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RUSSIA: Mixed response to sweeping government checks

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

Representatives of hundreds of religious organisations inspected by state officials this Spring have voiced mixed impressions of the checks to Forum 18 News Service. Following its inspection, a Catholic parish in southern Russia is facing a heavy fine for fire safety violations. But this appears exceptional. Unlike major human rights organisations the checks appeared to target, most religious representatives surveyed by Forum 18 received only minor complaints. Konstantin Andreyev, a Moscow-based lawyer, remarked to Forum 18: "The majority [of Public Prosecutor employees] did this quite formally, understanding that they just need to submit reports saying they checked." Protestant representatives in particular were unconcerned, and sometimes even defended the state's actions. But the Jehovah's Witnesses are worried about the possible consequences of a massive inspection of their Russian headquarters.

Representatives of hundreds of religious organisations inspected by state officials this Spring have voiced mixed impressions of the checks, according to a survey by Forum 18 News Service. So far, very few appear to be facing serious consequences, and most contacted stated they were unconcerned. "In practice these checks were quite formal," Konstantin Andreyev, a Moscow-based lawyer specialising in the rights of religious organisations, remarked to Forum 18 on 16 May. "In some regions some Public Prosecutor employees are quite zealous. But the majority of them did this quite formally, understanding that they just need to submit reports saying they checked."

The religious communities affected were among numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) inspected by state officials across Russia from early March. The sweep – ordered by the General Prosecutor's Office – apparently sought to uncover foreign backing for political opposition initiatives. While the results have yet to be fully released, several NGOs working in the public policy sphere – such as election monitoring group Golos – already face massive fines for failing to register as "foreign agents". The NGO sweep has drawn widespread criticism, including from Russia's Presidential Human Rights Council.

Forum 18 notes that controversial new regulations on foreign funding for NGOs – including designation of some as "foreign agents" – do not legally apply to religious organisations (see F18News 22 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1839).

A press spokesperson at the General Prosecutor's Office insisted to Forum 18 in March that all questions be submitted by fax. Forum 18 has earlier faxed questions to the Office's press service but received no response (see F18News 21 March 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1815).

"Extremism" was a key reason given for state inspections of some Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim communities (see F18News 29 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1842).

"Foreign agents"?

Representatives of two religious organisations, the Catholic charity Caritas and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, commonly known as the Mormons), told Forum 18 that inspectors explained orally that they were acting due to the 2012 amendments regulating foreign-funded NGOs, despite religious organisations' exemption from them.

Caritas' St Petersburg office was checked in April by numerous government agencies "against the background of the president saying we have 'foreign agents' in Russia," the office's head Natalya Pevtsova told Forum 18 on 14 May. In February President Vladimir Putin called for the regulations on foreign funding of NGOs to be implemented, declaring "any direct or indirect interference in our internal affairs (...) is unacceptable" (see F18News 22 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1839).

When Pevtsova pointed out to the inspectors that religious organisations are legally exempt from the new regulations on foreign funding and "foreign agents", the Public Prosecutor's representative co-ordinating the check-up explained that "she isn't a free person – she got the order, so she came to check," Pevtsova told Forum 18.

The Caritas inspection in St Petersburg involved various government structures – including the Hygiene and Tax Inspectorates – and

lasted three weeks, Pevtsova continued, as officials examined each of the charity's numerous projects with children, the disabled, elderly and homeless. The only results issued so far – from the Fire Inspectorate - are "ridiculous", Pevtsova remarked. "For instance, our fire extinguishers weren't numbered in white paint". Two Caritas branches in Moscow and Volgograd were also checked in the NGO sweep, she told Forum 18.

The Moscow office of the LDS Church was checked in early April "to see if we were in keeping with the law, and most specifically if we were involved in any political activities," its president Larry Lawrence told Forum 18 on 13 May. He too found it "interesting" that his Church was chosen for inspection, when religious organisations are legally exempt from the new regulations obliging some NGOs to register as "foreign agents".

Told by the Public Prosecutor representative leading the inspection that the LDS Church "was just one of many, many different organisations being visited" and that everything was in order, Lawrence felt confident, however. The inspection was "very business-like but polite", he noted to Forum 18.

Also in early April, the LDS Church' branches in St Petersburg and Novorossiisk (Krasnodar Region) were checked in the NGO sweep, Lawrence told Forum 18.

A press spokesperson for St Petersburg Public Prosecutor's Office insisted that questions be submitted in writing on 22 May. Forum 18 emailed questions the same day, including why Caritas, the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses (see below) were selected for inspection and whether any legal penalties had followed checks on religious organisations. There was no response by lunchtime in St Petersburg on 28 May.

Pevtsova of Caritas suggested to Forum 18 that her organisation was selected for inspection partly because "we receive funding from abroad". Yet the state's interest in religious organisations' foreign funding may extend beyond those commonly regarded in Russia as "foreign". Typical documentation from one inspection - a 23 April letter from Lenin District Public Prosecutor's Office in Saransk (Mordovia Republic) to the Moscow Patriarchate's local Orthodox seminary, seen by Forum 18 - asks to check that organisation's "funds and other property received from foreign sources".

