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RUSSIA: Shock at Moscow church demolition

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Unknown workers – backed by police and druzhinniki (civil volunteers) – began tearing down Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church on the eastern edge of Moscow soon after midnight today (6 September), the Church's Pastor, Vasili Romanyuk, told Forum 18 News Service from the Russian capital. By morning almost the entire three-storey building had been destroyed. "This is the Soviet approach – to come in the middle of the night with mechanical diggers," Mikhail Odintsov, an aide to Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, told Forum 18. "This is unacceptable." The church has struggled to legalise the building it put up with its own money in 1995-6. Andrei Ivanov, spokesperson for the prefect of Moscow's Eastern Administrative District, defended the destruction. "Everything was done at the decision of the court," he told Forum 18.

Human rights defenders and church members have expressed shock and outrage at the sudden destruction of a Pentecostal Church in Moscow's eastern suburbs, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Workers who did not identify themselves, accompanied by police and druzhinniki (civil volunteers), moved in soon after midnight today (6 September) and forcibly demolished most of the three-storey building. "In human terms, this is barbarism," Mikhail Odintsov, an aide to Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, told Forum 18 from Moscow on 6 September. "This is the Soviet approach – to come in the middle of the night with mechanical diggers. This is unacceptable."

Odintsov added that members of Holy Trinity Church in Kosino-Ukhtomsky District in Moscow's Eastern Administrative District (Okrug) had already spoken to the Ombudsperson's Office by telephone earlier in the day and are expected to lodge a written appeal to Ombudsperson Vladimir Lukin about the church destruction.

Holy Trinity Church was established in 1979 by Serafim Marin, a Pentecostal who had spent 18 years in Soviet labour camps for his faith. It gained registration with the Soviet authorities as an autonomous Pentecostal community in the late 1970s. However, the city authorities forced it out of its first building in 1995. The replacement "temporary" church – bulldozed today - was built on the current site in 1995-6.

Officials consistently refused to legalise the building and prevented it from being linked to the water and electricity supply and sewerage. Holy Trinity's Pastor, Vasili Romanyuk, and the congregation have long battled to save their church from confiscation and destruction. "We put a lot of our resources into this building," he told Forum 18.

Too late

Pastor Romanyuk told Forum 18 he had been woken in the early hours and had rushed to the site to try to halt the destruction, but was too late. "The workers didn't say who they were or who had sent them," Pastor Romanyuk complained. "They showed no documents. They did all this with the protection of the police, so some state body must have done this."

Pastor Romanyuk said he will lead Sunday worship at 11 am on 9 September in the ruins of his church. "Everyone is warmly invited," he told Forum 18.

Church members expressed concern not only for their own property. "This precedent shows that the authorities can unilaterally cancel a rental contract and can then seize the building from any church community," church members complained in a web post.

Insecurity over property has left many religious communities vulnerable to arbitrary action by state officials, as has happened with Glorification Pentecostal Church in the Siberian city of Abakan and a mosque in Astrakhan (see F18News 30 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1040).

"Court decision"

Forum 18 repeatedly tried to reach Nikolai Lomakin, Prefect of Moscow's Eastern Administrative District who, church members say, has been informed about the long-running case. However, his secretary told Forum 18 he was not in the office and refused to give a mobile phone number. His press secretary Andrei Ivanov also refused to give any contact number.

Ivanov defended the church destruction. "There was a court decision," he insisted to Forum 18 from Moscow on 6 September. "Everything was done at the decision of the court." He did not know which court had taken the decision or when and said he would look into it. Asked whether the authorities would have bulldozed a Russian Orthodox Church in this way, Ivanov said he did not know.

Officials at the administration of Kosino-Ukhtomsky District told Forum 18 they had no information about the church destruction. "Bulldozers don't just arrive to demolish buildings," one official – who would not give her name – told Forum 18 on 6 September.

The acting head of Kosino-Ukhtomsky District Police, Mikhail Sidelnikov, was not in his office when Forum 18 called. The duty officer – who did not give his name - initially told Forum 18 that no District officers had been at the scene. Then he added: "Our officers were there to defend public order." He declined to elaborate. The duty officer said that five church members had visited the police station to write complaints about events during the night.

Night-time destruction

Workers accompanied by the police arrived at the church building soon after midnight on 6 September, Pastor Romanyuk told Forum 18 and church members reported on church-related websites. They broke into the building, cut all the telephone lines and seized the mobile phone of the female caretaker. She was taken off to the police station, where she was held for the next three hours while the destruction began. She was not allowed to contact other church members while she was held.

While the caretaker was at the police, all the church's valuables were removed, including service books and chalices for the eucharist. Two mechanical diggers then began demolishing the building.

Church members say that while the destruction was underway, men in plain clothes, who called themselves *druzhinniki* (civil volunteers), circled the site. As church members began to arrive to try to salvage what they could from the wreckage of the building, the men in plain clothes refused to allow them access, and behaved "highly aggressively", church members complained.

"A car was destroyed, while a generator, the mixing desk with microphones, musical instruments and other valuable items were taken away," church members complained in a web post. A safe had also been broken open. "Eyewitnesses report that violence occurred too. A hail of stones rained down on church members trying to take photographs. Mechanical diggers destroyed most of the building."

Aleksandr Rodionov, who arrived at the site of the ruined church at 5 am, noted that the church's main sanctuary, the pastor's office and the room for the church's youth club had already been destroyed completely. "Only part of the roof and a room at the top remained undamaged," he reported.

Once the workers had gone, church members spent several hours digging in the ruins to save what they could, including church books and items of furniture which were still usable.

Church members have posted testimony, photographs and videos on church-related websites, including on the site <http://www.word4you.ru/news/16700/>.

Permission withheld

In 1992 Moscow's city government authorised Holy Trinity Church to situate its cultural centre in the outlying district of Novokosino, and ordered a plot of land to be reserved for it there. The corresponding decree (29 May 1992, *rasporiazhenie* no. 1323-RZP) was issued in the name of First Deputy Mayor Vladimir Resin, who remained in that post until elected to the State Duma in December 2011. Resin now advises Patriarch Kirill on church construction.

According to the Pentecostals, the Moscow authorities subsequently withheld permission to build on the plot allocated, and the city's Land Resources Department annulled its land rental agreement with the church in 2005.

In 2010 the public prosecutor of Moscow's Eastern Administrative District filed suit against Holy Trinity, demanding that the church remove all construction from and vacate the site. Primarily, this involves a 17-by-8-metre church building. The demand to remove all construction was successively upheld by the district court in nearby Perovo (3 September 2010), Moscow City Court (26 November 2010) and Russia's Supreme Court (10 May 2011).

The May 2011 Supreme Court ruling further claims that Holy Trinity is occupying "disputed land without any legal basis" and did not fulfil its construction targets within the time limit for which it was allotted land.

On 18 October 2011 Moscow Arbitration Court additionally ruled that the Pentecostals must pay the city's Land Resources Department damages of 4,888,271 Roubles (900,000 Norwegian Kroner, 120,000 Euros or 150,000 US Dollars) for unlawful land

use.

No official warning

Although church members had long struggled to retain the church building, Pastor Romanyuk said that they had no official warning of the destruction. "In late August a district official told us verbally and unofficially that they would go ahead with the destruction by 15 September," he told Forum 18. "We didn't believe they would just do this." (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

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