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RUSSIA: Komi non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox fight to retain Church building

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

An Orthodox monastery and parishioners have been harassed by local state authorities since they broke from the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese of Syktyvkar and Vorkuta to join the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR - which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate). Forum 18 News Service has seen a video of the local Moscow Patriarchate bishop trying with a police escort to go to the monastery, and of the bishop accusing the non-Patriarchate Orthodox clergy of theft and of being "American fascists". Both the Moscow Patriarchate diocese and local state authorities then launched failed law suits against the monastery, aimed at seizing a wooden church built after the breakaway took place.

An Orthodox monastery and its parishioners in the north-eastern European Russian republic of Komi have been harassed by the secular authorities since spring 1999, when they broke from the local Moscow Patriarchate diocese of Syktyvkar and Vorkuta to join the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate. At the same time, they maintain, grave allegations of unlawful activity within the Moscow Patriarchate diocese are not investigated by state agencies. (See forthcoming F18News article) ROCOR was formed as a temporary church administration in the early 1920s by exiled bishops cut off from the Moscow Patriarchate in the Soviet Union, which was heavily controlled by the then new atheist regime. Since 1990 it has established church structures within Russia.

On 14 April 1999, after the monastery announced its decision to join ROCOR, local Moscow Patriarchate Bishop Pitirim (Volochnikov) of Syktyvkar and Vorkuta, Sysola district head Ivan Kiselev and the then state official dealing with religious affairs in Komi republic, Valentina Kulimova, approached Votcha, a village of some 150 residents approximately 60km south of the Komi capital Syktyvkar, in several vehicles headed by a marked police car. Access to the village, where the breakaway St Stefan of Afanasyevo Monastery is based, is only possible via a crossing point on the then frozen River Sysola, which a crowd of several hundred local parishioners and sympathisers had blocked with two cars.

In a short video film of these events viewed by Forum 18 in Votcha on 7 July, the villagers shout "Clear off!" and "Anaxios!" ("Unworthy!" - the Greek word "Axios", or "Worthy," normally being used to greet the ordination of an Orthodox bishop) when Bishop Pitirim, in full episcopal vestments, approaches them across the ice singing the Easter troparion. A police officer then offers the bishop use of his car's loudspeaker, through which the bishop accuses the breakaway clergy of theft and calls them "American fascists." Showing Forum 18 the film, the monastery's abbot, Fr Stefan (Babayev), stated that this stand-off continued for several hours, after which the police informed the villagers that they were breaking the law and retreated with the bishop.

The only monastic building in Votcha then was a former school given to the Moscow Patriarchate diocese in 1996, which the approximately 10 brothers repaired to house a refectory, store, monastic cells, workshop, candleworks and banya. Babayev acknowledged to Forum 18 that this building, which, he said, was occupied by Patriarchate personnel on 16 April 1999 and has since inexplicably burnt down, belonged to the diocese - members of the breakaway monastic community later bought several smaller buildings elsewhere in Votcha. Babayev believes that the Patriarchate diocese also intended to seize a wooden church where the community meets for services, a few minutes walk from the former school. This is also suggested by the Patriarchate diocese's account of the April 1999 stand-off published afterwards in a local state newspaper "Tribuna." It states that Bishop Pitirim intended to hold an Easter-tide service at Votcha monastery, "the property of Syktyvkar diocese." But the wooden church was built in 1994 by local writer Yuri Yekishev, formerly a prominent figure in the Moscow Patriarchate diocese as secretary of its main St Stefan of Prokopyevsk Brotherhood, but now also with the non-Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR).

In an open letter to Sysola district administration published on 9 April 2002 in local newspaper "Mayak Sysoly," 113 residents of Votcha and nearby Pervomaisky villages complain that, having failed to take their Church of Holy New Martyr Viktor (Ostrovikov) by force on 14 April 1999, the Patriarchate diocese is now seeking to seize it through the courts. Interviewed by Forum 18 on 7 July at his home in the neighbouring hamlet of Yagdor, Yuri Yekishev stated that Votcha Village Council had legally allocated him, as a private individual, a plot of land for the construction of a chapel in October 1993. In accordance with relevant changes in property regulations, said Yekishev, he registered the church subsequently erected by himself and his friends as his own private property with the Sysola district authorities in June 2001.

An initial lawsuit by the Patriarchate diocese was refused by Sysola district federal court in 1999 due to incorrectly drawn up documentation. But in 2001 Mother Vasilisya (Mosyagina) filed suit against Yekishev, claiming that the wooden church belonged to her community. Fr Stefan (Babayev) explained to Forum 18 News Service that the Patriarchate diocese founded Mother Vasilisya's convent in the neighbouring village of Pervomaisky soon after the stand-off on the frozen Sysola, giving it exactly the same name as the breakaway monastic community - which, according to Yekishev, constituted "an attempt to create a community to which my church belonged." In the Moscow Patriarchate's 2001 official directory of monasteries and convents, the monastery in Votcha is stated as having been "transformed" into the convent in Pervomaisky in September 1999 "due to the small number of monks."

Yekishev won the 2001 case, citing the October 1993 Votcha Village Council decree and arguing that, since the Votcha parish charter was registered only in January 1995 and the Syktyvkar and Vorkuta diocese formed only at the end of the same year, these entities did not and could not have played any part in the funding or construction of the wooden church. The case was heard together with a suit brought by Komi republic's public prosecutor, who claimed that the land allocation had been conducted in violation of the law, since it was too close to a (now ruined) nineteenth-century stone church. Komi republic's Supreme Court later overturned this verdict, however, ruling that Syktyvkar and Vorkuta diocese and Komi republic's Department for Historical and Cultural Monuments should have been included alongside Mosyagina as plaintiffs. Yekishev won the subsequent analogous case in October 2002, against which verdict an appeal by Komi republic's public prosecutor was unsuccessful.

In an interview with Forum 18 News Service in her office on 8 July, the adviser on religious issues to the assistant head of Komi republic, Galina Gabusheva, suggested that police officers had led the bishop's vehicles to Votcha in April 1999 "to make sure that nothing untoward happened." She was unable to provide any further information about the situation concerning the wooden church.

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