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RUSSIA: Few complaints over Kalmykia's state support for Buddhism

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

Despite large state subsidies for building Buddhist temples and training Buddhist monks, while "the basics of traditional religions are taught in a historical-informational context" in schools, officials and Buddhist leaders reject suggestions that Buddhism has become Kalmykia's state religion. "In Russia the government and churches are separate, so it doesn't unite us that much," Buddhist leader Telo Tulku Rinpoche told Forum 18 News Service. Members of religious minorities voiced few complaints about this government support for Buddhism.

Since 1993, the state has directed the revival of Buddhism in Kalmykia, according to the southern Russian republic's official government website. Possibly the largest Buddhist temple in Europe, Syakyusn-syume was built in 1996 with regional state funds of over 2,500 million roubles (then worth approximately 500,000 US dollars), it maintains. The Kalmyk government has also made available to the temple's monks a new block of two-roomed flats "with all conveniences," the website continues, while local state newspapers such as "Izvestiya Kalmykii" and the Kalmyk-language "Khalmg Unn" play a major role in disseminating the Buddhist faith throughout the republic.

"Despite economic difficulties," the state will continue to play the leading role in providing material support for Kalmykia's Buddhist community, the website maintains, so that "the young generation growing up in conditions dominated by western pop culture might be inculcated with love for their national traditions, rituals and language."

On 12 April 1993, 31-year-old Kirsan Ilyumzhinov was elected president of Kalmykia for the first time. Ten years on, a billboard on the main street of the Kalmyk capital, Elista, features him alongside the Dalai Lama beneath the Buddhist mantra "Om mani padme hum". Nearby stands a statue of the "Blessed and Holy Teacher" Buddha, erected by Ilyumzhinov on behalf of the Kalmyk people in 1995. It was thanks to his programme to revive Buddhism that the Kalmyks supported Ilyumzhinov in the first place, chairwoman of the president's expert co-ordinational council, Zinaida Dorzhiyeva, explained to Forum 18 News Service at the Syakyusn-syume temple on 1 April.

According to Kalmykia's US-born head Buddhist, all of the republic's 21 khuruls, or temples, were built with state assistance. Speaking to Forum 18 on 1 April, Telo Tulku Rinpoche estimated that state contributions to new khuruls accounted for approximately 70 per cent of their cost. Acknowledging that the pace of temple construction "was not quite in balance" with that of living conditions in the republic, Telo Tulku Rinpoche nevertheless strongly defended the programme. "The state destroyed them," he explained, "they took from the people. The state feels guilty now, that is why they concentrate so much towards building temples." Before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution there were just over 100 Buddhist khuruls in the republic, but all had been destroyed by the late 1930s.

There were also approximately 1,000 Buddhist monks in the republic at the beginning of the twentieth century, according to Kalmyk government figures. Telo Tulku Rinpoche told Forum 18 that today there are fewer than ten who are fully-ordained, with approximately another 11 novices studying in southern India. Others serving in Kalmykia's khuruls are at a preparatory stage, he said. "We haven't really got up to the standard prior to the Revolution." A fully-ordained monk, or gelong, must keep 253 vows and traditionally lives in a highly disciplined environment, he pointed out.

This process of training Kalmykia's monks is also supported by the state. According to the republic's official dealing with religious affairs, President Ilyumzhinov recently signed a decree awarding scholarships to eleven Buddhist novices to be selected by Telo Tulku Rinpoche. Whereas some state officials might display Orthodox icons on their desks, Mikhail Burninov sits beneath a large wall poster of the Dalai Lama and Lhasa's Potala Palace. Speaking to Forum 18 in his office on 3 April, he similarly defended Kalmykia's policy of state aid to the Buddhist community. "As the president said, this is repentance for those crimes committed against them during [Stalin's] cultural revolution."

According to Telo Tulku Rinpoche, Buddhism is not a state religion in Kalmykia. "In Russia the government and churches are separate, so it doesn't unite us that much." Every time there is an inauguration or government function, however, the Buddhists

always have priority, he told Forum 18, "because we are a Buddhist republic." Telo Tulku Rinpoche doubted that there was a subject such as "Buddhist Culture" in Kalmykia's state schools. While there might be talk of introducing it on an optional basis, insisted Burninov, "we don't have specialists, and we can't violate the principles of our law – a school must be secular." According to the Kalmyk government website, however, "the basics of traditional religions are taught in a historical-informational context" within an optional subject called Native Regional History.

On 1 April, Forum 18 found that young members of Elista's "Lord's Love" evangelical church had varied experience of school lessons in Buddhism. One confirmed that Native Regional History included an element about Buddhist holidays and rituals, but said that it was not particularly serious. "We all got full marks." Another recalled that Buddhism had been part of a compulsory subject which also incorporated the history of Kalmykia and the national epic, "Dzhangar". More pointedly, he also said that, along with other state employees, his football trainer father had been forced to take part in a picket in October 2002 in support of the Dalai Lama visiting Kalmykia. President Ilyumzhinov heads the organisational committee to invite the Dalai Lama to Russia.

Forum 18 found little concern about the degree of state support for Buddhism, even among the young evangelicals, who said that they had not previously been aware of it. Since President Ilyumzhinov was one of Russia's top ten richest citizens and made large donations to the Buddhist community, everyone thought that he had financed the revival, they said, and even recounted with some pride that Syakyusn-syume was deemed to be one of the biggest Buddhist temples in Europe. An Elista taxi driver boasted to Forum 18 that there was now a temple in every region of Kalmykia, which had made everyone, even non-believers, "very glad". Nobody complained that state funds were being spent on khurul construction, he insisted.

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