Another Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox seminary in the southern city of Stavropol receives foreign funding of approximately 16,000 British Pounds annually from UK-based Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, according to that charity's website. While the seminary was not inspected separately as far as he knew, a secretary at the Moscow Patriarchate's Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk diocese told Forum 18 on 15 May that the diocese was checked as a whole in the course of the NGO sweep.

"The inspections were conducted tactfully"

"It was a formal, superficial inspection," the Stavropol Orthodox diocesan secretary reported. Most religious organisations contacted by Forum 18 after the NGO sweep voiced similar impressions.

Protestant leaders in particular sometimes seemed defensive, and stated that they were unconcerned by the checks. "We have excellent relations with the authorities. The inspections were conducted tactfully (..) as far as I know, no one had any problems," Pastor Anatoli Gilmanov of New Generation Pentecostal Church in Tolyatti (Samara Region) told Forum 18 on 8 May.

The Church is affiliated to the Latvia-based New Generation Church headed by Pastor Aleksei Ledyayev, who was deported from Russia in 2002 (see F18News 7 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=644).

"We didn't have any problems, and we didn't receive any indication of impropriety or incorrect actions by the authorities in the regions," Ivan Borichevsky, head of administration at the Russia-wide Pentecostal union led by Bishop Eduard Grabovenko, remarked to Forum 18 on 13 May. The NGO sweep affected the union's central administration and approximately 100 of its 2,000 churches, he told Forum 18. "But we tell our churches they should always be prepared to submit accounts to show all is in order – we must be transparent to the state."

While some 300 of its approximately 3,000 congregations were inspected, the Russia-wide Pentecostal union headed by Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky does not have serious complaints either, Ryakhovsky's chief assistant Konstantin Bendas told Forum 18 on 14 May. "As soon as the inspections began, we met with representatives of the General Prosecutor, asked questions and voiced our fears," he explained. "We, for example, have nothing to hide or be ashamed of in our activity." Bendas even argued that the sweep was entirely lawful, and described NGO alarm at the sweeps as "hysterical".

Inspectors acted improperly towards affiliate congregations in only four cases, Bendas said, including by requesting lists of members and making accusations of "extremism" (see F18News 29 May 2013 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1842). However, these situations had all reached or were close to a positive resolution, he said. "The Public Prosecutor employees who inspected weren't competent – we've received apologies."

Faults found by Public Prosecutor representatives during the checks appear to have been generally minor. For Cornerstone

Pentecostal Church in the southern Siberian city of Barnaul (Altai Region), the only issue was that its logo is not officially registered, its Pastor Mikhail Kashevarov told Forum 18 on 7 May. "In principle, every organisation in Russia has some kind of violation," he explained. "It's inconceivable that a check-up ends and they tell you, 'You know, everything is ideal here, we don't have any complaints'."

While not involving foreign funding or registration as "foreign agents", a very few religious organisations reported more serious complaints. Among several Catholic parishes inspected in southern Russia's Saratov-based Diocese of St Clement, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Novochoerkassk (Rostov Region) was fined due to fire safety violations uncovered during its 15 March inspection, Newsru website reported on 1 April. The fines totalled 477,000 Roubles (about 90,000 Norwegian Kroner, 12,000 Euros or 15,000 US Dollars).

Telephone numbers for the parish went unanswered on 13 and 14 May. St Clement's Catholic Diocese prefers not to release any information on government inspections of its parishes to the media, its secretary told Forum 18 on 14 May.

Ongoing scrutiny

The Volga Christian Centre in Naberezhnyye Chelny (Tatarstan Republic), a church affiliated to Bishop Grabovenko's Russia-wide Pentecostal Union, was similarly fined 150,000 Roubles (about 28,000 Norwegian Kroner, 3,700 Euros or 4,800 US Dollars) on 25 March due to fire safety violations, the Union reported. The 500-strong congregation has paid this fine, but is now struggling to raise a further 400,000 Roubles (about 74,000 Norwegian Kroner, 10,000 Euros or 13,000 US Dollars) for a fire alarm system demanded by inspectors, Larisa Tsygankova, assistant to local Pentecostal Bishop Vasily Yevchik, told Forum 18 on 7 May.

As the church was inspected on 3 February, however – weeks before the NGO sweep was ordered – its situation appears symptomatic of bureaucratic scrutiny long experienced by disfavoured and sometimes even favoured religious communities (see F18News 15 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=932).

Jehovah's Witness congregations are particular targets of such scrutiny. The 142 Public Prosecutor inspections they have recorded since the beginning of March is a higher than usual figure, it is therefore unclear how many were directly due to the NGO sweep, Jehovah's Witness representative Grigory Martynov told Forum 18 on 17 May.

Of the 142, the Jehovah's Witnesses are particularly concerned by the possible consequences of the inspection of their Russian headquarters near St Petersburg. Lasting eight hours on 1 April, this involved around 60 law enforcement agents, including from the ordinary and OMON special police, FSB security service, Public Prosecutor's Office, police Counter-extremism Department, Immigration Service and Fire Safety Department, Jehovah's Witnesses reported.

A text containing internal Jehovah's Witness guidelines for ordained ministers was confiscated and sent to Kazan (Tatarstan Republic) for expert analysis, Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Martynov told Forum 18. No results have been released, and none are expected soon, he added.

The reason for this confiscation was another of Forum 18's 22 May questions that St Petersburg Public Prosecutor's Office failed to answer. (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.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

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.

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY