack?"

Smirnova acknowledged, however, that, in accordance with the 1997 religion law, harm inflicted through hypnosis – and not just hypnosis itself - must be proven before a religious organisation can be liquidated. She also agreed that the same law stipulates that state expert analysis by religious specialists prior to re-registration may take place only if a religious organisation is not affiliated to a centralised religious organisation.

While the Kostroma state authorities had failed in the first instance and violated the law in the second, however, Smirnova continued to defend their response: "This concerns the lives of OUR people... hopefully we caused Danilov to think twice, I call that a result." In her view, the situation has exposed a deficiency in the 1997 law, which should be amended either so that centralised religious organisations carry greater responsibility for the activity of those affiliated to them, or to allow the possibility of local expert analysis in all instances.

Although Forum 18 submitted questions in writing to Archbishop Aleksandr as requested on 17 June, and he had previously remarked by telephone that he would definitely answer them the same week, Forum 18 has yet to receive an answer.

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