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RUSSIA: No more mosques outside "Muslim areas"?

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

Just as in the Russian capital, Muslims in other parts of Russia considered ethnically Russian face persistent difficulties building mosques to meet the growing numbers of Muslim worshippers, Forum 18 News Service has found. Jamaletdin Makhmudov, a St Petersburg Muslim, told Forum 18 that the municipal authorities do not prevent Muslims from meeting in approximately six rented premises besides the two official mosques. But he says the city's long-standing refusal to allow construction of further mosques remains unchanged. A Muslim community in Sochi – the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics - has lobbied fruitlessly for a mosque for over 15 years. Rejecting one appeal, an official pointed to a mosque in a village two hours' drive away. In Maloyaroslavets, officials rejected the community's latest application, claiming all sites for places of worship are already taken.

While vast crowds flock to Moscow's few official mosques on major Islamic festivals, similarly fast-growing Muslim communities across Russia are experiencing state obstruction to new mosques just as acutely, Forum 18 News Service has found.

Officials have long promoted mosque construction in regions whose titular ethnicities are traditionally viewed as Muslim, such as Dagestan and Tatarstan, regardless of how many of their inhabitants practise Islam. But Muslims are often barred from building in regions of Russia considered ethnically Russian, even if their communities have a long history there. In many such areas, a recent surge in the Muslim population due to labour migration both from within Russia and ex-Soviet Central Asia is turning the situation volatile (see also F18News 26 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1747).

Regional restrictions on construction of houses of worship are already well known to other disfavoured faiths, particularly Protestants (see F18News 6 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1738).

St Petersburg

In Russia's second city St Petersburg, prayer space at this year's end-of-Ramadan festival of Eid-ul-Fitr on 19 August was as "sorely lacking" as in Moscow, local Muslim representative Jamaletdin Makhmudov told Forum 18 on 17 September. The 100,000-strong crowd at the century-old, turquoise-domed Cathedral Mosque stretched hundreds of metres to nearby Gorky metro station, he said. Makhmudov confirmed that most worshippers are migrant labourers whose numbers have risen sharply over the past five years. "But they pay taxes - a large sum going to the state - so the state should think about places for services for visiting Muslims."

Footage of this year's crowd at St Petersburg's Cathedral Mosque on Eid-ul-Fitr (locally known as Uraza-bairam) may be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JWOxBCsopc>.

Legally, the state - which still controls most land – may allocate a plot to a religious organisation in order to build a house of worship. Under Article 30.3 of the 2001 Land Code such a plot is given for use free of charge during construction (bezvozmezdnoe strochnoe polzovanie). Once the building has been declared fit for use (prinyato v ekspluatatsiyu), the land beneath it becomes the religious organisation's private property (Article 36).

In practice, however, the process depends upon the continued goodwill and co-operation of the authorities, as the very different outcomes for different faiths demonstrate.

"Here in St Petersburg we constantly see new churches being built, but dozens of mosques are needed," Makhmudov remarked to Forum 18. With five million residents, the city still has only two official mosques, both controlled by the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of St Petersburg and Northwest Russia, loyal to Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin.

Makhmudov - who chairs the city's community loyal to rival Mufti Ravil Gainutdin – acknowledged that the municipal authorities do not prevent Muslims from meeting in approximately six rented premises besides the two official mosque buildings. He added, however, that the city's long-standing refusal to allow construction of further mosques by rival communities remains unchanged (see F18News 6 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=576).

Sochi

In the Black Sea coastal town of Sochi, Yasin Muslim community – named after a sura of the Koran - has lobbied fruitlessly for a mosque for over 15 years (see F18News 18 May 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=782).

Here, major Muslim festivals such as Eid-ul-Fitr are held at rented premises and attended by some 130 worshippers, but numbers are steadily growing, Yasin's current chair Valery Ilyasov told Forum 18 from Sochi on 2 October. As in previous years, the community meets for Friday prayers in its own cellar. "Fewer come as we have such a small prayer hall (..) about 25 people and the room's already full."

The Yasin community had hoped that Sochi's hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics would boost their campaign for a mosque. In July 2009 their national Mufti Ravil Gainutdin publicly reminded Dmitri Medvedev that some international athletes would seek out a mosque, and the then president backed his proposal to build one in Sochi. Medvedev added that this should not be just a temporary structure for the duration of the Olympics, ITAR-TASS news agency reported: "That would be unacceptable, irrational and a bad idea in every way. If one is built, it should be built well, to last for centuries."

Shortly beforehand in June 2009, Sochi's Vice-mayor Anatoli Rykov similarly remarked that "it's wrong that there is no proper mosque in Sochi where Muslims can perform religious rites, so we will deal with this issue straight away," RIA Novosti agency reported.

A year later, however, Rykov disagreed that Sochi needed a mosque. Responding to a June 2010 official request to support its construction from Gainutdin's Council of Muftis of Russia to Sochi's Mayor Anatoli Pakhomov, the vice-mayor pointed to the existence of a mosque in the neighbouring village of Tkhagapsh, the Council's website reported in September 2010.

The ethnic Shapsug Adyg (Circassian) village of Tkhagapsh indeed contains a nineteenth-century wooden mosque, Forum 18 notes, but it is over two hours' drive from Sochi.

Yasin chair Ilyasov told Forum 18 that the community has sent several further requests for allocation of a land plot in 2012, but has received no response. He understood that Sochi's municipal architect, Oleg Sheveika, was dealing with the issue.

Sheveika's secretary directed Forum 18 to Sochi's Information and Analytical Work Department on 2 October. There, a spokesperson explained on 3 October that Sochi administration is working to fulfil hundreds of obligations required by the International Olympic Committee, but that these do not include a mosque since the Committee "does not demand religious buildings". She was unaware of any plans for a mosque unconnected with the Olympics, and noted that construction of the event's main facilities is the separate responsibility of a state company.

The Sochi 2014 Organising Committee told Forum 18 that it "will provide a location and suitable facilities for religious services for Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Such facilities will be accessible for the residents of the Olympic/Paralympic Village and will be located near the housing facilities for the athletes." The Committee also stressed that it "is taking great care to ensure that various religious faiths will be accommodated and that provisions will be made to enable people to worship as they choose."

Asked whether these facilities would be solely for the use of the residents of the Olympic/Paralympic village and provided solely for the duration of the 2014 Games, however, the Committee replied that it could not offer further details.

Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk

Seven time zones east on Russia's Pacific island of Sakhalin, imam Abdulmalik Mirzoyev has observed a sharp rise in numbers at Eid-ul-Fitr prayers over the past five years. While some 300 attended in 2007, he told Forum 18 from the regional centre Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on 11 September, this year there were 10,000. Mirzoyev estimates that 70 per cent are migrant workers both from within Russia and ex-Soviet Central Asia and Azerbaijan. Lifelong Muslim residents of Sakhalin are sooner Tatar or Bashkir, he said, sometimes also ethnic Russian or Korean converts (approximately 5 per cent of Sakhalin region is ethnic Korean).

Images of the large crowd at this year's Eid-ul-Fitr prayers at a former factory in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk may be viewed at <http://www.islamnews.ru/news-135865.html>.

On a typical Friday, up to 700 attend prayers at the same rented premises, Mirzoyev told Forum 18. Yet the authorities have rejected the community's numerous requests to be allocated land for a mosque, giving "different excuses, bureaucratic answers". The imam also noted that this was while some 30 Orthodox and other Christian churches have been built in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk over the past two decades.

In what Mirzoyev characterised as a typical state response, Lyudmila Burlakova, chair of Sakhalin region's State Property Committee, refused the Muslims' request for a particular land plot at the very edge of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk in April 2009 on the grounds that the land was due to be auctioned. Also seen by Forum 18, she gave a similar reply in July 2009, promising that details

of the auction would be announced in the local press. But the auction "hasn't been held to this day", Ilshat Manyurov of the Muslim community told Forum 18 on 16 September, "and the land plot has already been given (sold) to another organisation."

Forum 18's emailed questions to Burlakova sent on 21 September went unanswered by the end of the working day in Sakhalin on 3 October.

Maloyaroslavets

In Maloyaroslavets, a town of 30,000 residents some 120 km (75 miles) southwest of Moscow in Kaluga region, local imam Rinat Batkayev has also seen his community grow rapidly since 2009. Then, some 150 worshippers attended Eid-ul-Fitr, he told Forum 18 on 11 September; this year there were 900. Private premises rented for Friday prayers cannot house such numbers, but the municipal authorities have twice rejected the community's requests to build a mosque.

Two days before this year's Eid-ul-Fitr, Batkayev was forced to cancel a rental agreement to hold prayers at local factory premises when the municipal authorities claimed they would violate the 2004 Demonstrations Law (see F18News 13 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1742).

Kaluga Regional Public Prosecutor's Office had not responded to Forum 18's 11 September request for the results of its investigation into the legality of this warning by the end of the 3 October working day.

The Maloyaroslavets municipal authorities first refused to allocate a land plot for a new mosque in December 2005 "due to numerous appeals from residents", according to the local Muslim community's website. Following a land application that June, anonymous posters appeared on lampposts and fences asking residents to sign a protest petition. "Do you think it's ethical to build a mosque in a town with a 600-year Orthodox history?" one poster seen by Forum 18 asks. "Do you want a repeat of the Beslan events on our land?" (In the southern Russian town of Beslan, the siege of a school by Islamist militants in September 2004 resulted in the deaths of hundreds of pupils, teachers and parents.)

Misbakh Gabitov – a pensioner and Second World War veteran then chair of Maloyaroslavets' Muslim community – was aggrieved that "our rights have been violated, that the people have succumbed to individuals who don't like Islam. We're Russians after all, we live alongside everyone else."

Gabitov's Tatar community settled in Maloyaroslavets in the 1930s due to a population transfer from Nizhny Novgorod region. Yet his late 2005 handwritten response to the anti-mosque campaign – seen by Forum 18 – defers to the "Orthodox majority". Not wishing to antagonise them, Gabitov explains, the Muslims will postpone the issue of mosque construction indefinitely rather than take their case to court.

Instead of requesting land allocation, the Maloyaroslavets Muslims could buy private land for a mosque, current chair Batkayev admits on his community's website. "But such an approach, as a rule, is fraught with conflict, a rise in social tensions, spoiled relations (...). And the question of building a mosque isn't just the whim of the imam or community - it's a question of state importance. Therefore, a decision can only begin with an application to the administration."

In March 2012 Batkayev filed a second land application for a mosque – seen by Forum 18 - with Maloyaroslavets mayor Aleksandr Geizer. Accompanied by photographs of the Muslims' cramped rented worship premises, it notes that the community "performs social and charitable work, educates migrant workers in the spirit of mutual respect and obedience to the law, works to prevent extremist and radical ideas". In July this application was rejected by head of Maloyaroslavets District Oleg Malashin, however, according to the Muslims' website. The reported reason given was that all land plots categorised as suitable for houses of worship are already taken.

A spokesperson at Maloyaroslavets District Administration told Forum 18 on 2 October that while the Muslims had appealed to Malashin, the issue of mosque construction is dealt with by Maloyaroslavets' municipal authorities.

At Maloyaroslavets Municipal Administration, Forum 18 was directed to assistant head Aleksandr Savonichev, but his phone repeatedly went unanswered on 3 October.

On his community's website, Batkayev notes that a typical negative local response to proposals for a mosque is that Maloyaroslavets is a Russian Orthodox town. "And what should we do, ban all religions except Orthodoxy from the town?" he asks. "Unrealistic. Push Muslims out of sight into basements and attics, where they will listen to preaching about how bad Christians won't let them build a mosque? You can be sure that people will immediately be found who wish to saddle that horse. This is the road to disaster." (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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